



Transnational family ties and networks of support for unaccompanied immigrant youths in Spain: The role of youth mentoring in Barcelona

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ABSTRACT

The growing number of unaccompanied immigrant youths arriving through Mediterranean routes from North and West African countries to Spain is challenging established political and social interventions. Their transition to adulthood and resettlement is made more difficult by the physical and geographical distance with their parents and the availability of networks of support in the host country. This qualitative study examines the transnational family support that unaccompanied youths receive, and the complementary support received from formal mentors in the new context. A focus group was conducted to explore the needs at this stage of life and to construct the interview guidelines. Our findings from twenty semi-structured interviews with mentored and non-mentored youth in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area during 2019 shows how the formal support provided by institutional agents is insufficient to fulfil their emotional needs. We conclude that the virtual presence of family caregivers and the different kinds of support received by adult mentors encourages them in overcoming challenges regarding their well-being.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the increasing migration of unaccompanied minors through Mediterranean routes has been one of the focuses of interest of the media, non-profit organisations and various governmental agencies. In fact, according to UNICEF (2020), a quarter of the 120,560 people who arrived to Europe in 2019 following these routes were minors. Job insecurity, political instability and the violation of fundamental rights in Mediterranean and West African countries are some of the reasons that drive these young people to search for a better future in Europe (Save the Children, 2020). In the Spanish state, Catalonia is one of the regions that hosts a larger number of unaccompanied minors, housing up to 3,742 foreign minors without family references in the protection system in 2018, a figure five times higher than in 2016 (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2020).

These minors can be detained, deported or excluded from various forms of assistance and access to legal protection, depending on the efforts of the destination country (Menjívar and Perreira, 2017). In addition, when they become adults they continue to face a number of adversities, which are mainly related to their legal status and to the difficulty of integrating into the labour market (Allsopp and Chase, 2017; Salmerón-Manzano and Manzano-Agugliaro, 2018). These socio-

legal adversities occur at a liminal stage of their lives and cause them to be immersed in a permanent temporality, in terms of achieving full integration within the destination country (Gonzales, 2016). During this period, the young people have to cope with a series of frustrations arising from the different bureaucratic and political-administrative obstacles they face, which can make it difficult for them to feel safe and develop a sense of belonging to the new environment and even affect their psychological well-being (Chase, 2019).

In recent years, a wide range of research has been carried out on unaccompanied minors, which has focused on existing legal protection, collective policies and mechanisms for determining age. However, very little research has been conducted on their special needs in terms of social support in the transition to adult life (Salmerón-Manzano and Manzano-Agugliaro, 2018). The need for future research to consider mentoring programmes with unaccompanied youths as a differential inclusion mechanism that can generate knowledge on how to develop social protection beyond the iron cage of welfare that we already know has been pointed out (Raithehuber, 2019). For this reason, we believe it is important to understand how these young people build support networks in the new environment, how they perceive them and how they combine with the support they receive from their relatives.

In this regard, we know that family support is affected not only by

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physical and geographical distance, but also by the lack of knowledge their families have of the new (legal and cultural) context and by the social expectations placed in these young people to achieve the European dream, a project that involves the whole family. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore and understand how the unaccompanied youth experience and make sense of these changes in their family and social support networks in this moment in their lives. Specifically, it explores how participation in a mentoring programme conditions the availability of support networks, complementing the social support received from relatives and professionals.

This study has focused on analysing what forms of support exist in their lives and highlighting which social agents they come from. In this article we have drawn on the forms of social support described by [Cutrona \(2000\)](#) and [Brady, Dolan and Canavan \(2015\)](#) in their analysis of “forms of social support in youth mentoring relationships”. From these studies we have considered the following four forms of support: emotional support, described by these authors as the act of expressing empathy, caring and concern for others; esteem support, defined as those motivating messages that enables a person to feel that somebody believes in their ability to overcome obstacles; concrete (or tangible) support, related to providing practical assistance; and advice (or informational) support, which consists of providing useful information or recommendations to somebody so that they can manage a specific situation.

