



**UNIVERSITY OF PADOVA**

**Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology**

**Master Degree in Clinical, Social and Intercultural Psychology**

**Final dissertation**

**Self and Mutual Recognition on the Path to Belonging:  
On the Transformative Potential of Critical Participatory  
Action Research with African Unaccompanied Minors in Italy**

***Supervisor***

Prof.ssa Sara Santilli

***Co-supervisor***

Prof. Ciro De Vincenzo

***Candidate:*** María Emilia Montaña Córdova

***Student ID number:*** 2071280

Academic Year 2023/2024

A mi familia, **mis pas y mi ñaña** que me han apoyado y sostenido en todo este proceso.

To **all the beautiful hearts** I have found along this way, who have challenged me through love and openness and helped me gain the knowledge and theory to hold my heart.

A love letter to **all immigrants, especially the boys who worked with us**, who left their homes to create a better world y a **Latinoamérica**, un continente que resiste desde el amor a su tierra.

“I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.”

**-Bell Hooks**

“Soy América latina, un pueblo sin piernas pero que camina. El viento que peina mi cabello. Soy todos los santos que cuelgan de mi cuello.”

**- Calle 13**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the transformative potential of critical participatory action research (CPAR) and Critical consciousness (CC) based interventions with unaccompanied migrant minors (UAMs) in Italy. The study uses liminality as a framework to understand migration. The research proposes that UAMs have to navigate these ambiguous spaces physically when crossing borders and symbolically when transitioning between identities.

Liminality creates a space that allows for meaning making, allowing UAMs to reconstruct their identities as they adapt to a new culture while simultaneously dealing with letting go of their previous one. Using this framework, we created and implemented an intervention of seven sessions around the generative topic of Power with a group of unaccompanied minors in a CAS in Italy. The intervention aimed at helping minors understand and challenge the systemic power structures and hierarchical dynamics that define their social and legal environments, promoting their self-agency and integration into Italian society. Similarly, by focusing on mutual recognition, vulnerability expression, and validation, this study investigates how empowering interventions can foster resilience, emotional healing, and identity reconstruction among these vulnerable populations. By using qualitative methodologies, including semi-structured group sessions, games and art activities, this study engages a group of unaccompanied minors in creative processes that facilitate self-expression, group cohesion, and community building. Art becomes a tool that crosses the restrictions of language for sharing and processing experiences. The intervention promotes social recognition, group vulnerability and solidarity, empowering minors to renegotiate their positions within these structures and reclaim agency over their identities. The research collective aims at exploring the potentiality of these approaches in this specific group while this thesis aims at exploring the role of self and mutual recognition in the process of developing a sense of belonging. The study's findings aim to contribute to developing more holistic intervention models that prioritize the voices and experiences of unaccompanied minors. These findings shed a light on the role of the expression and recognition of vulnerability as a means to create a greater sense of self-agency and belonging. The study offers practical recommendations for improving migrant reception services in a more humane way, promoting social and emotional resilience in this group, and enhancing their sense of belonging within host societies.

*Keywords:* Migration, Crit. Consciousness, Unaccompanied minors, Recognition, Liminality

## Introduction

Migration remains one of the most significant global challenges, impacting millions of people who leave their countries in search of safety, stability, and opportunities. Among these groups, unaccompanied minors – individuals who migrate without family or guardians – face particularly complex challenges as they navigate not only the physical journey but also the psychological and social integration into new environments. Italy, one of the primary destinations for unaccompanied minors in Europe, has become a focal point for exploring the experiences and needs of these young migrants as they seek to establish their new identities, sense of belonging, and capacity to act within a new society.

This study explores the potential of Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) alongside Critical Consciousness (CC) as a framework for psychosocial interventions with unaccompanied minors. CPAR is an approach that encourages participants to take action based on collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge. CPAR not only contributes to creating a platform where participants can share their stories but also supports empowerment to shape the narrative and direction of the intervention itself. CC is a methodology that aims to perceive and critically analyze power structures that act oppressively and create a framework for constructive and empowering dialogue. These two approaches, used complementarily, align with the study's goal of understanding how expressions of vulnerability can foster mutual recognition, leading to a greater capacity for action and a stronger sense of belonging.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition and Judith Butler's concept of the recognition of vulnerability. Honneth's theory identifies three principal axes of recognition– love, respect, and esteem – developed through interaction with others and proposes that they are essential for developing self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. These are particularly relevant in marginalized populations that experience higher levels of misrecognition or social exclusion. Butler's concept of vulnerability complements this theory by pointing out that vulnerability is a relational aspect of the human experience that has the power to foster solidarity and trust when acknowledged and validated. The theoretical framework also explores the experiences of migrants in liminal spaces and different tools that can be used to work with these populations. Together, these theories provide a lens through which we can observe and explore how the expressions of vulnerability of unaccompanied minors can lead to moments of mutual recognition,

allowing this group to navigate their social environment with a greater sense of empowerment and belonging.

In this study, I am guided by the research question: «How did the expression of vulnerability impact the recognition of one another, leading to expressions of greater self-agency and belonging, and how did we arrive there?» Through a thematic analysis of our observations and reflections on the different interactions that took place during the interventions, I identify four main themes – Trial and Resistance, Touching Middle Ground, You Can See (Hold) My Heart, and Joining Forces – that capture the dynamic processes of building trust, establishing mutual recognition, and fostering a sense of community within the group.

After this introduction, I will summarize relevant studies related to migration and unaccompanied minors in the literature review. I will also include the theories used to understand this research. In the Methodology section, I will outline the CPAR and CC approaches, the data collection methods used, and describe the seven sessions of the intervention. The Results section will present the main findings within the four identified themes. These results will be interpreted in the discussion through the lenses of the theoretical framework, highlighting the implications for psychosocial support for unaccompanied minors. Finally, in the Conclusion, I will summarize the contributions of this study and seek to propose directions for future research and practice.

This thesis explores the intersection of vulnerability, recognition, and belonging to contribute to a deeper understanding of how participatory methods can support the psychosocial well-being of migrants, focusing on unaccompanied minors. It offers insights that may foster more inclusive, humane, and empowering approaches to social integration.

This project seeks to center the voice of the oppressed within the global structure, highlighting the ongoing processes of resilience and adaptation that are constantly taking place beneath the surface while visualizing and showcasing this population's experiences and knowledge.

## Theoretical Background

Migration typically conjures images of animal populations traversing long distances through various mechanisms. As a multilevel biological trait, it is crucial to consider it in populations and individuals (Rogers, 1983). It is a phenomenon found in many beings and characterizes one of the most important behaviors of animals: our mobility (Dingle & Drake, 2007). Thus, in the animal realm (although it may also be applied to plants and fungi), migration refers to a fundamentally adaptive and ecologically sensitive behavior (whether innate or operational) that is transversal to the species<sup>1</sup>. The sapiens genre of the human species is the only one on the planet to have produced several different and complex migration-related behaviors some not aiming to find more suitable ecological niches. These behaviors could include tourism, professional assignments, seeking asylum from their country of origin, engaging in missionary work, or venturing into unexplored territories. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), migrant is:

«an umbrella term [...] reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons» (International Organization for Migration, 2024).

Migrating includes crossing a border separating these two places, a physical or symbolic division. Borders are everywhere, and crossing them results in a transition of roles to that of a migrant, exile, tourist, aid worker, or explorer. (Marsico, 2016). It is not only changing a physical space but also changing who we are and learning to identify ourselves with different characteristics. Therefore, borders shape our social and psychological existence. There are moments, places, and events that show us exactly how borders work and the sheer complexity of the process (Marsico, 2016). Borders are a duality. They unite and divide at the same time. They connect two places but also make them two separate spaces, and in this border, there exists an in-betweenness, belonging while not fully belonging yet. These paradoxical characteristics of borders not only define legal status and belonging but also regulate the psychological life of migrants since they serve as “principles of identification/differentiation” from the general population (De Vincenzo & Zamperini, 2023, pg. 2). This in-betweenness also affects the identity and perception of the self; crossing a

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<sup>1</sup> Importantly, identifying an individual of certain species as “migrant” would be a pleonasm (Dingle & Drake, 2007).

border means reframing and questioning who we are in this new space and who we were in the previous one.

### **On the problematization of mobilities**

Even though the term “migrant” is central to the following research since its core arguments revolve around this concept, identity, or state, there is no consensus on a single definition<sup>2</sup> of who counts as a migrant. Migrants may be defined by foreign birth, citizenship, or their movement into a new country to stay temporarily or long-term. In public debate and research, the use of ‘emigrant,’ ‘immigrant<sup>3</sup>,’ and ‘migrant’ are often used interchangeably (Anderson & Blinder, 2024). The lack of definition and joint agreement regarding this critical topic makes it more challenging to define this state, creating a bigger liminal space for a mobilizing person. Is crossing the border changing who we are? How can we define ourselves if there is no real consensus over this? (Kok, 1999).

We cannot ignore the fact that societal discourses have constructed the concept of migrants. What were previously considered movements due to colonization are now referred to as migrations, and this is key to understanding how specific movements are characterized as illegal and unwanted. In contrast, others are deemed legal and accepted. In various ways, the differentiation in the conceptualization of migration can be traced back to deep and internalized racial hierarchies that were structured during colonial periods (Adamson, 2024). In this way, we could also argue that nationalism is one of the keys to labeling someone as a migrant, given that this divides people who belong more or less to a territory (Schweppe & Sharma, 2015). This idea of belonging is closely linked to race and social class; those in a privileged position will be categorized as ex-pats and will be more wanted; therefore, they will be legal and have open borders for their mobility. On the other side, the construction of the migrants is seen as less valuable and wanted (Schweppe & Sharma, 2015).

Moreover, while there is a problematizing perspective on migration in contemporary times, classifying it as a migration and refugee crisis, it is important to recognize and remember that the movements of people come primarily from post-colonial states and are not new or isolated but strongly connected to a history that has long benefited the countries of the Global North (Wenden, 2023). We must consider that migration to Europe, and the Global North in general, is strongly rooted in the structures created during colonization,

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<sup>2</sup> The one provided above was chosen as an attempt to create a common ground for this research.

<sup>3</sup> Emigrant being the person who moves away, immigrant being the person who arrives to a new country and migrant being a neutral term as it doesn't mention direction of movement (Douglas et al., 2019)

where the countries that now hold power played a very important role (Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2021). Firstly, colonization contributed to large-scale forced migration with the transatlantic slave trade, where millions of people were relocated from Africa to the Americas. This, in turn, contributed to the present-day diasporic communities that maintain strong ties to colonial groups, impacting the flow of migrants into these spaces. In the same way, colonization created a familiarity with the colonizing countries as they forced the introduction of customs, religion, education systems, and language, thereby facilitating and influencing migration from Global South countries to Global North countries. For example, migration flows are often directed to their former colonizing countries due to the colonial heritage of official state languages such as English or French. The colonial era also played a role in the creation of borders and arbitrary divisions in the colonized countries, creating conflicts that displaced many people fleeing wars and internal conflicts (Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2023). Finally, colonization established an exploitative economic structure where colonized populations were forced to work for the benefit of the colonizers (Adamson, 2024). In the present day, these populations seek to reach more economically powerful countries in search of work opportunities and better life chances. It is important to remember this so that we can act to question how these power structures have impacted current history and how we can improve our interventions regarding psychosocial support to ensure better adaptation and integration of people arriving in the global north searching for a better future.

### **European perspective on unaccompanied minor migrants**

Human movement in Europe has always existed; nonetheless, we have seen an increase in the number of people arriving since the beginning of the 20th century. According to Eurostat, in 2021, 2.3 million immigrants from non-European countries arrived in Europe (European Union, 2024). This may be due to diverse conflicts in other parts of the world. The European countries that receive the biggest number of migrants are Germany, Spain, Italy, and France, which together account for 60% of immigrants that arrive in the EU (European Union, 2024).

Embedded in the global dynamic of refugees arriving in Europe is the reality of minors who arrive unaccompanied and are directed to reception centers. Here they wait for decisions on their application for protection.

In 2022, a record-breaking 42,000 asylum applications were made by unaccompanied minors in EU countries, marking a 60% increase from the previous year. This surge was

primarily driven by Afghans and Syrians, who accounted for over two-thirds of the total applications and three-quarters of the increase. Additionally, there was a notable rise in asylum applications from unaccompanied minors from Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia, India, Yemen, Burundi, and Ukraine, reaching levels not seen since 2008 (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023). Despite the overall significant increase in asylum applications in 2022, the proportion of unaccompanied minors remained steady at around 4%. However, this proportion varied widely among different nationalities, with one in seven Afghan applicants and one in eight Somali applicants being identified as unaccompanied minors, in contrast to only one in fourteen Syrian applicants. Notably, there were minimal applications from unaccompanied minors among top asylum-seeking nationalities such as Colombians, Turks, and Venezuelans (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023).

Unaccompanied migrant minors or UAMs are a unique population of migrants since their especially vulnerable positions requests more measures and attention when being received in the host countries. In this context, the Dublin III Regulation is of particular importance since it is the agreement that regulates the decision of which Member State will be responsible for examining the application for international protection of the respective migrant. It tries to guarantee effective and fair access to the asylum procedure. It is widely applied in UAMs since one of its objectives is to protect family unity. This means that upon arrival in the host country, the unaccompanied minor will be tried to be connected to family in European States to ensure a legal representative. If a family cannot be found or is not fit to care for the minor, then the minor will be put in the European system of the country where the first application was made (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023). Even though this regulation was created to facilitate the migration process, the refusal of Member States to cooperate often leaves immigrants unable to apply to the country where they intend to settle. Consequently, certain European countries have more immigrants who cannot cross their borders (Keller, 2020).

