Article

Conducting Research with Unaccompanied Refugee Minors within an Institutional Context: Challenges and Insights

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Abstract: The main goal of this paper is to explore the difficulties the refugee minors face in the process of seeking inclusion in Portugal. The project conducting this research takes place in a shelter for refugee minors in Portugal, and its inhabitants are the main focus of the analysis. The research is guided by Applied Anthropology which means that, in methodological terms, we use active listening, participant observation, and artistic workshops in drawing and photography in order to get to know them better and establish a closer relationship with the minors. Our interlocutors are refugee minors, boys and girls, aged between 15 and 18, who have been institutionalized by an NGOD responsible for hosting them in Portugal while they await their residence permit. These minors are characterized by a diversity of nationalities, socio-cultural and ethnolinguistic references and different life projects. The artistic focus (drawing and photography) is explored as a non-invasive methodology, a tool that best helps to express emotions, perceptions and desires in a creative and uncompromising way. We chose to focus our analysis not on the traumatic past, as is usually the case when it comes to refugees, but on the future. In other words: we invite these minors to think about their future, what they want for themselves in Portugal and the European Union. As we discuss our difficulties of conducting fieldwork in the institutionalized context, we conclude the article with the idea that working with refugee minors in that environment should not be an end in and of itself, but rather an opportunity to do more profound research. This investigation should continue, preferably outside the institutional gates, on a more personalized basis. As a practical goal, we also propose the idea of organizing an exhibition with the results of the workshops to facilitate the two-way process of inclusion.

Keywords: institutionalized unaccompanied refugee minors; social inclusion; art; future

1. Overview

Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs) are protected by law and are under responsibility of a Non-Governmental Organization for Development (NGOD) called Concelho Português para os Refugiados (Portuguese Council for Refugees, CPR). However, their difficulties in integrating into the country are partly due to the lack of specific support for their inclusion, particularly in terms of school accessibility and Portuguese learning, as well as insufficient support regarding physical and mental health which negatively impacts their future.

The Portuguese law on URMs follows the definitions proposed by international organizations (UNHCR; UN; UNICEF[1]) dedicated to the subject: "URM are third-country nationals or stateless persons, under the age of 18, who enter national territory unaccompanied by a family member or recognized adult who is responsible for them". In 2022, the reports from the Asylum Information Database (AIDA) and the European Council of Refugees and Exile (ECRE)[2], indicate that 83 URMs entered Portugal (4.2% of all asylum applications). According to ECRE, AIDA, and UNICEF, URMs are exposed to extreme forms of violence, exploitation, human trafficking, physical, psychological, and sexual

abuse before or after their arrival in the EU. They can be marginalized and drawn into criminal activities or radicalization. The article "Mental health of unaccompanied refugee minors in Europe: a systematic review" (Daniel-Calveras et al. 2022) refers to 23 studies carried out in nine countries that examined 80,651 URMs, concluding that post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety are the most prevalent problems. They warn of the need for early intervention in host countries to improve mental health outcomes.

In Portugal, research on refugees mentions the difficulties of social inclusion and their sometimes-problematic relationship with the state institutions responsible for hosting them. It is important to highlight that despite the small numbers, this is a very diverse and heterogeneous group of minors, both in terms of their geographical, socio-cultural, and linguistic origins, as well as their cognitive and intellectual abilities, schooling, and life experiences. Nevertheless, the image projected in political and social contexts corresponds to people trapped in homogeneous categories, dependent on welfare institutions, invisible, without agency and in constant social suffering (Rebelo 2021; Santinho 2011). The extreme vulnerability of URMs alerts us to the fact that education and care during the first years after arrival, combined with the desire to create a positive future, are essential factors for inclusion, and education plays a fundamental role in their lives (Moleiro and Roberto 2021).

1.1. School Education: Major Concerns and Some Recommendations

One of our primary goals is to investigate the issues that the URMs have on their journey to inclusion in Portugal. One of the main pillars of their inclusion in society at this age, namely participation in school education, does not correspond to their specific needs, leading to a high percentage of school dropouts. There are different reasons for this: (1) illiteracy: some minors have never been to school before, which has prevented them from acquiring fine motor skills, a basic requirement for learning to read and write; (2) inadequate language teaching programs: there are no specific official teaching guides for refugee or immigrant minors; (3) lack of teachers' training regarding refugees: public school teachers, despite their good will, are not trained by the Ministry of Education to understand the specificities and needs of refugee and immigrant children; and (4) lack of mental disposition by minors, also due to previous reasons. This means that they hardly find enough motivation to continue their studies at school. However, some of them manage to break through these barriers, given their resilience and determination to get out of their vulnerable situation. As individuals, all of them have their wants and needs, as well as stronger and weaker points. For instance, where Mohamad[3] is highly motivated to get his education and join the Portuguese society so that he can eventually become employed at AIMA[4] and help other refugees (that is how he envisions his future), Ali's resources do not allow him, at the moment, to think beyond working his customer service job, and Sulayman does not appear motivated to participate in any activities at all. This observation is divorced from any moral connotations, serving only to highlight the diversity of minors in the system and the unmet need for the accommodation of their individual needs.

