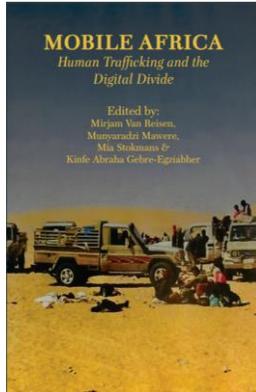


# Journeys of Trust and Hope: Unaccompanied Minors from Eritrea in Ethiopia and the Netherlands

*Rick Schoenmaeckers, Taha Al-Qasim & Carlotta Zanzottera*

## Chapter in: Mobile Africa: Human Trafficking and the Digital Divide

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## Chapter 15

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# Journeys of Trust and Hope: Unaccompanied Minors from Eritrea in Ethiopia and the Netherlands

*Rick Schoenmaeckers, Taba Al-Qasim & Carlotta Zanzottera*

### Introduction

The Netherlands has received a large number of unaccompanied minors from Eritrea, with 3,017 arriving between 2014 and 2017 (Immigratie-en Naturalisatiedienst, 2016; 2017). They travel alone or in groups, either not accompanied by parents or guardians or separated from them. The journeys they have travelled are complex and full of danger. Many arrive traumatised because of what they have been through in Eritrea or during their travels (Sterckx, Fessehazion, & Teklemariam, 2018). When they arrive in the Netherlands, a new journey starts full of bureaucracy and legal procedures, which lead to stress and uncertainty among the young refugees.

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*This study looked at unaccompanied Eritrean refugee minors and their relationships with their caregivers in Ethiopia and the Netherlands. It found that there is misunderstanding and mistrust on both sides of the relationship, which affects the way the refugee minors receive and process information. The authors conclude that discussion of the issues that affect trust would improve the relationship between caregivers and minors. Understanding would provide a strong basis for forging better connections between caregivers and minors and improve the life satisfaction of the minors.*

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This chapter looks at the way in which these minors settle in the Netherlands after their dangerous journeys through the Horn of Africa. Differences are investigated in terms of personal relationships and trust at their first place of arrival after leaving Eritrea, the refugee

camps in Ethiopia, and after settlement in the Netherlands. In Ethiopia, the guardianship for unaccompanied refugee minors is with the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) and the Norwegian Refugee Council. In the Netherlands, they fall under the authority of the Nidos Foundation (Schoenmaeckers, 2018; Nidos, 2018).

Eritrean refugees have particular difficulties when settling in the Netherlands. They often feel misunderstood and not taken seriously by institutions, and they can have difficulties participating in Dutch society and finding a job. This is partly to do with the fact that the majority have never received much education. They can read and write in their own language, but usually not much more than that. Apart from those who studied in bigger cities at one of the nine colleges in Eritrea, most of the arrivals in the Netherlands come from remote rural areas (Sterckx, Fessehazion, & Teklemariam, 2018).

Research among Eritrean unaccompanied minors in the Netherlands (Kulu-Glasgow, Noyon, Smit, & Shagiwal, 2018) shows similar findings. Additionally, Eritrean minors often have problems with trust and feel that they are not taken seriously by adults. Schoenmaeckers (2018) highlighted that most minors who leave Eritrea come from small border villages. Their education stops at the age of 17, when they are redirected to Sawa Military Training. As well as school, many have worked as shepherds and helped their mothers in the household. Practical or professional skills, other than working on the land and looking after cattle, are seldom acquired.

Eritreans have lived under constant surveillance and control by the state. In Eritrea, almost no-one can work or move freely. Family-members receive fines when their children escape the country and intimidation by government officials is a common method of control. This results in a culture of fear and secrecy, affecting young Eritreans and forcing them to leave the country (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). Most of the unaccompanied minors from Eritrea did not inform their parents at the time they left Eritrea, and only got in touch with them once they were outside the country (Chapter 6, *Journeys of Youth in*

*Digital Africa: Pulled by Connectivity*, by Rick Schoenmaeckers). Van Reisen, Al-Qasim, Zanzottera and Schoenmaeckers (2018) investigated the situation of the minors in the care-situation coordinated by Nidos. This research concluded that Eritrean minors suffer from the psychological burden resulting from the particularly harsh journeys they undertook and the ongoing uncertainty and hardships faced by their relatives in Eritrea. More particularly, the research investigated how the minors relate to the carers in their new home country. The research revealed serious trust deficits, which negatively affect the ability of the carers to guide the minors – who are often desperately in need of such guidance.