This is very helpful to understand the importance of this thesis in the Italian context. Being one of the countries in the EU with the biggest ports of reception of migrants from Africa, many of the UAMs will be processed here. As it was reported in 2022, Italy is currently home to 15,595 unaccompanied minors, reflecting a significant 99.9% increase from the previous year. Most minors are male (80.1%) and approximately 17 years old (44.8%). The primary countries of origin for these minors include Ukraine (5,932), Egypt (2,497), Albania (1,302), Bangladesh (1,239), and Tunisia (1,145). Notably, the increase in minors fleeing Ukraine has led to shifts in age and gender distribution, resulting in a decrease

in 17-year-olds and an increase in 15-year-olds, as well as a higher proportion of girls, who now make up 19.9% of the total number of unaccompanied minors in Italy (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022). Therefore, Italy is one of the countries that has been forced to create structures through which they can receive minors and process their different requirements.

### ***Italian response to UAMs***

In the context of migration, Italy is both a transit and a destination country for unaccompanied migrant minors. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (2015), by August 31st, 2015, Italy had received 8,944 unaccompanied migrant minors. Some minors will remain in Italy, while others will continue their journey to other safe countries. Italy has implemented a specialized reception system for Unaccompanied Minors or UAMs. The hospitality and assistance protocols now include identifying potential psycho-social problems and vulnerabilities. This allows for creating customized psycho-social support actions tailored to their difficult personal experiences.

Nevertheless, it is important to understand the process to which they are subjected upon their arrival in Italy. Italy is bound by international agreements like the New York Convention on Children's Rights of 1989 and the European Convention on Children's Rights signed in Strasbourg in 1991, which mandate the protection of children from harm and guarantees their right to education, healthcare and legal assistance during asylum or immigration procedures (Pittau et al., 2009, p10-12). This means that upon arrival in Italy, unaccompanied migrant minors are entitled to specific legal protections under national and international law. The minor must be identified, and their status as an unaccompanied minor is determined through interviews and documentation checks. The police and social services work together to meet the child's immediate needs. Following this, the minor is placed in a government shelter or specialized reception center while legal proceedings regarding their asylum or immigration status are initiated. (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020).

Unaccompanied foreign minor asylum applicants have specific rights under Italian immigration laws. They are entitled to receive information about asylum applications, the associated consequences, and the right to express their opinion. When they apply for international protection, the usual procedure for foreign minors is suspended, and the Juvenile Courts handle the application. Suppose a minor is not eligible for protection from the SAI (System of reception and integration), in that case, they are hosted and assisted by

social services of the Municipality, with the obligation to report the minor to the Central Service of the SAI for further assistance (Testore, 2021).

Moreover, the judicial process for unaccompanied minors includes the appointment of a legal guardian who represents the child in all legal matters, including asylum claims. Italy's "Zampa Law" (Law No. 47/2017) reinforces the protection of unaccompanied minors, providing them with more rights and ensuring they are not deported before age 18 unless it is in their best interest<sup>4</sup>. A change introduced in 2023 decrees that, in some cases, the age of UAMs can be determined by medical procedures, like a radiological exam. This change was introduced to ensure accuracy when identifying foreign minors (Pastore, 2023). The asylum procedure for these minors is expedited, with priority given to their claims, and they are exempt from the standard reception and detention rules that apply to adult migrants. The law also facilitates their integration into Italian society through access to education, healthcare, and other social services, and they also have the opportunity to learn the language and have a more straightforward adaptation (Save the Children, 2018).

However, we need to consider where the minors are hosted during this procedure. In October 2023, a new decree regarding unaccompanied minors and asylum was adopted in Italy. This decree affects this population in relevant ways. The change could impact the reception and integration of minors, given that it changes how UAMs are accommodated in the reception and integration system or SAI. In places where many UAMs arrive, if the relevant municipality cannot ensure their reception, it must be provided by the local offices of the Ministry of the Interior (the prefecture) by activating temporary structures or CAS (Centro di accoglienza straordinaria) for minors (Testore, 2021).

Nevertheless, if there is also no availability in these structures, then minors who are older than 16 years old might have to be placed in a temporary section. This temporary placement should not exceed 90 days. The European Court of Human Rights highly criticized this in the past since it allows minors in structures that are not designed to provide for their needs (Pastore, 2023). As stated, the CAS is a temporary shelter designed to provide for the basic needs of the minors, such as a place to sleep and food. However, it is not intended to go beyond these and ensure that other, more sophisticated, needs can be met (Testore, 2021).

Even though the laws, systems, and structures for unaccompanied minors are trying to be constantly improved, there is still a strong need for more community-based approaches

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<sup>4</sup> Although deciding what is "in their best interest" could be easily argued.

that aim to connect these individuals with society and empower them through such connections instead of isolating them. If we look past the basic needs of housing, food, and education, we can see that it is also necessary to create programs that facilitate the integration of foreign minors into Italian society, where they can feel seen and experience a sense of belonging. These processes are not separate from the legal procedures to which they are already exposed, and they are also closely related to the physical and symbolic spaces through which they move that impact their mental health.

### **Psychological challenges of UAM's**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) Constitution, health is a «state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity» (World Health Organization, 2020, p. 1). However, marginalized communities or minority groups, including migrants, frequently do not receive much focus on their social well-being or their physical and mental health. Dealing with marginalization necessitates social, cultural, political, and individual actions to establish conducive surroundings for favorable social engagements (Sapiro & Ward, 2020). In the context of migration, there are several obstacles that migrants need to overcome, creating significant mental and emotional pressure. In most cases, there are several changes that people need to face: language, landscape change, customs, ways to relate to other people, bureaucratic systems, and others. This does not come with little pressure on people who decide or are forced to leave their home countries. It means essentially entering and adapting to a new reality. This new reality might also come with much waiting. They are waiting to arrive, to get valid documents, to find a job, to settle down, adding more pressure on immigrants and affecting their physical and psychological health. These obstacles are more prominent in the group of unaccompanied minors since they do not have parental support to help them sort out these difficulties and model their emotional regulation (Bean et al., 2007).

Unaccompanied migrant minors are often fleeing from difficult situations in their original countries and face profound psychological and emotional challenges during their migration journeys and resettlement in host countries. Some main reasons minors leave their countries include fleeing conflicts, wars, or persecution, looking for better job and education opportunities, and following the steps of other family members and friends (Pittau et al., 2009, p. 8). They would not travel alone without an essential problem in their own countries.

One key challenge to consider is the possible trauma resulting from their experiences prior to and during migration, which often, if not always, includes violence, exploitation, and separation from family members. These experiences leave them more vulnerable than other populations of the same age to mental health problems like post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. Not knowing how they will cross certain borders, losing friends along the way, and the uncertainty of how they will survive until the next safe stop are just some of the factors that contribute to these mental health risks. As a result, studies indicate that unaccompanied minors are at a higher risk for these disorders due to the combined nature of their trauma (Fazel et al., 2016). Without the support of family members or a stable caregiving environment, UAMs struggle to process these burdens, which can severely impact their mental health and well-being (Jakobsen et al., 2014). Similarly, the absence of family or close relationships increases this challenge, leaving them isolated and unable to navigate the emotional consequences of their trauma (Corona Maioli et al., 2021). Many of the UAMs travel alone for weeks or months before arriving in a safe country where they can rest and be hosted; during this journey, they depend solely on the support of people they meet along the way and the virtual support, if any, that their family members can provide from afar. Moreover, we must consider the difficulties of adapting to a new country, which can be a very isolating experience (Fazel et al., 2016).

Unaccompanied minors not only face the possibility of trauma and isolation during migration but also emotional challenges related to displacement and loss. Many of these minors struggle with feelings of loneliness and segregation while navigating unfamiliar environments without caregivers or people able to provide them with guidance. Research has shown that cultural and linguistic barriers intensify these emotional difficulties, hindering their ability to seek support and contributing to feelings of alienation (Mateos Rodriguez & Dobler, 2021). The deep sense of loss they experience and the different situations they have to overcome may instill a sense of alertness and distrust, impairing their capacity to form trusting relationships with caregivers and peers (Ciaccia & John, 2016). Furthermore, the lack of stable and consistent relationships throughout their journey and during their first months in the host country exacerbates their vulnerability, making it more difficult for them to trust others and further isolating them in their new environments (Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010).

Moreover, the uncertainty surrounding their legal status and future contributes to the psychological stress experienced by unaccompanied minors. These children often face prolonged periods of uncertainty as they await decisions regarding asylum or immigration

status, which can lead to chronic anxiety and a sense of helplessness (Chase, 2020). This legal ambiguity leaves them in limbo, unsure whether they will be deported or allowed to remain in the host country, making it difficult to plan for the future (Vervliet et al., 2014). The ongoing stress caused by this uncertainty can result in long-term psychological effects as children become increasingly anxious about their future and potential separation from any new support networks they have built (Chase, 2020).

These combined psychological and emotional difficulties highlight the urgent need for tailored mental health interventions and legal advocacy to provide unaccompanied migrant minors with a clearer sense of security and belonging.

### **Liminality Processes in Migration (meeting a new culture)**

According to Stenner, a liminal experience «involves a temporary suspension of limits that permits a transition to a new set of limits» (2021, p.1). Liminality then refers to a state of transition and transformation where the boundaries or borders between one state and another are suspended. This created space of suspension allows for new things to emerge or old things to transform. It is a space characterized by ambiguity, potential, and uncertainty, where people no longer entirely belong to their previous state but are not yet in the new one. Even though some are more than others, we all go through states of suspension; one example can be adolescence: one is no longer a child, but not yet an adult and the rules of both worlds become blurred, interconnected, and confusing. As the term migrant is not defined, it is inherently a liminal space, a state lacking status and structurally invisible, becoming a physical, legal, and identity liminal space (Yahkya, 2021, pp. 25-38).

We can see the physicality of liminality in crossing borders, spaces that are neither one country nor the other. They are an ambiguous territory of waiting and uncertainty. Nevertheless, borders do not only refer to physical spaces dividing one territory from another. They can also signify the space between being and not being. Marsico (2016) states that the «border is the developmental conceptual place that accounts for processes of continuity and discontinuity, conflict and negotiation, innovation and reproduction in living open systems.» Thus, it is a paradoxical space filled with ambiguity. For immigrants, it also means belonging to two places but not being defined entirely by none.

As a liminal experience, borders also include different processes. Migrants go through the process of meaning-making and recreating their identity as such, and this comes from introducing themselves in a new symbolic realm and encountering a new culture with different social norms, values, religion, and more at play (Marsico, 2016, p.210). Migrants

are not what they were in their home countries; their status has changed in every sense, yet they are still not what they will become in their new home. They must reconstruct their identity while simultaneously saying goodbye to aspects of their previous identity. The liminal space exists in this limbo of uncertainty where one is not recognized in any way, and all that remains is to wait.

In post-colonial theories, liminality is a powerful lens for understanding the cultural hybridity that migrants encounter, facilitating their adaptation to the customs of the new country. Liminality is not just a state of transition; it is a transformative process that gives birth to new subjectivities, laying the foundation for the emergence of a new individual or societal identity (Raghuram et al., 2024, p. 5). It is crucial to remember that liminality is a space of creation, a refuge in chaos and calmness, from which new forms and structures can emerge (Sharpe, 2005).

In this sense, migration is in itself an act of passage, where people in motion are in a constant process of transformation; it is an existential act of becoming. In this rite of passage, many adaptations and reassemblies of the social structures we encounter are required. Migrants find themselves in a spatial-temporal network of significance where a sense is created through hybridity and ambiguity (Jankovic, 2017).

How does an individual without a clear immigration status navigate the transition from their previous reality to a new one filled with uncertainty? How can one effectively integrate into a new culture without completely letting go of their previous culture? Liminality is deeply intertwined with culture, serving as a source of rich experience, especially during periods of transformation and conversion. Culture, a dynamic and evolving entity, plays a significant role in helping individuals navigate and find meaning in the transitions they are experiencing (Stenner, 2021). The role of culture in the liminal experience is pivotal, as it provides a framework for understanding and adapting to the new reality. This is a crucial concept when considering migrants' acculturation to their new country and society. The habitus<sup>5</sup> is thus linked to the migration process as it guides how migrants interact with their environment based on the cultural and social structures they carry with them. Being in a liminal process of transformation, the habitus is also not viewed as static norms but as something that migrants are constantly changing and negotiating through exchanges with the people and structures they encounter along their way in order to achieve better responses

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<sup>5</sup> "Bourdieu use this term to refer to embodied categories of perception, appreciation and action" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 19).

and strategies for survival and adaptation to migration and their new identities (Jankovic, 2017).

Finally, liminality is constantly found in the waiting periods migrants face. Waiting, in this context, is synonymous with submission, submission to a new system that has power over the migrant's body and life. (Yahkya, 2021, p. 25-38). Migrants have little or no control over the waiting, as they find themselves adrift due to the decisions of a foreign system they do not understand. There are periods of long waiting where the ability to act is lost while waiting for a decision to be made or for documents to arrive. In contrast, there are unexpected moments of urgency where it is critical to find certain documents or complete a task to proceed with the process. In any case, migrants are stripped of their self-agency and lack control over their time, identity, and future (Meier & Donà, 2021, pp. 39-64).

As we can see, liminality is extremely important when discussing migration, as in this process, many suspended spaces are encountered, whether physical, such as crossing a border, or legal, when waiting for paperwork to regularize a person's legal status or symbolic when changing identities. Beyond that, migrants often find themselves in liminal states between simultaneously belonging to their country of origin and their country of arrival. It is a transformation process - letting go of certain social norms but not yet adopting the new ones. In their journey to becoming, migrants are constantly negotiating their diverse identities without fully committing to any one of them.

### **Recognition and Community Participation**

The well-being of immigrants is not only impacted by their processes and waiting periods in the liminal experiences but also by the relationships of recognition or misrecognition they encounter in their new countries.

«Social relations and processes can be better understood through the reference to recognition and misrecognition, which opens up potential for criticism and overcoming injustices and distortions in modern, capitalist societies» (Schweiger, 2021, p. 3).