2. Background

2.1. Social support of family

Parental support in childhood and adolescence has been extensively researched and has focused mainly on the role of the family in adolescent transitions ([Cornwell, Eggebeen and Meschke, 1996](#)). Although increasingly, research has also focused on the role of parents in providing ongoing support for their children in the transition to adult life ([Aquilino, 2006](#); [Fingerman, Miller, Birditt and Zarit, 2009](#); [Schoeni and Ross, 2005](#)), given that, at present, for many families active parenting extends beyond adolescence, with the independence of young people being a common goal ([Scabini, Marta and Lanz, 2006](#)).

The social support that parents can provide include financial and practical support, counselling, information, guidance, emotional support and companionship support ([Antonucci, 2001](#); [Vaux, 1988](#); [Wills and Shinar, 2000](#)). Although when focusing on young adults, most studies have highlighted the importance of financial and practical support, since material or instrumental support is considerable in the first stages of adulthood ([Schoeni and Ross, 2005](#); [Grundy and Henretta, 2006](#)). However, how parents can provide other intangible forms of support, such as advice and emotional support in complex situations, has also been studied. For example, [Fingerman \(2000\)](#) highlights how young people in early adulthood felt supported when their mothers simply listened to them talk about their day-to-day lives. Furthermore, these intangible forms of support can also be provided in spite of geographical distance or of limited economic resources, which makes it easier for family support to be present despite the difficulties inherent in transnational relations ([Fingerman, et al., 2009](#)).

In this regard, [Baldassar, Kilkey, Merla and Wilding \(2014\)](#) point out how support practices can also be realized in transnational circumstances, despite being affected and occurring to different degrees given a wide range of factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, cultural histories, and the structures of welfare regimes in which these individuals are immersed. Researchers have highlighted how migration does not prevent the exchange of support within the family, but it does affect the intensity with which each form of support is given, with emotional support being the most common form since it can be provided through letters, phone calls and internet-based communications ([Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding, 2007](#)). Therefore, this family support that unaccompanied youths receive is based on a virtual co-presence, which

supplements the absence of physical co-presence.

The findings of the academic literature related to maintaining family ties abroad have been focused more on unaccompanied refugee minors than on unaccompanied immigrant youths, but we believe that they may be useful for this article despite the different legal status of the two groups. In this regard, researchers have highlighted that those refugee minors that remain in touch with their families abroad perceive a greater family support that, despite the geographical barriers, has some impact on reducing symptoms of depression caused by discrimination and stressful events ([Oppedal and Idsoe 2015](#)). In the same vein, [Sierau, Schneider, Nesterko and Glaesmer \(2018\)](#) recognize the importance of family support for young refugees, ranking as the most important source of social support, even above the support received from friends and significant adults in the new environment.

Other articles have highlighted how difficult it is for young people to maintain these family ties while at the same time developing a life project focused on their own interests in the new environment ([Eide, Lidén, Haugland, Fladstad and Hauge, 2018](#); [Meloni, 2019](#)), given that the permanent attachment to these family ties can foster feelings of isolation and loneliness and be detrimental to the young person's resettlement, as well as being an obstacle to achieving full independence ([Omland and Andenas, 2017](#)). In the same vein, these studies have highlighted the importance of young people being able to establish new close social relationships that allow them to create a sense of home in the new context, similar to the one they had when they lived with their families in their country of origin ([Hertz and Lalander, 2017](#); [Wernesjö, 2014](#)).

2.2. The role of mentoring in providing support for unaccompanied youth

Formal mentoring relationships, meaning those consisting of volunteer mentors who enter the young people's lives through community programmes, have been extensively studied in recent decades (see [Dubois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn and Valentine, 2011](#); [Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent, 2004](#); [Prieto-Flores and Feu, 2017](#)). This is due, in part, to the rapid emergence of mentoring programmes in western countries since the turn of the century, which have focused mainly on adolescents and young people at risk of social exclusion and, in the last few years in Europe, on the inclusion of migrants or refugees in the host countries ([Preston, Prieto-Flores and Rhodes, 2019](#)). These studies have focused on highlighting how mentoring programmes can facilitate social, cultural and linguistic cohesion of foreigners, since the mentors act as translators and interpreters in the new environment ([Oberoi, 2016](#)). They also highlight how the mentors can influence the improvement of skills related to the educational itineraries of young migrants, as well as promote a sense of belonging to the host society and encourage greater hope for their future ([Feu, 2014](#); [Pryce, Kelly and Lawinger, 2019](#)).

