FACULTY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

To fight discrimination or to reproduce it?

Exploring professional's perceptions of Afghan Unaccompanied minors and their coping mechanisms

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Abstract – English

In Flanders, Afghan Unaccompanied minors (UAMs) face significant psychological vulnerability, with existing research highlighting their high susceptibility to mental health issues. Despite recognizing the impact of professional relationships on their wellbeing, gaps persist in comprehending the formation of these relationships and their influence on coping mechanisms. This study employs in-depth semi-structured interviews, analyzed thematically within a framework integrating Othering, Color-evasiveness, Cultural humility and Moral distress. The study aims to uncover professionals' (asylum center staff and OKAN teachers) perceptions of Afghan UAMs and their coping strategies, along with how these perceptions shape professional practices. Findings illuminate the coexistence of Othering dynamics and Color-evasiveness, reinforcing discrimination, alongside Cultural humility efforts to combat it. Reflections on racism within professional organizations reveal two perspectives: one emphasizing organizational neutrality and the other acknowledging the inevitability of racism. These perspectives correspond respectively to Color-evasiveness and Cultural humility, yet both impede open discussions on racism. Furthermore, professionals employ strategies including stimulating networks, institutional connections, emotional support, and role models, but also express powerlessness and Moral distress due to personal and structural challenges. Promoting Cultural humility requires addressing these challenges, associated feelings of Moral distress and powerlessness, and integrating reflective practices on discrimination within institutions. Furthermore, the research suggests that the concepts of Moral Distress and Cultural humility can offer entry points to improve care within institutions to combat (implicit) forms of discrimination but suggests integrating an institutional level in the model of Cultural humility to connect the individual level to the institutional level.

Abstract – Nederlands

Onderzoek wijst uit dat niet-begeleide minderjarige Afghaanse vluchtelingen (NMBVs) in Vlaanderen ernstige mentale gezondheidsproblemen ervaren. Hoewel het belang van professionele relaties ondertekend wordt, ontbreekt diepgaand onderzoek naar de vorming van deze professionale relaties en hun invloed op coping mechanismen. Deze studie maakt gebruik van semi-gestructureerde diepte-interviews, geanalyseerd via thematische analyse en een theoretisch kader dat de concepten Othering, Color-evasiveness, Cultural humility en Moral distress integreert. Het doel is de percepties van professionals (asielcentrum medewerkers en OKAN leekrachten) ten opzichte van deze jongeren en hun coping te onderzoeken, evenals de invloed van deze percepties op hun professionele praktijk. De resultaten tonen gelijktijdige aanwezigheid van dynamieken van Othering en Color-evasivenss en Cultural humility. Binnen de organisatie zijn er twee perspectieven op racisme: het ene benadrukt neutralitateit, terwijl het andere racisme als onvermijdelijk beschouwt. Deze perspectieven corresponderen respectievelijk met Color-evasiveness en Cultural Humility, maar belemmeren open discussie over racisme. Professionals blijken strategieën te hanteren zoals netwerken stimuleren, institutionele connecties leggen, emotionele steun bieden en rolmodellen aanbieden. Daarentegen ervaren ze ook gevoelens van machteloosheid en Moral distress als gevolg van persoonlijke en structurele uitdagingen. Het bevorderen van Cultural Humility vereist aanpak van deze uitdagingen en bevordering van reflectie binnen organisaties. Daarnaast bieden de concepten Moral Distress en Cultural Humility interessante perspectieven voor verbetering van de hulpverlening en aanpak van impliciete vormen van discriminatie. Het onderzoek benadrukt echter de noodzaak van integratie van een intsitutionele dimensie binnen het model van Cultural Humility, om zo het individueel en structureel niveau met elkaar te verbinden.

List of acronyms and abbreviations

UAMs: Unaccompanied minors

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for the Refugees

EU: European Union

EUAA: European Union Agency for Asylum

EEA: European Economic Area

CGRS: office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless persons

OOC: Observation and orientation center

LOI: Lokaal opvanginitiatief

CIBA: centrum voor Intensieve Begeleiding van Asielzoekers

OKAN: Onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige kinderen

WHO: World Health Organization

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1 Introduction

Since autumn 2021, Belgian newspapers and public broadcasting services have reported a surge in unaccompanied minors (UAMs) seeking asylum in Belgium, leading to mounting pressure on the reception network ("'Spectaculaire toename' van aantal niet-begeleide minderjarige asielzoekers in 2021," 2022). As a consequence, numerous asylum seekers have been forced to sleep on the streets of Brussels (Fedasil, 2022; Goethals & De Bode, 2022; Lyons, 2022; Temmerman & Macken, 2023). In October 2022, staff members of the Belgian asylum reception centers took to the streets to raise the alarm and ask for support in dealing with the disastrous consequences of this situation (Fedasil, 2022). The pertinent and continuing lack of resources and places within reception centers forces them to send people who seek international protection- including UAMs - back to the streets. This has a detrimental impact on the psychological wellbeing of everyone involved.

Similar to other European countries, UAMs have long been a significant concern in Belgium (Federale Overheidsdienst Justitie, n.d.). They are particularly vulnerable; they have traveled long distances, often experiencing traumatic events along the way (Caritas International, 2021). In 2021, 63.3% off all UAMs seeking asylum in Belgium were Afghan youth (CGRS, 2023). Given the vulnerability of UAMs, their mental health has been extensively studied (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008; Huemer, Karnik, & Steiner, 2009; Vervliet, Lammertyn, et al., 2014; Vervliet, Meyer Demott, et al., 2014). Longitudinal research in Belgium indicates persistent high levels of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in this group (Vervliet, Lammertyn, et al., 2014; Vervliet, Meyer Demott, et al., 2014). Although they are at high risk of developing mental disorders, this relationship is mediated by a complex interaction between factors like individual traumatic life experiences, being in a stable and supportive environment, the type of accommodation they reside in, family context, gender and cultural competences (Höhne et al., 2022). The significance of relationships with professionals especially proved to be one of the most important sources of social support for the minors (Mels et al., 2008) and is identified as an important coping mechanism (Nasir, 2012).

Considering the importance of the professional relationship for the coping and psychological wellbeing of (Afghan) UAMs, an in-depth understanding of the professional care relationships impacting UAMs in their everyday life is needed. While there has been research on the psychological wellbeing of UAMs and the care relationships in general, research exploring the ways in which professionals contribute to or hinder psychological wellbeing and coping of UAMs is yet to be done. Since asylum center staff and OKAN teachers are professionals who together form the majority of professionals in daily, immediate contact with UAMs, it can be expected that the professionals relationships with the minors are of most significance for their wellbeing. Therefore, they present as an interesting case-study to answer the main research

question: “How do professionals perceive Afghan UAMs and their coping behavior, and how do these perceptions inform their professional practice?” Sub-questions will explore the stereotypical ideas underlying perceptions of UAMs and their coping (1), the strategies used to support them (2), and the identified challenges (3). This way, this thesis aims to add to the literature by investigating previously explored ideas in a new, specific context (the asylum center and OKAN education) and allows for a more nuanced, complex and in-depth understanding of these issues by using a qualitative methodology.

Using a qualitative research design based on in-depth interviews with professionals within the contexts of the asylum center and OKAN education, this master thesis aims to increase our understanding of how professionals who are in direct contact with Afghan UAMs perceive this group and how this informs the strategies they use and relates to the challenges they identify within their practice. The thesis relies on a theoretical framework that combines concepts like Othering, Color-evasiveness and Cultural humility to analyze how the professionals negotiate potential cultural differences, and the concept of Moral distress to analyze the impact of structural factors on their psychological wellbeing.

In a first chapter, this master’s thesis presents a literature review to sketch the contextual and academic context against which the conducted study needs to be understood. A discussion of the specific context of the Afghan UAMs in Belgium is followed by a discussion of the most important professional care contexts, contemporary discourses of migration in Flanders as well as the role and impact of professional care relationships. Chapter 2 subsequently outlines the theoretical framework, combining the concepts of Othering, Color-evasiveness and Cultural Humility with a perspective of Moral distress. After a discussion of the research question (chapter 3), chapter 4 outlines the methodology of the research as well as a discussion on the positionality of the researcher. This is followed by a detailed data-analysis chapter analyzing the data according to Braun and Clarke’s approach to thematic analysis (2006, 2021). Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings and relates these to the literature review. Some limitations and suggestions for further research are included at the end.

2 Literature Review

This literature review is divided into three parts. Part I outlines the general context of the Afghan UAMs in Belgium. Then, Part II discusses contemporary discourses of migration and structural inequalities in Flanders. This provides the background against which part III needs to be understood, concerning the role and impact of professional relationships between migrants and professionals.

2.1 Afghan Unaccompanied Refugee minors in Belgium

Belgium as a destination country – Afghan migration to Belgium

Over the last 40 years, multiple crises including decades of war and the COVID-19 pandemic have put a lot of pressure on Afghanistan's public infrastructure (Essar et al., 2021), resulting in a so-called "humanitarian crisis" by (e.g. Essar et al., 2021) organizations like United Nations High Commissioner for the Refugees (UNHCR) (UNHCR, 2023) and scholars (Essar et al., 2021). Decades of conflict, natural disasters, food insecurity combined with the governmental take-over by the Taliban in August 2021 have further led to instability and the displacement of more than six million Afghans (Ryan & DeYoung, 2021). Even though the majority of them are internally displaced, other Afghan refugees are forced to seek better lives in other countries (UNHCR, 2023).

Yet, despite concerns of large-scale movements from Afghanistan coloring the rhetoric of neighboring countries and the European Union (EU), this was not the immediate effect. Due to the closure of land borders and an increase in securitized responses and Taliban checkpoints, regular migration pathways became less available, prompting migrants to rely on smugglers and risky routes (Mohammadi et al., 2021). Although Europe's approach has been to try to keep Afghans away from European borders through the EU Action plan (Council of the European Union, 2021), the mixed migration network does not consider these solutions durable. Instead, this approach increases pressure on neighboring countries and border countries without necessarily deterring Afghans' intention to move on towards Europe (Mohammadi et al., 2021). The EUAA report shows an increase in detected illegal border-crossings by Afghans along the Western Balkan route in August and September 2021 (following the Taliban takeover) and an increase in applications for international protection in EU+ countries (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022).

To understand the context of the Afghan UAMs in Belgium specifically, it is important to sketch the particular background of UAMs in Europe and Belgium. Unaccompanied minors or children, defined by the UNHCR as "children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so' ("Committee on the Rights of the Child, Thirty-Ninth Session, 17 May-3 June 2005,"

2008), have made up an average 16% of the total number of first-time asylum applicants in Europe aged less than 18, in the period between 2012 and 2022. Concretely, 24.147 children arrived in European border countries in 2021 of whom, 71% were unaccompanied or separated minors[1] (Eurostat, 2023). Afghanistan is by far the most represented country of origin of the UAMs that arrived in Europe between 2012 and 2022, with a percentage of 39.3% (Eurostat, 2023).

The EUAA report (2022) shows that Belgium is one of the countries where Afghan UAMs mostly and increasingly apply for asylum. This is mirrored in the number of requests for international protection filed in 2022, in which Afghanistan is overrepresented (CGRS, 2023). This rapport also notes an increase of 12.3% of registered unaccompanied minors, of whom 93.8% were boys and 67.6% had the Afghan nationality.

Studies show that UAMs are at greater risk of harm than adult migrants because they lack the protection of family or other adults ((Maioli et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2021). A report conducted by UNHCR and partners about refugee children who arrived in Europe in 2021 showed that 45% reported having been exposed to abuse, violence and/or exploitation throughout their flight experience (UNHCR et al., 2021). Another study that interviewed children who traveled the Balkan route reported that (sexual) violence was very common along the way. Although the journey itself was described as difficult and traumatic, the interviewed children expressed pride in overcoming the challenges and emphasized their resilience (Save the Children, 2019).

Legal context

Unaccompanied, Refugee, Minors

UNHCR distinguishes between "separated children" and "unaccompanied children". "Separated children" are defined as children separated from both their parents or previous legal primary or customary caregiver, but possibly still accompanied by other relatives, and "unaccompanied children" as children who have been separated from their parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so (UNHCR, 2021). In line with this, Belgium's Immigration Office uses the term "unaccompanied foreign minors" (niet-begeleide minderjarige vreemdelingen) to refer to every youngster who is 1) a minor under the age of 18 , 2) not a citizen of the European Economic Area (EEA), 3) who has arrived in Belgium unaccompanied by someone who does not have parental authority or legal guardianship as defined by the national law of the minor and 4) is in one of the following two situations: the minor has applied for refugee recognition or does not

[1] From now on, unaccompanied and separated minors will be taken together in the further description of this thesis, because these two groups fall under the same legal frameworks which means the way they are being professionally supported in Belgium is the same.

meet the conditions for entering the territory or residence, as regulated by the Aliens Act (Federale Overheidsdienst Justitie, n.d.). Following Derluyn and Broekaert (2008), this thesis considers the components "refugee", "minor" and "unaccompanied" as central to these different definitions and suitable to describe the legal context of the group of (Afghan) UAMs.

The term "refugee" refers to the first article of the 1951 Refugee convention (United Nations, n.d.), which is used as the head criterion in most European countries (including Belgium) to base their decisions on asylum applications on. This article defines a refugee as, "a person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution" (UNHCR, 2002). This definition is often used to distinguish between a refugee and a migrant, where a refugee is considered an involuntary migrant, forced to flee its country due to an immediate threat, migrants are considered to migrate because of economic or personal reasons (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008; Guarnaccia & Lopez, 1998; Hodes, 2000). However, as Derluyn and Broekaert (2008) argue, this distinction is hard to make. Especially in the case of minors, it is rarely the case that they make an independent decision to migrate which is why this thesis considers all Afghan UAMs refugees.

Being labelled a "minor" also has important legal implications. In Belgium, since the law of 19 January 1990, everyone under the age of 18 is considered a minor (Wet Tot Verlaging van de Leeftijd van Burgerlijke Meerderjarigheid Tot Achttien Jaar, 1990). This has important implications for migrants, because this means that the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child is applicable, stating that all minors have to be protected and cared for (Unicef, n.d.). This results in some differences to the usual asylum application procedure that are advantageous for the child. In Belgium for example, minors are being exempt from the Dublin regulation, assigned a legal guardian and provided with formal education (CGRS, 2019a). Furthermore, minors are considered a vulnerable group, which is taken into account when they are assigned a location of accommodation. However, the age of limit is rather an arbitrary one and does not always say something about the maturity of the person (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008). Yet, the significant implications that being considered a "minor" has, means that many countries including Belgium subject doubtful cases to age tests, despite the fact that medical experts have repeatedly criticized these tests for not being objective (Bhabha, J. & Young, 1999; Hunter, 2001).

Finally, being "unaccompanied" is also not easy to determine. In Belgium, a very strict definition is used. Receiving the label of "unaccompanied" results in the assignment of a legal guardian further regulated by the Guardianship Act (CGRS, 2019b). In Belgium it is legally required that every minor is guided and represented by a legal guardian (Caritas, 2021).

Asylum application procedure

It is out of the scope of this master thesis to go into too much detail in describing the exact application procedure, but a summary below focuses on the aspects relevant for the target group of Afghan UAMs. Despite efforts towards harmonization, care trajectories of UAMs in Belgium can vary sharply (De Graeve & Bex, 2017). Yet, a series of legal provisions assure the protection of unaccompanied minors specifically. This includes the prohibition of detention in closed centers and forced expulsion form the country as well as the appointment of a guardian.