Based on the research carried out in this project, and also on the research into the access of refugee students to university, "Integrating refugees and migrants into higher education in Portugal? An action research experience in a Portuguese university" (Rebelo 2021; Santinho 2011), we recommend that the Portuguese education system adopts a holistic vision. In other words, it should incorporate the diversity of its students (nationalities; socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds; life experiences; and family contexts or the absence thereof, as in the case of unnacompained refugee minors) in order to produce programs that include this same diversity. Following Tim Ingold (2017), "The educational community is held together through variation, not by similarity." We also believe that the development of communities of education is based on meeting others, establishing relationships, and together recreating collective learning spaces. However, the education system in Portugal is not yet prepared to incorporate this diversity. Our recommendations are twofold. (1) At a macro level, we believe there is a need for ongoing, in-depth training for the entire educational structure—including school management, teaching staff and other

employees—on what it means to be a refugee student. This training would include topics on the socio-political issues of refuge today and, in particular, guidance from specialists (social scientists, psychologists, cultural mediators and technicians from NGOs specializing in refugees) on how to deal with the suffering of these minors, which often includes healing from multiple losses, dealing with family separation, ongoing threats in society and at school (racism; bullying), difficulties in keeping to timetables, reasons for possible adaptation deficits, social isolation, among others). Still, at a macro level, it would be advisable to teach the Portuguese language in the full school timetable, ideally as a year 0, or propaedeutic, before these refugee minors (and other migrants with a different language background) start the normal school program. It would also be desirable for schools to offer complementary curricula based on the arts, as they facilitate the emotional expression of each student, as well as the imaginative projection of desired futures. (2) On a micro level, it would be important for each school to be able to count on a network of professionals who provide personalized care for each refugee minor student, including: a survey of their concrete social needs and a response to them, as well as structured mental health support based on cultural competence (Pussetti et al. 2009). Finally, each school could develop projects (possibly with external funding) that promote the establishment of support networks and intercultural dialogue, which would include national and foreign students, on a basis of mutual help and mediation, using "buddy programs" (Bacher et al. 2020).

Apart from being an enabling and inalienable human right, education has been shown to protect the psychosocial, physical, and cognitive well-being of refugees and migrants (Smith 2011). To make this happen, each country's educational policies must be able to adapt to current times, evolving to include all differences.

Another goal for this research project aims to contribute to the construction of appropriate representations of inclusion, enhanced by artistic methodologies. In Portugal, there is little literature on "refugees" and "art" (Galvão and Cabrita 2019; Santinho 2022). However, in the international context, references abound (Foster 2015; Lenette 2019), alluding to the importance of participatory arts for empowering the most socially invisible groups, leading to political strategies that make society pay more attention to what these groups want to convey (Dreher 2017; Couldry and Jenkins 2014; Bickford 1996; Fairey 2017).

As we can see in several publications, art has also been widely recognized for its therapeutic benefits, especially for children and adolescents who may struggle to express their emotions verbally. Studies have shown that engaging in artistic activities can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD among refugee children (Cohen-Yatziv and Regev 2019). However, most of the references available in the scientific articles belong to the field of medicine or psychotherapy and are related to refugee adults. In Akthar, Z. and Lovell, A., for example, the research focused not on refugee children, but on the therapists who accompanied them (Akthar and Lovell 2018). However, the focus was, once again, on the refugees' past traumas and not on what they aspire to do or envision for their future. Oepen and Gruber (2023) carried out an extensive literature review on what has been produced at the intersection of art therapy and migration. Once again, we found that the focus was mainly on mental health and trauma in adult refugees. In a different direction, this master's thesis from the University of Porto in Portugal entitled "Refugees and Migrants in Art Integration processes of refugees and migrants through art practices" (Kosmatka-Kos 2017) tells us the following: "Art is known as the universal medium of communication which can help to accelerate the intercultural dialogue." (p. 3). This thesis represents a different point of view from the others (although complementary) in the sense that it approaches art not from a therapeutic point of view but as a methodology that facilitates reciprocal dialogue between refugees and the host society, helping to promote inclusion. The methodology used was based on the analysis of various artistic manifestations in defense of the hosting of refugees, on both national and international levels, carried out either by NGOs or art collectives, not directly involving adult refugees or minors. It should be noted that, as mentioned above, the review of the literature produced so far in Portugal on art and refugee minors, has been very scarce, mainly because there are few scientific

research projects on this subject. With this article we intend to contribute to broadening the debate, focusing precisely on art as a vehicle for reflection and communication, and for social and cultural inclusion.