Because of the existent inequalities, people need to find a better life in the Global North. In this way, migration is already motivated by global injustices. Nevertheless, sadly, migrants often find themselves in societies with structures where injustice still prevails (Schweiger, 2021). In this aspect, Honneth proposes the Theory of Recognition, which is highly applicable to migration and asylum-seeking.

In general terms, Honneth is based on two aspects. The first is that modern agency requires forming practical relationships with the self, constituted through relationships of recognition with others (Brink & Owen, 2007). Recognition occurs in three main areas: love, respect, and esteem. The second aspect of this theory is that the lack of recognition or the misrecognition of individuals is ultimately experienced as harm or injustice, which could motivate a struggle for recognition under appropriate social conditions (Brink & Owen, 2007). Honneth mentions the dependence of human beings on social relationships to construct parts of their identity, parts linked with integrity as moral subjects and agents, and their capacity to act within society (Honneth, 2007). In this way, this development depends on the response of others regarding our needs and emotions, respect for our dignity, and esteem for our achievements within society. These struggles for recognition manifest in various ways, such as workers demanding fair wages for their work or colonized populations demanding freedom and independence due to their need for dignity, being experiences that impair the ability to participate in social cooperation (Huth, 2021). Similarly, creating successful recognition experiences requires cultural knowledge to understand these social norms and to have realistic expectations while managing any biases that may be present (Schweiger, 2021). Societies vary in their recognition standards and how they are obtained; thus, socialization and adaptation of the migrant population are necessary. However, the three axes of recognition remain invariant.

Let us look at the components of recognition in relation to migration. The first axis is love; it refers to healthy caregiving and friendship relationships that result in self-trust development. This is a constant process for an individual as it may start with the primary caregiver but will continue based on the other relationships formed throughout life (Huth, 2021). For immigrants, they need to have access and the ability to form friendships within their communities. The second axis is respect, based on equal and fair treatment regarding rights and legal issues. This is related to the development of self-respect. It is important to emphasize that this principle arose from the creation of universal human rights and plays a crucial role in migration, as it is often the most dependent on institutions and what migrants tend to demand first and in greater quantity. Legal recognition allows individuals to see themselves as capable of being full members of society (Hirvonen, 2021). The final axis is esteem; it is recognized through valuable work or productive achievements for a society and results in a person's self-esteem development. Here, we can discuss two processes: individualization and equalization (Brink & Owen, 2007). Through relationships of solidarity in which groups or individuals share a joint project or values, social esteem

processes emerge where individual life projects are respected (individualization), and at the same time, the individual can separate from social hierarchy processes to interweave within a framework of pluralistic values (equalization) (Brink & Owen, 2007). These areas are hypothesized as preconditions that must exist in a society and to which individuals must have access to act from their autonomy. Beyond this, autonomy within these axes is about viewing the individual not only as one who receives recognition but also as an agent capable of giving and demanding recognition from others.

Recognition works hand in hand with the capacity for action and the autonomy of individuals, and this is a crucial topic within migration. How does someone feel comfortable and secure enough to participate within their community? Through recognition, the foundations or prerequisites can be established to ensure autonomy that can be socially implemented.

«The development and realization of individual autonomy is in a certain sense only possible when subjects have the social preconditions for realizing their life goals without unjustifiable disadvantages and with the greatest possible freedom.» (Honneth in Brink & Owen, 2007, p. 8).

The other side of recognition is non-recognition or misrecognition, which causes feelings of shame, pain, or anger in individuals. It is essential to consider that recognition, and consequently, the lack of it, is closely tied to the structures and power relations that operate in society because, theoretically, symmetrical recognition relationships would be needed where the same level of esteem can be generated (Rossler, 2007). In reality, relationships occur within highly asymmetrical societies and institutions that ultimately perpetuate non-recognition toward specific populations. These structures and relationships will shape aspects of the identity of individuals acting within the society, and those who do not have the power to determine their legal or social status may internalize feelings of powerlessness or inferiority (Huth, 2021). In this way, we can understand struggles for recognition as social processes, motivated by feelings that society's standards of recognition are unfair, where particular groups in society demand from the predominant group and question the established norms that were already in operation and that were frustrating the development of specific individuals.

Beyond all this, the theory of recognition helps us formulate the elements that society owes to immigrants and conceptualize their moral rights (Schweiger, 2021). Let us explore the close relationship between recognition and migration more. First, migration can be described as a relationship of recognition, where migrants ask to be recognized as people

with the same rights as the native population. If their claims are ignored, it results in misrecognition, which causes pain and suffering in this population (Schweiger, 2021). Experiences of misrecognition can be found on an individual and a collective level, such as racism or exclusion, and they may cause humiliation or anger. In the same way, non-recognition, especially in immigrants, would be similar to invisibility and could be considered a more passive way of disrespect (Lysaker, 2021). We can see this in societies where immigrants are marginalized and separated from the native population, forcing them to create a parallel society and struggling to be recognized as active members of the dominant group (Huth, 2021). Moreover, the struggles for recognition can also be individualized or collectivized while trying to change the social framework where these actions occur (Schweiger, 2021).

Schweiger (2021) proposes the idea of recognition within a dynamic sphere of time, meaning that it changes and develops through different periods. In this way, the recognition axes will result from historical struggles for recognition. This also implies that forms of recognition may change in the future. It is also dynamic over time because there is the presupposition that recognition changes the subjects who receive it, either by creating a more complete identity or generating more autonomy within themselves. Large entities like the state cannot provide some forms of recognition proposed in this theory. However, individuals and social institutions must offer them closer to the people who can provide solidarity and create social cohesion. The duty lies in developing institutions that can weave recognition for all the individuals who utilize them. For immigrants, we must also consider that the longer this state of invisibility or disrespect lasts, the more long-term effects it will have, damaging individuals' self-esteem and identity.

«If people are not recognized, their practical self-relation gets hurt, and individuals are unable to develop or maintain basic self-confidence, self-respect or self-esteem» (Herzog, 2021, p. 213).

How can people develop a healthy relationship with themselves if their parts are constantly being invisibilized? This struggle may start as an individual quest but can also be contextualized as a group and social struggle. This is because the experiences of migrants are always included at a macro level, where social structures, norms, and practices are defined (Huth, 2021). The struggles for recognition that begin with an individual can also become a collective action to urgently impact a social and political framework.

It is also important to interpret the pleas for recognition from immigrants within a temporal framework. First, by acknowledging the person's past, we can identify forms of disrespect they have endured and give voice to the experiences they have previously lived to understand them better. At present, it is necessary to pay attention to the stage and living situation of the migrant; a child will have different recognition needs than a young adult. For example, the child may need social inclusion to form friendships, while the young adult may need legal recognition to be able to work and generate income. The third timeframe is that of the future; through recognition, the individual can feel validated in their journey and find it easier to plan for the future. At the same time, it is challenging to plan a life when one is in the process of awaiting legal documents, and there is uncertainty about the physical place where one will be able to stay (Schweiger, 2021).

Finally, within the migration framework, it is crucial to understand this group's unique vulnerability and the particular need for recognition they demand and deserve. This population is more vulnerable in the sense that they must fight harder to gain recognition from structures that are already in place and that they do not control, in addition to the situational vulnerability that puts them at greater risk, such as their journey, access to healthcare, experiences of war or armed conflict, among others (Schweiger, 2021). This vulnerability, in turn, is linked to greater suffering on the part of this group and a more remarkable inability to take action. Recognition here implies empowerment as a social subject and the ability to participate in the productivity of society. Immigrants and refugees are forced to navigate physical and symbolic spaces where it is more difficult to obtain recognition and where they are more vulnerable to disrespect. It is more challenging to create relationships of love and friendship when they have experienced traumatic situations that destroy their ability to trust (Schweiger, 2021). Finding work and contributing economically is more complicated when they do not have their papers in order or their university degrees validated. Recognizing this vulnerability means creating institutions and structures that ensure the recognition of these individuals.

Another, more modern branch of this theory suggests recognizing not only the individual but also their vulnerability as a generator of solidarity in a society where immigrants do not have as much access to recognition structures. Vulnerability is an element for the humanization of these groups and a basis for solidarity before forming relationships of love, obtaining legal recognition, or being a productive individual in society (Huth, 2021). It also aligns well with the power differences in different groups, as it proposes greater recognition for greater vulnerability, which is not distributed equitably. All human beings

are vulnerable in some way, but some will be much more so than others, depending on various factors. According to Butler (2009), vulnerability is socially mediated and facilitated. In this manner, it also depends on the practices and social structures of the space where the individual finds themselves. Established frameworks will determine who is a vulnerable entity and what our perspective and response will be towards this, which can be considered acts of recognition.

The theory of recognition not only theorizes about inequalities and injustices but also holds a strong potential to transform the structures where immigrants move. This transformative potential, akin to Critical Consciousness, inspires hope for positive change and encourages us to consider its application in the context of migration.

### **Critical Consciousness and Its Role in Empowerment**

Critical Consciousness, or CC, is a methodology created by Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire in his initial work with illiterate field workers, where he proposed a core connection between education and socio-economic development and learning through dialoguing with the educator. One of the underlying ideas for his theory was that Brazilian citizens developed a lack of societal participation because of the predatory colonization that the country suffered, where there was the excessive use of power and slave labor, resulting in the muteness and submission of the people when confronting power (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009). Therefore, CC refers to an individual's ability to perceive and critically analyze social, political, and economic contradictions and act against oppressive societal elements (Freire, 1993). It places an important and active combination of cognitive and behavioral dimensions. In this manner, one cannot act without the other; critical analysis of systems of oppression and the creation of collective action to foster change are necessary (Cadenas et al., 2022). CC is of great importance in migration, especially for unaccompanied minors, since this group often faces systemic adversities such as discrimination, marginalization, and legal difficulties. CC would allow them to understand and confront these barriers (Negrón-Gonzales, 2013). This theory puts a big emphasis on oppression and privileges; in this sense, more privileged people should develop more consciousness about the oppression of others and how their own privilege is maintained through it to create allies that support change in society (Diemer et al., 2016).

CC methodology interventions have shown significant advances in youth, including awareness-based empowerment. Developing critical awareness allows minors to gain an

understanding of the power dynamics that affect their daily lives, such as institutionalized racism, and challenge them through reflection and action (Vargas et al., 2022). On the other hand, these interventions also help build resilience in these groups. Through analyzing their experiences, minors can transform feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness into the capacity to take action to overcome systemic adversities. Similarly, there is evidence that CC promotes a framework to facilitate the processing of trauma and challenges faced during migration processes, helping to improve the mental health of migrants (Diemer et al., 2016).

In interventions with UAMs, CC can be applied in different ways. It will be essential to conduct education that places culture at the forefront to historicize their realities and promote solidarity with people in similar positions (Bajaj et al., 2017). Educators grounded in Freire's theory could create group discussions using Socratic questioning around social justice, lack of equality, and the power structures surrounding us and under which migration occurs to help minors contextualize their experiences (Diemer & Li, 2011). Through critical reflection, migrant minors are also allowed to reconstruct their identity in the new environment, promoting a sense of belonging and the ability to act despite the marginalization experienced. Finally, collective CC can be developed through dialogue and interactions with peers with a non-dominant perspective, allowing minors to share and validate their own experiences within a cultural framework (Pillen et al., 2020).

Critical consciousness is closely linked to Critical Participatory Action Research - CPAR (Diemer et al., 2016), which aims at creating conscious citizens of this challenging world and, where a relationship is created between researchers and participants simultaneously. Here the group has the power to design, direct, and decide on the research to be conducted and knowledge to be developed. Many programs utilizing this methodology have succeeded in involving minors in research and the objectives to achieve relevant interventions that address social issues directly affecting specific communities, thereby fostering empowerment within the community (Fine et al., 2021).

### **On the potential of using art as a tool in group interventions**

Art has been widely recognized and used in diverse interventions because it fosters emotional expression, confidence, and healing (Birrell et al., 2024). In the context of UAMs, it is specifically helpful, given the possible trauma, displacement, and identity challenges they face, by being a powerful tool for self-expression and community building. The use of art in this group is beneficial as it allows for the establishment of trust that facilitates the

exchange of relevant information to collectively discover, with respect and empathy, our different realities and improve the sense of belonging (Lipe et al., 2012). Creating art in a group setting allows for implementing mechanisms that reduce potential and natural communication barriers and increase participation within the group (Elkchirid & Motia, 2022). Art can also help by creating a safe and non-intrusive space that allows the exploration of difficult memories or emotions and the creation of safe relationships by connecting with others who might share similar perspectives and narratives.

### **Setting the stage for the current study**

The present study is based on the previously reviewed theory to construct an intervention for unaccompanied migrant minors in a CAS in Padua, Italy. The study aims to explore these dimensions by focusing on the transformative potential of interventions that use critical consciousness and art as tools to promote social integration and emotional healing. The project is based on the idea that knowledge and development cannot occur in an isolated context but in a community where safe spaces can be opened to share narratives, get to know each other, and discuss topics of interest for the population involved. As it is an open and participative dialogue space, a qualitative and exploratory research model is proposed.

Many studies related to unaccompanied minors have focused on clarifying the psychological, emotional, legal, and social challenges that this group faces. However, there is still a gap in the literature where one can elaborate on the potential of using interventions based on the development of critical awareness through participatory action research and the use of creative tools to generate processes of identity reconstruction, mutual recognition, a sense of belonging, and empowerment both as individuals and as a community.

In this project, art is used as a tool to create meaning within the liminal experiences that this group undergoes. Similarly, art becomes an important tool for building trust and getting to know one another within a safe space that respects boundaries. Specifically, music, body movement, games, and painting are utilized to connect from a place without many language barriers, allowing us to relate without overthinking it. The photovoice method, an open and non-invasive invitation, is also used as a generator of dialogues and shared narratives.