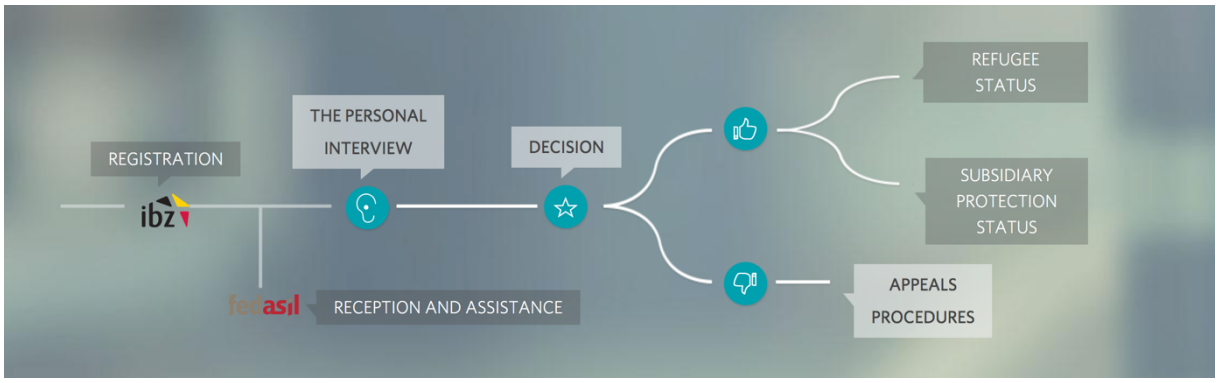

Figure 1. Asylum application procedure: The Unaccompanied Child. Retrieved from: *The Unaccompanied Child* from CGRS, 2019, (https://www.cgrs.be/en/unaccompanied-child). Copyright 2015 – 2022, Office of the CGRS

As illustrated in figure 1, the procedure for Afghan UAMs to apply for asylum consists of a few important steps. Two types of asylum are possible, the minor can obtain protection because they have been persecuted or fears persecution in their country of origin due to several reasons (religion, race, nationality, political opinions or those of family, membership of a "particular social group" that shares certain unchangeable characteristics and is treated hostilely in the country of origin) (CGRS, 2019b). Secondly, subsidiary protection can be granted in case the refugee status does not apply, but the minor is still at serious risk of harm in the country of origin. Serious harm can consist of a serious threat to life because of armed conflict, torture or inhuman treatment or execution or the death penalty (CGRS, 2019b).

After the registration of the application and the age test if considered necessary, the minor is assigned a legal guardian to assist them in finding a lawyer and to make sure that the paperwork is in order, and that the minor goes to school. The guardian will be present at interviews at the Immigration Office to ensure that the minor's rights are protected. Furthermore, when there is no other family to live with, the minor is housed in a reception center operated by Fedasil or one of its partners (e.g. the Red Cross) in a place that is separated from adults and adapted to the specific needs of UAMs (CGRS, 2019b).

Importantly, recent events have led to certain particularities in the application procedure of UAMs from Afghanistan specifically. In August 2021, after the political take-over of the Taliban, the CGRS decided to put the granting of subsidiary protection to applicants from Afghanistan on hold because they argued that necessary information about the situation in Afghanistan was lacking. Previously, Afghan applicants could be granted subsidiary protection because of the war context in Afghanistan. However, on 2 March 2022 they lifted this ban and decided that subsidiary protection can no longer be granted as according to them, there is not real risk anymore in Afghanistan to become the victim of random acts of violence (CGRS, 2022). The CGRS argues that ever since the Taliban took over political control of Afghanistan, violent incidents can still happen but only targeted on specific people who meet the conditions to obtain protection via the refugee status (CGRS, 2022).

This decision is heavily criticized by Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen. This organization analyzed different recent decisions of the CGRS to deny asylum applications of Afghans and concluded that these decisions lacked in different aspects including the fact that the decisions are diametrically opposed to the guidelines provided by the UNHCR and the EAA and foremost that they disregard the humanitarian and economic situation of Afghanistan. Contrary to what the CGRS states, European jurisprudence does say that it is possible that the current humanitarian and economic crisis is caused by the actors involved, such as the Taliban (Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, n.d.). Furthermore, after receiving a negative decision by the CGRS, the department of Immigration needs to issue an order to leave the Belgian territory that cannot be considered to be in conflict with article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (Equality and Human Rights Commission, n.d., p. 3) which includes the right of protection by the prohibition of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishments. This means that in reality, more and more Afghan nationals have received a negative decision on their application and the message to leave the Belgian territory. Yet, at the same time, they cannot be send back because this would violate article 3 (Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, n.d.). Evidently, this context has an important impact on the process for Afghan UAMs and the way professionals try to support them.

Professional support: contexts of care

After the registration is made, Afghan UAMs find themselves in two important contexts that will have an important impact on their further personal development: the context of the reception center and the educational context. Both can be seen as contexts where care is provided for the minors.

Reception center

The reception policies for UAMs include a three-phrase trajectory. In the first phase, minors stay for a period of 2 – 4 weeks in one of the two federal observation and orientation centers (OOCs), where a first medical, psychological and social profile is created. The goal is to determine vulnerabilities to orient the minor towards a reception center fitted for their personal needs. Furthermore, this phase allows the Guardianship Service to determine if the minor is indeed a minor and is indeed unaccompanied (Fedasil, 2016a).

In the second phase, they are referred to other care facilities depending on their chosen procedure (De Graeve & Bex, 2017). They are received in federal (often collective) reception centers operated by Fedasil or one of its partners. The different facilities in which they end up differ in scale, quality and in the number of social workers who take care of them. According to Belgian law, asylum seekers can apply for a transition to individual accommodation after six months, but reality shows that people usually stay in these collective centers much longer (Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2016). In the center they receive material and medical assistance and reside in a separate part of the center, with its own team of social workers and supporting staff (CGRS, 2019a; Fedasil, 2016a). This team supports them in their daily life and progressively prepares them for autonomy (Fedasil, 2016a). In a third phase, minors above the age of 16 whose request for international protection was accepted can go to a local reception initiative ('Lokaal opvanginitiatief' (LOI)). Until the age of 18, UAMs cannot be deported, regardless if the minor has or has not filed an application for international protection. If the minor turns 18 before a decision is made, they are transferred to a reception structure for adults (Fedasil, 2016a).

In Belgium there are almost 80 reception centers run by Fedasil or its partners for people who seek international protection. Despite differences in size and location, all centers offer the same services. Next to the regular centers, there are certain centers with a particular function. For example, CIBA (Centrum voor Intensieve Begeleiding van Asielzoekers) is a special center operated by the Red Cross where people from Fedasil's regular reception network with intensive psychological or psychiatric difficulties can be treated (Rode Kruis Vlaanderen, 2023) (Fedasil, 2016a).

Despite the efforts made to receive as many people as possible, Fedasil has been raising alarm repeatedly as they are unable to receive everyone after their initial registration (Fedasil, 2022). Since May 2021, people who are considered vulnerable, including the minors, are given priority in the allocation of a place in a reception center. However, even this priority given to the most vulnerable group of minors is insufficient to accommodate everyone. On 12th October 2022, Fedasil published a new article stating that only half of the 40 registered minors that were registered the previous day, could be allocated a place (Fedasil, 2022).

OKAN

Being an UAM and thus under 18 at the time of arrival gives the minor access to one year of full-time day education provided to newcomers (De Graeve & Bex, 2017). In Flanders, this is called the OKAN-class ('Onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige kinderen), a form of education that is organized for children and adolescents with a nationality that is not Belgian or Dutch who are new to the country and whose knowledge of Dutch is insufficient to participate in the regular education system. In the case of secondary education, the OKAN-trajectory includes one year of intensive Dutch classes, after which they transition to the regular education system. The aim of OKAN-education is to increase the probability of newcomers to catch up and be included in the regular education system (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2018).

Since 2006, OKAN support is no longer restricted to the first year of newcomer education but followed by a year of support when the pupil is already attending the regular school. This system is called follow-up education coaching (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2018; Vlaamse Overheid, n.d.). The official task of a follow-up coach includes the follow-up and support of ex-pupils in the school the follow-up school as well as sharing expertise and support the teachers there (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2018). However, rapports show that next to their education-oriented tasks, follow-up coaches also take up tasks related to practical and psychological support (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2018).

Mental health, coping, and the importance of relationships with professionals

From mental health towards psychological wellbeing

Historically, how to define "mental health" and how to measure it has been a core dilemma in academia. As the implications of the definition go straight into the heart of etiological debates and has very important implications for the way care is structured, it is important to realize that defining it is always a political issue (Vega & Rumbaut, 1991).

In the past, definitions of mental health have mainly been constructed by psychiatrists, starting from a disease model and therefore defining it as the absence of mental illnesses (Vega & Rumbaut, 1991). Yet, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (World Health Organization, 2004, p. 10) . This definition represents substantial progress in comparison to the previous one, but again raises several concerns among academics, as it identifies positive feelings and positive functioning as key factors for mental health.

As explained by (Galderisi et al., 2015), people in good mental health are often sad, unwell, angry or unhappy, and this is part of a fully lived life. Therefore, they criticize other academics, who have developed concepts based on the previously mentioned definition of the WHO, focusing only on positive emotions and positive functioning. They propose a new definition of mental health, avoiding as much restrictive and culture-bound statements as possible. The proposed definition is the following: "Mental health is a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society. Basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one's own emotions, as well as empathize with others; flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles; and harmonious relationship between body and mind represent important components of mental health which contribute, to varying degrees, to the state of internal equilibrium" (Galderisi et al., 2015, p.3). This new definition is compatible with the recovery movement perspective, in which recovery after an illness is seen as a process aimed to attain a fulfilled and valued life by building on the functions that have not been impaired by the illness (Slade et al., 2014).

In line with this evolution towards a recovery-oriented perspective, more and more researchers insist to use the term "psychological wellbeing" instead of "mental health" (Ahearn, 2000; Amro, 2019) because it is considered to be less stigmatizing. The concept of "psychological wellbeing" on the contrary, goes beyond the classical notion of "mental health" as the absence of mental disorders by taking into account the resilience of individuals, referring to how they overcome difficulties, adversity or trauma so well that functioning can even be better than before (Schultze-Lutter et al., 2016).

Coping and the importance of professional support

As both Schultze-Lutter et al. (2016) and Amro (2019) assert, views on psychological wellbeing overlap but still show significant diversity. Therefore, it is important to focus on what is meant by the concept in the specific context in which it is used. This master's thesis will follow the recovery movement in taking a strengths-based approach instead of focusing on mental illness, using the concept of "coping".

Although scholars agree that UAMs are confronted with traumatic experiences and challenges of acculturation, they also show remarkable emotional resilience (Huemer, Karnik, Voelkl-Kernstock, et al., 2009; Lustig et al., 2004; Rousseau et al., 1998). A literature review by Nasir (2012) evaluated ten qualitative studies studying coping mechanisms as they were identified by UAMs themselves and identified three important analytical factors in relation to coping and resilience: individual factors, external factors and bi-cultural identity development. Individual factors refer to internal resources and personal traits that could help them to cope with difficulties in the host country, like religion, suppressing difficult emotions and survival skills.

External factors are the support and services they receive (education, professionals, mental health services). Lastly, the way in which they succeed in negotiating and integrate the culture of the host and the home country (bi-cultural identity development) also proved to be important.

Receiving adequate professional support is thus an important external factor that can help UAMs to address difficulties they encounter (Eriksson & Rundgren, 2019; Höhne et al., 2022; Nasir, 2012). Similarly, in Flanders, scholars call for a further investigation of the way social relationships and networks including those with professionals help migrants to overcome experiences of racial discrimination and exclusion (De Kock, 2020; Rondelez et al., 2016; Snoubar & Zengin, 2022). Being under a lot of pressure during this stressful time of waiting for an answer regarding their asylum application, living together with other people in a collective center is not easy. As Lietaert, Verhaeghe and Derluyn (2020) point out, the way in which life in collective asylum centers is organized impacts the wellbeing of its residents. An important factor here, is the way in which they are perceived and treated by staff members. As a study of Mels, Derluyn & Broekaert (2008) indicates, the asylum center staff proved to be one of the most important resources of social support for UAMs in Belgium and the extent to which minors perceived these relationships to be strong and positive was an important indicator for how well they could cope with distress. Next to the staff in the asylum centers, connections with teachers can be expected to play an important role here as well. Throughout this master's dissertation, the word "professionals" is used to refer to all those whose professional activities include the support (mental, physical, educational) of Afghan UAMs in a direct way (meaning there has to be a lot of contact with this group).

Before presenting a literature review focused on the impact of professional relationships on the wellbeing of minorities and Afghan UAMs in part III, part II sketches a background of the discourses and inequalities in Flanders against which the findings in part III need to be understood.

2.2 Migration discourse and structural inequalities in Belgium

Migration discourse

Although Western European countries like to present themselves as promoting equality and social rights, scholars point to discrepancies between this rhetoric and actual practice. This creates what Kamali (2010, p. 14) calls "The European Dilemma", a paradox between the declaration of universalism, human rights and democracy on the one hand and the existence of institutional discrimination on the other hand. He argues that this paradox is the major obstacle that hinders the promotion of social cohesion and explains a lot of tension within Western European countries today. To understand how a discourse of equality and social rights can keep existing, despite persisting forms of inequality, it is important to zoom in on the evolution of discourses around migration that have become dominant over the last decades.

The increase in migration to Western European countries after the Cold War has challenged boundaries of citizenship and has evoked discourses like "multiculturalism", "integration", "assimilation" and "neo-assimilation" (Eliassi, 2010). Eliassi highlights that scholars who have studied the evolutions of those discourses concerning migrants in Europe have come to the conclusion that generally, migrants are constructed as a threat to Western cultural values and civilization (Asad, 2003; De Cleen et al., 2017; Eliassi, 2010; Gullestad, 2002). International evolutions like the increased focus on the "war on terror" after the events of 9/11 also had a major impact on migration discourses, as it led to new legislation and the introduction of counter-terrorist measures and increased policing. Furthermore, this has further fueled the construction of Muslims in particular, as the enemy, and thus led to the extension of already existing exclusionary discourses and racism that targeted asylum-seekers to Muslim communities and led to high levels of anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe (Fekete, 2004; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2009). Then, in the aftermath of the mid-2010 terror attacks in Western-European cities, Islamophobia and anti-Islam sentiments have further increased (De Coninck, 2022; Wieviorka, 2018). This "Islamization of the Stranger", like Elchardus and Spruyt (2014) call it, results in anti-Muslim feelings becoming more widespread. These are no longer limited to extreme right-wing but are present across the political spectrum.

Similar trends have been observed within the Flemish context, research conducted after the 2015 so-called "refugee crisis" has shown that the dominant negative discourse has drawn on long-established culturalist, economic and securitarian discursive logics to construct migrants, ethnic minorities and asylum seekers as a threat to Flanders, Belgium and Europe in general (De Cleen et al., 2017). Despite not changing its fundaments, this dominant discourse adapted itself after 2015 and strengthened an already existing discourse of an anti-Islam clash of civilizations (De Cleen et al., 2017; De Nolf et al., 2021). As Spruyt and van der Noll (2017) point out, this may not be by a change of attitude towards a specific group (Muslims) per se, but rather an increased salience of that group in the mental image of people that they use to make sense of categories like "strangers" and "migrants". These discourses that are grounded in culturally essentialist understandings presenting migrants and especially Muslims as a threat to the so-called cultural homogeneity of Flanders (De Cleen et al., 2017), are the background to which we need to understand the persistence of racial and ethnic inequalities in Western societies.

Inequality

These inequalities persist in different contexts like (mental) health care, education and access to the labor market, and are widely documented. Research in the United States and Europe show that people who belong to ethnic minority groups are often confronted with racial stratification, which increases their probability to develop mental health issues in comparison to the dominant

ethnic group (Brown, 2003; Chakraborty et al., 2010; Karlsen et al., 2005). Belgium follows this trend, as research conducted by Rondelez et al. (2017) shows how religious minorities face racial discrimination, increasing the extent to which they are exposed to mental health risks. Yet, despite the increased mental health risks, studies across different Western countries have shown that ethnic minorities receive far less or inadequate mental health care compared to the dominant ethnic group (Cook et al., 2014; Howell & McFeeters, 2008; Jimenez et al., 2013).

Structural inequality can also be found in the context of education, scholarly work conducted by Merry (2005) shows for example how Muslim youth face exclusion in the educational context in many forms. The way that education policy, praxis and the school composition is organized contributes to the creation and reproduction of a separate "Muslim underclass", that is oriented towards lower educational trajectories and jobs. This is consistent with earlier work, providing evidence for a cumulative ethnic and class disadvantage for Turkish and Moroccan minorities in the Belgian educational system. The largest disadvantage proved to be for the Turkish minority in Flanders who were the most underrepresented in tertiary education and at higher risk for school drop out in secondary education (Phalet et al., 2007). More recent work has evaluated the effectiveness of measures that have been taken in primary and secondary education in schools with a high number of students with a lower socio-economic background and ethnic minorities on the long term. Although the impact of ethnic inequality on educational attainment and the spread of students over the different segments in the education was lower compared to earlier, the inequality still persists (Cincinnato et al., 2020).

This, in turn, is also tied to inequality in access and participation in the labor market. Linked to low education levels and a lack of knowledge of Dutch, surveys show that Flemings with a migration background are overrepresented in unemployment figures (Van de Velden & Roelens, 2017). Furthermore, the unemployment among people with a migration background is often understood in culturalist terms by people and institutions and this culturalization of the main causes in turn perpetuates further dynamics of discrimination (Aziz, 2017; Charkaoui, 2019; Lamrabet, 2017; Zemni, 2009). This illustrates how a vicious circle is installed where denigrating discourses, discrimination and structural inequalities mutually reinforce each other.