1.2. Envisioning a Future

One of the special features of this project is that we focus the approach on the present and the future and not on the traumas of the past. This option is justified by the avoidance of subjecting adolescent refugees to constant repetition and re-victimization. Usually, the methodology used by the host institutions to test whether the asylum seeker is telling the truth is based on interviews where refugees are asked to describe, in detail, episodes that illustrate their traumatic past, like reasons for fleeing their place of origin, with details of violence suffered or witnessed; detailed description of the journey (land or sea) with possible references to traumas such as physical and psychological violence or rape. But as researchers, we are not interested in ascertaining the supposed truth of the facts described by the asylum seekers. That is not our role at all. By inviting young refugees to envision their future, we believe we can contribute to encouraging more positive feelings and attitudes towards their life in Portugal. Using the methods of anthropology already referred, combined with artistic techniques (drawing and photography), and performative ways of staging social problems, our objective has been to encourage URMs to reflect on the ways in which they choose to represent themselves in the current context; what their priorities are and how they project their future; what they understand by peace; inclusion, identity, cultural, religious, and gender diversity; racism and, also, how they imagine Europe (Figure 1a,b).

(**a**)   (**b**)

Figure 1. (**a**) The minors were invited to draw their hands, color them, and write down words they felt best described them. This is Christiane's result, the words including: amicable, foodie, lover, charitable, humble, your best friend, shy, gourmand, simplist [sic], introverted, OCD, an MC, I can be anything, Jesus is my first love, wifey, active, the sky is the limit (Not), and never stop dreaming; and (**b**) Mohamad's result: study, liberty, and music (written in Portuguese).

To sum up, we have the following objectives that we wish to shed light on: the various barriers the minors struggle with during the process of hosting and inclusion, the obstacles we face on our side while conducting research, and art as a dialogue facilitator between cultures and a therapeutic supplementary tool for inclusion.

1.3. Participants

It is important to better clarify who these minors are and where they are institutionalized. As mentioned earlier, they are children and teenagers—boys and girls, under the age of 18—who have applied for asylum in Portugal, having traveled alone, without family

members or legal guardians. Currently, around 25 URMs live in the shelter, but only eight or nine (the number varies depending on their availability) voluntarily join our proposed activities. Social workers responsible for the minors, plus a few mediators' volunteers, are always present in the house. The house shelter is located in Lisbon, but it is relatively isolated, on the side of a public park where people rarely circulate.

The institution's management and social workers promptly supported this project. We were told that they presented our proposal to the minors and, of these, nine (6 boys and 3 girls) were interested in taking part in the sessions. We do not know why the other residents of the shelter did not want to join. After we explained the purpose of our project to the management of the CPR, it was the technicians who contacted the minors and informed us that this group of nine would be the ones interested. As the days and times for our activities were also set by the CPR, we never had contact with the other minors living there, which limits our research somewhat, as we do not know, for example, the profile of the other minors and the reasons why they chose not to join. These teenagers arrived at the institution at separate times; some arrived almost a year ago, others just the week before the beginning of the project. All of them are still waiting for their official documents, issued by the Foreigners and Borders Service (formerly SEF, now AIMA[5]), which is slow in assessing the applications for residence permits, as is usually the case with this bureaucratic, security-oriented service which does not hesitate to keep their lives on hold for much longer than necessary. The group that usually takes part in the activities we propose includes several national origins and different linguistic backgrounds. They come from Congo, Guinea–Bissau, Senegal, Algeria, Benin, Morocco, Mali, Gambia, and Afghanistan, and their languages vary between Arabic, French, English, Portuguese (from Guinea–Bissau), Wolof (Senegal's vehicular language, spoken by around 90% of the population), and many others.

2. Materials and Methods

The research has been conducted by the authors since October 2023. At the meeting that preceded the workshops, we introduced ourselves to the minors, explained the objectives of the project, guaranteed them total freedom to participate or not participate. We wanted to explore the ways auto-reflexivity could be facilitated through art, gently inviting the minors to engage in introspection using guided art techniques. Doing everything we could to keep them interested, participating, and confident, we chose to focus on something concrete at the end of our journey together, namely a public photographic exhibition that would showcase the way they chose to represent themselves or others, without corsets categorizable by notions of culture, religion, gender, past, suffering, origins—but, at the same time, also with them, if that was what they wanted. The sessions can be divided into two categories: drawing and photography.

2.1. Drawing

Our drawing sessions last 1.5–2 h and take place almost every week before supper, between 6 and 8 p.m., in the large room that doubles as the dining hall. The topic of each workshop is suggested by us in advance. Participation in the decision making from the students is always welcome, and they are regularly invited to propose their own topics, but overall, they tend to dislike the perceived pressure of 'responsibility', preferring to follow our lead.