[Barrera and Bonds \(2005\)](#) made an extensive analysis of the relationship between mentoring and social support, highlighting the different forms of social support that can be given in the natural mentoring relationship, which are primarily emotional support, cognitive guidance, positive feedback and tangible assistance. Natural mentoring relationships are those that occur within the usual relationships between young people (with relatives, friends, neighbours or professionals) and, although in this article we focus on formal mentoring relationships, it has been suggested that these need to resemble natural relationships in terms of the closeness and trust that is generated in them, in order that the impact of the relationship be deeper ([Brady, Dolan and Canavan, 2015](#); [DuBois et al., 2011](#); [Rhodes, 2005](#); [Spencer, 2006](#)).

In this regard, one might think that the youth workers of the flats in which they live would be able to develop this role of natural mentors, but several studies have highlighted the difficulty they have to generate close and trusting relationships because the young people usually see them as people who are doing their job, rather than people who are emotionally involved in their lives ([Kauhanen and Kauko, 2020](#); [Wernesjö, 2014](#)). In fact, studies of young people in care and leaving

care, argue that social care professionals are usually seen as representatives of a more formal and instrumentalised world or, in other words, more focused on solving specific problems (Brady, Dolan and McGregor, 2020). This, in the Spanish context, has already been pointed out as causing a lack of adult role models, since there is also a shortage of resources that fully address the emotional needs of the minors, while the proliferation of reception and retention programmes (due to the large number of arrivals of minors in the last few years) has led to very negative assessments in which the young people stress a feeling of boredom and feelings of hopelessness (Bravo and Santos, 2017).

On the other hand, the mentors are part of a more informal world, so they can take time to get to know their mentees in depth, becoming adult role models for them and thus help them to cope with their situations without focusing directly on the specific problems (Brady and Dolan, 2020). This enables the young people to be able to thrive in ways that are meaningful to them and identify forms of mentor support such as: concrete and companionship support, by being introduced to new activities; emotional support, as a source of support in their daily lives or to manage negative emotions; esteem support, due to the pride shown by mentors for the mentees' achievements; and advice support, in naturally established conversations with the young person (Brady, Dolan and Canavan 2015). It is therefore considered important to delve into the social support provided by adult mentors in the new environment and how this is combined with the support received from relatives and youth workers.

3. Methods

This article is part of the research project "Applying mentoring: Social and Technological Innovations for the Inclusion of Immigrant and Refugee Populations" that aims to evaluate the impact of social mentoring on different population groups of foreign origin: migrant children, young foreigners and refugee adults.

Specifically, this article was developed within the framework of the mentoring programme *Referents*, developed by the social entity *Punt de Referència* (Point of Reference) since 1998, which works for the emancipation of young people in situations of vulnerability in Barcelona. Through this programme they develop a six-month educational accompaniment with adult volunteers that establish a one-to-one mentoring relationship with young people previously in the government guardianship system. For some years now, most of the young people who take part in mentoring and in general in the different resources of the entity, are unaccompanied foreigners, essentially unaccompanied minors who are part of the child protection system. They therefore lived in residences until the age of 18, when they were obliged to accept a forced emancipation that led them to a strong selection process in order to access a flat for ex-government wards, a screening process that leaves some young people completely unprotected and without any kind of social coverage at the moment of reaching adulthood. However, this study only involved young people who had their housing needs covered, mainly due to having been able to access flats for over 18-years-olds that were managed by the regional government.

The study was conducted between January and December 2019 with young people aged between 17 and 23 ($M = 18.80$, $SD = 1.24$) residing in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area or adjacent municipalities and mostly from Northwest African countries (mainly Morocco). Thirty interviews were held, ten of which were with young people that did not participate in the mentoring programme, ten with young mentees, and ten with mentors, which we will not delve into in this article. Some elements that explain the reality of the group of young people we were in contact with can be seen in Tables 1 and 2 below, which we will discuss later. Out of all of them, the presence of two young people that arrived in Spanish territory by plane with dependents stands out, who later separated from the minors in order to continue their migratory journey or return to their country of origin.

The selection of the young people was based, first of all, on finding

Table 1
Migratory journey, place of residence and family contact.