The research presented here builds on the investigation carried out by Van Reisen *et al.* (2018) in the Netherlands, but also studies the lack of trust observed in Eritrean unaccompanied minors, in part because of their journeys to the Netherlands. In order to do so, the situation of minors in the refugee camp of first arrival – Hitsats, in northern Ethiopia – was studied during a three-month period of field work. The findings of the field work in Hitsats were analysed alongside the findings of the research carried out in the Netherlands.

The design of this research is not just a comparative design in multiple settings. Many unaccompanied minors in the Netherlands have travelled through Hitsats camp, or the other three camps in northern Ethiopia. This research, therefore, allows the investigation of how issues of trust emerge and develop over time, as the minors travel through these different locations, towards the final destination (in this case the Netherlands). The study was carried out as ethnographic field research, making use of observations-in-presence, interviews and focus group discussions.

### **Feelings as information**

The chapter is based on the theoretical framework of Schwarz (2010), the feelings-as-information theory. This theory outlines how emotions, moods, metacognitive experiences, and bodily sensations influence one's feelings and judgements. Consequently, feelings are

considered an important way of processing information. The way information is received and processed, differs from person to person, as well as at different times and in different situations. If someone is in a good mood when receiving bad news, the news is processed differently than if they are in a bad mood. “The theory [of feelings-as-information] postulates that people attend to their feelings as a source of information, with different types of feelings, providing different types of information” (Schwarz, 2010, p. 8). Raghunathan and Pham (1999) outline how feelings interfere with one’s ability to process information. If people are sad or anxious, they might process information less systematically when making judgements or decisions. This is also reflected in people’s motivation to achieve tasks: sad or anxious people tend to choose emotionally rewarding options instead of the best option to achieve a certain result. Such decisions are made in order to ‘feel good’ at the specific moment, not necessarily to improve the long-term situation.

Jonas-Simpson (2001) highlighted how being misunderstood can lead to feelings of isolation and being disconnected – whereas being understood, can lead to feeling connected. Jonas-Simpson used psychology literature for her analysis. She outlined that the feeling of being understood is linked to receiving empathy. Receiving empathy makes one feel valued, cared for and accepted, and dissolves feelings of alienation. Consequently, Condon (2010) described how feeling misunderstood can lead to a feeling of being betrayed, disappointed, lonely, out of place, disregarded and judged. These feelings affect the way information is processed and consequently harm trust.

Unaccompanied minors from Eritrea have difficulty trusting adults, including the people who are supposed to take care of them. In Nidos, the minors are cared for by adults who work as social workers and guardians and who, subsequently, develop difficulties trusting the minors as well (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2018). Such a relationship can have a negative effect on the minor’s integration and participation in the host society, which automatically has a negative effect on their wellbeing.

Trust is defined in this research as a: “positive feeling about or evaluation of the intentions or behaviour of another, and conceptualize[d] ...as a discursively created emotion and practice which is based on the relations between the ‘trustor’ and the ‘trustee’” (Lyytinen, 2017, p. 489). Trust is, therefore, the basis for harmonious relationships. The ability of refugee children to trust adults to take care of them is often shaken by past experiences, such as experiences in their country of origin and during their migration journey, as a result of which a psychosocial crisis can develop, the symptoms of which can include a feeling of mistrust, self-doubt and inferiority (Lustig *et al.*, 2004).