The workshops, so far, have ranged from classical drawing with pencils and markers to stamping with ink and drawing with threads soaked in paint. There have also been sessions focused more on the crafting side, such as designing a keepsake box using the *decoupage* technique or making collages and enhancing them with drawing. The topics range from free (usually when they are just starting to learn the technique and need to focus on it first) to gentle invitations to explore the ideas of 'home' and their inner worlds (Figure 2). While the staff (CPR's social workers designated to support us in these sessions that also make the link between the refugees and us) provide some materials as requested,

like A4 printer paper and a box of assorted pencils and markers, we bring the rest of the materials and tools with us. They cover the basics like scissors, glue, thicker or larger sheets of white and color paper, rolls of craft paper, newer markers, acrylic and watercolor paint, brushes, but also more specific items like magazines for collages, napkins for *decoupage*, sponges and screws to play with ink, and so on. Every time we bring only the materials needed for the specific workshop to use to minimize the mess; however, the shape of the table inevitably leads to things piling on top of each other and the participants having to clear spots for themselves. Explaining the techniques and goals of a given workshop can take a significant amount of time, as the instructions must be given in English, Portuguese, and French, with an intern at CPR providing the translation in Arabic, to make sure that no one is left clueless about the day's plan. In situations where not all languages can be covered, the barrier is prominently felt and finer points can easily be lost, although we do our best to signal that it is not for a lack of trying to include all participants.

Figure 2. This drawing represents "home", according to Noor. It started with a red dot in the middle. Then, all turned black.

In every session, participants are invited to use the suggested techniques and work on suggested topics (examples include the idea of home, a self-portrait, celebration of a major holiday like Eid-Mubarak[6] as individual work, or creating a large scale poster of a city for everyone to live in as a group project), but in cases where the participant would rather do something else, they are encouraged to do so with our full support. We want them to engage in a creative process and feel safe doing it; what exactly it is that they do is of secondary concern. Ismail, for example, enjoys drawing and says he does it in his free time too, so during sessions he tends to show that preference as well. However, while not following our proposed guidelines for materials and techniques, Ismail still sticks to the proposed topics and readily discusses his work with us. He eagerly engages with us and is open to dialogue while doing things that bring him pleasure and he feels committed to, which reinforces the idea of these workshops as islands of safety and mental healthcare.

While the participants work, they engage in conversations with us and with each other, which often leads to impromptu interviews as they are invited to share their thought process behind their current work, or to include us in the conversation on an unrelated topic. Given how limited our contact time is with them, these moments are precious, as they allow us to get to know each other better and gain some mutual trust. Trust is necessary to establish closer relationships. We were hoping that we would be able to dive into more sensitive or complex themes and concepts, such as the idea of religious or gender diversity, or even the idea of freedom, and so far, the atmosphere of budding trust and the gentle encouragement provided by engaging in art have led to exactly that, either as part of an explanation of their work, or even unprompted; some minors have already confided in us about their past (like the flight to Europe) or held active discussions regarding topics like religion or LGBTQ+.

At the end, once the work is complete or a logical stopping point is reached, we ask them to sign their names and offer to take their works with them. Mostly, the participants let us keep them, with the argument of not having space in their rooms, although it is unclear whether it is a genuine argument or a way to say that they are not very interested in keeping their works. In some cases, the participants are eager to keep the finished product (like the keepsake boxes).

2.2. Photography

So far, two photography sessions have taken place. Unlike the drawing workshops, these sessions were held on Friday and Saturday afternoons, in broad daylight and with no set end time. For better facilitation, we enlisted the help of a professional photographer with extensive experience of working with refugees. The workshops took place at the facility as well, and the materials (professional cameras, tripods, lenses, and art books focusing on visual art and photography) were provided by the invited professional for shared use, and the minors were also invited and encouraged to use their cell phones.

In the first session, the photographer began by explaining some basic rules of cell phone photography (everyone has a personal phone). The space for this activity was open and dynamic, in the sense that the participants could move around the room and the courtyard outside the house, putting into practice the technical guidelines provided earlier by the trainer. The second session began a little differently, namely, sitting around the table where a computer was placed, the minors were invited to look and 'read' images with iconic photographs taken from a book. The trainer then invited them to observe, describe, and reflect on the images in terms of content, form, color (or lack thereof), light, and angle.

This time, there was a simple but very important exercise. The minors were asked to photograph objects or situations that could answer the proposed questions: 'what I like', 'what I do not like', and 'what makes me happy'. At the end of the time stipulated for taking photos, everyone sat down again to look at the results together, and each person, in turn, explained the meaning of the photos and the reasons that corresponded to the emotions. Some examples of photos were a Bible, a plate of Arabic food; the face of a boyfriend and his girlfriend; money; a reading book; and cats in the courtyard. From a negative point of view ('what I do not like'), the photos represented a garbage can, a perfume bottle with an unpleasant smell, and the dining room where the workshops take place.

According to the aforementioned literature, engaged photography promotes a focused view of the world around us, which also includes our self; confidence in others and in oneself; self-esteem; a sense of identity; autonomy; and independence and better inclusion in the new socio-cultural context. It also promotes language learning and a sense of belonging, breaking down stereotypes and prejudices. Cultural experiences are built using photography in order to generate dialogues on various subjects, such as cultural diversity; living conditions; school learning; health; family; friends; and, above all, constructive ideas for the future. Photography also helps build individual and collective stories with a common visual language, namely focus on the person (and not on the refugee category) as part of the group, producing collective work with respect for personal identity.