To understand how these dynamics of discrimination impact ethnic minorities concretely to produce racialized outcomes, it is also important to look at individual interactions between minorities and professionals who work in these institutions. Certain micro-level factors like attitudes of professionals can play an important role here (Dumke & Neuner, 2023). An important point raised by scholars researching structural and institutional dimensions of racism highlights the mutually reinforcing impact of different dimensions of racism, including structural, institutional and interpersonal dimensions (Lazaridou & Fernando, 2022; Nazroo et al., 2020). The next part sketches the academic debate that focuses on how interpersonal

relations between professionals and ethnic minority individuals and racial discourses and structural inequalities are mutually reinforcing each other. The selected literature focuses on the professions of social work and education.

2.3 The impact of relationships with professionals: social work and education

Despite how relevant professional support is considered by both minors and professionals alike, several studies show that professionals do identify certain challenges, related to both external and internal factors, in providing this professional care.

Psychological distress

Studies point out how migration policies within contemporary liberal democracies are marked by ambivalence because of different, often contradictory jurisdictions and policies (Andersson, 2014; Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018; Mänttäri-van Der Kuip, 2020). Shaped by controversial ideological transformations outlined previously, the welfare context for migration has been restructured and had to be adapted to diverse austerity measures (Baines & Van Den Broek, 2016; Garrett & Bertotti, 2017). After 2015, public debate surrounding the so-called refugee crisis and connected discussions on migrant reception in Europe have been marked by themes like human rights versus national security and refugee rights versus the right and need to protect welfare institutions (Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018), a trend that also informed the framing of the refugee crisis in Flanders (De Cleen et al., 2017). These discussions resulted in new regulations and stricter border controls around the EU's external borders (Andersson, 2014). The national level also experienced restructuring, impacting daily practices of professionals dealing with refugee reception due to increasingly restrictive legislation (Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018).

According to Mänttäri-van der Kuip (2020), these evolutions make it increasingly challenging for professionals to meet the needs of their clients and adhere to the ethical principles of social work (IFSW, 2018). Different studies highlight the psychological effects of this new context on professionals who need to work within it. A grounded theory exploration of experiences of staff working with refugees and asylum seekers in the UK has shown that the personal impact on the professionals is profound. Feelings of being overwhelmed, helpless, powerless, frustration and exhaustion came to the forefront (Guhan & Liebling-Kalifani, 2011) and corroborated findings pointing out difficulties to work within the asylum system (Johnson, 2003) and managing professional boundaries (Century et al., 2007; Misra et al., 2006). They also found evidence for the existence of positive emotions; they often felt more fulfilled in their jobs than professionals in the social work sector who do not work with refugee clients specifically. But despite these possible positive effects, these scholars hihglight the importance of attending to these negative effects.

The grounded theory exploration of professionals' experiences within the refugee system (Guhan & Liebling-Kalifani, 2011) support earlier developed concepts like vicarious trauma, secondary traumatization and compassion fatigue that are often present in this professional population working in the reception context (Canning, 2021). Although often used interchangeably, vicarious trauma is a commonly used umbrella term to describe "the cumulative, negative psychological effects on workers as a result of hearing the harrowing stories of trauma survivors" (Rønning et al., 2020, p. 1). Secondary traumatization refers to similar psychological effects, but the difference is that secondary traumatization can happen at once whereas vicarious trauma develops over a period of time (Rønning et al., 2020). Compassion fatigue finally, refers to negative feelings that result from exhaustion or overexposure to similar, relentless problems that seem to be endemic.

Based on Canning's findings, it's crucial to recognize that the distress among professionals in the reception context goes beyond working with survivors of persecution or violence (Canning, 2021). These experiences are intrinsically linked to the wider socio-political context enforcing restrictive and hostile border controls and measures. The concept of "moral distress", developed by Jameton (1984), takes this argument into account. The concept has been developed and used in the nursing literature to refer to personal feelings of distress that can arise in this situation. Jameton defined it as a feeling that develops "when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action" (Jameton, 1984, p6 in Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2019). Recently, it has also been applied to the social work context (Mänttäri-van Der Kuip, 2020) offering a theoretical framework to interpret feelings of social workers. The concept is further discussed in the next chapter.

Negotiating cultural differences

Furthermore, Backlund et al. (2015) have shown that social workers working with refugee minors are often unsure how to relate to the children's cultural background. These authors argue that professionals should have in-depth knowledge of the treatment and understanding of trauma as well of "different cultures" in order to work with minors. Research investigating coping in UAMs specifically warns for the risk of Western professionals using Western accounts of coping, which may lead to incorrect and biased interpretations (Nasir, 2012).

Additionally, research in Sweden shows that often, a certain discourse is present among social workers that can lead to pathologizing minoritized groups, particularly men, as violent (Eliassi, 2010). Ideological constructions of Muslims in particular, are a problem for European societies and play a significant role in legitimizing state racism and repressive immigration policies (Brah, 1992 p. 71; Fekete, 2006). These constructions can have very strong effects when they are consequently translated into social policy or become "professional common sense" of teachers, social workers and health visitors (Brah, 1992, p.73; Eliassi, 2010).

Within academia, the intellectual movement of postcolonialism has dedicated itself to investigate how these intercultural challenges can be understood. The next section will explore the academic debate that has been initiated by postcolonial theorists and resulted in the development and application of concepts like Othering and Color-evasiveness to explain how professional relationships between (usually white) professional caregivers and (usually non-white) patients/clients/recipients of care possibly reinforce dynamics of inequality. Additionally, the anti-oppressive movement within sectors like social work and education is discussed to look at how these sectors try to oppose these dynamics, including an argument for the use of a Cultural Humility approach.

Dynamics that reinforce inequality

The concept of Othering

To understand and explain how mechanisms of structural inequality persist today, postcolonial theorists have pointed out that these mechanisms result from colonial systems of domination that continue to structure the postcolonial world. Additionally, they influence current relations between "the West" and countries or people considered "non-Western". Scholars emphasize the central role of discourse in shaping the reality of dominant and dominated groups (Eliassi, 2015). Moreover, they acknowledge that dominant groups possess more power to define discourse (Piazza & Wodak, 2023), contributing to the hegemony of certain discourses, including Othering. Such hegemonic discourses can lead to the material and symbolic exclusion of minority groups from society, reinforcing existing inequalities (Eliassi, 2015).

Before delving further into a discussion on Othering, it is important to note that there is no consensus on its content (Akbulut & Razum, 2022). Generally, there are two theoretical views, each with its own assumptions. The first view is based on social psychological literature on in-group and outgroup formations, where Othering is studied in conjunction with concepts like stereotyping, prejudice and stigmatization (Canales, 2000). This thesis adopts the second theoretical view, the postcolonial perspective, which studies Othering as a process of construction within discourses. This view implies that Othering does not arise from misconceptions to be corrected (theoretical view 1), but it is based on representations that need to be deconstructed (Canales, 2000).

The main goal of postcolonial theorists in constructing the concept of Othering was to highlight how current relations of dominance between Western and non-Western countries are the result of inherited colonial power structures (Akbulut & Razum, 2022; Hall, 1992; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1985). Said's work on Orientalism has been interpreted as a paradigmatic case of Othering, fueling further theory development and the creation of a new area of study (Spivak, 1985). Othering is defined as "a process in which, through discursive practices, different subjects are formed, hegemonic subjects – that is, subjects in powerful social positions – as well as those

subjugated to these powerful conditions" (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011). This definition emphasizes that Othering refers simultaneously to discursive practices and processes as well as subjective positions formed through these discourses. Certain characteristics and effects of Othering, built upon the work of various scholars, can be used to analyze contemporary society. These will be discussed in the next chapter.

Othering within professional contexts

Numerous studies have investigated how Othering and its dynamics persist in professional relationships between (white) professionals and non-white clients across various disciplines. For instance, Eliassi conducted extensive research on the discourse produced by Swedish social workers regarding immigrant clients (Eliassi, 2015) and the topics of racism and integration (Eliassi, 2017), identifying a discourse of culturalization as the main Othering dynamic. Culturalization assumes that culture is a monolithic, geographically bounded, and homogeneous element that is transmitted across generations (Stolcke, 1995) and reinforces ideas of cultural hierarchy that regard Swedish people as superior to others. Integration was framed in relation to cultural differences and the role of racism was in most cases denied or minimized (Eliassi, 2017). These dynamics contribute to the unequal participation of non-Swedish people who are seen as non-Swedish in society (Eliassi, 2015, 2017). Social workers with immigrant backgrounds, however, were more eager to discuss racism within their profession and in wider society, reflecting differences in discourse (Eliassi, 2017). The presence of culturalization discourses supports earlier findings in child welfare contexts where social workers use culture to explain ordinary and "normal" child-rearing practices and encounter difficulties interacting with immigrant clients (Anis, 2005).

Similar dynamics of Othering have been found in nursing practice (Canales, 2000), general health care services (Canales, 2000), and education in Western countries like the United Kingdom (Archer & Francis, 2005), the Netherlands (Isik et al., 2021) and Germany (Moffitt & Juang, 2019). Many examples are given of how professionals tend to use essentializing, culturalist and racializing explanations in their interactions with racialized patients (Johnson et al., 2004).

At the same time: color-evasiveness

Interestingly, alongside dynamics of Othering, there is evidence of an ideology of "color-evasive racism", which expands upon the concept of a "color-blind racial ideology" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Color-evasive racism involves refusing to acknowledge the role of racism in normalizing and maintaining white supremacy in European countries (Migliarini, 2018). Bonilla-Silva (2006) introduced the concept of color-blind racism, which highlights four

interrelated frames - abstract liberalism, naturalization, culturalization, and the minimization of racism- that perpetuate racial hierarchies in contemporary Western societies by denying racism's existence and impact. These frames are further elaborated on in the next chapter.

Effects of color-evasiveness

Studies on color-evasiveness in immigration and political practice show its deep embedding in Western countries like France (Bleich, 2000), Italy (Hawthorne & Piccolo, 2017; Migliarini, 2018) and the United States (Annamma et al., 2017) since World War II. Migliarini (2018) found that Italian professionals in education, health and social services for refugees prefer terms like "ethnicity" or "culture" over "race", but that using these terms can also contribute to Othering dynamics, disregarding that they also postulate a normative state against which the Other is contrasted (Hawthorne & Piccolo, 2017). Furthermore, it hinders an adequate analysis and deconstruction of the dynamics of racism in contemporary society and how it still creates unequal opportunities for racialized people (Douglas et al., 2015), making it even harder to fight these inequalities.

On a psychological level, color-evasiveness reduces individuals' sensitivity to racism (Plaut et al., 2018) and negatively impacts interracial interaction, as racialized individuals perceive those with a color-evasive ideology as more biased (Holoien & Shelton, 2012).

A study by Hagenaars et al. (2023) in the Flemish education context contrasted the effects of a teaching approach grounded in a color evasive ideology (i.e. tending to ignore ethnic diversity and focus instead on uniqueness, individualism and equality (Rosenthal & Levy, 2010) with an approach grounded in multiculturalism (i.e. inclusive teaching practices allowing students to express their cultural heritage) and assimilation (i.e. practices that pressure ethnic minority students to adapt to the majority norms and values). It showed that grounding school policies in a color-evasive ideology often translates into a push for neutrality and an emphasis on individual talent. Often, this goes hand in hand with a prohibition of religious symbols and a zero-tolerance policy towards racism (Celeste et al., 2019). Although it lets schools explicitly take a stand against discrimination, it often results in prejudice, less adoption of inclusive teacher practices and it reduces students' possibility to recognize instances of (racial) discrimination (Apfelbaum et al., 2010; Aragón et al., 2017; Hachfeld et al., 2015; Wolsko et al., 2000). However, it is essential to look beyond policies at the organizational level. In a Flemish sample, the way teachers put into practice certain policies based on their personal beliefs, proved to be more important (Hagenaars et al., 2023).

Anti-oppressive social work and education: fighting against inequality

While detecting and analyzing dynamics of Othering and Color-evasiveness remain crucial in social work and education, these professions can be at the forefront of resistance against racism and discrimination. As Foucault said (1987, p.319): "There is no relationship of power without resistance, without resort or escape, without the possible reversal." Of course, it is central to listen to voices of marginalized groups who have always resisted these dynamics. But additionally, looking at acts and discourses of resistance by people like social workers and teachers is also relevant, because they occupy positions in society that allow them to effect positive change.

Social work plays a significant role in pursuing social justice through their practice (Eliassi, 2017; Humphries, 2008; Pease, 2010). It is considered to be the task of social workers to advocate for structural change by mobilizing anti-racist perspectives and challenge racial domination (Dominelli, 1997; Eliassi, 2010). This view on social work practice, called "critical social work practice", aims to critically analyze both the indirect and direct impact of societal perceptions of oppressed populations (Adams et al., 2009). Anti-oppressive practice, a constellation of strategies to fights oppression (Baines, 2007), aligns with these principles.

Education also plays a crucial role in challenging (racial) inequalities (Kumashiro, 2000). The reproduction of (racial) inequalities also happens within the educational system, which makes it another context with the potential for change. Throughout the years, the question of addressing (ethnic) diversity within the educational context has led scholars to develop different frameworks and ideas, one of those is the Cultural humility framework.

Cultural Humility

Cultural humility refers to an approach within professional relationships and was first defined by Tervalon and Murray-García (1998). They argued for a distinction between Cultural competence and Cultural humility and the adoption of a cultural humility framework by practitioners, in order to allow for a better negotiation of diversity within clinical practices. The definition they proposed can be summarized as followed, Cultural humility incorporates (1) a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, (2) redressing the power imbalances in the physician-patient dynamic, and (3) developing mutually beneficently and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, p. 123).

The call for cultural competence, introduced by Sue et al. (1992) was a first call for a much-needed training to improve the practice of white-European, middle-class practitioners in navigating professional environments of increasing diversity. The important distinction

Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) made with cultural competence, lays in the fact that "competence" implies that there exists a possibility to master cultures and to get to an expert position. Cultural humility on the other hand, stresses commitment and engagement in a process of life-long learning. This critique on the concept of "cultural competence" was supported and further elaborated in later scholarship. Next to critiquing the way "competence" implies that "knowing" or be "competent" in another's culture is even possible (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010; Dean, 2001), others argue that it lacks the commitment to a social justice agenda, the objective to rectify inequalities and go against power imbalances in society (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). Also, the term Cultural humility, aligns better with collaborative conceptualizations of the relationship between patients and professionals, something that has been stressed repeatedly in sectors like health care, but can also be presumed in contexts like social work and education. Furthermore, stimulating Cultural competence training has shown to be limited in effectiveness and entails the risk of stigmatizing, stereotyping and othering patients in a way that fosters racist attitudes and behaviors (Lekas et al., 2020).

Other conceptualizations have built further on the original idea proposed by Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) and took into consideration the lack present in the concept of Cultural competence:

> Cultural humility is about committing to an ongoing relationship with patients, communities, and colleagues that requires humility, as individuals continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique (p. 118). Cultural humility takes into account the fluidity and subjectivity of culture and challenges both individuals and institutions to address inequalities … it challenges active engagement in a lifelong process (versus a discrete endpoint) that individuals enter into with clients, organizational structures, and within themselves.' (p. 171) (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015, p.118 and p. 171).

The extra elements added here – the focus on the fluidity of culture and the idea of addressing power imbalances on different levels – make this framework useful for social work practice. The main actions the framework asks the social worker to do, can be summarized following Gottlieb et al. (2021): it challenges practitioners to (1) keep exploring their own social location and how certain identities influence beliefs on normality, justice and health, (2) to de-center their own knowledge and focus on the clients' knowledge and (3) it requires paying attention to ongoing power imbalances between client and practitioner and in society as a whole.

The ideas presented here illustrate how Cultural humility can be aligned with the principles embodied by critical social work practice and anti-oppressive practice. As Ross (2010) argues, Cultural humility must always take on a critical anti-oppressive approach which should not only manifest itself in critical self-reflection, but should also mean that practitioners reflect on the ways that power has been distributed interpersonally, historically and institutionally. The

concept of Cultural humility is further discussed in the next chapter, where it is incorporated in the theoretical framework.