In the same way, Freire's theory of critical consciousness is combined with participatory action research methodology to create a safe space where authentic group dialogue and sharing experiences and narratives can take place—experiences that might not find a place

in other contexts. Socratic questioning and problem-posing are used to build knowledge collaboratively and establish relationships of trust and openness. At the same time, the researcher-participant / participant-researcher<sup>6</sup> relationship is proposed as a way to question power dynamics that may be implicit in the group's relationships, challenging the hierarchy that may be expected within the CAS. Playfully, it seeks to promote equity, curiosity, and understanding relationships that can lead the group to self-recognize and acknowledge other members as part of a community. This is an effort to create a space where different transformation processes can occur.

In the intervention, *power* is proposed as a generating theme, which was decided for various reasons. One of them is that it is closely linked to Freire's theory and the methodology used, as it aims to raise awareness about power structures that affect different populations in order to generate empowerment and action from collective knowledge. Power is also a topic that is particularly interesting for the population in which the project was carried out, and we sought to propose alternatives that encourage UAMs engagement; for this reason, unconventional activities were also conducted in an effort to maintain our population's attention by deviating from the expected script. In this space, we were able to delve into liminal processes where there are no clear rules, which strongly generate meaning and growth. By working in this way, we hoped to offer a space where we could create new norms of socialization within the group that could challenge the expected norms.

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<sup>6</sup> We created these labels as an attempt to replicate Paulo Freire's relationship of teacher-student / student-teacher and to challenge the power dynamics that might have been implicit in the group when we first entered the CAS.

## Methods

The present study was designed within a bigger research group project conducted inside the FISSPA department of the University of Padova that aims to explore diverse themes related to migration. It employs a qualitative, exploratory design to investigate the experiences and empowerment processes of unaccompanied migrant minors through a series of seven critical participatory action research interventions. The exploratory nature of the research allows for flexibility in understanding how minors navigate liminality and engage with art-based, critical consciousness-raising interventions. The exploratory approach was chosen because it permits adapting the themes and activities to the interests and the flow of the group, which is aimed at building knowledge together.

We chose an approach based on qualitative methodologies because it allows space to hear the voices and perspectives of groups and individuals that have been historically studied about or studied on, and marginalized from the spaces where scientific knowledge is "created." To achieve this, we decided to base our intervention on Freire's theory of Critical Consciousness, where power perspectives are questioned and social hierarchies are negotiated through collective dialogue (Freire, 1993). Similarly, we used Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) methodologies to center these voices in the research and work collaboratively on issues of interest to the community by engaging them with the research and repositioning them at the center of what is being studied. The CPAR approach serves as a foundation for our interventions as it is based on co-creating knowledge together by creating spaces for listening, analysis, and idea exchange, where topics are collectively selected and the research responsibility is within the group. It creates a framework that democratizes and decolonizes research (Fine & Torre, 2021).

It is important to note that our objective was not to generalize this study to other contexts but to provide a window into the lives and realities that intertwine within this group of minors in a residential care facility in Italy and, hopefully, to generate positive changes within this community. Throughout the process, we remained aware of our unique position in guiding this research and questioned our own perspectives and interpretations of the process and phenomena observed during the interventions. Within the collective and individually, we sought to engage with questions about our own narratives to maintain a transparent and emancipatory approach during this project.

In this thesis project, we aim to collaborate with a group of UAMs in a critical awareness process through the CPAR methodology. The study is guided by an exploratory approach

that seeks to observe how this process unfolded, the different dynamics that emerged, and the possible changes in group dialogue. Six preliminary sessions were designed and presented to the CAS staff.

### **Our research collective**

In the CPAR approach, people from different backgrounds meet in the same physical and symbolic space to investigate an interesting topic in the group. This process aims to share various community members' experiences, knowledge, and expertise (Fine & Torre, 2021). As everyone has different life experiences and interacts with power differently, this becomes an enriching element for generating knowledge resources related to the topic under investigation; there is not a hierarchy but everyone learns and everyone teaches (Freire, 1993). In this process, the effort to dilute the dichotomies of student/teacher and the hierarchies of power involved becomes central. Like Paulo Freire, we have sought to confront these dynamics by introducing the terms researcher-participant and participant-researcher, as this questions the researcher/participant dynamic. We all investigate and participate in generating knowledge together based on sharing our experiences, expectations, and narratives within a framework of open and respectful dialogue.

### ***The researcher-participants***

Five researcher-participants collaboratively designed this project. Our background and societal position are essential to understanding our role in research. We cannot be separated from our perspectives and understandings of the observed phenomena. Similarly, by using a participatory action research approach, the researcher-participants implicitly become part of the research process. Therefore, it is important to note that we all occupy different roles in the field of psychology, such as students, researchers, professors, and/or therapists. It is also important to mention that we all find a space in the shared experience of having crossed borders in a significant way at some point in our lives, assuming in some way the role of migrants. Despite having different experiences, we share a common interest in migration issues and have a point of interaction as members of UNIPD.

I would like to emphasize that the interventions were designed with the expertise and guidance of Professors Sara Santilli and Ciro De Vincenzo. Although they did not participate in the interventions, they guided us in the process and analysis. Professor De Vincenzo played a vital role as our point of contact and entry to the CAS, as he works there and knows the team and the minors more closely. The interventions were created and led by us, three

students from the master's program in Clinical, Social, and Intercultural Psychology: Paula Cramer, Hanna Reisch, and me, María Emilia Montaña. Drawing on our diverse experiences and knowledge, we worked closely together to create the interventions. The languages spoken by the group are English, Italian, Spanish, German, and French.

### ***The participant-researchers***

The group of participant-researchers consisted of 18 unaccompanied minors living within the CAS, which implies they were already acquainted before this project. Participation was not mandatory for the group, and it varied during the different sessions, ranging from 4 to 12 participants per session. All participants are recognized as minors and have been in Italy for less than one year. Their countries of origin are Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Gambia, Cameroon, Egypt, Tunisia, and Mali. Therefore, the languages spoken in this group are: Arabic, Bambara, Mandinka, Wolof, Fula, Maninka, Pulaar, English, French, and various levels of Italian. The participant-researchers vary in levels of formal education, from illiteracy to having completed secondary education. Mentioning the variations in this group is also essential for understanding the creation and development of the project.

### ***Possible power dynamics***

As this is such a central theme for our study, it is essential to mention and consider the different power structures that may have been present in the research group. Two of the researcher-participants are socially racialized as *white*, while the other one is socially racialized as *mestiza*. The participant-researchers are socially racialized as *black* or *POC*<sup>7</sup>. The three researcher-participants identify as women, while the participant-researchers identify as men. Additionally, the interventions were conducted in three languages: Italian, English, and French, languages that the researcher-participants managed quite well. While the group of participant-researchers only managed 1 or 2 of these at a time, limiting their capacity for understanding or engagement in the sessions. Finally, there is also an age difference that, although minor, should be considered, especially when dealing with an intervention involving minors. All these characteristics can be linked to larger power

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<sup>7</sup> We consider it important to acknowledge how the different participants are socially racialized since this may have implications for their social positioning, how they are perceived by others, and how they relate to other people

structures and may affect group dynamics and the group's ability to communicate and open up to one another.

For the development of the CC and a sustainable process of CPAR, it is essential to make a conscious effort to overcome these potential power dynamics. The group made several efforts to balance them. Firstly, to insert the labels of researcher-participant and participant-researcher, to note and value all interventions and voices within the dialogues, to translate into different languages when necessary, to bring these dynamics to the table so that they can be visualized and deconstructed, and to position ourselves in the role of co-researchers and co-learners from the standpoint of curiosity and solidarity.

## **Procedure**

As it is an exploratory research study, as a team, we posed an open research question: «What are the potentials of conducting critical participatory action research as a psycho-social intervention with unaccompanied minors in Italy? »

After the intervention, each of the researcher-participants decided to focus on different aspects of the process for analysis. Hanna Reisch focused on the emancipatory potential of liminal resistance. Paula Cramer focused on the potential of fostering authentic dialogue in a liminal space. I was drawn to the processes of mutual and self-recognition that we were observing and experiencing throughout the sessions, and I based my research on the following question:

«How did the expression of vulnerability impact the recognition of one another, leading to expressions of greater self-agency and belonging, and how did we arrive there? »

The project planning process began in February 2024 with various meetings among the researcher-participants group. Professor Ciro De Vincenzo was our first point of contact with the CAS; we began to familiarize ourselves with the methodology to be used and the context of this community. Based on these initial contacts, we started planning what would later become the intervention sessions. In early July 2024, we visited the CAS, where we got to know the physical space, the staff, and some of the minors who would participate in our project. It is important to note that the CAS is designed to be an extraordinary and temporary welcoming space, not a permanent home. For this reason, it is not equipped to address and meet the various needs that unaccompanied minors may develop in the host community. Due to circumstances beyond the team's control, most boys had lived longer than expected in this space and were beginning to demand other services. In this first meeting, we had the

opportunity to participate in a team meeting, where the need for the operators to break the barriers of their current roles and go beyond them to meet the needs of the minors was mentioned. Although the operators had made various efforts to bridge the gaps between resources and needs, they faced different barriers to achieving this. Among these was the resistance of some minors to allow total involvement in the care dynamics. Our intervention was introduced as part of an art workshop for minors during the summer holidays in an attempt to address some of the needs expressed by the boys. Between July and August 2024, we conducted seven semi-structured interventions for approximately five weeks, each lasting about two hours. In addition, we made some informal visits to the CAS to spend more time with the minors, better understand their context, and work on building trust within the group. These informal visits lasted approximately 2 hours each and took place between July and October 2024; not all researcher-participants were present at each visit. We used these visits to remind the minors about the dates of the encounters and to share time with them outside of the research space. These spaces were also important because they opened the opportunity for the roles to be reverted; in these moments, the minors were receiving us in their home, offering us food and guiding the conversations, sometimes picking themes we had discussed in the sessions.

### ***Recruitment process***

As mentioned earlier, participation in the sessions was optional for the minors. To generate interest in the group, we visited the CAS to allow them to get to know us and invite them personally to the activities. During this first visit, we only met a few of the minors. We also created a flyer titled “Let’s Talk About Power” (Appendix A), featuring our photo for identification. We made it available in three languages (English, French, and Italian) to emphasize the linguistic diversity in the group and ensure communication options were available. The operators also supported participation by reminding the minors about the meeting dates.

### ***Management of different languages***

In an effort to engage the children and align ourselves with CC theory and CPAR methodology, we offered three language options (those available to us) for communication during the sessions. Each researcher-participant was responsible for translating a different language: Hanna Reisch - French, Paula Cramer - English, María Emilia Montaña - Italian, to ensure the understanding and engagement of the group. Additionally, some participant-

researchers took on the role of translators when it involved languages we did not know. We also created smaller group spaces in different languages where the children could choose which group they wanted to participate in depending on the language they wanted to communicate in. Finally, we also included activities that did not require verbal communication to help break this language barrier and facilitate the participation of all group members.

### ***The semi-structured interventions***

Initially, we planned an intervention consisting of 6 sessions; however, throughout the project, we realized the need to adapt the activities to the group's needs and direct the content towards the ideas and demands of the participant-researchers. This meant that after each session, the researcher-participants met to discuss the observed needs and adapt the following session. As a result, the project was extended to 7 sessions.

All sessions were held in the backyard of the CAS, in the shade of a large tree and surrounded by fruit trees. We had tables for working and chairs to sit in a circle. Additionally, we brought cookies and juice for each session as snacks and incentives for the minors since the sessions took place in the morning. To capture the minors' attention and create a safe environment, we started each session with music one of the minors chose. All sessions after the first began in a circle where we tossed a ball, and each participant shared something they remembered from past sessions. We also wrote the day's activities on the board to facilitate agreement and guidance on what we would work together. As will be explained later, the activities alternated between experiences, games, dialogue, art, and big and small groups activities. The experiential activities aimed to engage the body and senses to generate a deeper understanding of the processes and concepts to be shared, promote teamwork and trust, and explore the topics discussed from another perspective. The dialogue activities encouraged introspection, shared ideas and perspectives, and facilitated reflection and critical thinking. Combining different types of activities allowed us to generate various forms of participation, recognition, and understanding.

**1st Session:** This session introduced the CPAR methodology and the generative topic of power. Its main objective was to generate curiosity and interest in the group and foster their commitment to come in the next few days. We began by introducing ourselves and collectively choosing the languages we wanted to communicate in the group.

*Introduction:* Everyone introduced themselves. We had different questions that everyone could respond to: your name, what it means, where you come from, and what

languages you speak. This was followed by a movement that represented how you felt. We all participated in this activity by throwing a small ball to get our turn to speak.

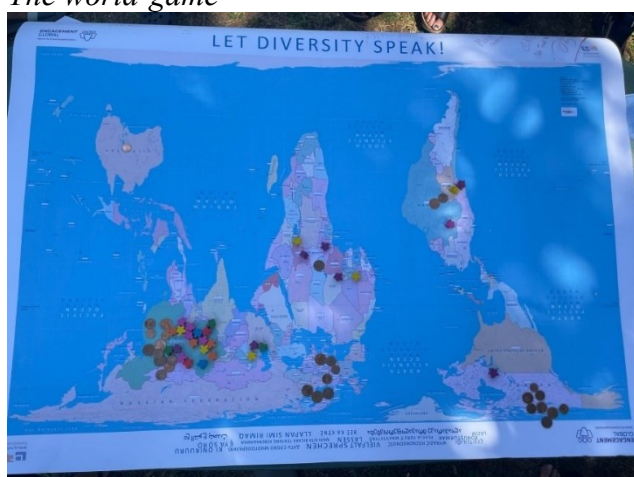
*Crossing the River:* This activity is aimed at building teamwork and cooperation. The group was divided into two teams, and each participant was given a piece of paper representing a stepping stone. The objective was to cross the imaginary river as a team by moving the stones to create a path.

*Map introduction:* We showed them the Peter's Projection and Mercator's Projection maps and fostered a discussion about their differences. We introduced the topic of power and incentivized them to explain what power is for them and how to say it in their native languages. We then encouraged them to write the words around the map.