The activities related to photography have two interconnected objectives. The first one is technical photography training, using the personal cell phones of URMs. The second one is the promotion of the materialization of images in young refugees on themes that have meaning to them and represent themselves based on reflective encouragement about the ways in which they see the world and themselves.

Again, by organizing and offering training in photography and drawing, we intended to explore the auto-reflexivity associated with the use of language as a facilitating mechanism for inclusion. We explored playful and free creation as an easier way for the subject to think of themself, to see themself in the future in a more positive way, to value their own knowledge and actions, to relate to society, to improve their self-esteem, to improve their command of the language and to contribute, at the same time, to the valorization of their inclusion and to the valorization on society's perception of refugees.

Photography, as many other inclusive arts particularly related to inclusion projects (Pienimäki 2021), promotes a focused view of the world around us, confidence in others and in oneself, self-esteem, a sense of identity, autonomy, independence, and better inclusion in the new socio-cultural context. Photography helps build cultural experiences in order to generate dialogues on various subjects such as cultural diversity. It also promotes language learning and development of a sense of belonging, breaking down stereotypes and prejudices. Before moving on to the photographic exercises, we talked with the minors about the results they hoped to achieve and for what purpose they would be used.

The photo workshops aimed to teach the minors to use their own cellphones in applying their knowledge of photographic techniques such as light; shadow; angles; perspectives; the rule of thirds, etc. With these exercises, we aimed to encourage minors to see the world and its meanings in a reflective way by inviting them to materialize, in images, the ideas of belonging, cultural diversity, well-being, and even the idea of what the future might mean to them.

The atmosphere at the facility has a marked impact on the quality of the experience that we are able to give to the URMs during the workshops. We have to hold the workshops downstairs, in the room/kitchen area, as there is no designated area large or equipped enough to facilitate the workshops. The place we use to work is the collective dining room, which is spacious, but the presence of other people occupied with something else can be distracting. The room itself has been described as unwelcoming by one of the regular participants (there is now a side project in progress, made with active participation and inspiration of Christiane, to paint the room's walls, creating images of people's silhouettes filled with flags of African and Asian countries). While large, it can be dark as it is situated on the lower level, with windows opening into a cramped, walled off area with relatively little natural light. The two rows of lights along the ceiling, reflecting off yellowish walls, would not provide sufficient illumination even if both were in working condition, which they are not. Not only does it make it physically difficult to see and limits the possible experiences in wintertime, when the sun goes down before we even arrive for the workshop, but it also leads to faulty perceptions of colors and contrast which can impact both the result and the participants' experience and interaction with the process, not to mention adding to the gloomy atmosphere.

The big space also means that it can be difficult to control the temperature. With the massive space heater off, it feels chilly; with it on, a stream of hot air is blasted in the direction of the participants with a loud whooshing noise, which can easily lead to sensory overload and add to the existing difficulty of mutual understanding due to the language barriers. The participants, usually eight or nine, are seated around a long dining table covered with a sticky plastic tablecloth, which makes it difficult to divide attention in an efficient way, sometimes leading to someone 'falling off' and making it harder to do group projects than it would be, for example, with everyone seated at a round table. As it is a common dining room area, people who do not participate in the workshop still come to eat at a neighboring table or turn on the TV and chat with each other while sprawled on the couches, and towards the end of the session, the kitchen behind the half-wall comes to

life. All of it adds to the distractions and the somewhat precarious feeling of the artistic workshops, and while we stress that the participation is never mandatory, the distracting factors and the suboptimal overall atmosphere can tip it all the way into being perceived as unimportant. All in all, between the television, the conversations of other people in the room, the noise of the heater, the clanging of pots, the hot or cold air, and the cluttered and messy table lend an air of vague discomfort, transiency, and busyness (Figure 3).

Figure 3. A typical picture of the workshop: a large dining room, busy table, and crowded spaces.

One of the themes most often drawn brought up by Noor in drawing and in conversation revolved around models of elegant and colorful dresses. She told us that she loved fashion and that her dream was to become a model. And so, when our first photography workshop took place, we found Noor's absence strange, as she had previously expressed a strong desire to be photographed by our professional photographer, in order to create a portfolio that she could present at a casting. Twenty minutes after the workshop began, Noor entered the room, dressed in her hijab, justifying her delay by the fact that she had gone to the mosque, as she does every Friday. She asked for a few more minutes to get ready for the much-desired photo shoot. When she returned, she was dressed 'western style': short black skirt, white blouse, handbag, make-up, and loose hair. The session was fun, with the whole group taking part (boys and girls), rehearsing poses collectively or in pairs for the photos. But Noor did not just play. She was serious about getting the quality photos she needed for her portfolio (Figure 4a,b). One day later, we sent all the photos that were taken of her to her private cell phone. Afterwards, we asked the social workers if they had made any contact with modeling companies. They told us that they did, as this was clearly Noor's wish (if it happened, they would always be there to supervise). However, they explained, the modeling companies that had seen Noor before were quick to clarify that they were not interested in her. Not because she lacked beauty or posture, but because they were only interested if Noor wore her hijab at castings, something she refused to do. For her, the hijab represented something untouchable: her religion, her culture, her family, and her roots. The Western dress she wore in the photos was rather her mask or, maybe, the new identity (Camino 1994) that she would like to perform here, in Portugal, the embodiment of her presence in Western European countries. This episode illustrates some of the attitudes our society has towards refugees. They are only 'interesting' if they are exoticized. They are