2.4 Conclusion literature review

Afghan UAMs form a significant group in Belgium. Looking at the history and characteristics of Afghan migration to Belgium it can be expected this will stay the same in the near future, making it particularly pertinent to focus more research on this group specifically. Furthermore, an analysis of the legal context shows that their minority provides them with important rights like the right to care and education, but also adds to their vulnerability. Additionally, recent developments in Belgium's asylum procedure management resulting in a great number of negative decisions for Afghans add further to the precarity of their situation.

Considering the significance in number and particular vulnerability of this group, a great deal of research has been dedicated to the psychological wellbeing and coping mechanisms of (Afghan) UAMs. This scholarship indicates a high prevalence of mental health issues and the importance of social networks, including relationships with professionals. However, studies show that these professionals are confronted with certain challenges in their work with refugee minors.

A first important challenge involves experiences of moral distress and powerlessness resulting from increasingly restrictive policies in the reception context. Additionally, culturally essentialist discourses about migration in Flanders, presenting migrants as a threat to society, are widespread. These discourses contribute to structural inequalities in labor, education and health care. Keeping these findings in mind, the review also shows how dynamics of Othering and Color-evasiveness are omnipresent in society, including social work and educational contexts, which leads to negative outcomes and reinforces inequality. On the other hand, other work advocates that these contexts are the ideal contexts to affect positive change and argue for the use of a Cultural humility context.

3 Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework of this dissertation, examining the role of teachers and asylum center staff in caring for Afghan UAMs in Flanders. The framework consists of two parts, addressing the previously identified challenges of psychological distress and cultural differences. Part I uses postcolonial theory to understand how prejudice and racism, in the form of Othering and Color-evasiveness, impact professional relationships. This critical approach is complemented by a framework of Cultural humility, aligning with anti-oppressive social work and education, to investigate professionals' strategies to resist inequality. Part II employs the concept of Moral distress to analyze the relationship between psychological distress and structural factors affecting professionals' care for Afghan UAMs. While part I provides theory to analyze the extent to which professionals use their practice to reinforce or fight (racial) inequality, part II allows for a concurrent analysis of the emotional wellbeing of these professionals when they are not always able to do what they would want to do.

The discussion of the emergence of the different concepts can be found in the previous chapter. This chapter starts with a description of the main beliefs and characteristics of the different concepts, followed by a critical discussion of how they can contribute to the data analysis.

3.1 Part 1: negotiating cultural differences

Reproducing inequalities: identifying Othering and Color-evasiveness

Othering as a discursive practice

To understand Othering, both discursive and subjective levels need to be considered. Said's work is valuable in understanding the discursive level because he explains how so-called "objective" hegemonic knowledge about the Other can become institutionalized in political power relations. As Said explains, to produce the Orient or the Other, there is a need for *essentializing* and *homogenization* practices, constructing one generalized discourse about the Other in which negative attributes are ascribed to that collective, including traits like "irrational", "deprived", "childlike" and "different" (Said, 1978). As a result, when this discourse becomes dominant, it can result in epistemological practices that create knowledge that seems to be abstracted from individual traits and presents itself as uncontestable. All that is specific and individual within the Other is negated (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011). Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012) ague that *objectification* and *decontextualization* are two important elements to consider here. Objectification includes subjugation, stigmatization, stereotyping and inferiorizing individual and collective perspectives as well as identities. Decontextualization, on the other hand, detaches individuals form socioeconomic and other societal structures when their behavior, perceptions and situation are interpreted (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012).

Secondly, this homogenizing production of the Other simultaneously creates an equally *homogenized image of the West*, of the self, that is then ascribed opposite qualities like being "rational", "mature" and "normal" (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011). Othering thus has a dispositive character, fixating postcolonial and racist relations of power. According to Bhabba (1995) this fixity has been the most important characteristic of colonial Othering discourses because it rendered the constructed differences and inequality between subjects natural and unchanging. This aspect explains why this way of thinking still structures contemporary society. Furthermore, Othering is not only the effect of big political campaigns but impacts everyday life, necessitating the study of everyday life discourses (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011).

Othering and subjective positions

Next to the structural and political level, Othering also affects subjective positions and experiences of the people who live within a society marked by these discourses. Foucault (1984) and Laclau (Reckwitz, 2006, p. 341) argue, just like Fanon ([1952], 2012) who focused on the colonial situation specifically, that hegemonic discourses always constitute structural totalities that influence the subjectivity of subjects moving within that realm. On the one hand, "white" subjects or subjects who belong to the dominant group, will form subject formations based on being a member of the group represented as "normal" and situated out of racializing dynamics. The *process of identification* with that group and the adoption of values and norms and membership to the hegemonic group will safeguard the Self (Wollrad, 2007).

On the other hand, Othering also influences the subjectivity of those who are subjected to Othering dynamics, perpetuating an *internalization of the self-as-other* and a *desire of assimilation* (Hall, 1992) which results in attempts of assimilating practices and trying to become a "good migrant" (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011). However, as Thomas-Olalde and Velho (2011) argue, these attempts can be considered implicit confessions of indeed being the Other, of indeed being inherently different. Yet, paradoxically, this does mean that full integration in terms of assimilation is unattainable, which means it can sometimes lead to complete role-taking, but other times to partial identification that goes hand in hand with self-denigration and self-humiliation. Furthermore, research shows that minoritized people are also expected to add a certain flavor to everyday life (Hooks, 1994), for example, by sharing their exotic appearance or in the form of culinary or artist productions. This can then result in the minoritized experiencing processes of *self-culturalization* and *self-ethnicization*, again reinforcing the internalization for the self-as-other (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011).

Overall, the literature on Othering points out that the different discourses around integration are produced by a history of Othering (dating back to colonial times) and at the same time reproduce these Othering discourses through impacting the subjectivity of both hegemonic and

minoritized subjects alike. These different characteristics and effects need to be studied together.

Color-evasiveness

Analyzing Othering can be enriched by examining Color-evasiveness, using Bonilla-Silva's framework (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Through the analysis of four underlying frames, Bonilla-Silva provides a framework to identify his concept of Color-blindness. Yet, following critiques of Migliarini (2018) and others, the choice was made to use the word "evasion" instead of "blindness", because it highlights the avoidance or the escape of looking at race as an explanation for hierarchies. Also, it does not enforce an idea of disabilities as disadvantages.

The first underlying frame is that of *abstract liberalism*, which is based on principles like equal opportunity, individuals, and free market ideas, and suggests that disparities in outcomes within society are the result of individual choices rather than systemic racism. This frame is further supported by a *naturalization frame*, suggesting that racial inequalities are natural and inevitable consequences of cultural and social differences between racial groups, and a frame of *cultural racism* that regards cultural values and practices as explanations for the disadvantaged position of ethnic minorities. These three frames then feed into a fourth one, the *minimization of racism*, that asserts that current society is post-racial, downplaying contemporary manifestations and dynamics of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Opposing oppression: a framework of Cultural humility

While the concepts of Othering and Color-evasiveness can help to analyze the reproduction of inequalities, Cultural humility offers a constructive approach to address those issues.

Building onto a concept analysis of the term (Foronda et al., 2016) and the previously mentioned definitions (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998), the most important attributes of Cultural humility to take into consideration when applying the framework to professional contexts are *openness*, *self-awareness*, *egolessness*, *supportive interaction*, *self-reflection* and *critique*. This led to the development of a theoretical framework by Foronda (2020), summarized in this rainbow model (figure 2).

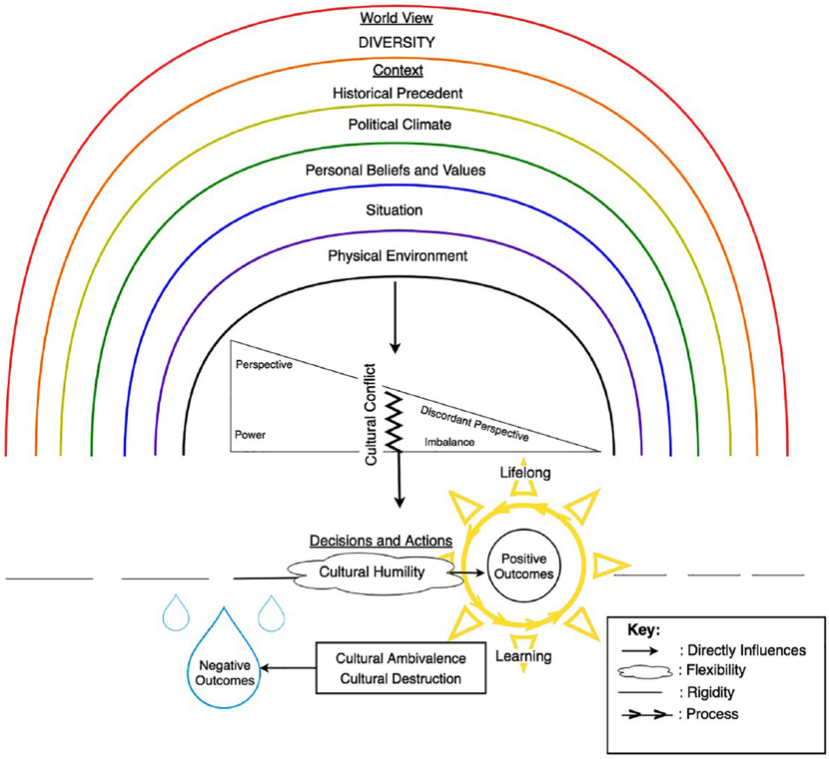

Figure 2. A Rainbow Model of Cultural Humility. Retrieved from A Theory of Cultural Humility by Foronda et al., 2020, p.10.

The main idea is that factors like a worldview that recognizes diversity, the historical context, the political climate, personal beliefs and values, the situation, and the physical environment in which people find themselves overlap and influence the way an individual interprets and approaches a specific situation. This can result in different perspectives and power imbalances, and cultural conflicts (defined as a difference in perspective on an issue) can emerge. Important to note is that approaches of Cultural humility define culture very broadly and could refer to any identity that is based on a common set of values and beliefs.

When a difference in perspective arises, the practitioner can respond in three different ways. The first approach is that of Cultural humility and refers to previously mentioned actions of *recognizing diversity and power imbalances*, and implementing actions of *openness, self-awareness, egolessness, supportive interactions* and *self-reflection and critique*. The second approach is one of cultural ambivalence and refers to decisions and actions of neglecting the consideration of power imbalances and diversity, which means that all individuals are being treated the same. The third one is cultural destruction and refers to the oppression and discrimination against individuals or groups based on diversity. It is postulated that, contrary to approaches two and three, an approach of Cultural humility leads to positive outcomes like lifelong learning, mutual empowerment, mutual respect, partnerships, and optimal care.

3.2 Part 2: the challenge of psychological distress

Moral distress

Ever since Jameton introduced the concept of Moral distress in 1984, it has been subjected to different analyses and critiques. Yet, most scholars agree it can still be useful and generally refers to work-related suffering caused by restricted moral agency (McCarthy & Gastmans, 2015).

In Jameton's original definition of moral distress, the main focus is on the impact of external factors restricting professionals in their ability to act in an ethical way according to their own moral code (Jameton, 1984). Thus, an adequate analysis of moral distress requires focusing on how professionals are *restricted and affected by organizational strategies, practices* as well as *broader socio-political structures* (Mänttäri-van Der Kuip, 2020). Additionally, other studies have shown that moral distress can also result from internal factors, such as *insufficient education*, *skills or knowledge* and *a lack of moral courage or ethical awareness* (Christen & Katsarov, 2016; Grady et al., 2008; Hanna, 2004; Mänttäri-van Der Kuip, 2020).

This master thesis aligns itself with the idea that professionals are part of a complex and multilayered system of relationships, meaning that they are actors who have agency to affect change, but at the same time are affected by the organization and the broader climate in which they work (Weinberg, 2009). Analyzing both internal and external aspects is essential for a comprehensive analysis of their practice and experiences. Adding this concept to the framework of Othering, Color-evasiveness and Cultural Humility can broaden the discussion on these dynamics by adding this experiential perspective considering structural factors.

3.3 Analytical utility

Despite formulated critiques, this thesis argues this novel framework is analytically useful when some critiques are taken into consideration.

Critical readings of the concept of Othering warn against the possibility that using it can have an essentializing effect and realize what the concept tries to criticize, fixating subjects who are "othered" in a certain subjective position which they cannot escape (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011). Furthermore, caution is needed against generalizing concrete and different forms of racialization and discrimination. Keeping these critiques in mind is indeed important; however, Thomas-Olalde and Velho (2011) and other scholars like Eliassi (2010) still consider the concept relevant. According to Thomas-Olalde and Velho (2011), the main analytical value lies in the possibility it opens to discern hegemonic discourses and how these are normalized. It allows for studying effects on both a structural and a subjective level. Furthermore, the room

for ambivalence also opens up the possibility to study how anti-hegemonic discourses and related strategies emerge.

Regarding Cultural humility, studies using the Cultural Humility Scale focusing on clients' experiences have shown that it is associated with positive outcomes, including a stronger working alliance (Hook et al., 2013) and can be seen as a reparative mediator for the working alliance in case the client experiences micro-aggressions (Davis et al., 2016). This means, that clients who identify themselves as culturally different from the professional they are working with give them more room for error if they perceive them as taking a Cultural humility approach in their work. Complementing these results with qualitative studies can deepen the understanding of how professionals use and negotiate cultural differences within specific contexts and implement strategies that fit under the framework of Cultural humility. The presented rainbow model of Cultural humility is very broad to be useful in a broad range of contexts and situations, yet it requires testing in further research. This master's thesis can test the applicability of the framework in the contexts of asylum centers and OKAN education. Considering the novelty of the framework, studies that critique it have not been found up until today. Therefore, the present study can potentially contribute to the formulation of critiques.

Furthermore, some considerations will be taken into account regarding the concept of Moral distress. Whereas some scholars say that a broader understanding of the phenomenon is needed (Campbell et al., 2018; Fourie, 2016), others argue that it is already too broad and risks losing its analytical utility (Johnstone & Hutchinson, 2015; Wocial, 2016). The conceptual analysis by Mänttäri-van der Kuip (2020) does acknowledge the utility of the concept as long as two things are considered. First of all, the influence of both external and internal factors on experiences of Moral distress need to be studied, and secondly, the concept has to be understood as a complex, dynamic phenomenon, considering the bi-directional relationship between individuals and structures at all times.

This theoretical framework uniquely combines the identification of Othering and Color-evasiveness with an analysis of Cultural humility and Moral distress and can thus be informative for the present research focusing on how perceptions of professionals inform their professional work with Afghan UAMs. Using this framework offers an approach to analyze dynamics of Othering and Color-evasiveness on the one hand, and also offers a way to identify strategies used by professionals to counter dynamics of Othering, stereotyping, and discrimination. The part of the framework focused on Cultural humility can shed light on how professionals negotiate cultural differences and classify these strategies as fitting within the framework or not, yet it also can help to interpret the challenges these professionals are met with and explain certain positive and negative outcomes. Here, the additional concept of Moral distress provides analytical opportunities to further analyze psychological distress in

professionals and explain why othering dynamics or Cultural humility can be found (or not). Furthermore, the present research is also innovative because this framework has not been applied to the contexts of newcomer education and asylum centers before.

4 Research question

The importance of relationships with professionals for the wellbeing and quality of care of Afghan UAMs cannot be underestimated (Mels et al., 2008; Nasir, 2012). This thesis follows Nasir (2012) and Eliassi (2010) in their argument that research starting from the perspective of the minors themselves is indispensable, and that it is important to listen to the voices of marginalized groups to fully understand how professional relationships impact them as individuals. Yet, without disregarding the power imbalance that this relationship unavoidably entails, this thesis will focus on an investigation of the perspectives of professionals themselves, which is also much needed according to Eliassi (2015).

Starting from a social constructivist ontology, this thesis assumes that the social reality is actively shaped by the way in which actors give meaning to experiences, events, and situations (Burr, 1995). Starting form a position of power in relation to these minors, professionals constantly create and define a particular social reality through their professional practice, which is why it is of particular relevance to study in-depth what that means in these contexts. Although many researchers have focused on professional relationships with ethnic minorities in contexts like health care and education in general, research focusing on the context of the asylum center and OKAN education is lacking. Considering their immediate contact with Afghan UAMs and the role they play in their lives, researching this group specifically is relevant.

Furthermore, although other research has pointed out the importance of these relations, research that zooms in on the professional relationship in-depth, exploring the ways in which it can contribute or hinder psychological wellbeing and coping in UAMs, has yet to be done. By means of an in-depth qualitative study, this master's thesis aims to contribute to these identified gaps by exploring the way in which OKAN teachers and asylum center staff construct and give meaning to their own social reality and how this informs their practices of care. Rather than through a top-down imposed framework, this research is exploratory in nature, allowing an improved understanding of the perceptions underlying their professional practice as well as an identification of the different strategies they use and challenges they encounter.