	Arrival by		Arrival with		Place of residence		In touch with parents	
Small boat	13	Alone	12	Shelter flats	15	Both	15	
Hidden in a truck/bus	5	Friends	6	Shelter	3	One of them	4	
Airplane	2	Family members	2	Rented rooms	2	None	1	
Total	20	Total	20	Total	20	Total	20	

participants in the mentoring programme that were able to answer the questions more fully (due to having the linguistic and communicative capacity to do so) and that, above all, were motivated to speak about their daily lives and the difficulties they faced. The group of non-mentored participants was then chosen following the same criteria, and an attempt was made to find common characteristics between the groups. Table 2 shows the final distribution of the youths organized by country of origin, city of residence and year of arrival.

Access to the non-mentored group of young people was made possible by the Federation of Entities with Assisted Projects and Flats (FEPA, according to its Spanish initials), which facilitated direct contact with the participants and with the entities that accompany them. The fact that the group of participants was a hard-to-reach group was also taken into account, which pushed the study to focus on the young people's perspective of their own needs and difficulties, in such a way that they co-constructed and gave their own meaning to their experiences (Chase, Otto, Belloni, Lems and Wernesjö, 2019). Thus, we began this process thanks to the collaboration of four unaccompanied young migrants who contributed their perspective in a focus group. Two main issues were identified in what they said. First, the difficulties with their legal status, which are related to delays in the processing of a temporary residence permit before reaching the age of 18 and, subsequently, with the processing of a work permit. Second, they stressed the vital need to acquire an educational trajectory during the first years of resettlement that enables them to later access the labour market.

Both issues are related to the goal of achieving full independence, an aspiration that, being truncated or hindered repeatedly, ends up leading to constant emotional distress, something that the focus group highlighted. However, they mentioned the existence of several social agents in their lives that helped them to overcome some obstacles, such as youth workers in the flats and professionals from other social entities. Following these conclusions, the script of the interviews focused on the issues mentioned by the focus group and was divided into six core sections: educational/work expectations and aspirations, social support, legal status, mood, resettlement and mentoring (this last one applied only to the mentored youths).

Mentees were interviewed individually at different times and spaces by the researchers to provide an opportunity to talk freely about their experiences. The interviews were held in the flats where the young people live or, if this was not possible, in the facilities of the entities that support them, in a place where there was enough privacy for the young people to express themselves freely. We chose this procedure because we wished the interviewees to feel comfortable in expressing their opinions, since they knew the place where the interview was held, and it meant that they did not have to move to some place they did not know where they might feel inhibited. They were also able to choose the most appropriate time for them, which meant that it was the interviewer who had to adapt to the daily routines of each young person. Thus, one difficulty was related to being able to fit all the interviews in a way that matched the best times for the young people, as well as taking into account the available space.

The interviews lasted about one hour and were conducted in Spanish. This was problematic, since it meant that we were unable to interview young people who had just arrived here and lacked any knowledge of

Table 2

Country of origin, city of residence and year of arrival.

Country of origin	Mentored	Non-Mentored	City of Residence	Mentored	Non-mentored	Year of arrival	Mentored	Non-mentored
Morocco	6	7	Barcelona	7	5	Before 2015	0	1
Western Africa	4	1	Others from AMB*	2	3	2015–2016	1	2
Others	0	2	Adjacent to AMB*	1	2	2017–2018	9	7
Total	10	10	Total	10	10	Total	10	10

*AMB stands for Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona (Barcelona Metropolitan Area)

the language. We had to focus on young people that had already lived in Spain for some time and that had had the opportunity to improve their Spanish. Once the interviews and discussion groups had been conducted, the audio files that were collected were transcribed and manually coded and anonymised for further analysis.

The questions were designed to explore and understand their support networks in the new region, in order to identify whether there were differences between the different agents present in their lives, and to find out whether they had any impact on the difficulties they faced. We coded the materials using ATLAST.ti following a flexible coding strategy (Deterding and Waters, 2021), paying attention inductively to the information provided. After a first coding, which was reviewed by another member of the research group, it was determined that family support had an implication in the young people's lives that we had not expected to find. As a result, we carried out a more deductive coding that enabled us to delve more deeply into transnational family support and the differences and similarities with other agents that gave them support in the new country.

