

Growing roots: The everyday life of unaccompanied refugee minors in South Tyrol – A grounded theory inquiry

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Unaccompanied refugee minors are children and young people under the age of 18 who find themselves on foreign territory in absence of their parents, family members, or legal guardians. Processes of globalization, resulting conflicts, economic distress, ecological disasters and other factors push a growing number of minors to seek for a better future elsewhere, without their families. Many of these minors transit through South Tyrol on their way north; some decide to stay.

Despite the constant presence of unaccompanied refugee minors in South Tyrol in the past 15 years, public administration and academic community have paid little to no attention to their very specific situation.

How do unaccompanied refugee minors live their everyday life? How do they settle in a society that struggles with its own trilingual and tricultural identity? How do they transition an independent life, without their family network and social support structure? How do they reconcile the struggle for their legal status, learning a new language, educational and vocational projects, the contact with the family in their country of origin, and being a young person? Which importance do they attribute to different aspects of their lives?

The study is constructed around a longer period (>6 months) of participant observation in Bolzano's first arrival centre for unaccompanied refugee minors. These observations build the basis for a cycle of reflections and constructivist theory building. Theories are then validated in a process involving unaccompanied refugee minors, former minors, and professionals working in the field.

The aim of the study is to gain a better understanding of the way these minors live their everyday life and the way they perceive their own situation, in order to be able to better interact with these important members of our population.