*World Game:* (Figure 1) The objective of this game is to visualize and motivate discussion on global power dynamics (EPiZ, 2022). First, we gave them small pieces to place on the map to guess collectively how the world's population is distributed. Afterwards, we showed the actual numbers and rearranged the pieces. Next, we gave them small coins to distribute the world's wealth based on their guesses. Afterwards, we showed the actual numbers and rearranged the coins. We opened a space for discussion and reflection around our thoughts during the game.

*Closure:* We concluded this session by introducing the research concept and proposing to create a research group around the topic of power. In the end, we stood in a circle with music, and everyone shared their favorite dance move while the others copied.

**Figure 1**  
*The world-game*



**2<sup>nd</sup> Session:** The goal of this session was to establish some rules for the group to ensure that everyone felt comfortable and safe participating. We also wanted to explore the concept of power and colonialism more deeply.

*Introduction:* We distributed Post-its for everyone to write down questions that they would like to discuss in the session. We then collected them. We did a check-in round, also going by turns, throwing the ball around, and sharing what we remembered from the last session.

*Rules construction:* We asked them what makes them feel comfortable and respected in a group. Then, we gave them Post-its to write down their answers, and we collected them and grouped them in clusters on the whiteboard. There was a general agreement on the importance of active listening and avoiding offensive language.

*Feel the Power:* (Figure 2) The game aims to make players feel power or powerlessness. We created pairs and gave them blindfolds. Taking turns, one had to put on the blindfold and allow the other to guide them around the garden. We explored these roles and then gathered to discuss our impressions and how they relate to power.

*Quiz about colonialism:* (Appendix B) We divided the big group into three small groups with different language options: Italian, English, and French. Each researcher-participant had small cards with questions the groups had to choose and find, sometimes researching the answers on our phones.

## **Figure 2**

*Experiencing Power(lessness)*



**3<sup>rd</sup> Session:** The main objective of the third session was to provide more insight on the topic of power, which had been highly demanded in the previous sessions.

*Introduction:* We did our general check-in and introduced an energizing game called the Human Tower. In this game, we divided the group into two teams. The objective was to work together to build the highest possible tower.

*Power metaphor:* In this exercise, we wanted to represent power relations visually. We asked for two volunteers who held a metal bar with an 8kg weight that moved from one extreme to the other. As each volunteer moved the bar in different directions, the weight shifted from one side to the other, representing privileges and oppression. We proposed that when one person or group has more privileges, another person or group is more oppressed. We explained how, for us, power operates within relationships and how it can be applied to larger social structures.

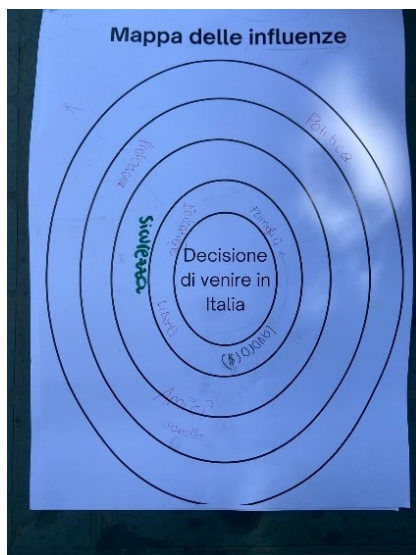
*Power-critical glasses:* In this art activity, we wanted to embody the idea of generating a “power-critical” perspective. We crafted and decorated, individually, paper glasses that would help us visualize the world from a different perspective. Moreover, with this perspective, we went to the next exercise.

*Map of influences:* In small groups, divided by languages, we gave them individual maps (Figure 3) and shared a bigger one where we brainstormed the factors that influenced our decision to come to Italy. The closer we placed the factor, the more power it had over the decision, and the further, the less power it exercised.

*Closure:* We played HI-HA-HO, a group game in which we had to make different movements depending on the syllable a person said.

### Figure 3

*The map of influences*



**4<sup>th</sup> Session:** The main objective of this session was to introduce the Photovoice method and to choose a topic for our pictures together.



*Introduction:* Check-in and the “Human Knot” game.

*Power metaphors:* We aimed to explain how power dynamics, privileges, and oppressions work daily. We asked a volunteer to come to the front and stand up with arms stretched wide while holding two plastic bags in each hand (Figure 5). We gathered together different examples of privileges and oppressions (Figure 6). For each privilege, we would put an air balloon on the plastic bag; for each oppression, we would put a water balloon, creating different weights and representing the more significant effort needed to move and act through oppressive systems. We then asked different participant-researchers to come to the front and feel the different weights. This sparked a discussion on the intersectional nature of oppression and how it can change depending on the context, leading us to the next activity.

*Crossing the line:* In this game, we all stood beside each other in the middle of two lines. We then read the dichotomies of privileges and oppressions we had brainstormed before and moved towards the side we identified more with, returning to the center after each. We discussed the idea that in some contexts, we might have the privileged side and, in others, be on the oppressed side. We then opened space for discussion of our personal experiences and thoughts.

*Photovoice:* We recapitulated the idea and objective of the photovoice and offered the time and space to take their pictures for the project. We opened two options: to take pictures at that moment, offering our phones and help, or to send us pictures that they already had. We asked them to send them to the CAS number so we could print them.

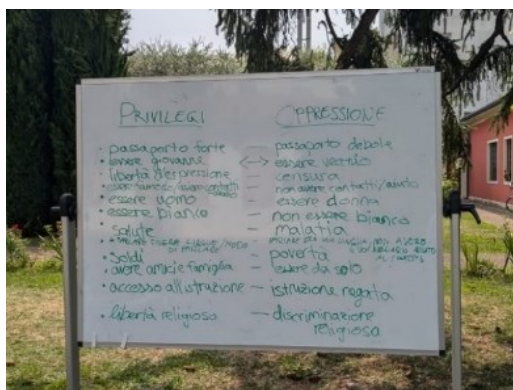
## **Figure 5**

*Power dynamics metaphor*



**Figure 6**

*Privileges and oppressions*



**6<sup>th</sup> Session:** The main objective of this session was to discuss the pictures we had shared; it became a central moment for our project. This was the first session that was audio-recorded. We started by asking the participant-researchers if they felt comfortable with us recording, and they all agreed.

*Introduction:* Check-in and Yoga practice. We began by doing a short yoga practice together. It created a calm atmosphere for the next activity.

*Photovoice:* We gave them the printed pictures they sent us; each participant had two pictures. We began by doing a round of passing our pictures around so everyone could see all the pictures before starting, and then we encouraged them to choose one to share during our reflection session. We conducted this session sitting together around a table. In turn, each participant first showed their picture, and everyone described what they saw in the image. Then, the participant explained what it was and its meaning. The reflection was encouraged with questions we had prepared in advance by merging different Photovoice projects (Bank et al., 2022; Marcu, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1994):

1. Is there a difference between what we see and what is really happening? If yes, what is really happening?
2. How / what did you feel while taking the pictures? (What was easy and what was difficult in this process?)
3. Why did you choose to take a picture of this person/place/event? What does it mean to you?
4. What kind of memories does this photo bring to you?
5. Why did you choose to share this picture with us?
6. Where do we see power here?

With the final question, following Wang and Burris (1997), we tried to contextualize the different narratives of the individuals in the broader framework of the theme of power. We guided the discussion so that everyone could intervene when they wanted with observations or reflections, while the questions were mainly answered by the person presenting the picture. Everyone clapped after each participant shared.

**7<sup>th</sup> Session:** The objective of this session was to have some space to share the pictures of the participant-researchers who were not present in the previous photovoice session and to create a closure together as it was the last session of our project.

*Introduction:* We started by having a stretching session guided by one of the participant-researchers to bring our attention to the group.

*Photovoice:* We shared a small recapitulation of the last session and allowed the participants who were not there the last time to share their pictures with the group.

*Frame creation:* (Figure 7) We provided everyone with materials to create a frame for the pictures. Participants were encouraged to create a title for the picture and write it in the frame. We took pictures of all the participants with their pictures.

*Memory Lane:* Pictures of the previous sessions were laid on the floor chronologically, encouraging the participants-researchers to go along with the pictures and remember the moments we shared in the last weeks. We opened a space to share what we remember the most from the activities.

*Feedback:* It was important to receive feedback from the group regarding our intervention. We asked the participant researchers to choose and stand next to a picture of an activity that they had liked, that could be improved, and one that they did not like. We asked them to elaborate on the reasons for it. Afterward, we proposed to them to create an art exhibition with the pictures we had framed and the pictures of our project together, which they agreed to. We ended this session by thanking the participant-researchers for working with us, thanked each other for the time we shared, and applauded.

## Figure 7

### *Frame creation*



### **Data construction and collection**

We used different data construction and collection techniques from ethnographic research methodology throughout the intervention sessions. The construction included observations, focus groups, informal conversations, and taking pictures of ideas we collected in the sessions in the form of mental maps. The data collection was mainly through extensive journal entries written individually by the researcher-participants after each session. These entries were shared between the researcher-participants to enrich our collective understanding and interpretation of what had happened in the sessions and what was happening in the group. The journal entries were focused on implicit and explicit events of the sessions and the interpretations and thoughts of the researcher-participants. Furthermore, the last two sessions, where we worked on the Photovoice, were audio-recorded with the permission of the minors. In qualitative research, it is helpful to triangulate data to gain different perspectives on the phenomena being investigated (Mayring, 2016). In the same way, combining data collection methods is necessary to grasp the complexity of the dynamics unfolding in the process (LeFrancois, 2014). Since the sessions included different languages, the researcher participants translated the audio recordings into English to facilitate the analysis. Later on, they were transcribed manually by the three researcher-participants, Paula Cramer, Hanna Reisch, and me, María Emilia Montaña; we created a document with transcription instructions to ensure consistency throughout this (Appendix C).

## **Data analysis**

I decided to use thematic analysis for this research as it provides the framework and flexibility needed to identify, analyze, and interpret the patterns found in the participants' experiences. This method allows for exploring the complex psychological and social processes throughout our interventions. Thematic analysis is particularly applicable in exploratory qualitative research as it helps identify recurrent themes related to the impact of the interventions while giving space to each participant's different experiences (Braun et al., 2023). Another important reason to use this framework for analysis is that thematic analysis is embedded in the values of using the inevitable researcher subjectivity as a resource for the research and contextualizing knowledge (Braun et al., 2023).

## Results

When considering our initial research question, «What are the potentials of conducting critical participatory action research as a psychological social intervention with unaccompanied minors in Italy?» We observed different processes occurring within the group simultaneously. Since there were three researcher-participants, we decided to focus on different processes according to our interests and areas of expertise.

After observing the development and progress of the group, I chose to focus on the question:

«How did the expression of vulnerability impact the recognition of one another, leading to expressions of greater self-agency and belonging, and how did we arrive there?»

Throughout this description of the results, we will see how these processes unfolded over the time shared between the researcher-participants and participant-researchers and how sufficiently strong trusting relationships were created to uphold the vulnerability of oneself and others within the group. Our data tells a story of how a relationship formed and includes the elements that sustain these processes to achieve collaborative work and shared responsibility. To tell this story, I identified four themes: *Trial and Resistance*, *Touching middle ground*, *You can see (hold) my heart*, and *Joining forces*. Each of them has different subthemes that will help in their description.

Themes	Subthemes
Trial and Resistance	Experiences of misrecognition / Struggles for recognition / Testing boundaries / Distrust
Touching middle ground	Mutual efforts / Sharing / Questioning
You can see (hold) my heart	Care / Validation / Showing emotion / Vulnerability
Joining forces	Collaboration / Solidarity / Community expression

### ***Trial and Resistance***

When proposing teamwork, regardless of the context, one cannot expect to work together perfectly from the start. This topic addresses the initial barriers encountered within the group. It describes how the participant-researchers applied resistance strategies and how the researcher-participants attempted to navigate the symbolic terrain in their relationships to overcome these barriers. It talks about experiences of misrecognition and struggles for proper recognition from the participants.

One of the barriers was a lack of trust within the group, which was evident in behaviors such as reluctance to participate, arriving much later than planned, or disconnecting from the group with which we were interacting. The lack of trust may be linked to past experiences of misrecognition that this group has endured, leading them to struggle for and demand the recognition they need and deserve. This topic also discusses testing and understanding the boundaries set by others within the group while the participants find and express their own limits. It describes efforts to negotiate spaces and roles within the team and reach agreements among all the voices involved.

“At the end of the intervention, one of the kids said that we had not answered his question about what is power, he made it clear that he had come for that reason and wanted an answer from us. Another guy seconded the question. It is important for me to keep in mind that these kids don’t know us, they don’t know who we are or what we are here for.” (Combined Diary entries)

In the initial sessions, the minors demanded more answers from the researcher-participants, maintaining a role of teacher-student and wanting to be recipients of knowledge. In the previous comment, we can see how there is an effort to keep the hierarchical relationship as a boundary to more authentic communication and relationships.

“One of the boys (the one that took up a lot of the speaking space) replied that he is dissatisfied because he feels like he still has so many questions and that we didn’t answer all of his questions. We replied that of course we cannot talk about everything in just one meeting, but that that’s why we want to come together several times. Also,

we said that we are not here to give answers, but to find answers together in the group.” (Combined Diary entries)

This moment can be interpreted as a struggle for recognition, acknowledging that their intellectual needs are not being met and trying to engage or elevate the communication to another level. This struggle to seek more information from our side persisted in the initial sessions. In the excerpt, we can also note the negotiation of roles, where the researcher-participants tried to propose different roles within the group. At the same time, in these sessions, the minors resisted participating deeply. For example, in the following excerpt:

“Some of the boys didn’t really write down their thoughts, and others were not really participating” (Combined diary entries)

Arriving late to the sessions, refusing to participate, or being on their cell phones, we can see how the minors were also negotiating their role in the group and their relationship with us. There was no trust for them to express that they did not like the activity or did not want to participate at that moment.