For this reason, we decided to codify the content according to the forms of social support that predominated, placing special interest in signs of care and concern (emotional support), motivating messages and recognition (esteem support), acts of assistance to address specific needs (concrete support), and also advice and recommendations that enabled them to address problems and needs related to their life trajectories (advice support). Furthermore, five categories of agents that provided different forms of support were distinguished: Family abroad, mentors, youth workers of the flats, friends/peers and mentoring programme practitioners. However, in this study we focus on the findings of the first three groups because, among other reasons, they were the most mentioned categories.

4. Findings

The findings of this study allowed us to first identify whether the supportive family ties of the unaccompanied youth were maintained, and to understand in what ways social support was maintained. They also enabled us to understand how these forms of support interrelated with those obtained from the support networks that are built in the new environment (focusing on the mentors and youth workers of the flats), observing what shortcomings or absences there are with regard to the social support they receive.

We highlight first that types of support are present transnationally in the relationship between families and young people (emotional and esteem support). We then highlight why young people sometimes need the support of new adult role models who are not their relatives. Finally, we explain the support provided by youth workers, more focused on instrumental support, and also the support of mentors, which is related to a wide variety of types of support.

4.1. Family Support: Emotional and esteem support

The family ties of the unaccompanied youth that participated in the study were maintained during the period of resettlement and transition to adult life in which they find themselves. Mainly, different examples of emotional and esteem support relative to the nuclear family were identified, given the willingness of fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and

the young people themselves to remain connected virtually. This virtual co-presence was maintained practically daily, or at least weekly through internet-based communications (mostly by instant messaging). The trust that sustains these family ties is paramount, so much so that certain elements of their lives are only shared with relatives they have a very close relationship with. This is something that Mamadou, a young Senegalese boy, sums up when we discuss the people with whom he usually speaks to in his family:

Well, with my family, I mostly talk to my mother or my father, my siblings...or my uncles, also. We now use internet a lot, WhatsApp and stuff. [...] It's that people.... It depends on the trust you have in talking about your things. My secrets, my whatever, I talk a lot about with my mother. [...] I talk to my mother about everything that happens to me, about what I don't like. She also understands me and tells me it's normal. (Mamadou, non-mentored youth)

This emotional support of concern and empathy received from relatives is a common element in the observations of both the young people that participated in the mentoring programmes and those that did not. We also identified comments that lean more towards a perception of esteem support. Below Rashid mentions the appreciation and recognition received from his parents when we asked him specifically about what his relatives say when he explains his problems to them:

If I have a problem, the first one [to find out] is my brother or my father. The first out of everyone. Before anyone else. [...] They tell me to have patience, that I can get there, that I can do it... (Rashid, non-mentored youth)

Therefore, we can interpret that parents send hopeful messages to their children, encouraging the emergence of positive emotions in the face of difficulties that arise. Below we add an example in which the young person is even motivated to have positive relationships with the adults that accompany him, which could foster a more fruitful relationship with his youth workers or mentors. Aliou explains the conversations he has with his mother and the kind of advice she gives him:

My mother always gives me advice. She tells me to be calm, to not do bad things to people... [...] She tells me that the people who are with me... that you should always listen to these people, that you should work with these people. [...] For example, where I live now... [she says] "if they give you advice or have told you something, don't say no, you have to be positive". (Aliou, mentored youth)

On the other hand, there is an absence of exchange of information with relatives, which is caused by two main reasons. First, several youths mentioned that they do not wish to share certain negative emotions that might upset the family. Said, for example, allows us to understand that he sometimes prefers not to verbalize negative emotions despite feeling some distress:

Of course, they (the family) are sometimes worried about me and ask me how I am doing, how things are going here, and I tell them I am fine, well, so they stop worrying about me. (Said, mentored youth)

Second, another impediment to the exchange of forms of support between the young people and their families abroad is the difficulty for the latter to understand the socio-political context in which their children are immersed. This is manifested mainly in the perception of the parents being unable to understand the administrative procedures the young people are involved in and the obstacles that arise from them. Ahmed gives us an example of a situation in which his parents cannot help him:

What do papers mean, it doesn't authorize work... So many things they won't understand... [...] when I tell them that I don't have work and I do have papers, but I don't have work, they don't understand it, they say "it's a lie". Because they say "you are there, you don't want to work, what do you have papers for? If you don't have papers, tell us...". This is the difference. (Ahmed, non-mentored youth)

These elements that hinder some of the parents' social support are present in several arguments around social support and the transnational family ties that young people maintain. This is partly why the young people seek to build new networks of support in which significant adults can help them in aspects that their parents are unable to.