Using the theoretical framework that combines both a critical analysis of dynamics like Othering, Color-evasiveness, Cultural humility with Moral distress, allows for a heterogenous and nuanced analysis of the role these professionals play, moving away from homogenization and essentialism. It can contribute to the understanding of how these theoretical dynamics present themselves in practice, with room for a nuanced analysis of contradictions and other challenges that may play a role here, possibly providing entry points to improve the care relationships of Afghan UAMs in the future.

This results in the following research questions:

Main research question: How do professionals perceive Afghan Unaccompanied minors and their coping behavior, and how do these perceptions inform their professional practice?

- Sub-question 1: To what extent do stereotypical ideas underly the way in which professionals perceive Afghan Unaccompanied minors and the coping mechanisms they use?
- Sub-question 2: Which strategies do professionals use to support Afghan Unaccompanied minors in coping with difficulties they encounter?
- Sub-question 3: What are the challenges the professionals identify in their professional practice to support Afghan Unaccompanied minors?

5 Methodology

5.1 Qualitative research design

This study adopted a qualitative approach, employing a social constructivist and critical perspective to explore the subjective reality of professionals working with Afghan UAMs. The study began with a literature review to identify gaps and formulate research questions. This literature review, in combination with two preliminary interviews with social workers in Flemish asylum centers, informed the final research questions and methodology.

The social constructivist approach adopted, assumes that we (research participants as well as researchers) cannot know the reality as it is. It assumes that research can only build an understanding of how certain actors perceive their own subjective reality and how this informs their behavior (Lincoln & Guba, 2016; Stevens, 2022). Qualitative methods align well with social constructionism, because these take on an interpretive, naturalistic approach to make sense of the meaning that actors give to specific phenomena (Denzin, 1994). Using a qualitative, social constructivist approach allows to get in-depth insights about participants' perceptions, understandings and practice as well as how these develop in interactions within their specific context (Stevens, 2022).

Furthermore, the research was also informed by a critical approach, as it started from the assumption that this subjective reality is informed by real, objective structures in which people are situated. This approach assumes that people who occupy the same position in society see and present the reality somewhat similarly (Lincoln & Guba, 2016) and using it allows to improve the understanding of how structures of inequality structure people's experiences and interests, which is relevant for the research question of this study.

Given the labor-intensive nature of qualitative research, only a limited number of cases could be studied. However, this was not a problem here as the goal of the study was getting an in-depth understanding of the selected case. Selecting a smaller number of participants allowed taking time to discuss the ideas of the participants in all their complexity and nuances, a level of depth that is impossible to reach when using larger scale quantitative studies.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews

The study used semi-structured in-depth interviews, a method that allows for an in-depth understanding of the personal thoughts, reflections and experiences of the participants (Morris, 2015). Given the personal and delicate nature of the topics discussed, this study opted for an individual setting to ensure privacy and full attention to the participants. The advantage of using a semi-structured format was the possibility for new interesting topics to emerge. The literature review and research question informed the construction of the topic list for the interviews (see

attachment 1), consisting of four general subsections (introductory questions, explicit perceptions about Afghanistan, racism and integration).

The interviews were conducted between 31/03/2023 and 20/04/2023, lasting an average of 57 minutes each. All interviews were conducted in real life in the professional contexts of the interviewees, except one interview that was conducted online and one in the home of the interviewee.

Sample

The sample comprised 12 participants, contacted through purposive sampling (relevant institutions were contacted with the question to participate) and snowball sampling (some participants were recommended by other participants). The only criterion for selection was practicing a profession within an asylum center or OKAN class involving immediate and regular contact with Afghan UAMs.

Different centers were contacted to create a sample with individuals from as many different centers as possible. Both centers operated by Fedasil and the Red Cross were contacted in an attempt to integrate an equal number of participants by both organizations. However, because the Red Cross refused to let participants take part in the research during the working hours it was harder finding participants willing to participate. Consequently, only Red Cross employee was included in the study. This is important to keep in mind when interpreting the results.

Finally, the sample of asylum center staff existed of seven participants working in a Flemish collective reception center at the department designated to unaccompanied minors specifically. Of these participants, two were social workers, four support workers and on was a department head. The remaining five interviews involved OKAN teachers. In total, the asylum center participants worked at three different Flemish centers, two operated by Fedasil and one operated by the Red Cross, providing specialized treatments for refugee (minors) with severe psychiatric issues. The OKAN teachers taught in three different schools and all of them worked (at least) part-time as a follow-up coach. In total, three people of color participated in the study.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed ad verbatim and imported in Nvivo (Edwards-Jones, 2014), an ideal software program for qualitative analysis that facilitates coding and analysis of collected data.

Both deductive and inductive codes were used in the coding process. The deductive codes were informed by the literature review and served as a starting point for coding, these were

complemented by inductive codes based on the ideas that emerged from the data itself. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021) guided data analysis. This is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting recurring patterns (= themes) in the data, allowing for a detailed analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this thesis, thematic analysis was used as a contextual method, situated between two poles of essentialism and constructionism. It started from a constructivist epistemology, assuming that individuals make meaning of their experiences and the ways the broader social context informs those meanings (= constructivist, Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, at the same time, attention was given to how the participants report experiences, meanings and their reality (= critical realism, Willig, 1999).

The six phases of Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2021) thematic analysis were followed: step 1: familiarize yourself with the data; step 2: coding, step 3: generating initial themes; step 4: developing and reviewing themes, step 5: refining, defining and naming themes, step 6: writing up. Getting familiar with the data happened throughout the transcription by keeping note of recurring ideas and interesting findings to suggest potentially theoretically relevant codes, informing the rest of the coding process. In step 2, the whole data set was coded combining both deductive and inductive codes. Consequently, in step 3, initial themes and sub-themes were generated based on connections between codes and their relation to broader themes. In step 4, these initial themes were reviewed by looking back at the data to determine if they represented the data and its underlying meanings well. In step 5, the themes were reviewed and named, using the analytical process of writing. Eventually, in step 6 the results were written down in the next chapter of this thesis.

5.2 Ethics and positionality

Positionality

The social constructionist and critical paradigms informing this research also acknowledge the researcher's role in knowledge production (Stevens, 2022), making it important to reflect on my own position of relative power within society and how it has impacted this research. As a white Belgian woman, I have not been subjected to the same experiences of racial Othering that are questioned within this research and I may be prone to similar ways of (implicit) stereotypical thinking as my participants. This makes it harder for me to discern these ideas in their discourses.

However, as the literature on Othering and Cultural humility shows, it is not because dynamics of Othering are still present in society that there is no possibility to go against it (Foucault, 1984; Humphries, 2008; Eliassi, 2017). Embracing Cultural humility and anti-oppressive principles, I strive to be self-reflective and aware of these power imbalances (Foronda et al., 2020), and using constructivist and critical approaches in this research I hope the findings can contribute to a more fair and just society (Stevens, 2022). I believe that acknowledging my

positionality and its blind spots is a first step in trying to go against these dynamics. Furthermore, in order to oppose these implicit ideas in my own thinking and in society, reflective research that tries to detect these mechanisms in professional contexts is necessary.

A second aspect of my positionality is my background as a mental health professional. Having this background, I empathized with the participants' struggles and value their motivation and drive deeply, which initially made it challenging to examine Othering dynamics. I noticed how all my participants work in hard circumstances, but still do that starting from a true and deep motivation to help the minors the best they can. To ensure a nuanced view, I added theoretical concepts to analyze their distress and strategies opposing Othering, whilst still providing room to discuss stereotypes and Othering too.

Data storage and management

All data obtained in this research is processed according to the General Data Protection Regulation. Interviews are cited and stored anonymously and data from the interviews (i.e. transcripts and recordings) are kept in an encrypted file, only accessible by me. Only the professional context is mentioned in the analysis because it is relevant to the interpretation of the results. The transcriptions and data do not include any identifying elements, and all participants were informed of the data management plan. Before the start of the interview, the participants received an information letter (see attachment 2) and an informed consent form in which ethical matters like anonymity and privacy were discussed and consent was asked for the recordings of the interviews and the use of quotes.

6 Analysis

Using Braun and Clarke's popular approach to thematic analysis (2006, 2021), various topics were addressed in the interviews, including perceptions, integration, coping, racism and discrimination, structural challenges, personal challenges, mental health, etc. Looking at recurring ideas and connections, the topics were eventually clustered together into four overarching themes. Although the themes represent different arguments in the analysis, they are also interconnected.

These four themes do not encompass all the topics that were discussed but focus on the ones that are relevant to the research question. Specific ideas about integration, for example, were left out of the analysis. This chapter is divided in four parts, in which all themes are discussed by exploring the different sub-themes and how these connect to the broader academic debate.

6.1 Perceptions marked by heterogeneity

> *"Hoh, it's a country full of euhmm contrasts, full of conflict, a very ethnically divided country, yes, unstable… euhm… little women's rights."* Participant 8 (AC)

Overall, the analysis of the data showed that the way the participants perceive Afghanistan and Afghan people is heterogeneous rather than homogenous. When asked to share their first thoughts about Afghanistan, 25% of the participants mentioned that Afghanistan is "complex" and marked by internal differences and contrasts.

Furthermore, most participants referred to both negative and positive aspects when they articulate these first associations. Negative aspects that came back include the situation of war and instability, and the violation of human and especially women's rights in Afghanistan (mentioned in all interviews). On the other hand, multiple participants stressed positive aspects such as how Afghan culture is marked by warmth and hospitality and the resilience of Afghan UAMs (participant 9 (OK) and 11 (OK)). The associations with Afghanistan as a country were mainly negatively colored, while they associated positive characteristics with Afghan people and culture. By attending to the complexity and contradictions of their own perceptions, these explicit answers of the participants tended to go against the dynamic of Othering that is marked by essentialization and homogeneity (Said, 1987) and is in line with an approach of Cultural humility where having a worldview that recognizes diversity is a first important step (Foronda, 2020).

Impacting factors: media and positive contact

Remarkably, all participants shared the opinion that the common Flemish citizen's first associations with Afghanistan and Afghans are more negatively tinted than their own opinion. Eight participants stressed the role of the media and identified it as the main factor feeding negative perceptions of Afghanistan by spreading information about war and the Taliban.

Importantly, they also identified the media as a source impacting their own imaging; words like "war" and "Taliban" were present in all interviews and were the first words expressed in interviews 7 (AC), 10 (OK) and 12 (OK). However, they identified their daily contact with Afghan UAMs as the most important source of positive associations that can complement and nuance the picture painted by the media.

> *"I think that the media gives very negative coverage and yes, most people will think that Afghanistan is a backward country and that there is only violence there, while there is such a beautiful side to it, or yeah that's what I think at least, or that is my experience with the people in any case. It's my experience with these people, they* [Flemish people who do not work with Afghans] *don't know and I on the contrary learn to look at it that way, because I am working with people you know, and I am not just interacting with images on a television screen. That's a big difference, of course."* Participant 9 (OK)

Looking closer at the construction of their perceptions, there seemed to be a struggle present. On the one hand, the participants seemed eager to sketch a nuanced picture that entails more than just negative ideas. This may be related to the fact that the participants are aware of the negative perceptions that exist about refugees and how harmful these discourses are (further elaborated in subsequent themes). But, on the other hand, they also stressed the misery and seriousness of the situation in Afghanistan to criticize the current situation of Afghans who seek international protection in Belgium. As discussed in the literature review, the decision made by the CGRS that Afghanistan is no longer a country for which subsidiary protection can be granted has led to a huge increase in negative answers for Afghans applying for asylum in Belgium (CGRS, 2022). In the first associations made, multiple participants expressed their discontent with this decision by stressing the hardship of Afghan citizens today. As participant 1 (AC) said, "*Two years ago, they have begun to give negative answers to Afghans. Really, the Belgian Government supposes that ever since the Taliban took over, it is safe there. So actually, the Taliban, the aggressor, is now in power and then all the misery is gone, right. That's really, that's so crazy, it makes me furious*." So, this discontent present in all interviews may explain why hardship and instability in Afghanistan was repeatedly stressed too.

> *"I think many people do not lose much sleep over their situation, I think that it is something that has been pushed away again and is less present in the media and in the*

mindset of the average Belgian. Because, meanwhile, there are so many other countries that are also in misery again. And [I think] *that there are few people who realize that there has been misery in Afghanistan for more than 20 years, three generations actually. And that they don't realize what impact that has on those people, their level of education and their image of the future and their self-image.*" Participant 11 (AC)

This wish to stress the seriousness of the situation is evidenced in this quote, which also shows that negative representation in the media may also serve the purpose of increasing consciousness. So, these findings uncover an important paradox. On the one hand, the participants warned that the media can reinforce negative perceptions about Afghans and refugees in general by spreading negative information, yet on the other hand, spreading this information might also be crucial in order to increase consciousness and mobilize support.

Implicit dynamics of Othering

Although the analysis showed that the explicit discussion of perceptions concerning Afghanistan and Afghan people was overall very nuanced, this does not mean that Othering dynamics were completely absent. Implicitly, Othering dynamics were found in the discourse of 9 out of 12 participants.

As Said (1978) argued, Othering involves practices of essentialization and homogenization, resulting in the construction of a generalized discourse about the Other in which negative attributes are ascribed to the collective. Four participants sometimes talked about the group of Afghan UAMs in a homogenous way, connecting characteristics to the general group without attending to the individual differences within it. Examples include: "*I once asked around and apparently they are also very racist towards black people in Afghanistan, so that is just something that they have been culturally brought up with"*" (participant 1, AC), or "*The problem is, psychological care is not accepted by Muslim people in my experience*" (participant 4, AC). The issues mentioned here are relevant, but the way they are framed here tends to essentialize Afghan culture or Muslims, not acknowledging contradictions and variety within those groups.

Furthermore, expressions where participants compared the Afghan youth with other nationalities also tended to essentialize to a certain extent. For example, participant 10 talked about how Syrians are more open-minded than Afghans because of their faith, or participant 4 said "*There are sometimes fights at school, Afghans are famous because they fight often you know, they often go into conflict, it also happened here you see*." Participant 7 said, "*If I think about cultural differences in coping mechanisms, I mainly think about how Afghans use aggression while African boys are usually very quiet."* In line with Eliassi's research (2015) focusing on the discourses used by social workers in Sweden, a form of culturalization could

be found here. They showed a tendency to take culture as a central idea to explain particular issues, unintentionally creating an Other that is culturally different and inferior.

Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012) added the importance of looking at objectification (e.g. statements that subjugate, stigmatize, stereotype and interiorize individual and collective identities) and decontextualization (detaching individuals from socioeconomic and other societal structures when behavior and perceptions of the group are interpreted). Whilst examples of decontextualization could not be found, expressions that tended to objectify the Afghan minors did come back in the discourse of five participants.

> *"We try to explain them, women and men are equal. But it is not…, they are super sweet to us you know, but they find it very hard to grasp that. So, we kind of have to teach the norms and values of a normal life you know, because they are a little bit brain washed there."* Participant 5 (AC)

> *"If you grow up in Afghanistan, you have not learned to be open-minded, you know? Or to be critical, or to have your own opinion. In some cultures, those are not values, on the contrary."* Participant 6 (OK)

Through these statements, an implicit idea of Belgium as "superior" and "normal" versus Afghanistan as "backward" and "abnormal" is conveyed. These findings support Fanon's idea that dynamics of Othering have an important effect on the subject formation of the dominant ethnic group ([1952], 2012) resulting in a process of identification, as Wollrad (2007) calls it, in which the dominant group associates itself with values of superiority.

6.2 OKAN and asylum center as safe spaces

Racist Flanders

> *"Racism… Oh yes, unfortunately it is present yeah, it is present everywhere in society. We also notice it when we have to work together with others, for example when we have to go to an interim office to look for a student job. Such a…, certain things yeah, but well, that's unfortunate."* participant 3 (AC)

The literature study showed that in Belgium, ethnic minorities are hindered in their everyday life by structural inequalities (in access to health care and the labor market for example) and that this needs to be understood against a background of culturally essentialist discourses presenting migrants and especially Muslims as a threat to the so-called cultural homogeneity of Flanders (De Cleen et al., 2017). Yet, Bonilla-Silva (2006) and Migliarini (2018) have argued that contemporary Western societies are also marked by a discourse of Color-evasiveness, referring to a race-neutral approach that includes the idea of a post-racial society where racism

no longer plays a role in the normalization and reproduction of white supremacy (Migliarini, 2018). This ideology is deeply embedded into the political system of Western countries like France (Bleich, 2000), Italy (Hawthorne and Piccolo, 2016) and the United States (Annamma et al., 2017) and implies a denial of the presence of these essentialist discourses and how they, in turn, reinforce racial structural inequalities.

