
Reflecting on Mental Health Resources for Unaccompanied Migrant Youth from the Perspective of the Social-Ecological Model of Resilience

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Abstract

Unaccompanied migrant youth fleeing without their parents are exposed to mental health risks. Social ecological systems play a central role in promoting resilience in unaccompanied migrant youth. While navigating and negotiating resources is a key element of a working social-ecological model of resilience, the systems supporting the unaccompanied migrant youth are under-resourced. In this paper, we reflect on ecosystems of mental health resources from the perspective of the social-ecological model of resilience and how this plays out in the context of unaccompanied migrant youth.

Author Keywords

Mental Health; Social-Ecological Model; Refugee Context

CCS Concepts

•Human-centered computing → Field studies;

Introduction

In this position paper, we draw on ongoing empirical work in a three-year long project in Austria, where we investigate how technology could support promoting resilience in unaccompanied migrant youth. This research project is motivated by the fact that unaccompanied migrant youth who flee their home country without their parents face enormous challenges in their new home country. This

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places them at high risk for mental health problems [2].

As part of this research project, we conducted three different studies: We interviewed 5 unaccompanied migrant youths as well as 18 professional and volunteer support workers spread across social work, educational programs, mental health promotion, and mentoring programs. We conducted three co-design workshops in which volunteers acting as mentors and a social worker developed together a guidebook for newcomer mentors¹. We also conducted two series of three co-design workshops, in which unaccompanied migrant youths tested and developed concepts for mental health apps.

In [4], we suggested the social-ecological model of resilience as a framework to map out the design space for how technology could promote mental health in unaccompanied migrant youth by supporting the supporters. In this model, three different types of social systems are responsible for providing support. In a well-working social-ecological model of resilience, people who are part of the social-ecological systems need to be able to navigate and negotiate resources easily and thus need and contribute to a well-functioning ecosystem of mental health resources. In the scope of this paper, we share our initial reflections on the interplay between the social-ecological systems and mental health resources from the perspective of the social-ecological model of resilience [5, 6, 7].

Our context

In recent years, many children and youth have been forced to flee their home countries without their parents. The term “unaccompanied minors” describes *“all foreign nationals or stateless persons below the age of 18, who either arrive in the EU unaccompanied by a responsible*

adult or who are left unaccompanied after their arrival” [3, p. 7]. Unaccompanied migrant youth have to deal with many challenges such as lack of a familial system at a crucial development period, arriving in a country of asylum that is new to them, and overcoming cultural differences [2]. Therefore, they face a high risk of mental illness [2] and could benefit from mental health resources.

The social-ecological model of resilience

In our research [4], the social-ecological model provided a useful lens through which to account for the challenges and needs of the everyday support structure of unaccompanied migrant youth. We identified that different professional and volunteer support workers play an important role in providing care. The volunteers acting as mentors build a crucial trust relationship to the youth. The social-ecological model of resilience helped to make sense of our findings, specify the the different interactions, attributes, and interplay between systems which ideally are involved in providing care, and map out the design space by drawing on design solutions from other contexts with similar challenges.

The role of mental health resources

Resources play a key role in the social-ecological model of resilience. The social-ecological model of resilience shifts the focus from the individual to the environment and the interrelations there and argues that the environment has to facilitate resilience promotion. A key element of a facilitative environment is that the individual, namely the supporters and the supported young person, can easily navigate and access resources, and that the resources are meaningful [5]. According to [6], *“resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that build and sustain their well-being, and their individual and*

¹ These two studies will be presented as a full paper at CHI [4].

collective capacity to negotiate for these resources” [6, p. 17]. Thus, the capacity to navigate and negotiate resources are key to a well-functioning resilience promotion.

The role of the social-ecological systems

In the social-ecological model of resilience, different systems around the individual, namely the unaccompanied migrant youth, have the main responsibility to make resources available in culturally meaningful ways: “While individual agency is a component of one’s ability to navigate to resources, it remains the role of families, communities, and governments to make those resources available in culturally meaningful ways that reflect the preferences of those who need them.” [6, p. 17]. In [4], we suggest design directions how technology could contribute to promote resilience from a social-ecological perspective, namely by 1. facilitating navigating resources; 2. facilitating applying resources; 3. coordinating between various care providers for the same young person; 4. strengthening the exchange between peers and experts; 5. sustaining the individual’s capacity and wellbeing. While 1. and 2. are connected directly to resources, 3., 4. and 5. could support indirectly 1. and 2. and thus support navigating and negotiating resources.

The systems in the social-ecological model of resilience are based on the systems identified by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of development for children [1]. Four of these systems involve people, namely the bio, micro, exo, meso-systems. While the bio-system focuses on the individual, namely the young person, the micro, exo, and meso-systems focus on the different supporters. The macro- and chrono-systems focus on cultural and time dimension and influence all other systems [7].

The micro-systems (Figure 1, A) directly impact the young

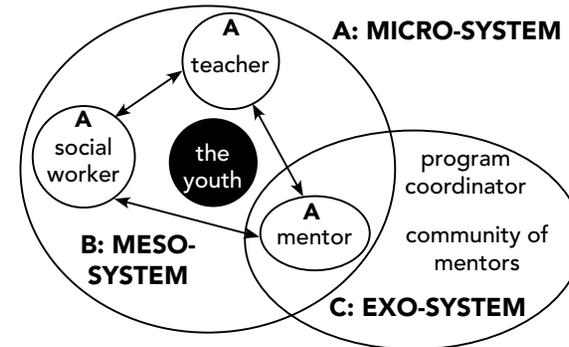


Figure 1: Social-ecological model of resilience with the different support systems.

person [7]. These are in our context the school, residential home and mentorship. These systems are not only resources for the young person’s development but also directly influence the young person’s usage and access to digital and non-digital resources. For instance, one young person at our workshops explained that because of his teacher he started noting down appointments to better remember them. The facilitation of the workshop showed as well the key role of the mentors to enable the participation: The mentors helped the mentees to find and install the mental health apps and asked the workshop facilitator to contact them in case of any misunderstandings.

Meso-system (Figure 1, B) describes the interactions between micro-systems, e.g., the exchange between teachers and mentors [7]. Technology could support a better exchange between the teachers and the mentor. This might help as well identifying a resource that supports the young person with learning difficulties, which then leads to a better mental health outcome.

The exo-system (Figure 1, C) links to social systems that indirectly influence the quality of meso- and micro-systemic interactions [7]. The exchange with other mentors is a resource for the mentor to deal with emotional challenges and learn about initiatives supporting unaccompanied migrant youths. The guidebook, which mentors developed for newcomer mentors during our workshops, could be a resource to facilitate this exchange.

Contribution to the workshop

Our work provides insights into one specific context where accessible and meaningful mental health resources are needed. In addition, our research introduces a social-ecological way of thinking about the interplay between systems which provide and need different mental health resources. As part of the workshop, we are interested in learning how similar systems in other contexts provide and need ecosystems of mental health resources, learn from their challenges and solutions and discuss if and how the social-ecological model of resilience could help us to design well-functioning ecosystems of mental health resources.

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