4.2. Social support provided by mentors and the absence of youth workers

The group of young people who participated in the mentoring programme identified multiple forms of support that complemented the absence of the parents in certain aspects of their lives. In the young people's statements, the mentors appear as a source of social support which can be identified in different forms, primarily: concrete support, advice support, emotional support and esteem support. Nordin gives a clear first example of this support, saying that he prefers to talk about certain things with his mentor rather than with his parents for the reasons we have mentioned. He also adds some examples of how Miquel, his mentor, is present in several tangible needs of his day to day, such as improving his use of the language and knowing new environments. Nordin responds as follows when asked about what things his parents can help him in from a distance and what things his mentors can, and whether there is any difference between them:

They are there and I am here in Spain. And here, Miquel, he's like my father, you know? Because he teaches me things my parents don't know. [...] Speaking, he teaches me a bit to study, to practise the language, Catalan and Spanish, he shows me the city, Barcelona, we are in different places... [...] When I have problems, I don't want to tell them to my parents. I don't want to upset them and make them sad. I tell them to my friends and other people, like Miquel. (Nordin, mentored youth)

It should be noted that not all forms of support appear in all relations, but several can be identified in each. The presence of concrete support in Nordin's case has already been identified. Below is an example of advice support provided by the mentor, which consists of important information for the mentee if he wants to continue studying in formal education. Furthermore, Hakim, the young mentee, explains that he did not receive this guidance from his youth workers, as he expected.

Because when I wanted to do the first course, I did a course in waiting and didn't know what courses there were... you know? I did a course for work as a waiter and as a cook because everybody does that. [The youth workers] don't tell you what there is...that you can do a PFI¹ and then there's the middle grade... then the upper grade... [...] She (the mentor) explained to me that, for example, if you don't have ESO², you can study a PFI to do a middle grade and when you pass the middle grade you can do the upper grade and then, if you want, you can go to the university. (Hakim, mentored youth)

This is not the only case in which we identify an absence of support from youth workers. In fact, in terms of narratives more related to emotional and esteem support, we detected how mentees seek this support from programme mentors rather than youth workers. We can see an example of this in the interview with Amadou when we ask him about the support he received from his family, and then we ask him if there is anybody in Barcelona with whom he can speak about such issues:

P: Well, the truth is that if I have a problem in which my heart cries a lot,

most [of the time], I'll tell my mother, because she's one of the only people I trust.

I: Ok, and wouldn't you talk about the things you talk to your mother about with other people from here?

P: Well, some, not all. I explain a lot of things to my volunteer, in fact. Because sometimes if he sees me...Because I always, if I meet with him, I am very happy and if one day he sees me a little down, he asks "What's up?", he tells me this will blow over, even though my head hurts a little... He says "calm down", this and that... (Amadou, mentored youth)

Following this line, if we examine the interviews of the non-mentored young people more deeply, we find that it is relatively common for them not to be in situations where they can express their negative emotions or in which to feel motivated to continue their life trajectory. Mustafá, after explaining that when he has a problem he calls his parents or siblings, makes clear the lack of support from youth workers or other adults that may be involved in his life in the new environment.

P: There are problems I can solve on my own, but there are other problems I have to talk to a friend about. [...] I can talk about financial problems with friends. I solve personal problems on my own.

I: Don't you usually talk to other people about them?

P: No. No need. [...] Because they can't fix it for you. How are they going to solve your personal problems? It's difficult, right? What are they going to do for you? They can't do anything for you. Well, that's how it is... (Mustafá, non-mentored youth)

This response may be motivated by feelings of isolation, common among young migrants in their resettlement process, but these feelings come in part from the lack of support networks in their surroundings. Similarly, when we spoke to Ibrahim about what he does when he has a problem, we observed that nobody around him is mentioned, and yet his family remains the main source of support.