“(we) asked them to write some questions on them that they would like to ask to us, of course related to the topic. They all said ok, but no one wrote any question down” (Combined diary entries)

Not raising the voice when they didn’t understand something was also a common behavior in the starting sessions, the researcher-participants didn’t know if it was a lack of engagement or a lack of understanding and asking questions to try to understand was a difficult process.

Throughout the sessions, we can also see struggles for recognition on the part of the boys:

“While splitting into the groups, one of the guys was refusing to join any language group: he said he only wanted to do a Wolof group. I responded that sadly we don’t speak that so we cannot offer that to him, but that he can choose which one he can join out of the other three languages” (Combined diary entries)

On this occasion, we can see how the boy seeks recognition for their language and possibly their identity within the group. It can also be interpreted as a test of boundaries with the researcher-participants to see how far they could go and how much would be considered. We can observe how the researcher-participant acknowledges this need and offers feasible alternatives within the intervention.

The following extracts try to exemplify moments of strong resistance towards activities proposed during the intervention. Even though the researcher-participants were open to suggestions and change in activities, there was not a proposal from the participant-researchers.

“He sat at the table and after listening to the conversation he said he was not going to answer any of those questions, that they are questions that are asked in Questura.- the immigration office.” (Combined diary entries)

This and the next moment reflect the lack of trust that existed within the group during the initial interventions. We can understand that by the comparison that they did with the immigration office, a institution that they feel is out to get them and they fear that they cannot be fully transparent with.

“There was immediate hesitation. One guy asked us “why” and said he won’t share because this is a Questura question (...) there was very little active input honestly. They all seemed shy to answer.” (Combined diary entries)

During the intervention, there were also moments of reluctance toward participating. The participant-researchers were setting and communicating boundaries regarding how much we could ask or try to enter their world. At the same time, we can see how the researcher-participants acknowledge and respect these boundaries, strive to work around them, and adjust to achieve a better relationship. The next quota also exemplifies a struggle for intellectual recognition by one of the participant-researchers, to acknowledge that they understand what is happening in the intervention.

“One boy shouted at one point “yes, yes we all understand, you don’t need to translate”. He did this with a slightly annoyed air and I felt I had to give in to what he was saying to try to keep them happy and interested.” (Combined diary entries)

### ***Touching middle ground***

This topic describes a step further in the relationship with the participant-researchers, outlining how the group gradually attempted to permeate the barriers in their relationship. It discusses how the participant-researchers invited the researcher-participants into their liminal space and how they slowly moved toward that space. Mutual efforts can be seen, although still not together, to understand one another, question the reasons for being there and the intentions of others, and begin to share certain aspects of their own internal world cautiously.

This topic shows how a new liminal space is entered or created in the CAS. Through this back and forth and boundary-testing in the previous topic, we managed to step towards a shared space. A space that is somewhat sustained over time, within the symbolic space of sharing liminal experiences, such as belonging-not belonging, students-workers, participants-researchers.

“We did a circle of names, the meaning of their names, which languages we speak, and a movement of how they feel today... in the beginning, they were a little bit shy, but with time they became more open.” (Combined diary entries)

This excerpt reflects mutual efforts to begin sharing certain personal aspects such as their names, their meanings, things related to their cultural background, and a part of their feelings. The researcher-participants make efforts to propose and understand with curiosity while simultaneously participating in the same manner as the participant-researchers, sharing the same level of openness.

“Another thing I found interesting is that one of the boys playfully started mocking me calling me Madame Pouvoir. (...) Afterwards they invited me to stay over for dinner mentioning that we always bring snacks also so they would like to offer me something to eat back.” (Combined diary entries)

This excerpt shows the first signs of trust and attempts to invite us into their physical space through reciprocity and joking. The invitation to share and be in their physical space could be the first step toward entering their liminal space. Furthermore, the playful comment also shows efforts to transform the hierarchical relationship into a horizontal one.

- “P-R1 (FR): I have something to say. This is very beautiful, everyone sees. But there is something that has come to change Africa: money. Due to money, we don’t find this anymore, we don’t see that anymore. And the people who have money, pay the Africans to approach the animals as it is easy for them. When an animal sees an African in the forest, he doesn’t flee.
- P-R4 (FR): They start to sell the animals.
- P-R1 (FR): Yes, this is a bit the problem.”

Little by little, the minors allow us to see parts of their lives in Africa, sharing reflections with us and opening a window to understand their perspective on life in Italy. This voluntary work is accepted and appreciated within this space we are creating together.

“When I was in the CAS the other day... one of them asked me about my tattoo and because of that we starting talking about Yoga. They were interested and wanted me to show them what Yoga was like so I proposed to do some Yoga together.” (Combined diary entries)

In this quote, we can see how paths of curiosity start to open towards one another and attempt to understand and learn about each other's identity beyond what is shared in the interventions.

“As we closed this activity, one of the boys asked me what the point of the activity was. I took the time to engage in conversation with him. He said that he found it very interesting and went on asking about our background and studies”. (Combined diary entries)

We could increasingly see curiosity appearing as it was not only us trying to understand them but also them trying to understand us. We can see this in the questions that we begin visualizing in the group. These questions focus on more personal aspects of the group members in an attempt to understand them more deeply.

“He asked me if I am always this nice or if I am doing it because it is my work. I told him that this is not my work, that I don’t get paid. And then he said sure but still I am there for a reason, because I want something from it.” (Combined diary entries)

These moments in the group exemplify instances where both parties try to understand each other's inner world. Through relationships and shared activities, certain bridges are created for more authentic communication, opening space to generate questions about understanding others' personalities.

“These are moments where I feel strongly connected and like we are truly touching each other. I wonder if this is their normal way of interaction or if they don’t experience proper, mindful attention in many of their interactions so suddenly, when I am listening fully to them, they demand for more of that.” (Combined diary entries)

This last excerpt exemplifies how deep connections occur during the intervention. Participant-researchers and researcher-participants create a shared space, erasing the boundaries of previous hierarchical dynamics.

### ***You can see (hold) my heart***

You can see (hold) my heart speaks of a relationship of trust. It uses two verbs: “see” refers to a more passive action, where permission is granted to go further and closely observe the vulnerability expressed by the group members. “Hold” refers to a more active verb where efforts are made to support the person within the experience of vulnerability. Similarly, the topic has two sides: that of granting permission and that of trusting. Grant permission to observe the struggles, pain, and joys that exist in our experiences and have the trust that the other person or group will be able to validate and support the emotions within that experience.

This topic includes sub-themes of care, validation, and expression of emotion and vulnerability that work together, almost in a feedback loop, to create safer and more open

spaces. In these spaces, vulnerability is not forced but welcomed and validated. Likewise, this topic describes the moments of openness to foster recognition within the group of the minors' past, the context in which we find ourselves, the researcher-participants, and the events occurring within the proposed space.

“At one point one of the guys made a comment (in another language, I didn’t understand) but I felt like most of the guys, especially P-R1 and P-R6 came out to defend the 3 of us. I understood them saying things like: they are women show respect, they come to work with us and you can’t say those things, you see they understand French you can’t say that, and the theme of respect was repeated a lot. I felt protected but also seen by these guys and I felt like I could trust them to also handle discussions that come up within the group”.

This quote demonstrates important aspects of the relationship. First, it acknowledges the status of the researcher-participants as women and the need to protect them in a certain way. It also shows signs of trust within the group, such as the ability to rely on the boys to manage discussions and the trust that they can recognize the vulnerability of other group members.

Throughout the interventions, moments of openness also began to emerge where both the boys and the researcher-participants could share their experiences outside of the CAS, their past, and their trips to Italy. In these spaces, the group supported and validated the expressed emotions, leading to more authentic conversations and relationships. The following is an example of these types of openings, where the permission to see their past experiences and internal world starts to show:

- “P-R2 (IT): Even if I was suffering there. A bit not too much, because I was always finding something to eat. Also a place to sleep, even if it is not perfect. (...) But I was a bit sad. Sometimes we laugh, we do some jokes together. (..) But there were also those who speak French that give me help, but because I was not an arrogant person. So everyone helped me.
- R-P2 (IT): So a lot of community in that also.

- P-R2 (IT): Yes
- P-R1 (IT): This picture speaks for all of us
- (conversation goes on)
- P-R2 (IT): Do you have a tissue? [tears have entered his eyes] [R-P1 gets up to get him a tissue].”

(Figure 8)

During this very vulnerable interaction, we can understand how the group is able to hold the vulnerability and space for the participants. In these excerpts, we can see the trusting aspect of the theme, where the participants trust the group to do this.

### Figure 8

*La Vita*



Note: Picture of one of the participant-researchers during their journey.

“His sadness was welcomed by the group who went with it and became even more calm and attentive to what he was saying. The boy didn’t try to hide his tears but instead asked for a tissue to wipe them off. (...) I saw R-P1 briefly touching his arm in an attempt to console him.” (Combined diary entries)

This way, more spaces were created for group members to express their emotions. Not only negative emotions but also positive ones, and memories bring comfort and strength.

- “R-P2 (IT): For me, this photo makes me feel very powerful because this is my closest friends (...) And when I am with them or when I think about them, I feel

very strong. (...) Together we can change things and give this energy to other people.”

- “P-R4 (EN): The action speaks that I am feeling happy with my monkey, you know, at the moment.”

In a feedback way, the more vulnerable the participants showed themselves, the more support and recognition the group provided.

“In general it was a very respectful atmosphere. There was genuine listening on all sides, none of us was on the phone. Everyone was attentive and it seemed like no one was bored but actually engaging. It felt like a moment of truly getting a deeper glimpse into each other’s lives. Into how we see ourselves, into some of our values and ideas. It was nice to see how many times people were relating among each other through the pictures.” (Combined diary entries)

This excerpt illustrates an example of how the group's behavior changed in this space we created together. As individuals became more present, and through the recognition of individual experiences and the vulnerability in the stories of others, a sense of community was achieved, where deeper characteristics were shared among group members.

### ***Joining forces***

When discussing joining forces, a collaborative space is reached. Experiences of teamwork are described, where the group members feel comfortable taking on certain responsibilities and acting within the group. Experiences of collaboration, solidarity, and community are explored, alongside questioning our roles or identities within this space to define a new identity, a relationship that challenges the initial power dynamics.

*Joining* calls for evidence that a team has been created where the initially proposed hierarchies have been questioned, allowing for horizontal relationships to be created and fostered. *Forces* refer to power, the ability to act and move together within a space and group. It describes how a sense of belonging to a community and the ability to act can be nurtured through collaboration, solidarity, and mutual recognition.

“It was like an invisible web that we were spinning. We have been wanting to do this web method where we weave a visible web with wool about things that unite us. This session it really felt like we were doing this implicitly.” (Combined diary entries)

At this moment, one can see how a feeling of unity begins to form. Through the acknowledgment of vulnerability and the openness to express emotions and experiences, a fabric is created that connects the group members within the collaboratively established space.

- “R-P1 (IT): Yes, I wanted to ask why you chose to share this picture?”
- P-R2 (IT): Because also all the people in this house. Like he said – there is the story of every one of use inside. I tell my story, there is the story of P-R1 inside, of P-R4 inside, of P-R3 inside. Of all the people here.
- P-R1 (IT): There is the situation of all the sub-saharan African migrants.”

This quote shows how a community begins to form among the kids at the CAS. They share their experiences and can redefine their identity within the group based on the recognition of the struggles they have in common.

In this context, we can also identify moments where the participant-researchers start to feel more comfortable to act within the group, which we notice when they express their needs. In the following excerpt, we can also see acts of solidarity, where a participant-researcher acts for a translation for one of the other minors.

- “P-R1 (FR): P-R3 didn’t understand. We need to explain.
- R-P3 (FR): Did you understand?
- P-R3 (FR): No, I didn’t understand
- R-P3 (FR): Alright then I will do the translation. She said that this picture was taken on a festival...
- P-R3 (FR): No, I understood that. What she said in English I didn’t understand”

Similarly, we see how they request translations that allow them to engage more in the conversations.

“One thing that was really nice in this session was that P-R4 regularly asked for us to translate into English, which was we came up with four different topics we could talk about during the photovoice.” (Combined diary entries)

In the last sessions, we also noticed how the boys began to feel more comfortable taking the lead and participating in the interventions. Although it seems simple in the following conversation, it is evident how roles are reversed at the moment of photovoice, where one of the researcher-participants must present their photograph. The minors take on the role of asking questions. This transition occurs progressively but naturally throughout the interventions. It demonstrates that they feel comfortable leading conversations and participating within the group.

“R-P3 and P-R2 took the role of asking questions because up until then I had been leading the questions. I liked that P-R2 felt safe taking on that role.” (Combined diary entries)

- “P-R2 (IT): Why is he so important?
- R-P1 (IT): Because he is my baby and I miss him a lot here
- P-R2 (IT): Nooo, you should bring him here
- P-R4 (IT): This dog, how old is he?
- R-P1 (IT): He is five years old.
- P-R2 (IT): It is a female or a male?”

(Figure 9)

## Figure 9

### *Safe Place*



Note: Picture of one of the researcher-participants

In this theme, it can also be noticed how a new identity is collectively created, where strength within the community is discussed.

- “P-R4 (EN): This picture is good because you know, when you watch it, you remember a lot and you know you are strong.
- P-R1 (IT): yes!
- R-P1 (IT): and that’s the question I wanted to ask, where do you see power in this picture?
- P-R1 (IT): Let’s say, here, where I see power is in the union that we do, we eat together. Maybe we also look together if there you are sad but we also laugh together. In this photo there is the unity. We eat together, we help each other, even if you don’t have money to buy food”

“We left them there as a group sitting around the table, waving goodbye as we went off. It was a beautiful metaphor for me. We came and found them all dispersed and we left them there as a community, a bit closer to each other. A bit more united.”