In this sample, the participants did not align themselves with this color-evasive ideology, at least not at the level of society (see quote above). All 12 participants believed that racism is a huge problem within society; they described it as a "*problem that is real and there is still a lot of work to do in that area*" (participant 9, OK). Definitely in the interviews with OKAN teachers, it came to the forefront that discrimination and stereotypical ways of thinking are very present in the regular education system. Participant 6 (OK) explained that follow-up coaches often see racism in teacher's rooms of regular schools or when they have to defend their students in deliberations. Similarly, participant 9 (OK) said that in some teachers' rooms, teachers talk with very little respect about ethnic minority students, bringing follow-up coaches in a difficult position because this undermines their students' chances at school. So, regarding their perceptions of society in general, a color-evasive ideology was not found in this group, as they do recognize dynamics of racialization and structural inequality.

Reflexivity: 2 dominant perspectives

In contrast with the ease with which the participants could acknowledge and reflect on the presence of racism in Flemish society, reflecting on racism within the own professional context or behavior was harder. In general, two different perspectives emerged when discussing racism.

'Real racism' vs. little things

Five of the participants had the opinion that racism is not present within their own professional context. Statements like "*Well, we're in OKAN, so there are definitely no racist teachers present or something because… well, otherwise they definitely didn't choose the right job"* (participant 2, OK) and "*racism here? I think I can happily say that I have never seen that in the seven years I have been working here."* (participants 3, AC) illustrate this perspective.

> *"I don't have those extreme incidents you know, to be clear, there are no real instances of racism here at school. It's sometimes about very small little things that you can feel, but that is not really racism in my opinion."* participant 6 (OK)

This quote, which illustrates how these participants defined the term "racism", can provide one possible explanation for their perspective. All of these participants differentiated between what some called "real racism" and "small things" that they did not consider as real examples of

racism. Throughout the discussion, it became clear that terms like “racism” and “racist” are very heavily loaded and to be associated with it proved to be a great insult for them. Like participant 8 (AC) explained, “*racism, I have the impression that yes, it’s a very loaded term, people see it as a very negative thing*”. Furthermore, this group of participants shared the opinion that it is impossible for racism to be present in contexts where everyone “*has chosen to be there, if they were racist, they would not work there”* (participant 2, AC). This shows that generally, these participants did not differentiate between intentional, explicit examples of racism and other, more subtle forms of racism that may be present unintentionally.

So, when reflecting on the presence of racism within their own context, the weight that was given to the concept of racism paradoxically seemed to hinder a critical reflection of it within those contexts. Despite the fact that most acknowledged the importance of reflecting on these “little, subtle things”, which is an important first step that aligns with Cultural humility, it also obscures a broader discussion on racism where these ideas can be linked to wider structures of inequality. This aligns with cultural ambivalence, an approach that neglects power imbalances. This can be seen as a form of Color-evasiveness within their own professional context, aligning in particular with Bonilla-Silva’s fourth frame of Color-evasiveness, the minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). With that frame, Bonilla-Silva argues that the current society is seen as post-racial, which leads to the downplaying of contemporary manifestations and dynamics of racism. Similarly, by perceiving the OKAN class and asylum center as a safe space where “real racism” is impossible, other more subtle manifestations and dynamics of racism are ignored, hindering an adequate analysis of subtle dynamics of racism, the most important consequence of a color-evasive ideology according to Douglas et al. (2015).

Furthermore, Plaut et al. (2018) have argued that this ideology reduces the sensitivity to racism of individuals on a psychological level and can negatively impact the interracial interactions between these individuals and racialized people who can consider these individuals more biased (Holoien and Shelton, 2012). This decreased sensitivity became also clear in the interviews. When these participants were asked about racism within their own context, defensive reactions were given, and it became impossible for these individuals to think of examples of racism, also in other contexts (e.g. interview 2 (AC), 12 AC). This suggests that the idea that racism is impossible also makes it impossible to detect incidents around them, confirming earlier findings from Plaut et al. (2018). To verify the effect this ideology can have on the relationship between the professionals and the Afghan minors themselves, further research should focus on exploring this on the ground and from the perspective of the minors themselves.

A second aspect that came up throughout this set of interviews was that these participants often referred to values of “neutrality” to explain why racism is impossible within their professional contexts. The literature shows that an ideology of Color-evasiveness often translates into a push

for neutrality in the policy of institutions like schools (Hagenaars et al., 2023), which lets schools take explicit stand against racism and discrimination, but often results in an increase in prejudice and less adoption of inclusive practice in their teaching (Hachfeld et al., 2015). In this sample, this idea of neutrality was not mentioned by the OKAN teachers but did come up in the interviews with some of the asylum center staff, participant 4 (AC) for example said, "*We are neutral here, so I have never experienced racism*." So, referring to the idea of neutrality and how this is part of Fedasil's and the Red Cross' code of conduct is used to justify why racism is impossible among professionals. Indeed, on Fedasil's website, it is stated that professionals need to be "impartial", which means that they need to execute their profession "neutral, objective and without regarding their self-interest" (Fedasil, 2016b). Furthermore, almost all participants said that racism is not often discussed within their teams.

These official policies combined with a lack of opportunities within their context to reflect upon prejudice and stereotypes may hinder self-reflection on the individual level. It is an interesting finding here that this ethic of neutrality that is well-intentioned, may actually hinder what it aims to do, create a safe space where dynamics of racism and discrimination can be discussed and ultimately erased completely. Important to note however, is that elements of Cultural destruction (explicit acts of discrimination) could not be found in the interviews.

Racism is everywhere

> *"And I think we are all guilty of it sometimes too, even me who comes into contact with people from different backgrounds on a daily basis. I also sometimes still think like, ah yes, but that's an Afghan, so it must be like that."* Participant 9 (OK)

The remaining seven participants did acknowledge the presence of racism in their own professional contexts, as illustrated in the quote above. An important consequence of these participants being able to recognize the presence of racism in their own contexts is that it opened up the opportunity to reflect on themselves and how they may be informed by stereotypes in their own professional practice. All of these participants admit that they sometimes catch themselves in thinking stereotypically, but they also actively try to reflect on that to prevent it from happening again. As participant 11 (OK) said, "*if you cannot admit that to yourself and say, look, I made a mistake, I said something wrong, then you cannot learn anything from it. So, you have to keep doing that in my opinion.*"

These findings do only partially support Eliassi's findings in Sweden, which showed that white social workers found it hard to discuss racism and could not discern it in their own practice (Eliassi, 2015). In this research, on the contrary, the majority of the participants did talk about racism and could be self-reflective on that, which means that they implicitly align with the

Cultural humility approach that stresses the importance of a professional attitude of self-reflection and self-critique (Foronda et al., 2020).

Again, the way these participants defined racism can possibly explain their position on the role of racism within their professional context. Different participants said that racism is "*just a reality"* (participant 2, AC), a "*natural thing, a sort of instinct, a shortcut in our brain"* (participant 9, OK), "*typical for humanity*" (participant 7, AC). Participant 12 (OK) in the same line of thinking argued that it is sometimes necessary for people to think in boxes, to keep the overview of what is going on. On the one hand, acknowledging tendencies of people to think in terms of boxes does create a form of self-awareness and egolessness in line with the Cultural humility approach, which makes an analysis of their own behavior and thoughts possible. On the other hand, these ideas also risk tapping into what Bonilla-Silva calls a "naturalization frame" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), suggesting that racial inequalities are also a natural consequence of cultural and social differences between racial groups, which risks feeding back into a Color-evasive ideology. However, it is important to also acknowledge that these participants do point at the problematics of racism and its detrimental consequences, exposing a contradiction here.

Despite the fact that these participants were able to reflect on racism within their own professional context, all of them mentioned that within their organization, it is not a topic that is often discussed. Also, different participants said that they find it very difficult to comment on it when they see it in the behavior of their colleagues, illustrated in the following quote.

> *"And I've also had colleagues who completely missed the mark… and I find it very difficult to say, as a colleague, 'you're really wrong'. I've actually never felt strong enough to do that, I do try to do that sometimes, but I find it very difficult as a colleague to say, 'That's really not possible, what you've done now really crosses the line, that's not possible, that's really not appropriate.' I've never been... I do want to become stronger and be able to do that."* participant 11 (OK)

Possibly, the organizational focus on neutrality as basic principle may also explain why the organization of the schools and asylum centers do not provide opportunities to discuss dynamics of racism in a way that allows for an analysis of racism in its subtle forms. This idea of neutrality linked to the idea that any form of discriminating behavior cannot be tolerated in the context can actually lead to a color-evasive blind spot on the level of the organization. This not only makes it harder for individuals to see dynamics of racism, Othering and discrimination in their context (like the other group of participants), but also hinders individuals who do recognize the impact of racism from actually reflecting on it with their colleagues in a constructive way.

These results do not provide further support earlier findings that professionals with an immigrant background are more eager to discuss racism in their own professional context or in

society in general (Eliassi, 2017). Both perspectives were taken on by both participants with and without a migration background. However, only three people of color took part in this study, so it is important to consider the possibility that this was not sufficient to find an effect.

Racism and Afghan UAMs

> *"There are actually two groups of Afghans, Dari and Pashtu. And really, Pashtu bully Dari. They are often racist towards Dari; they are really excluded. I also don't know exactly what the conflict is there in Afghanistan itself, but it really is a thing, and there are a lot of Dari speakers.* (…) *And also, Afghans are actually quite light-skinned, so what you see is that they are racist towards black people, like people from Somalia and Eritrea* [..] *Oh, those Afghans feel quite important compared to the others."* Participant 1 (AC)

When discussing racism with the participants, another topic that came up was the high frequency of incidents of racism and discrimination among the Afghan UAMs and how that surprises many of the participants. This idea came back in ten interviews. This connects back to the literature on Othering and Fanon ([1952], 2012) who argued that a society that is racially organized not only influences the subjectivity of the white people but also of those who are racialized by it, leading to an internalization of it. The stories of the participants arguing that Afghan minors display racist behavior towards African youngsters in particular support this idea.

Secondly, the majority of the participants highlighted that Afghan youngsters sometimes use the word "racist" wrongly, accusing everyone who asks something from them that they do not like as "racist". Like participant 3 (AC) said, "*it is a word that the boys often take into their mouth, also when it is not appropriate"*. Similarly, participant 6 (AC) said *"We hear that very often, if you comment on something, then it is because you are racist, if they are not allowed to do something, you are racist. So, it really is one of the first words they remember. And I think, especially because they are often treated unfairly, that they are extra sensitive to it, but they often use the word in wrong scenarios."* Again, this may partially be the result of tendencies of Color-evasiveness within the context and among the professionals, as discussed before. Scholars studying Color-evasiveness in schools for example, like Hagenaars et al. (2023), have shown that Color-evasive policies on the organizational level may reduce the student's possibility to recognize instances of (racial) discrimination. This may possibly play a role in these examples as well, although further exploration needs to be done to further test this hypothesis.

6.3 Position of power…

Power of professionals

> *"If it's a good social assistant, that's everything, you know. You really have people who go very far for the boys, family reunion depends hugely on the social assistant and the guardian. There are some boys who are never going to have that because the social assistant started the process too late. While then the good ones, they really go very far for their boys, they keep looking for solutions…"* Participant 1 (AC)

In every single interview, the participants mentioned that they want to do more than they can do, and especially in the case of the teachers, it was repeatedly stressed that they do more for their pupils than they officially have to. As participant 6 said, "*The strict job description of a follow-up school coach, um, is not actually to arrange things outside of the school context. But of course, you become a person of trust for those pupils and they do contact you for all sort of things. And I am not that strict about it, I don't strictly adhere to that description."*

The literature shows that the professional relationship and the quality of care is of utmost importance for Afghan UAMs to address difficulties in the host country (Eriksson & Rundgren, 2019; Höhne et al., 2022). From the interviews, it can be concluded that professionals agree with this idea and that they perceive the professional relationship as having important consequences for the quality of care the Afghan UAMs receive. In a way, they acknowledged that professionals do have a lot of power to determine outcomes with regards to procedures and wellbeing of the minors.

However, while the lengths to which these participants go to for the minors is very admirable, it also exposes an important pain point in the current system. Due to lack of resources and official task descriptions that do not allow a provision of optimal care, professionals need to go beyond their official hours to do the things they really want to do. In the end, this results in the quality of care depending on the willingness of professionals to take on more work than they have to, than they can handle maybe. This issue is further discussed in the last theme.

Importance of building a relationship of trust

Nasir (2012), Höhne (2022) and Eriksson and Rundgren (2019) also pointed out how important the relationship with professionals is as a coping mechanism for UAMs in particular. This importance was confirmed in the interviews with the asylum center social workers, who explained that they need to take on a parental role in their profession (participant 1, AC) and that one of the most important strategies they use to care for the minors is building a relationship of trust.

> *"I think, the relationship of trust that we have with the boys…it plays a very important role. Of course, one person could choose to keep their distance from everyone… or… or… or there is one colleague who likes to joke around, or because someone is a better listener some will more look that person up, while others like to play more…. How can I say that? … It is different for everyone, but we all try to use our particular style when we see that one of the boys isn't doing well."* Participant 7 (AC).

The same idea came back in the interviews with the OKAN teachers; participant 9, for example, said that building a relationship of trust is a precondition before you are able to teach them things and cultural challenges can be addressed.

> *"First of all, I think it's very important to build a good relationship with your pupils, to show them that you have a lot of respect for them and for their way of doing things, well, their way, I mean that you show respect for the fact that it's still difficult to accept some things from us in the beginning, but that you have faith that it will gradually come. And once you have a connection with them, you can explain a lot more to them. One time they say xxx, that's a good lady, then you can tell them 'I don't believe'. If they don't know you yet and you say from day one that you don't believe in God at all and they are very deeply religious Muslims, it is very difficult for them."* Participant 9 (OK)

"*The strategy of always respecting cultural and religious habits needs to be a basic attitude professional practice"*, participant 3 (AC) argued. When a new youngster arrives, it is crucial to make them feel at ease by getting to know them, who they really are, according to this participant. This includes showing an interest in their religion and country of origin. Participants 4 (AC) and 8 (AC) likewise stressed that it is very important to respect the minors for who they are, as this is crucial to establish a good working alliance before moving to expectations and rules.

This approach aligns well with a Cultural humility approach. Three of its main characteristics are openness, egolessness and supportive interactions (Foronda et al., 2016). This strategy used by the professionals fits well within this framework, and in this specific case, openness for religion and the country of origin come back as especially important. So, based on this research, it can be argued that building a relationship of trust that starts from respect for cultural differences reflects an implicit practice based on the principles put forward in this theoretical model. Of course, to be able to verify if it really has the good outcome that the model and the professionals claim, this has to be verified by researching the perspective of the minors.

Instrumentalizing the relationship of trust

Other than merely stressing the importance and necessity of building this relationship of trust, the participants also perceiveed this relationship as a tool. This tool can be used by both the professionals themselves to help the boys, as well as by the boys as a coping mechanism. Throughout the discussion of how they aimed to improve the wellbeing of the minors and support their integration, four main strategies were mentioned by the majority of the participants: the importance of networks, making the link to other institutions, providing emotional supportive interactions and offering role models.

Stimulating (inter-ethnic) networks and learning Dutch

> *"We always try to encourage them to go to school, to reduce the language barrier, to learn Dutch, we try to broaden the network of the minors, by organizing activities and certainly in the holidays, sending them to camps with Belgian youngsters, mixed camps. This way they can also get to know Belgian people."* participant 4 (AC)

When asked about the professional actions they take to support the Afghan UAMs in their wellbeing and integration in society, half of the participants spontaneously started off with explaining how they aim to create opportunities for the minors to really "bring them into Belgian society" including the stimulation of networks and learning the Dutch language through those networks.

Six participants talked about the importance of stimulating the creation of networks as one of their core tasks; five of these participants were asylum center staff. Remarkably, they mainly talked about the importance of inter-ethnic networks specifically. Only some of the participants referred to networks with family and other Afghans as also possibly important, but this was formulated more in the sense of a coping mechanism than with regards to integration. Furthermore, the participants stressed that networks with Afghan friends and family may be positive but can also negatively influence their process here. Yet, no one mentioned possible negative effects of inter-ethnic networks (e.g. possible experiences of paternalism and (racial) exclusion). The fact that stimulating the formation of networks came up more in the interviews with asylum center staff than with teachers could result from their different job content.