I don't know. Well, I call my family, mainly my mother and I tell her everything. So that I feel more relaxed and everything. And sometimes nothing, I just sit there doing nothing, waiting for it to pass. Patience... (Ibrahim, non-mentored youth)

We also asked all these young people how their flat youth workers could help them. Several youths made it clear that the practitioners are more focused on specific aspects of their day to day and not so much when it comes to expressing negative emotions or feeling valued. Youssef explains the following when we ask him about the support his flat youth worker gives him.

I don't know at the moment. In work issues, I think. In how to maintain a flat. [...] Keep it clean... He likes to pester, "This has to be clean, this has to be this way"... Well, he teaches you how to have a house. (Youssef, non-mentored youth)

Thus, we highlight that the support of youth workers is totally instrumentalised, focusing on very basic aspects of emancipation and the transition to adult life, a task that the young people also see as necessary. Finally, it should be noted that various mentees mentioned that they wanted to participate in the mentoring programme because they felt alone, and because they needed to cover certain needs that were not covered. Hassan, one of the mentees, responded as follows when we asked him about his reasons for participating in the programme:

As I said before, I felt alone in the centre and didn't know anyone from here, from Barcelona or from Spain. I wanted to meet some kind of friend, I wanted to know places, practise Spanish more... [...] She was like a sister, I swear to you. Like I had a sister here. I trusted her, and still [trust her] to explain everything that happens to me. I can explain things to Antonia (his mentor) that I can't explain to my family. (Hassan, mentored youth)

5. Discussion

In this article we focused first on highlighting the social support provided by the family abroad and then on the social support provided by the social agents present in the new context. However, the academic literature that has examined the resettlement of unaccompanied youths

¹ PFI stands for Programas de Formación e Inserción (Training and labour insertion programme)

² ESO stands for Educación Secundaria Obligatoria (Compulsory Secondary Education)

has focused more on highlighting the networks of support that are built in the destination country. This is why we consider the findings of this article relevant, since they allow us to have a more holistic vision of the whole network of support that exists around them.

The family, essentially the fathers and mothers, are a source of emotional and esteem support that clearly predominates in this period of transition to adult life, having an impact on the resettlement process as well. We can see how the family gives motivating messages in the face of existing obstacles, acknowledges the young person's efforts to overcome daily difficulties, and constantly worries about their well-being. In fact, the close relationship and trust between parents and children is so unique that certain problems are only discussed with them. However, as we have already highlighted, there are certain issues for which the young people prefer to seek support from other adults. This drives the young people to have to build a support network in the new environment, which facilitates their social, cultural and linguistic integration, and also helps them to find spaces in which to converse and reflect upon their own migratory process, independently of their families' expectations. Therefore, relationships are established with mentors that end up also being very significant for them, thus avoiding a permanent attachment to their parents, which could be detrimental to their transition to adult life and their integration in the new country (Omland and Andenas, 2017). This is something that can happen to the non-mentored youths in this study that have no mentors that counteract this lack of social support to count on.

Mentored young people build a network of support in which the different agents are involved in their lives providing complementary forms of support, all of which pursue a common final objective: the full independence of the young person. We would first highlight the presence of the family, but this is followed closely by the mentors and youth workers. Maintaining family ties not only has a positive impact on the emotional management of the young people but can also strengthen the bonds that are built with new significant adults in the new country, since the messages of the parents can promote this connection. The mentors become a source of social support that can acquire both tangible and intangible forms. On the one hand, the mentees speak with their mentors about their emotional distress and receive messages of calm and understanding; and on the other hand, there are also spaces of more instrumental assistance, such as the fact of practising Spanish or receiving advice about how to continue their educational path, providing a more informal support that complements the formal support of the youth workers and professionals of the entities that accompany them.

The youth workers establish themselves as adult role models when it comes to looking for courses and job opportunities or renewing the work permit, as well as fostering basic skills for emancipation. Their ability to support young people is therefore limited to more instrumentalised forms of support as previous research has indicated (Brady et al., 2020). This finding does not negate the fact that some youth workers can provide emotional and esteem support, but it does show that, on several occasions, this support of the youth workers is insufficient for the young person, which coincides with the evaluation of Bravo and Santos-González (2017) regarding the lack of resources to address the emotional needs of unaccompanied youth in Spain.