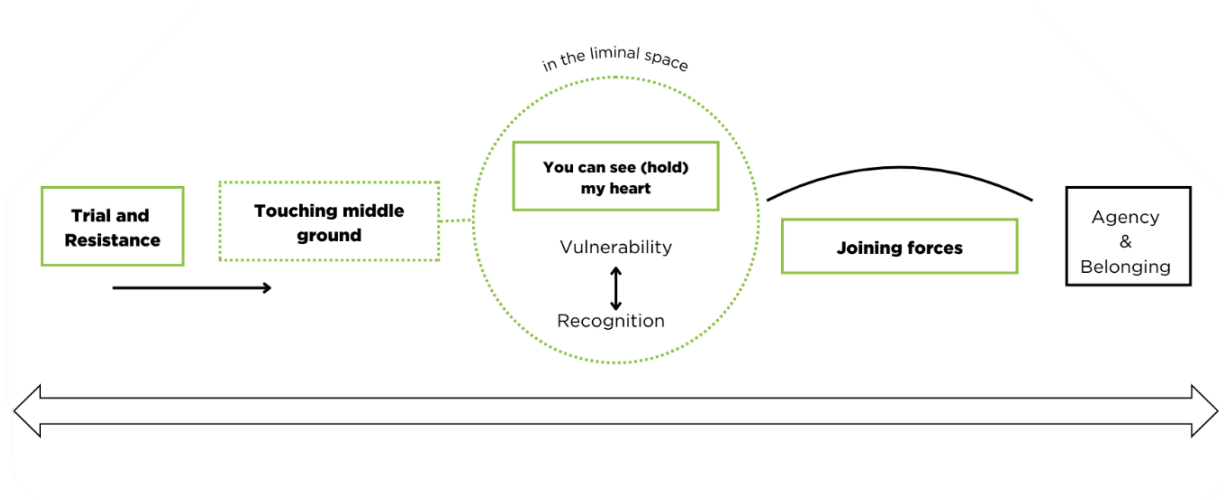
(Combined diary entries)

These extracts exemplify the sense of community woven throughout the interventions. It can be seen from both the perspective of the minors and that of the

researcher-participants. Recognizing the barriers to working with them and entering a shared space where emotions and vulnerability were exchanged allowed us to create greater closeness and work together to form the community humans need to feel more whole.

**Figure 10**

Flow chart of the relation between themes



In Figure 10, we can see how we move from the trial and resistance of the participants to an experience of touching a middle ground that allows us to move into a joined liminal space. Inside the liminal space, we can trust one another to be vulnerable and hold and recognize not only vulnerability but the rest of the members. Through this space, we can build a bridge to a place of belonging where the group members feel comfortable acting within their community. The arrow below shows that this process is a constant flow, moving back and forth between these proposed spaces.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The initial purpose of this project was to explore the potential of carrying out a psychosocial intervention based on critical participatory action research with unaccompanied minors in Italy. Given that this is an extensive and rich topic for study, it was divided into different studies focusing on various aspects of the intervention. This thesis aimed to explore the role of vulnerability and recognition in creating self-agency and a sense of belonging among unaccompanied minors in Italy. Specifically, this study sought to answer the question: How did the expression of vulnerability impact the recognition of one another, leading to expressions of greater self-agency and belonging, and how did we arrive there?

Several key themes emerged through the information gathered during participatory activities, revealing how vulnerability became essential in building trust and mutual recognition within the group. These results demonstrate that, over time, participants could move from initial resistance and testing of boundaries to a shared space of collaboration and solidarity, where others recognized, validated, and supported vulnerability. Moreover, recognizing vulnerability allowed the group members to move towards a space of solidarity, collaboration, and belonging.

In this section, we will first discuss some of the potentials of creating an intervention of this nature with unaccompanied minors in the Italian context concerning the theories of CPAR and CC. We will then move on to discuss these results in relation to the theoretical frameworks proposed by Honneth's recognition theory and Judith Butler's concept of vulnerability, highlighting the processes through which emotional and intellectual openness led us to a greater sense of self-agency and the formation of a collective sense of belonging. Additionally, the discussion will consider the broader implications of this study for psychosocial interventions with vulnerable migrant populations and the challenges and opportunities presented in the CPAR approach.

### **On the potential of Critical consciousness and CPAR with UAMs**

The approaches used during the intervention were picked carefully, relating to the group we would work with. Shweppe and Sharma (2015) mention that their status as migrants often makes them less wanted in society, creating a sense of marginalization and deepening their vulnerability in the host country. Marginalized groups tend to have their voices and perspectives also invisibilized. In the same way, the welcoming structures offered by the host countries are often unable to handle this group's need for integration and self-

agency. More safe and secure structures are needed to manage these needs and ensure effective social participation. Similarly, supportive relationships must be fostered by centering connection instead of self-sufficiency. (Sapiro & Ward, 2020). We must also take into account the significant vulnerability that exists in groups of UAMs, which is given by previous experiences in their countries of origin, by events that they had to endure on their journeys on their own by traveling without adults to protect them, and also by arriving in a new country without being able to count on a solid support system to help them adapt and process these changes (Fazel et al., 2016). All these factors make them a vulnerable group to develop mental health disorders and, therefore, a group that needs more support and attention to generate a sense of security and belonging.

Due to this vulnerability and lack of integration, during the interventions, there was an intentional effort to ensure that the voices of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) were heard and valued in the process. We aimed to place their voices and experiences at the center of the conversation so they could express themselves and begin to take ownership of the physical and symbolic spaces in their new country. Using a Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR) approach, we engaged the UAMs in this process and listened to their voices and feedback to adapt each session's content and activities. During the interventions, we observed how, gradually, hierarchical relationships were replaced by more horizontal relationships of cooperation and collaboration.

Paulo Freire's methodology of Critical Consciousness allowed us to create the framework for these processes. CC aims to develop the ability to perceive and critically analyze the power structures that act oppressively on marginalized groups (Freire, 1993). In the interventions, stories of colonization were analyzed and how this has impacted the current world organization. The abundance of natural resources in Africa was discussed, as well as how governments were unable to manage them assertively to provide wealth for their inhabitants. Similarly, topics regarding power distribution and the interaction of privilege and oppression were addressed. This is related to what Diemer et al. (2016) mentioned about making power relations visible to counteract them. The CC framework helped us understand and confront these dynamics through group reflection to develop a greater capacity for action, empowerment, and resilience. Like Bajaj et al. (2017), we sought to document the realities of the UAMs by opening spaces to share cultural reflections and life experiences, thereby creating more solidarity and a sense of belonging within the group. Throughout the seven sessions, we could see the potential of these approaches in the group by creating deep

spaces for discussion and reflection where individuals can interact within the group to enrich their perspectives and narratives. In the same manner, the

### **The relation of vulnerability, recognition, and belonging**

Throughout the interventions, various processes were observed developing within the group. For the analysis of the study question - How did the expression of vulnerability impact the recognition of one another, leading to expressions of greater self-agency and belonging, and how did we arrive there? Four themes were identified that encompass different parts of this process: Trial and Resistance, Touching Middle Ground, You Can See (Hold) My Heart, and Joining Forces. Although each is built upon the previous one as a process, it is also important to note that this process is not necessarily linear, as the group had moments where they entered and exited the different stages.

The first theme, Trial and Resistance, describes the initial barriers within the group and the attempts of the researcher-participants to overcome these barriers. It also describes moments of lack of confidence, possibly related to past experiences of being overlooked or misrecognized, the struggles of the participants for recognition, and the probing of boundaries within the group. In other studies, it has been observed that young men of color, due to previous experiences, may feel the need to be hyper-vigilant and unable to trust in certain situations (Sapiro & Ward, 2020). This was evident in the initial sessions of the interventions and was expressed as not wanting to participate in the group, being on their phones, arriving late, and in comments made by the participants about the proposed activities. Similarly, it has been observed that in the transition from adolescence to adulthood, there are needs for autonomy, independence, and support, which can create ambivalence in the level of trust towards adults and institutional staff (Sapiro & Ward, 2020). In UAMs, this process can be more intense, as the inability to trust could be interpreted as a defense mechanism to protect themselves from unknown situations (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). The probing of boundaries was also observed through provocative comments or questions to better understand the reasons and intentions of the researcher-participants. On the other hand, efforts to establish clear boundaries that create a safe relationship within the group can be observed, for example, by establishing rules collectively. There are also efforts to give space to each voice within the group in the language chosen by each participant.

In this way, the group could move toward a relationship characterized by greater curiosity and understanding, where mutual comprehension was achieved, allowing them to begin working differently. This can be seen in the topic of Touching Middle Ground. It is proposed that the barriers of the relationship were permeated, and the researcher-participants were somewhat invited into the liminal space of the participant-researchers. Mutual efforts to understand each other are observed through questions and cautiously sharing their inner worlds. In the intervention sessions, this can be seen in conversations where the minors share stories of their lives in Africa and describe their different realities. Efforts to understand the identity of the other group members are also evident, as they ask more personal questions and try to comprehend each other's inner worlds. Mateos Rodriguez and Dobler (2021) mention the importance of having a group with similar experiences to share these life stories on their own terms, often using humor as a tool. We observed this in the group where the process of finding common ground was facilitated through games, arts, and sharing leisure time. We believe that casual visits without an agenda played a crucial role in the development of this collective space, as they created environments where roles were ambiguous and interchangeable, allowing for sharing from a more authentic place without expectations. For instance, during these visits, the minors acted as hosts, choosing the spaces to occupy and leading the conversations that took place.

We observed the third theme within this jointly created space: You can see (hold) my heart. This theme describes the processes of vulnerability and recognition within the group. Similarly, it describes a relationship between permission and trust. Permission to see vulnerability and trust that the other members will be capable of recognizing and supporting it. I propose that these elements work together to reinforce each other, promoting more authentic expressions and the ability to act within the community. UAMs find themselves immersed in structures that replicate the injustices seen on a global level, making them more vulnerable to experiences of disrespect and lack of recognition.

The Recognition Theory of Honneth is particularly important given this context (Honneth, 2007). First, the axis of love involves care and friendships, which are crucial elements for building self-confidence. For unaccompanied minors (UAMs), the opportunities to form relationships where care and friendship exist are crucial; however, this is hindered by language barriers, trauma, or difficulties in understanding one another. Throughout the interventions, we saw how these obstacles were somewhat overcome by creating a safe and understanding space. There was patience and resources to express oneself in different languages and opportunities to work together on various activities. Expressions

related to the second axis proposed by Honneth, that of respect, were also present. This relates to being treated fairly and equally in legal structures and institutions. In the intervention, conversations took place about the struggle for legal recognition, the ability to travel, or moving to live in another country. In the group of UAMs, this dimension helps them to self-perceive as valuable members of society and to have the capacity to make decisions and take action. These struggles were recognized and reframed within the group, thus generating motivation to take action and learn from the experiences they have lived and are currently living. The third axis, esteem, is based on social solidarity and how the contributions of each individual are valued within the community (Brink & Owen, 2007). UAMs are limited in their ability to contribute, hindering their ability to increase their self-worth and integrate as full members of society. The researcher-participants and other group members expressed and recognized these struggles in the intervention. Similarly, a space of horizontal relationships was created where all members had the same rights and opportunities for participation, thereby generating opportunities for action.

Beyond this, we also focus on recognizing the vulnerability expressed by group members. According to Butler (2009), recognizing vulnerability is a central and necessary component for creating solidarity and equitable relationships in society. Vulnerability is a resource that UAMs can use to share and validate their experiences within a safe and supportive group. This way, they can feel secure in being recognized as individuals and community members. In the context of this study, mutual recognition of vulnerability allowed for the development of trust and emotional openness, leading to a stronger sense of belonging and empowerment. This is reflected in the increased expression of emotions in the later sessions of the intervention and in acts of emotional support, such as words of affirmation or moments of silence to honor the other person's feelings.

In this way, we were able to advance to the last topic encountered in the intervention: Joining forces. This topic is observed when a collaborative space is created. It describes team working experiences, where all members feel comfortable taking on responsibilities and acting within the group. Additionally, it explores solidarity and feelings of belonging to a community. Through recognition, a foundation was created to allow for the manifestation of autonomy, seen in the younger members leading discussions, deciding to propose topics, or taking on key roles within the group. The sense of belonging is observed in conversations where it is expressed how they are a stronger community thanks to the experiences they share or how the power lies in the unity of people.

All these topics highlight the importance of fostering a safe and validating space where UAMs can express their vulnerabilities without fear or shame. Recognizing and supporting this vulnerability through care, respect, and opportunities for esteem establishes the necessary conditions for minors to transition from isolation to a state of solidarity, empowerment, and belonging to a community. Similarly, Sapiro and Ward (2020) emphasize the importance of secure relationships as a source of resilience for UAMs and as spaces where minors can question and rebuild their identities.

### **The potential partnership between the university and CAS**

The potential partnership between the university and different reception centers in the city holds significant promise for the support and integration of UAMs. By leveraging the resources and expertise of both institutions, we can create a more comprehensive and effective support system for these vulnerable individuals. The minors shared stories that revealed their strong desire to create a better future for themselves; however, it was also clear that this was a communal process. Emphasis was placed on the fact that these struggles are not just for and about them. It was evident that much of the motivation stemmed from the wish to support their families financially and from the emotional support that their family and friends could offer them. The journeys taken are not solitary; instead, they are filled with individuals encountered along the way, with whom they formed connections to support each other and survive together. They shared stories about community strength and being part of a group that protected one another. Upon arriving in Italy, it seems that these young migrant Black men end up being marginalized from mainstream society, significantly hindering their process of adaptation and the creation of life goals and plans. It is necessary to utilize the existing institutions to create opportunities where time, knowledge, and activities can be shared, allowing them to recognize each other within the city they share.