Although most participants mentioned that they support the learning of Dutch, the participants differed in how important they considered the level of Dutch to judge how well the minor is "integrated" in society. "Integration" is put into brackets here, because the way the interviewees define integration is also heterogeneous, which can partly explain the different opinions on the importance of the Dutch language. In three interviews, learning the Dutch language was mentioned as the most important factor in "integration". Participant 2 (AC) mentioned that

learning Dutch is important because it is part of doing "*what is expected of you, living as a normal Belgian person*" and participant 3 (AC) framed Dutch as a necessity to be part of society and agreed with how important the language if regarded in Belgian policy. Then, in six other interviews, the participants also argued that they considered learning and teaching Dutch as one of their core tasks because it facilitates the youngster's process and integration in society, but they added that integration and providing care to them always needs to be broader than that. They frame Dutch as a useful tool (participant 6, OK) or a display of being interested in Flemish culture (participant 8, AC). The important difference with the first two interviews is that they referred to the usefulness and facilitating aspect of it, rather than seeing it as a necessity to become "a typical Belgian". The remaining three participants went even further and think that Flemish people focus way too much on Dutch, turning it into an obligation to culturally assimilate completely, an idea that they disagree with. They acknowledged the usefulness and the importance of being able to communicate with people, but this can be through other languages like English, for example.

> *"For me, integration doesn't mean being able to speak Dutch, I know that with the average Fleming it's like 'you have to be able to speak Dutch and Dutch this, and Dutch that'. Okay yes, you have to be able to express yourself I certainly understand that. But for me, if you can speak good English or French, that's perfectly fine. Okay yes, you have to be able to understand each other… But I do think sometimes there is too much pressure on that."* participant 5 (AC)

Looking at how these last three interviewees defined integration, it is obvious that they focus more on integration as an interaction between the newcomer and society, whereas the first interviewees defined integration more in terms of requirements for the newcomer. This may partially explain why they had different opinions on the role of Dutch. It could be argued that the majority of the interviewees aligned in their opinion on integration and the role of Dutch with a Cultural humility approach, except to the first group of interviewees defining it in terms of assimilation. As Fisher-Borne et al. (2015) argued, the basic premise of a Cultural humility approach is to start from the idea that culture is fluid and subjective. When Dutch is seen as a part of Flemish culture that the newcomer needs to assimilate to, as was the case in the other three interviews, Flemish culture is constructed as a rigid and defined object that needs to be taken over completely by the newcomer. However, looking at Flemish culture as a something that is diverse, and seeing the Dutch language as a tool that may facilitate getting to know other aspects of that culture but not as a necessity, creates room for people with other cultural backgrounds to also become part of that Flemish culture, even if they do not speak the Dutch language.

Link to other institutions

> *"Our role as caregivers is also mainly to direct them to the right agencies... He needs a psychologist, a social worker, he needs a hobby, ..."* participant 1 (AC)

The professional as a key figure that has to facilitate connections with other services was mentioned explicitly or implicitly in every single interview. In the case of the asylum center staff, this is not surprising, as connecting with other professionals and institutions his part of their official job description. However, in the case of the OKAN teachers, this is often taken up by the follow-up coaches on top of their official task description.

> *"You can't do everything, but really, I find that so difficult (...) I find that very difficult because I see that relationship with that assistant is not good, so then I know of they are not going to help them… I do it. So, then I try to follow that up, take that up. Also looking for homes, psychological support, ..."* participant 10 (OK)

Emotional supportive interactions

> *"I also notice if you leave them alone, they won't come to school if they feel bad. But if you keep saying, how are you, we miss you, come please. Then, they will still be drawn to you or something. And if you ask that kindly and you show, I know what you're going through, or, I don't quite know, but I understand. Just come, we're here for you, you can have a chat with me or with the others, or not, just come. That does work, you know."* Participant 11 (OK)

Another important strategy that came back in almost all interviews was providing emotional support. As explained before, the majority of the interviewees mentioned the importance of the relationship of trust, which is in line with what has been argued in the literature (Nasir, 2012; Höhne, 2022; and Eriksson and Rundgren, 2019) and serves as a precondition to be able to provide emotional support.

In discussing the different coping mechanisms used by the minors, the strategy of talking to the staff was often given as an example of an adaptive coping strategy and juxtaposed with the strategy of closing off completely. Participants 4 (AC), 5 (AC) and 7 (AC) for example, mentioned specifically that many minors approach them to ventilate about emotional distress, something that they consider very valuable. Also, in the context of school, participants 6 (OK), 10 (OK), 11 (OK) and 12 (OK) explain that school and especially the contacts they have there with staff and other students is something that can help them cope with adversaries.

This confirms earlier studies (e.g. Mels, Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008), indicating that asylum center staff are one of the most important resources of social support of UAMs in Belgium and

contributes to their wellbeing. This research suggests that OKAN teachers may be included here as well; it would be interesting to verify in further research to what extent the minors agree with this and in how far it really does influence their psychological wellbeing. Once again, it can also be seen as an illustration of how these professionals implicitly implement a Cultural humility approach in their practice, because supportive interactions are also one of the main attributes of Cultural humility (Foronda et al., 2016).

Role models

> *"But that is never the same as having someone of color in your team. If you have a teacher in your team who has been an ex-OKAN pupil himself and has made it to teacher, that is a super strong statement to the students. I can say 100 times as a follow-up school coach 'but you can do anything you want as long as you work hard for it'. But then they will say,' fuck you, you were born here, and you don't really know shit'. And they are right. But um, if a teacher who has experienced that himself says that then he can say that once. (...) That's why I think yes, we need to integrate a lot more people of color in our team, I think, yes."* Participant 9 (OK)

As illustrated in this quote, providing role models in the team, people of color whom the minors can identify with, was also seen as an important aspect of the job. This topic came up in five of the interviews, so almost in half of the interviews and four of these interviewees were OKAN teachers. All four teachers who mentioned this found it an important issue that the team of OKAN teachers today is still very white and talked about the need for more diversity in their team. They called this an important "lack" (participant 6 (OK) and 9 (OK)).

In the interviews with asylum center staff, the topic of representation and role models was less present. The fact that their personnel is already quite diverse may explain this. Participant 1 (AC) referred to Fedasil's diverse personnel as a strength but mainly by pointing out the advantages this has to be able to communicate with people in their mother tongue. It was furthermore remarkable how this came up in the interviews with the 2 asylum center staff who are people of color themselves.

> *"I admit, my strongest point here is my skin color, I have a fantastic connection with the young people because they were able to accept me immediately as a new supervisor because I am Indian."* Participant 4 (AC)

> *"I try to show them through myself, that it doesn't have to be all so delineated, it can be much broader. (...) I try to show them, it is not because you are Muslim that you cannot drink alcohol, you can also, you can also be a good person and a good Muslim, and drink something, look at me...."* Participant 5 (AC)

These quotes illustrate well how their positionality as a person of color creates a unique opportunity to connect with the minors and to be a role model. Participant 5 (AC) described their positionality as an asset that informs their professional practice and sees that as a big advantage.

This can be connected to the literature on Cultural humility. As Fisher-Borne et al. (2015) argued, "Cultural humility takes into account the fluidity and subjectivity of culture and challenges both individuals and institutions to address inequalities… it challenges active engagement in a lifelong process that individuals enter into with clients, organizational structures, and within themselves" (Fisher-borne et al., 2015, p.171). It could be argued that investing in staff that is diverse is also a way to address inequalities in society, showing that people of color can also pursue higher education and the kind of jobs these people do. Because, as becomes clear in the quote of participant 9 at the beginning of this section, actually proving this in the image of your team is probably the strongest message you can send as an institution. Otherwise, words will always remain empty. However, this also shows a lack in the concrete theoretical model of Cultural humility of presented by Foronda (2020), that only focuses on the way Cultural humility can influence the personal level and does not sufficiently provide tools to analyze the structural level.

6.4 … yet, feeling powerless

Suddenly the conversation took a very emotional turn. My participant revealed how every day she puts in all her effort to convince her students that education is oh so important, that they have the make the most of it because everything they have had cannot be taken away from them. However, in recent months, she has seen how Afghan minors repeatedly receive a negative advice which means that they cannot stay in Belgium. In moments like that, she realizes that the words she uses everyday suddenly feel empty, that she sometimes has trouble to even believe in those words herself. She explained to me how heartbreaking it is to see a young person completely fall apart, a young person who was working so hard and was so grateful for all the opportunities he had received. She tells how she sometimes literally sees the light in their eyes fade and how hard it is to not be able to do anything. She emphasized the feeling of helplessness that overwhelms her at such moments, because she cannot influence such structural factors and confided in me that this feeling has been weighing on her increasingly heavily lately. At that moment, while expressing her frustration and pain, tears welled up in her eyes. I too felt a lump in my throat at that moment and suddenly silence fell upon us. Personal notes, based on interview 11 (OK)

Despite the importance and the impact these professionals know they can have, feelings of powerlessness and other internal struggles were also very present throughout the interviews. These struggles were related to the challenges they identified, both on the individual and

structural level. Challenges on the individual level related to the issue of boundaries and the right balance between proximity and distance. The main structural challenges that came up through the interviews were related to the asylum procedure of Afghans in Belgium and a lack of resources and expertise. Additionally, the challenge of handling the topic of sexuality also came up.

Personal challenges

> *"But you can also lose yourself in it, I think* [in caring too much]. *In my early years, I did that more often* [mixing work and private life], *but in the meantime I have met so many youngsters and yeah… You need to be careful with that, you know? Burn-outs are always just around the corner and you have to be a bit careful to protect your family and yourself."* participant 9 (OK)

In 7 of the 12 interviews, participants brought up the subject of their own mental health and how challenging it is to protect their personal boundaries while fully committing to the work. An earlier theme showed that the workload is very high, and the quality of care is heavily dependent on the individual professional's personal choices. As participant 6 (OK) says, "*The quality of care then almost depends on the individual carrying capacity of people, who then, for minors that they have a special connection with, do more than they are actually expected to. And that happens everywhere, not only in schools, but also in other professions… Yeah, it's a boundary that is difficult to draw for every caretaker".* This quote illustrates the importance of connecting the personal and the structural level; high workloads and structurally insufficient resources can put pressure on professionals to take on too much work and cross their personal boundaries.

> *"It's a conflict. You know, at work I am often struggling internally, thinking: 'what am I actually doing here?'. I want to be as neutral as possible, but at the same time I also want to show as much as possible that it's okay to be yourself but being myself might not be so neutral. So, it's difficult."* participant 5 (AC)

This quote illustrates a second internal struggle, relating to the idea of neutrality and the balance between distance and proximity. This topic was brought up by four of the participants (three of which were asylum center staff). This challenge is related to the issue of boundary setting, but not as much with regards to how much work you take on but rather how personally involved you get in your own practice.

In discussing this issue with the four participants who brought it up, the value of being neutral that is part of the guidelines by Fedasil and the Red Cross was brought up but also contested. In the quote above, participant 5 clearly refers to the idea of neutrality as something that the

participant strives for, but later the participant said "*I don't believe you can be completely neutral as a care giver or teacher, I don't believe that is possible when you have a hierarchal relationship between a care giver and a client. (…) I believe, to give them everything I have got to offer in my caregiving practice, I need to be transparent, and show, hey, I'm also human, I get what you are going through, I may not experience the exact same things, but I experience similar things. In that way, they can identify with me which may help their integration. I think that works; I hope it does*." This illustrates the struggle the participants are in, to decide in how far they use their own positionality as a tool to influence their professional practice. Participant 1 (AC) similarly had the opinion that minors need a personal approach and is very affectionate in their practice (for example, hugging minors), but this has brought them in conflict with their boss. The third participant saw it more as a personal choice that depends on the professional itself and their personality (Participant 3, AC). However, what they all agreed on is the importance of constructing your own professional care and to "*dare to speak from your own position as a human*" (participant 3, AC).

The way these participants argued for an approach to their practice that starts from their position as a human can be seen as a way to redress the classical power imbalance in a professional-patient dynamic, an integral component of a Cultural humility approach (Murray-García (1998). In this case, the imbalance is not situated on the cultural level per se, but rather refers to a general commitment within social work practice to question hierarchical relationships between professional and client. However, taking on this approach in general increases the chance that the same approach will be taken when matters concerning culture come up. Looking back at the subchapter on racism, it is indeed remarkable that the same professionals who take on a Cultural humility approach with regards to racism, were also the ones who contested the concept of neutrality in the professional- client relationship in general as discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, the internal struggles with boundaries and neutrality discussed here, can also be understood through the concept of Moral distress, as these feelings can possible be interpreted as a form of distress that results from not being able to act in the way they ethically want to act. For example, they seemed to want to do more or take on a more personal approach than the organization wants them to. This link with Moral distress is discussed further below.

Structural challenges

As presented in the introductory vignette above, many participants expressed frustration related to the current situation of Afghan refugees in Belgium at the moment of the interviews. The literature review has shown that recent trends in the asylum procedure of Afghans has led to a significant increase in negative responses, which also has a profound impact on the wellbeing and trajectory of the Afghan UAMs in the centers and schools. They talk about how it leads to the minors becoming very demotivated, losing their faith in what they are doing which

eventually results in them retreating completely, both from the staff in the asylum center as from school (e.g. participants 1 (AC), 2 (AC), 3 (AC), 4 (AC), 7 (AC), 8 (AC)).

They are stuck in bureaucratic no-man's land, argued participants 1 (AC) and 2 (AC), they know the chance of getting a positive answer is slim and yet going back is not an option. Furthermore, half of the participants added that the discrepancy that exists between the results for Afghan UAMs and other UAMs also contributes to feelings of hopelessness in the youngsters. As participant 9 (OK) says, "*They are walking on the tips of their toes, Ukranians get all opportunities, and get a positive advice straight away. They feel that you know, I can feel their desperation. And personally, I also feel that…*" Many participants referred to these incidents with sadness in their voice, expressing a desire to do something about it and yet not being able to do so.

> "*All those people just really want to stay in Europe and start their lives and the fact that I don't have the power to say… Because, I know so many amazing refugees and should it be up to me, they would all get positive advice. They want positive so badly that they weep and try to commit suicide, you know? And I just sit here, and I can't help them, right? (...) And I think that's a shame, that's a shortcoming in my job I think, I wish I could.... I just sit there, I just have to listen, but sometimes I feel that I fall short because I want to be able to say, stay here and I'll help you. But I can't, because that's above my head*." participant 5 (AC)

Apart from expressing their frustration with the recent developments on the procedural level, every single one of the participants talked about the lack of resources and related to that a lacking expertise to deal with particular problems in their job. Some participants talked about the unhygienic conditions of their center and a lack of privacy for young adolescent boys (participants 1 and 4 AC). Additionally, every asylum center staff member mentioned that the groups of minors are too big, making individualized support very difficult.

> *"It would be better if we could work with smaller groups. Now, the group consists of 64 minors and sometimes you are alone here as staff... Then you can't really work individually... Then you can't do much except from what is absolutely necessary."* participant 2 (AC)

Similarly, in the interviews with OKAN teachers, the lack of resources including financial resources, space as well as personnel came up in every single interview.

> *"We are always short of spaces, always short of staff. Because we work with a system of teaching hours, my colleagues... I am sure I may come back next year because of my seniority, but a lot of work is thrown in the bin. Because they cannot promise in June*

> *whether they are going to have a job in September, a lot of young colleagues are leaving and it is a shame, because it means we have to start over every year."* participant 11 (OK)

Related to this lack of resources, all participants mentioned that they experience a lack of expertise especially within the context of mental health care. This is concerning, keeping in mind the high prevalence of mental health issues amongst Afghan UAMs, as came up in both the literature review (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008; Huemer, Karnik, & Steiner, 2009; Vervliet, Lammertyn, et al., 2014; Vervliet, Meyer Demott, et al., 2014) and the interviews. When discussing mental health care and coping, all asylum center staffs and almost all teachers talked about the high prevalence of self-harm in the group of Afghan UAMs specifically as discussed in the following quote.