This research thus sheds some light on the need for these young people to build new close social relationships that enable them to feel at home in the new country (Hertz and Lalander, 2017; Wernesjö, 2014). Since even in the narratives of these young people there are evaluations that compare the role of the mentors with family roles; even the words that they use to define these relationships resemble those used to define the uniqueness of those that exist with parents. There is especially talk of close and trusting relationships, something which several studies focused on mentoring relationships have highlighted as essential aspects for the impact to be deeper (see Brady, Dolan and Canavan, 2015; DuBois et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2005; Spencer, 2006). Furthermore, seeing that formal mentors can play a similar role to that of natural mentors by

providing emotional and esteem support indicates that the mentoring programmes with unaccompanied youth can provide differential social inclusion for this group, which goes beyond the provision of practical assistance or the covering of basic needs (Raithehuber, 2019).

In addition, we suggest that one element that may be fundamental to situate the findings of this study is the support mentors receive from the organisation's mentoring professionals, who provide training based on the needs of the young people, and also monitor the relationship on a weekly basis in order to guide the mentor. Training in mentoring projects is essential to address the problems faced by a specific population, since in this way the mentor can address the needs of the mentee with greater knowledge, instead of providing support in general terms (Christensen, Hagler, Stams, Raposa, Burton and Rhodes, 2020). Moreover, this training helps mentors feel better guided in building a solid relationship with their mentees, which is important considering that an approach that is too rigid and focused only on solving specific problems can threaten the duration of the relationship (Cavell and Elledge, 2015). Therefore, we suggest that for mentoring with unaccompanied youths to be truly effective, there needs to be a well-established training focused on the building of a solid relationship with the mentee and on the specific needs of the groups.

Finally, it should be mentioned that this is an exploratory and descriptive study of support networks of unaccompanied youths in a specific setting, so that the topics discussed may lack in-depth analysis. However, writing this article has given us the ability to make some recommendations on how research on transnational family support for unaccompanied youths could be developed in the future. Although this study has been able to examine family social support taking into account support provided by people from outside the family – something that the literature on transnational family support has already highlighted as necessary to go beyond the nuclear family (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011) – another methodological approach could have provided a deeper understanding of existing support networks.

In this regard, Bernardi (2011) argues that a mixed methods approach can offer several advantages in the area of well-being of children and young people in transnational families. She argues that while qualitative analysis can address family strategies to maintain a geographically distant relationship, quantitative analysis has the ability to reconstruct the potential and actual relational support that is available in a context where interactions can be hampered by periods of separation. Further, in terms of data analysis, the documentary method could be a more suitable tool for carrying out a deep narrative analysis. This method would offer access to the pre-reflexive or tacit knowledge of the young migrants, which in this study we have disregarded (Bohnsack, Pfaff, & Weller, 2010).

Furthermore, studies on transnational families have emphasised that most research is only carried out in a single nation or state, so it only focuses on one of the two contexts involved in this transnational relationship (Mazzucato, 2008). This leaves part of the family out of focus and provides a partial vision of the factors that impact such a relationship. This, furthermore, would be of special interest for research on mentoring young migrants. Studies on mentoring have highlighted the importance of families maintaining an active role when their children take part in a mentoring project, because the success of the relationships increases when parents are informed about what happens during the process and approve of the relationship with the mentor (Taylor and Porcellini, 2013). In this regard, it would be interesting to explore whether these elements also have some effect on the success of the mentoring relationships when there is a transnational family.

Furthermore, we must point out the limitation of this study in providing information on the social integration of unaccompanied young girls, since the sample of our qualitative study is entirely made up of men. In addition, except for one participant, they all had significant transnational family ties, which makes it difficult for us to draw conclusions regarding the impact that the absence of family support abroad can have on the mentoring relationship. We also consider that these two

issues remain under researched, so we encourage qualitative studies that enable us to delve more deeply into whether the impact of mentoring on boys is the same as on girls or whether there are significant differences. We also encourage further research into the consequences that the absence of transnational family ties has on the construction of mentoring relationships with adults in the new environment.

Ethical approval

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee of the University of Girona) under the code: CEBRU0001-2018 (6th of April 2018).

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Declaration of Competing Interest

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

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