It seems inevitable and necessary to mention the potential that exists in this project to create collaborative relationships between the university and the support centers. On the one hand, the university has the resources of skilled individuals full of ideas and motivation to generate positive changes in their environment. It also needs to provide learning experiences and opportunities for its students to gain practical experience. On the other hand, the support centers are established institutions capable of receiving and managing this support. They also require human resources that can contribute to offering more comprehensive, more humane, and higher quality services to their users. In today's world, where being an

immigrant often means being marginalized and adapting to a new country is just one of the many challenges that must be overcome, the university can provide a space to visualize and integrate these groups. It is necessary to create collaborative spaces where community and a sense of belonging can be generated and where the isolation that migrant individuals are exposed to can be countered. Interventions like this, where we can shed previous roles and labels, can begin to create the solidarity and humanization needed in migration processes.

### **Limitations and implications for the future**

Although this study provides significant insight into the potential of working with UAMs using CC and CPAR tools and an important framework for community formation based on recognition processes, especially concerning vulnerability, it is essential to mention some of the limitations encountered.

The first limitation was that we did not have complete support from the CAS operators. Since most sessions were in the morning, at 9:30 or 10 a.m., we needed the operators to help wake the children to arrive on time. Many times, some minors would arrive at the beginning, and the rest would join later; this disrupted the flow between the activities. Waking the children is not a straightforward process, and we must consider that the intervention took place during the summer months when the minors were resting from school. Similarly, there was a lack of communication with the CAS operators; sometimes, they did not know when we would come. This caused our sessions to clash with other activities at the CAS, such as Italian classes or the monthly allowance payment, which meant we had to reschedule some sessions.

The second limitation is related to the first. A constant rotation of participants led to a highly variable number of participants during the sessions. For example, one session could have 12 participants, while another only had 4. This caused some participants to be unable to follow the entire process and fully engage in the activities or discussions of subsequent sessions. Various efforts were made to motivate the youth to attend the sessions and provide summaries of past activities so everyone knew what we were doing. Similarly, it is vital for our project that participation was voluntary, not out of obligation or commitment.

Looking back, we consider an important limitation to be the lack of sufficient time to share with the boys before starting the project. We think that visiting the CAS casually to build a relationship with the children and for them to get to know us better before starting

the intervention could have helped with the initial lack of trust and could have facilitated deeper discussion of different topics.

It is also important to mention that our intervention was relatively short compared to other projects using the Critical Consciousness and Critical Participatory Action Research methodology. For example, in several studies that use CC in schools, projects are implemented and refined throughout the school year. Due to this same time limitation for the project, we arrived at the CAS with a proposal for the intervention. Although many activities were adapted throughout the sessions, the project was not built from the ground up with the group, as would be the case in a pure CPAR methodology activity.

Finally, it is essential to mention the social positionality of the researcher-participants as a possible limitation of our research. This is an example of the predominance of white researchers in psychology. Although my perspective as a mixed Latina helped a bit to bridge the gap with the European perspective of the other researcher-participants, we still lacked an understanding of the realities faced by this specific group of unaccompanied minors.

Although some of these limitations are inherent to qualitative research and our methodology, it is important to note them and make efforts to improve this type of project's creation, design, and implementation.

In considering future implications, it is crucial to recognize that implementing the political action component underlying CC is complex. This complexity arises from the need for collective actions that can impact larger social structures. More time to implement the project would allow for the planning of this component. Additionally, it is important to examine this type of research with other groups of UAMs in Italy, as they may have varying experiences during their journeys and face different challenges in their adaptation processes.

Moving forward with this project, we are working on creating an exhibition of the photovoice pictures inside the CAS. The objective would be to show what we worked on to the rest of the kids and personnel and hopefully motivate them to continue this type of intervention and engage the kids in future projects. We are also planning to present our project in a class led by Professor Sara Santilli and include some of the boys voluntarily so they can share their experiences. We want to make the university part of this project and hopefully motivate future partnerships.

## **Practical implications for practitioners**

This study highlights important information that different practitioners could implement. The intervention was created to bridge the gap between the operators and the minors of the CAS in terms of collaboration and providing the services that the kids were demanding. The approaches used collectively contribute to creating a psychosocial intervention framework that prioritizes recognition in the form of emotional care, establishing authentic relationships, and safe dialogue spaces. By fostering vulnerability as a source of connection and creating different pathways for the ability to take action, professionals can facilitate the transition from isolation to a sense of empowerment and belonging.

First, the work with UAMs should not only focus on providing the basic needs that this group demands but also go beyond and help them express their life experiences in different timeframes. This study provides the framework to create a safe space that fosters trust among community participants. These spaces are crucial for strengthening authentic relationships based on love and care. Regular group discussions, play and art activities, and exercises encouraging participation can help build the necessary trust and emotional openness.

Similarly, professionals can empower unaccompanied minors by fostering group and community participation, enhancing their social esteem and sense of belonging. Projects that allow them to showcase their talents, perspectives, and reflections to their communities provide an important platform for self-expression and positive recognition from others. These processes, in turn, reinforce self-esteem and promote the view of each minor as a valuable agent of change within their community.

Beyond this, by accepting and acknowledging the vulnerability expressed by minors, professionals can foster the solidarity and collective resilience of the group. As Judith Butler suggested, vulnerability can be an important means for human connection. Practitioners can cultivate a safe space where migration stories and struggles for recognition can be shared and acknowledged with empathy and understanding. In this way, a community support framework that mitigates isolation and strengthens connection can be reinforced.

Finally, it is essential to recognize that many unaccompanied minors face challenges in adapting to a new culture while trying to maintain parts of their identity. Professionals should encourage acknowledging various cultural backgrounds and attempt to integrate these elements into interventions. This can be done by opening spaces where they share their

life in their country of origin, listening to their perspectives on politics or European life, and comparing their previous and new countries. This approach affirms the minor's identity and provides an opportunity to redefine that identity to better adapt to the host country.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis explored the role of Critical participatory action research (CPAR) and Critical consciousness (CC) as a framework for a psychosocial intervention among unaccompanied minors in Italy. Starting with a general exploratory question, «What are the potentials of conducting critical participatory action research as a psycho-social intervention with unaccompanied minors in Italy?» each researcher-participant then focused on different topics observed during the intervention. Centering on the research question, «How did the expression of vulnerability impact the recognition of one another, leading to expressions of greater self-agency and belonging, and how did we arrive there?» this study provides insights into the complex intersection between vulnerability, recognition, and sense of belonging and self-agency in the context of unaccompanied minors in a CAS in Italy.

Based on Honneth's Theory of Recognition and Butler's concept of vulnerability, this research highlights that recognition in its three forms—love, respect, and esteem—is critical for marginalized individuals' psychosocial well-being and empowerment. Honneth's framework sheds light on how unaccompanied minors navigate their experiences of migration and settlement in Italy through relational dynamics that support or hinder their ability to trust, belong, and contribute meaningfully to their new environment. Butler's notion of vulnerability deepens this understanding, emphasizing that shared and validated vulnerability can build community solidarity and mutual recognition.

The findings from this study are organized into four key themes—Trial and Resistance, Touching Middle Ground, You Can See (Hold) My Heart, and Joining Forces—which illustrate a journey from initial mistrust and boundary-testing to collaborative participation, empowerment, and shared belonging. Vulnerability emerged as a central element in the development of trust and recognition. As participants began to share personal stories, they opened themselves up to more profound recognition by their peers, reinforcing a sense of value, belonging, and mutual support within the group. This process highlights the potential of CPAR and CC as a method that allows participants to co-construct safe spaces where they can express and reclaim their experiences and renegotiate their identities.

The practical implications of this research are significant for practitioners working with unaccompanied minors and migrants in general. By recognizing the importance of safe, trust-building environments, practitioners can foster relationships based on care, respect, and validation. This approach enables minors to express their vulnerabilities, develop self-agency, and engage meaningfully in their new communities. Moreover, by advocating for legal and social recognition and encouraging active community participation, practitioners can support the structural and relational aspects of integration, promoting psychological resilience and a greater sense of belonging.

In conclusion, this thesis emphasizes the transformative potential of vulnerability and recognition in supporting unaccompanied minors' well-being and social integration. By highlighting CPAR and CC as valuable approaches in migration and psychosocial interventions, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how empowerment, belonging, and community can be cultivated in marginalized and vulnerable populations. Moving forward, social policies and practices must continue to center the voices and needs of unaccompanied minors, fostering environments where their vulnerabilities are seen, held, and respected, thus enabling them to navigate their journeys with dignity and resilience.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Flyer posted in the CAS

#### English Format

**LET'S TALK ABOUT POWER**

What is happening?

- arts project (photography, movement)
- discussions around the topic Power

Why should I come?

- have fun together
- exchange ideas
- practice critical thinking
- create an exhibition

**WHEN & WHERE ?**

- 16.07 09:00 - 11:00
- 21.07 10:00 - 12:00
- 23.07 10:00 - 12:00
- 24.07 15:00 - 17:00
- 01.08 10:00 - 12:00
- 03.08 10:00 - 12:00

=> in the big garden

Emilia, Paula & Hanna

**WITH WHO?**

#### Italian Format

**PARLIAMOCI DI POTERE**

Cosa faremo?

- progetto artistico (fotografia, movimento)
- discussioni intorno al tema Potere

Perché dovrei venire?

- divertirsi insieme
- scambiare idee
- praticare un pensiero critico
- creare una mostra di arte

**QUANDO & DOVE ?**

- 16.07 09:00 - 11:00
- 21.07 10:00 - 12:00
- 23.07 10:00 - 12:00
- 24.07 15:00 - 17:00
- 01.08 10:00 - 12:00
- 03.08 10:00 - 12:00

=> nel giardino grande

Emilia, Paula & Hanna

**CON CHI?**

#### French Format

**PARLONS-NOUS DU POUVOIR**

On va faire quoi?

- projet artistique (photographie, mouvement)
- discussions autour du sujet Pouvoir

Pourquoi devrais-je venir?

- s'amuser ensemble
- échanger des idées
- pratiquer une pensée critique
- créer une exposition artistique

**OU & QUAND ?**

- 16.07 09:00 - 11:00
- 21.07 10:00 - 12:00
- 23.07 10:00 - 12:00
- 24.07 15:00 - 17:00
- 01.08 09:00 - 11:00
- 03.08 09:00 - 11:00

=> dans le grand jardin

Emilia, Paula & Hanna

**AVEC QUI?**

## Appendix B. Colonization Quiz

1. *How were your ancestors living before European colonization?*

2. *What is Colonization?*

→ when a country takes over another land, rules it, uses and harms its resources for its own profit<sup>8</sup>

3. *In what conference did the Western Powers divide Africa in between them?*

→ The Berlin conference (in 1884)

4. *What was one of the main ideologies that was meant to justify European colonization?*

→ Racism

5. *What were the main goods/resources that European colonizers were aiming for in Africa?*

→ Gold, Ivory, Diamonds, Rubber, Copper, Slaves

6. *What was the transatlantic slave trade?*

→ a centuries-long practice of forcibly transporting Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas, where they were sold as slaves

7. *What colonies did France have in Africa?*

→ Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Benin, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Central African Republic, Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Gabon, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco (as a protectorate), Madagascar and Djibouti

8. *Which colonies did Great Britain have in Africa?*

→ Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Somalia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Lesotho, eSwatini, Egypt, Sudan?

9. *What year did your countries gain official Independence?*

→ Mali (1960), Gambia (1965), Ivory Coast (1960), Cameroon (1960; French Part & 1961; British Part), Sierra Leone (1961), Guinea: (1958), Tunisia (1956)

10. *Are there places that are still under colonial rule and if yes, how are they called now?*

→ Overseas territories e.g.: Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion

11. *Who were some important fighters for Independence in your countries?*

→ some examples:

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<sup>8</sup> The indicated answers are of exemplary nature

- *Modibo Keita* (Mali): leader of the Sudanese Union-African Democratic Rally (US-RDA) , the first President after Independence
- *Sékou Touré* (Guinea): leader of the Democratic Party of Guinea (PDG), played a pivotal role in the country's decision to reject the French Community and opt for full independence, the first President after Independence
- *Ruben Um Nyobé* (Cameroon): key figure in the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), Um Nyobé faced significant challenges, including repression by colonial and post-colonial authorities, and he was eventually killed by French forces in 1958 (before independence)
- *Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara* (Gambia): leader of the People's Democratic Organisation for Independence (PDOI) and later the United Party, he became the first Prime Minister and later the first President of The Gambia
- *Félix Houphouët-Boigny* (Ivory Coast): founded the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) and played a significant role in negotiating with the French government for greater autonomy and eventual independence, the country's first President after Independence, leading the nation for over three decades
- *Siaka Stevens* (Sierra Leone): leader of the All People's Congress (APC), a party that played a central role in the push for self-governance, first Prime Minister and later its first President of independent Sierra Leone
- *Habib Bourguiba* (Tunisia): most prominent leader in Tunisia's struggle for independence from French colonial rule, leader of the Neo Destour (New Constitutional Liberal Party), first Prime Minister and later its first President after Independence &

*Salah Ben Youssef* (Tunisia): key figure in the nationalist movement alongside Bourguiba. He was a leader of the Tunisian nationalist party, and his efforts were instrumental in the push for independence

12. *In which ways do you feel your countries up until today are influenced by European colonialism?*

## Appendix C. Transcription Instructions

### Transcription instructions

1. Verbatim transcription in standard orthography
2. During transcription immediate translation into English; original language needs to be marked at the beginning of the transcribed paragraph
  - (IT) : Italian
  - (FR): French
  - (EN): English
  - (GE): German
3. Filler words such as “um” are not transcribed
4. [...] : Something was said in the background that couldn't be deciphered
5. In order to add context information, write them in [brackets]
6. “...”: a sentence was cut off from someone and then continued in a next sentence
7. “/”: Two parallel conversations were going on, to distinguish who said what to who
8. Transcript does not need to be anonymised, nevertheless any excerpts presented to an outer audience (e.g. in the thesis) are anonymised by coarsening or aggregating information, e.g. “from Douala” becomes “from [city in the Cameroon]”