no longer interesting if they are seen as 'one of us'. Our aim with this project is precisely to raise public awareness of the right of refugees to build a future according to their wishes and aspirations instead of stereotypes frozen in a colonialist past, glued to the idea of exotic lives that are being perpetuated for the pleasure of Western society.
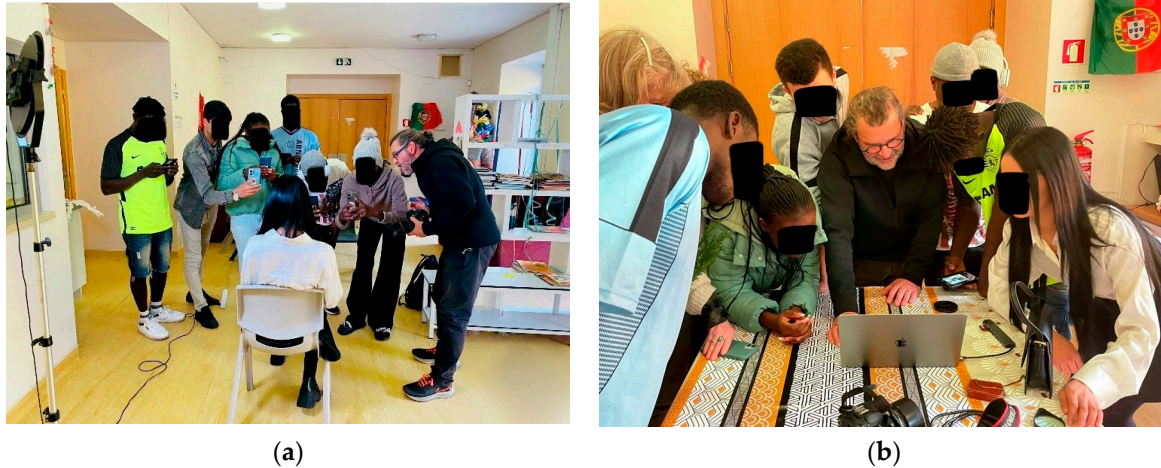

(**a**)   (**b**)

Figure 4. (**a**) Minors taking pictures of Noor as the model while the photographer coaches both sides. (**b**) The group discussing the resulting pictures, with the photographer providing professional commentary regarding the techniques used in the process.

In addition to drawing and photography, the researchers are always available for other unplanned activities. One of the advantages of our fieldwork lies in the spontaneous conversations that take place during that time. One Saturday, we invited two of the girls, Noor and Christiane, to visit the 'Museu do Traje' (costume museum) in Lisbon. Both watched the exhibition with interest, took photos, drew pictures of the costumes on display, made comparisons and comments. It was the first—and only—time, so far, that we have had the opportunity to spend time with them outside of CPR, and it already felt like a much more intimate and free experience in comparison to our sessions in the facility. This is something we would like to do more of in the future as a way to create more informal and trusting relationships.

The journey to the museum felt closer to the CPR atmosphere, with the two girls somewhat tense and quiet in the back of the car as we drove them to the museum. At one point, as one of the researchers complained to the car's faulty navigation system to '*please* talk!', one of the girls must have thought that she was being addressed and replied in a voice that was somewhere between frustrated and panicked, 'I *am!* We're doing well!'.

However, once we arrived and got out of the car on a sunny morning, the atmosphere became easier too. On the walk to the museum, Christiane and one of the researchers were excited to compare old Portuguese architecture with Congolese (they did not compare at all, neither in materials nor in structure, which amused both parties) and, after visiting the museum, on the way back to the car, Christiane casually spoke about how she would like to go to a nursing school and help people once she is old enough to apply for one.

The fact that the girls were so much more relaxed and eager to talk unprompted is stark evidence of how constrained we are in our fieldwork at the facility—and a strong argument for why we aim to spend time with them out of it in the future.

3. Discussion

In this research, we confirm that here, in Portugal, the lived experiences of URMs reflect the findings listed in the literature already referenced before. However, there was a lack of references describing the difficulties the researchers and the minors had in relating to each other in a confined context, and it is important to point out that the research is influenced by the constraints that prevent organic relationships from forming.