> *"All Afghan boys do it here, really, they cut their wrists, you don't want to know how many times a week I have to take care of wrists. Uh, legs, chests. Half of my job literally consists of nursing self-inflicted wounds (...) So that's their coping, we see that a lot, but cutting in particular, that's really, amongst Afghan youths that's very much alive. They make TikTok videos of that and send those to each other."* participant 5 (AC)

This issue is experienced as an important challenge in the centers, and often they felt that they don't have "*the right educational background to deal with it in the best way*" (participant 1, AC). Although the centers do offer psychological care, access to these psychologists is still too hard, argued the participants. The psychologists are often based outside of the center or are only present once every two weeks in the center, which makes the step to go there very big for the youngsters. A similar story is told by the OKAN teachers, as participant 9 (OK) said, "*The question is always, how do we get the students to the psychologists? But that's not the question you should be asking, the question should be, how do you get the psychologists to the students?"* Especially for a population that is not used to psychological care and is often wary of it, this participant argued that lowering the step to care and providing the opportunity to build relationships of trust with psychologists by having them present in schools and centers, is an important way to do that.

Lastly, talking about topics concerning sexuality and gender is seen as very challenging in the group of Afghan UAMs in particular. It is very hard to talk about these topics with the boys who are often raised with the idea that these topics are taboo. Especially homosexuality and gender stereotypical ideas concerning women were mentioned by the participants, yet despite mentioning it as a challenge, they also argued that they see important evolutions as the youngsters are longer in Belgium. By talking about it in proactive circles for example (e.g. participants 10, 11 and 12) and building a relationship of trust first before discussing topics like gender stereotypes (participant 9, OK), the minors also evolve in their opinions about these

topics. Related to this, three participants mentioned that amongst Afghan UAMs specifically, they increasingly see sexually transgressive behavior amongst boys. By experimenting with ways to create more opportunities to discuss sexuality in general, the participants hope to deal with this challenge as well.

Although the participants talked about it as challenges and still planning to keep going and face those challenges head on, the way they talked about it was often accompanied with feelings of frustration and desperation. A possible way to interpret these feelings of frustration, is through the concept of Moral distress (Jameton, 1984; Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2020). Jameton (1984) emphasized the importance of studying the effects of external factors restricting professionals in acting according to their moral code and defined moral distress as personal feelings of distress that arise "when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action" (Jameton, 1984, p.6). The feelings of frustration and desperation expressed in this subtheme were linked by the professionals themselves to the lack of resources and evolutions in the asylum procedure, which are effects of broader socio-political structures and decisions. So, classifying these feelings as Moral distress seems appropriate. Throughout the interviews, the idea that if things would be organized differently, they would be able to do way more comes back repeatedly. Mänttäri-van der Kuip (2020), who reflected on the concept of Moral distress within the social work sector specifically, argued that Moral distress can also result from internal factors like insufficient education, skills or knowledge are a lack of moral awareness (Hanna, 2004; Grady et al., 2008; Christen and Katsarov, 2016 in Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2020). Thus, the lack of expertise that the professional experienced in the context of mental health care is also an important factor contributing to these feelings of Moral distress. Interestingly, this study showed that the effects of both external factors and internal factors are deeply intertwined and produce feelings of moral distress in interaction with each other. This supports Mänttäri-van der Kuip's theoretical argument that both internal and external factors need to be considered in order to fully comprehend moral distress and look for solutions (Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2020).

It is important to take these feelings of Moral distress and the related shortcomings in the system of care seriously, as this may offer an explanation for findings discussed in the previous themes. For example, the analysis showed that issues of racism and discrimination are not always addressed by professionals, both because of external factors (the organization does not offer possibilities to do so) and internal factors (the professionals often do not regard is as a possibility). Possibly, feelings of powerlessness resulting from Moral distress already take up so much room that there is not much space left to reflect on the issues like racism, discrimination, especially through more implicit dynamics of Othering and Color-evasiveness.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of how asylum center staff and OKAN teachers perceive Afghan UAMs and their coping mechanisms, and how these perceptions inform their professional practice. The findings reveal that the construction of these perceptions and their influence on care practices is complex and nuanced. The professionals' discourse demonstrated a simultaneous presence of Othering dynamics and Color-evasiveness, reinforcing inequalities, alongside strategies that aligned with Cultural humility in opposing such dynamics. Furthermore, this research interestingly suggests that both structural and personal challenges interact with these dynamics, creating feelings of Moral distress and powerlessness that can obstruct fully adopting an approach committed to fighting racial inequality and (subtle) dynamics of discrimination.

Regarding the extent to which stereotypes underly these perceptions (sub-question 1), an important difference emerged between the explicit and implicit levels. Professionals presented a nuanced and heterogenous set of perceptions when asked directly, contradicting stereotypical thinking and dynamics of Othering that tend to oversimplify the situation in Afghanistan. Interestingly, the professionals aimed to distinguish themselves from the general perceptions in Flanders, emphasizing both positive and negative aspects of Afghanistan, possibly to raise awareness and garner support. The study highlighted the role of media (mainly feeding negative perceptions) and positive contact (contributing to positive perceptions) in shaping perceptions. Implicitly however, the study did find evidence for the presence of Othering dynamics like essentialization, culturalization and objectification, involuntary evoking an image of Afghanistan and Afghans as "backwards" and "abnormal" in the discourse of the professionals.

Secondly, the research identified two dominant perspectives concerning the challenge of racism. One perspective perceived racism and discrimination as explicit and intentional acts, considered incompatible with the safe and neutral environment promoted in OKAN and asylum centers. This idea of the asylum center and OKAN class as "safe spaces", is also reflected on the organizational level where values of neutrality are promoted. This perspective, although acknowledging racism at a societal level, hindered the recognition of more subtle and unintentional forms of discrimination and Othering, which are crucial for adopting a Cultural humility approach. It is thus more in line with Cultural ambivalence and a form of Color-evasiveness that forecloses a critical self-analysis, both within the organizations and the individuals.

The other perspective recognized racism as multi-dimensional, spanning personal and structural levels, explicit and implicit acts. This more critical and self-reflective stance aligned with Cultural humility, yet it sometimes led to the belief that racism is natural, potentially

undermining efforts to tackle the issue. Additionally, this study also revealed racist behavior among the minors themselves and instances of wrong use of the word. Furthermore, the analysis showed that even individuals adhering to this second perspective rarely extend this cultural humility approach of self-reflection in order to comment on the behavior of colleagues. Both the confusion amongst the UAMs and the hesitation to confront colleagues may be related to the Color-evasiveness ideology that dominates the institutional level. So, this shows the importance of taking into account interactions between the individual and organizational level. These findings suggest that future research using the Cultural humility model of Foronda (2020) could benefit from including a structural and organizational level in the analysis.

Thirdly, in response to sub-question 2, professionals' strategies for guiding their practice varied depending on context, positionality, and personal opinions regarding integration. Yet, there were also similarities. A common thread was recognition of trust as a crucial prerequisite and tool in their professional relationships. Elements of Cultural humility were implicitly present in their approach, including starting from an attitude of openness (in particular for religion and the country of origin) and respect for cultural differences, egolessness and building supportive interactions. There was a lack of emphasis on self-reflection and critique, no evidence for dynamics of cultural destruction.

Four main strategies were identified, including stimulating networking and Dutch language learning, making connections with other institutions, providing emotional support, and offering role models. Differences in opinions on the importance of Dutch language learning and the role of role models reflected varying ideas about integration and cultural rigidity. Where some stressed the importance of learning Dutch as a precondition to become part of society, others merely saw it as a tool and a third group explicitly opposed Flanders' fixation on its importance. This first perspective is related to the idea that "culture" is a rigid thing that has to be taken over by the newcomer, the second perspective looks at culture as fluid and subjective and not per definition defined by a particular language. The last perspective aligns better with Cultural humility, illustrating that differences in conceptualizing culture and integration may explain differences in using strategies. The presence of role models was highlighted, mainly by OKAN teachers, possibly because it is especially in the educational context that people of color are still underrepresented in the teams. Yet, examples given by professionals of color in this study illustrate well how this specific positionality can be a valuable tool within the professional practice. In order to fully foster a Cultural humility perspective, representation and the presence of role models within organizations can be an important first step. Again, this shows the usefulness of extending the theoretical model of Cultural humility to include an institutional dimension.

The discussion on professionals' strategies confirmed the significance of the professional relationship and illustrated they occupy a position of power, considering the profound impact they have on the wellbeing of Afghan UAMs. However, professionals also expressed feelings of powerlessness due to personal and structural challenges (sub-question 3). Organizational emphasis on neutrality generated internal struggles in determining the scope of their care practice, while a lack of resources and expertise in addressing severe mental health issues as well as the current difficulties for Afghans to get asylum in Belgium further contributed to feelings of frustration. Considering the high incidence of mental health issues among Afghan UAMs and difficulties in getting them proper care, this last finding is particularly concerning and prompts more attention in future research and policy making. The concept of Moral distress is useful to understand these feelings of powerlessness, showing how both external factors like the asylum application context and a lack of resources and internal factors like a lack of expertise to deal with severe mental health issues to produce those feelings of powerlessness.

Furthermore, these structural and personal challenges and how it impacts the professionals' wellbeing needs to be addressed in interpreting the other results about (stereotypical) perceptions and the strategies used and to what extent these challenge existing inequalities. Also, addressing these issues is crucial to fostering a Cultural humility perspective that fights inequality effectively. Possibly, these issues result in a lack of space, both within organizations as mentally within individuals to reflect on dynamics of discrimination and inequality. Therefore, this study recommends incorporating an institutional dimension into the Cultural humility model to better account for these challenges. Fostering a Cultural humility approach within an organization requires both a restructuring that makes room for the discussion of these topics, along with addressing the mentioned challenges and feelings of moral distress and powerlessness that result from it.

Despite the valuable insights gained from this research, it has some limitations. The small number of participants of color prevents drawing definitive conclusions about potential differences in perceptions between them and white participants. Future research could explore this aspect further with a more diverse sample. Furthermore, using semi-structured interviews; while beneficial for in-depth analysis, might not entirely reflect actual practices, future research could benefit from fieldwork methods. Furthermore, the research focused primarily on OKAN and asylum center staff, including other contexts such as guardians could offer an even broader perspective. Lastly, comparing the findings with the perspectives of Afghan UAMs themselves would be valuable in verifying the identified strategies and their impact.

In conclusion, this research provides valuable insights into the perceptions and coping mechanisms of asylum center staff and OKAN teachers regarding Afghan UAMs and how these shape their professional practices. By addressing the complex dynamics of discrimination

(including Othering and Color-evasiveness) and Cultural humility, along with the identified challenges and feelings of Moral distress and powerlessness among professionals, policymakers and organizations can work towards a more equitable and effective approach in caring for Afghan UAMs and promoting racial equality.

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9 Attachments

9.1 Attachment 1: Interview guideline

Inleiding

- Mezelf + onderzoek introduceren
- Uitleg: anonimiseren, feit dat men altijd mag stoppen + vragen of ik het interview mag opnemen
- Informed consent tekenen

Inleidende vragen:

- Welke functie precies, bij welke instelling
- Hoeveel jaren ervaring
- Welke achtergrond (opleiding)/ specifieke andere cursussen gevolgd om met deze doelgroep te werken

Inhoudelijke vragen:

- Wat zijn de eerste woorden/beelden/gedachten die in u opkomen als u **'Afghanistan'** hoort?
    - Wat denkt u dat het antwoord op deze vraag zou zijn, indien ik dit aan een doorsnee Vlaming vraag?
    - Welke zaken hebben uw perceptie van Afghanistan mensen met Afghaanse roots bepaald? Hoe zou u zelf de impact van uw professionele activiteiten op deze perceptie beschrijven?
    - In welke mate denkt u dat deze percepties het welzijn van niet-begeleide Afghaanse jongeren beïnvloedt?
- Hoe kijkt u over het algemeen naar de **integratie** van niet-begeleide Afghaanse jongeren in de Belgische samenleving?
    - Wat betekent 'integratie'/ 'geïntegreerd' zijn voor u?
    - Welke factoren beïnvloeden de integratie van deze jongeren (positief/negatief)?
        - Stel verwijzingen naar culturele identiteit -> verder op ingaan: hoe construeren ze die identiteit, op basis van wat, in hoeverre is dit iets specifiek voor deze groep (versus minderjarigen van andere thuislanden bijvoorbeeld)
    - Welke rol spelen hulpverleners hierin/ welke rol zouden ze volgens u moeten spelen?
        - In welke mate probeert u binnen uw functie jongeren te ondersteunen in dit proces?
        - Welke mogelijkheden bestaan er binnen uw professionele context om jongeren hierin te ondersteunen?
        - Welke uitdagingen identificeert u nog binnen de professionele context?
        - Zijn er zaken die u graag anders zou zien binnen uw professionele context om aan de geïdentificeerde uitdagingen tegemoet te komen?
- Indien de jongeren op moeilijkheden stoten tijdens dit proces, welke **coping strategieën** gebruiken deze jongeren dan volgens u om hiermee om te gaan (zowel adaptieve als maladaptieve strategieën?)
    - Heel concreet: voor adolescenten, wat vindt u adaptieve manieren om met stress en psychische moeilijkheden om te gaan? En wat minder adaptieve manieren?
    - Hoe probeert u als hulpverlener hierop in te spelen?

    - Welke strategieën lijken u zelf het meest/ minst helpend?
    - Op welke manier beïnvloedt uw eigen achtergrond en eigen ideeën omtrent coping de manier waarop u deze jongeren probeert te helpen?
- Wordt er soms gesproken over **racisme** binnen uw professionele context?
    - Indien ja, wat houdt dit dan in en in welke mate vindt u dat er soms racistisch gedacht en/of gehandeld wordt in uw professionele omgeving?
    - Indien ja, in hoeverre ziet u deze dynamieken in relatie tot de doelgroep (niet-begeleide minderjarige Afghaanse jongeren)?
    - Hoe zou u racisme zelf definiëren? Welke dimensies van racisme zou u zelf onderscheiden?

Afsluitend

- Zijn er nog thema's/ zaken die u graag zou willen bespreken of heeft u nog specifieke vragen voor mij?

9.2 Attachment 2: Information letter

Information letter: Master's thesis – Professionals' perceptions of unaccompanied Afghan minors and their coping strategies

Dear reader,

First and foremost, I would like to thank you for your interest in my master's thesis research. In this information letter, I would like to provide some additional information about the research design and what participation entails.

Purpose of the research

This research is part of a master's thesis within the Conflict and Development Studies program at Ghent University, under the supervision of the promoter, Prof. Dr. Marlies Casier. The purpose of this master's thesis is to explore how professionals perceive unaccompanied minor Afghan youth and their integration into society (including coping strategies). Specifically, I want to investigate how these perceptions are formed and how they guide professional practice. Themes that will be addressed include what problems these youth experience with regard to their integration into Belgian society, how they typically cope with these issues, and how these processes can be best supported in a counseling context. The research concerns the perceptions and experiences of professionals, which means that semi-structured personal interviews are the ideal method for collecting the desired information. Based on these interviews, supplemented by specific observations and a literature review, I will collect data to answer my research question.

Why were you chosen and what does it mean to participate in the research?

As a teacher/counselor, you have or had regular contact with these youth, which means that you have a unique perspective on the topic I am exploring in this research. I would like to invite you for a personal interview that will take place at the end of March/beginning of April.

Participation involves having a personal interview with me, the researcher. This interview will last about an hour and will take place at a location of your choice, such as an office, your home, or a public place. Participation is free and there is room for your input. If you think certain topics are important, you can let me know at the beginning of the interview. Moreover, I will provide you with a list of different topics that will be covered in advance, to give you the opportunity to further prepare if you wish. It is important to note that your participation is

entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign an informed consent form. You have the right to refuse participation and do not need to provide a reason; this will not affect your relationship with Ghent University or your employer. If you wish to stop the interview, you may do so at any time during the research without having to specify the reason. Participation can also be withdrawn up to 1 week after the interview. You can contact me personally to do so (see below).

Privacy

Your privacy will be respected in accordance with the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation). If you have no objections, the interview will be recorded. We can decide together which personal information can be used for further research and which information cannot. In the master's thesis itself, you will be anonymized as much as possible, which means that only general information about you that is relevant to the topic (such as your profession) will be provided. The audio recording will be transcribed verbatim, and both the recording itself and the transcript will be stored on the UGent server, which is password protected. Personal information that you share will be anonymized in the transcript (e.g., by using pseudonyms). The only people who have access to the data are myself and my promoter (Prof. Dr. Marlies Casier). Moreover, all audio recordings and transcripts will be destroyed after the research is completed. For more information, you can always contact the Data Protection Officer of Ghent University: privacy@ugent.be.

Results

The final results of this master's thesis will be available in the online library of Ghent University. If you would like a copy of the results/the master's thesis itself, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you in advance for reading this letter. You will receive a copy of this letter and an informed consent form before the start of the interview.

More information: `

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