These minors are in a situation of extreme vulnerability, both physically and mentally, exposed to attacks on their integrity of all kinds, from rape, trafficking, extortion, mental confusion, and a huge fog about what the future means for any one of them. The violence to which they are subjected does not end because they are formally protected by Portuguese institutions. The delay in obtaining legal documents that will allow them to continue their lives in Portugal (or abroad) can take up to a year, which can be considered ongoing structural violence (Farmer 2004), even in the country of asylum.

One of the problems in research on refugees coming from such different backgrounds is that we hardly know the socio-cultural contexts of each origin, and their particularities (including communicational and symbolic ones), apart from what we learn in two forms, namely written reports from other studies, or narratives, often subjective, which are communicated to us by the refugees themselves and according to their own terms and circumstances. However, we are very clear that what interests us is to understand how people (minors or adults) in situations of refuge want to represent themselves in the present and how they project themselves into the future. Identity is fluid, just like culture; it changes and adapts to new contexts. While this is true for all people, regardless of their origins, it is even more true for people who migrate, and even more so for adolescents—unaccompanied minors—who, due to their young age, have yet to form an identity (James 1995) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Minors were invited to design masks where the front side would represent the picture of themselves they project outwards (**left**), and the back side would represent inner world (**right**). This is Christiane's result. Outwardly, she is cheerful and loving and caring; inwardly, she is quick to cry and feels like she cannot express herself. The watch on her forehead represents lasting memories of people who have offended her.

Another issue, and one that somewhat constrains the research, is the fact that our fieldwork—by fieldwork, in this particular case, we mean the physical space where we interact with the young refugees, as well as with the institution's staff—is necessarily constrained by the institution (in this case, the CPR) as well as by the available free time of those minors who have decided to take part in the project. The days and hours of contact between us, the researchers, and them, are scarce (usually, one day a week for two hours), limited further by the time we take to try to translate the few phrases and ideas that we

want to suggest for transposition into drawings or photos into each language with or without the help of the Arabic mediator.

We can also infer from the communication between these boys and girls during the sessions that they rarely have cohesive peer relationships, in the sense that it is apparently rare to witness relationships of friendship or empathy between them, except for some cases. This shows the different situation each person is in regarding their process of obtaining documents, and in the same group, there may be youths who have been living in the refuge for two years and others who have just arrived. But it also happens that, during our research, there are boys or girls with whom we have deepened our relationship, who suddenly leave the center. This can happen for two reasons; either they find work and a place to stay outside the center, or they simply disappear without a trace. This situation is undoubtedly more worrying because it is known that, due to their multiple vulnerabilities, they are subject to enticement by unscrupulous organizations or individuals, including human trafficking.

Of course, they are not an amorphous mass; they are a group composed of different people, with diverse backgrounds, life experiences and different hopes for the future. Some are relatively participative, in the sense that they can answer our questions in a couple of words or even engage with us in conversations. Others do not seem to be there of their own free will but in line with the institution's commitment to bring in those who were initially convinced to take part in the project. However, they communicate with each other, laugh, and draw with the materials we have brought them. One or two of them sit at the end of the table, hiding under their hoods until the session is over.

The difference in reactions and behaviors in the group, when faced with the same stimuli (drawing and talking about what they drew), tells us that, despite all of them having endured traumatic situations, each one is a different person, with their own emotions, mental structures, cosmovision and personalities, which confirms the need to look at all refugees, regardless of age or gender, as heterogeneous groups, as unique and independent individuals.

Some participants are explicitly happy to spend time with us, describing the pleasure of sitting there and working on something they will not 'be judged for' or just taking their time to engage in something creative, so we know for sure that there are at least a few students who openly benefit from our sessions. They are open to communication, do not freeze up when asked questions about their work, and voluntarily share information about their past and present, which signifies a considerable level of trust and comfort. We can only guess the degree of free will with which some of the others come to our sessions, as there seems to be some pressure from the staff to participate. However, in the later sessions, there have often been few people present, with others excusing themselves because of exhaustion from the classes earlier in the day, and the staff do not seem to push quite as hard. Our guess would be that as time has passed, and we have all become slightly more familiar with each other, there is now a degree of comfort that makes the students feel like they have the right to say no without repercussions. While, of course, we would appreciate higher numbers of participants, their comfort and safety remain the top priority which is why every time someone excuses themself, we make sure to let them know that there are no hard feelings involved while, hopefully, communicating that we would be happy to have them with us next time they have the opportunity to join. We were also delighted to hear from the social worker assigned as our mediator that he and other members of the staff were positively surprised to see some of the students continuing with the workshops week after week (Figure 6).

It is also obvious, from the minors' ways with the materials and from their own words, that the majority of them have not had the chance to engage in arts and crafts of any sort, so for many of them, participating in the workshops requires a certain effort they might struggle to make, and while we keep the space for them to do that, their hesitation is completely understandable.

Figure 6. Everyone working on a shared sheet of paper; the task is described in Figure 1.

Engaging in creative endeavors is crucial for people of all ages, but especially for those still developing both physically and mentally. The refugee minors are under a lot of stress, both acute and chronic, with their futures nebulous and their presents transitive. In that state, building up a sense of inner peace is paramount in staying on course and not losing oneself, and taking the time to engage with oneself and one's own world creatively can be key to that task.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to highlight the multifaceted difficulties the URMs face in the process of seeking inclusion in Portugal, as well as discuss the work that has been carried out so far in facilitating the development of their understanding of themselves and their place in the world through art workshops. Additionally, we discussed our own discoveries in conducting research at an institutional facility and projecting ways of expanding that in continued work.

The fieldwork and the circumstances in which the research is being carried out—little time of actual contact with the refugee minors despite the fact that the project started eight months ago—allow us to state that the results obtained so far are still preliminary. What we do know is that quality research with refugees requires time to establish the trust that will allow refugees to share their own thoughts, desires and projects more freely. This is more difficult to achieve in an institutional context where none of these minors are free to do so. They just stay there while they wait for their documents. Their life there is only temporary. Our findings are related to the insights of this process at its current stage. It will take more contact time and another area of research. From now on, our work with the minors will also follow in their footsteps. In other words, we will be with them in schools, at social gatherings outside the shelter, at the recreational events they would like us to take them to. Fieldwork, for anthropology, cannot only be marked by specific territory (the shelter) and time (the hours of contact with the minors, in this case). Fieldwork is fundamentally about establishing a reciprocal relationship of trust between the 'observers' and 'observed'. Sometimes, it takes years for this relationship to be established. This is why institutions (in this case, the CPR) can only represent a starting point, a first point of contact between researchers and refugee minors, never an end in and of itself.

In relation to that, we have decided to review our goal of creating an exhibition. An exhibition showcasing art created by URMs should have a clear political objective of showing to the viewer (the host society) that they are here, and they deserve to be heard and included. Inclusion is a two-way process that requires the receiving side to make an effort to adapt too, and choosing a clear topic and a straightforward way of transmitting it could be a solution.

Another aspect we want to highlight is the heterogeny of the group. This means that each minor that asks for asylum in Portugal has an acquired social, cultural and experiential heritage that shapes their relationship with everyone around them and also with themself. This makes the research richer and more complex. The group sessions—in this case, the drawing and photography workshops, in the physical context of the institution—are also just a starting point. What we want to highlight is the fact that it is about honoring each individual and their perceptions of identity, future, the meaning of culture, freedom, and democracy, and not simply about a group of refugee minors. The group we work with does not necessarily represent a community, but only a sum of individuals who are stuck together under artificial circumstances related to the processes of asylum hosting and inclusion. Therefore, there are not necessarily any conclusions yet, only records of processes of mutual discovery and the beginnings of relationships between researchers and the minors. Research must, therefore, continue.

The heterogeny of the group also means that, as researchers, we have to accept that, from our point of view and with our resources, we cannot fully encapsulate every culture represented in the group. Therefore, this research is not yet about cultural differences, but about individuals on their own paths.

Furthermore, as we have said before, unaccompanied refugee minors represent a vulnerable group with specific needs and challenges. While the Portuguese legal and policy framework provides a foundation for their protection and inclusion, ongoing efforts are required to address the multifaceted barriers they face. There is a need for enhanced data collection and monitoring to inform evidence-based interventions. Ethics must also always be taken into account. Broader and more in-depth results could be achieved with appropriate funding that facilitates longitudinal studies to better understand the trajectories of URMs and the effectiveness of current policies and programs. Additionally, it would enable a broader discussion within academia, as well as society. Targeted interventions with the institutions responsible for the refugee minors, as well as the synthesis of artistic and anthropological methodologies (and social sciences in general) in programs of refugee hosting and inclusion in Portugal and in other European countries are essential to ensure that these minors have the support necessary to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to society at large. Above all, we need to host open dialogues of attentive listening with the minors themselves, as what they have to say is an essential contribution to public policy conversation and must be treated as such.

Notes

1   UNHCR: United Nations Refugee Agency; UN: United Nations; UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund.
2   https://asylumineurope.org/ (accessed on 3 April 2024).
3   In order to comply with ethical principles, all the people involved in this research have been anonymized. Therefore, the names used in this article are false.
4   Agência para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo: "The Agency for inclusion, Migration and Asylum (AIMA, I.P.), created by Decree-Law no. 41/2023, of June 2, is a public institute integrated into the indirect administration of the State, endowed with administrative and financial autonomy, with jurisdiction and deconcentrated services throughout the national territory, subject to the superintendence and supervision of the member of the Government responsible for the areas of equality and migration." https://aima.gov.pt/pt (accessed on 3 April 2024).
5   SEF: Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras; AIMA: Agência para a Integração Migrações e Asilo.
6   The day Ramadan ends.

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