Accordingly, this research looks at the role of feelings in the development of trust in the personal relationships of unaccompanied minors from Eritrea in Ethiopia and the Netherlands. It seeks to answer the following research question: *To what extent can the concept of feelings-as-information help explain trust (or lack of it) in the personal relationships of Eritrean unaccompanied minors on their migration trajectories and with their caregivers in the Netherlands?*

## **Context**

In Ethiopia, refugees from Eritrea arrive daily in the northern province of Tigray. The Eritrean refugee population in Tigray was 72,772 on 31 December 2018. Of this number, 10,540 were unaccompanied minors (UNHCR, 2018). They are provided with shelter and basic resources in four refugee camps: Mai Ayni, Shimelba, Adi Harush and Hitsats. Most unaccompanied minors stay in Hitsats. The children fall under the responsibility of ARRA; in Hitsats the Norwegian Refugee Council takes responsibility for the care of the children. They are housed in different care arrangements including foster, kinship and community care. Most minors live in community care. In this arrangement, they live together with 10 peers in houses of approximately 10 square metres in size. Social workers are employed by the Norwegian Refugee Council; they are refugees themselves and work with the children (Schoenmaeckers, 2018).

Most minors want to reach Europe or the United States via the legal registration and resettlement procedure of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR). However, registration for resettlement in Hitsats is for refugees aged 18 years and over. This means that the minors have to wait, sometimes many years, to register. After being registered, people have to wait an undefined period of time before being resettled – if they have a strong case. Minors who have resided in the camp for many years before turning 18-years old do not generally have a strong case, which means that their future involves many years of uncertainty. Additionally, family reunification processes outside Ethiopia are complex. Procedures are time consuming and minors can have difficulty getting in direct contact with the responsible officials from UNHCR. They also lack the assets to communicate easily and directly with family members abroad, which complicates the process further (Schoenmaeckers, 2018).

Between January 2014 and July 2017, 10 to 15% of all asylum applications in the Netherlands were from Eritreans, a total of 17,000 people. Although immigration and asylum policies are becoming more and more restrictive, most refugees from Eritrea are granted asylum in a relatively short period of time (Rath, 2009; Sterckx *et al.*, 2018). Whereas the majority of the Eritrean refugees arriving in the Netherlands are single young men, a considerable number are unaccompanied minors. Many of them become embroiled in a long and frustrating process of family reunification. Most of the time family reunification does not succeed due to missing documents. Such documents are absent because they were never issued in the small rural villages where the minors are from, or because were lost during their journey (Sterckx *et al.*, 2018; see Chapter 16, *Refugees' Right to Family Unity in Belgium and the Netherlands: 'Life is Nothing without Family'*, by Mirjam Van Reisen, Eva Berends, Lucie Delecolle, Jakob Hagenberg, Marco Paron Trivellato & Naomi Stocker).

In the Netherlands, unaccompanied refugee minors fall under the legal responsibility of Nidos. In 2017, 4,469 minors received guardianship from Nidos, of which 1,436 were unaccompanied

minors from Eritrea (Nidos, 2018). Nidos assigns a mentor and a guardian to each minor and provides accommodation. The different care arrangements in the Netherlands include foster and kinship care, as well as group care facilities. In the smaller units, children live in groups of 6 to 10 and receive care from their mentor 24-hours a day. In other living units, minors live more independently with 16 or 17 others. There is also campus housing, where approximately 80 to 100 minors live together.

## **Methodology**

The field work for this study was conducted in Ethiopia (by Rick Schoenmaeckers) and the Netherlands (by Taha Al-Qasim and Carlotta Zanzottera) from January to August 2017. In Ethiopia, the main part of the research was conducted in Hitsats Eritrean Refugee Camp, but data was also collected in Shimelba Eritrean Refugee Camp, Endabagoona Screening and Reception Centre and in the city of Shire. In the Netherlands, the field work was carried out in six refugee centres for unaccompanied minors, located in the centre, south, south-west and south-east of the Netherlands.

In Hitsats, 16 minors were interviewed. Focus group discussions and workshops were held with the same group of participants in two age groups: 12 to 14 and 15 to 17 years old. Most of the minors who participated in the study came from southern rural regions of Eritrea and belonged to the Christian Tigrinya ethnic group. Seven interviews were conducted with ARRA camp coordinating officers, UNHCR officials and officers from the Norwegian Refugee Council. In addition, informal interviews were conducted with officials of livelihood and relief providing non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Apart from one of the research coordinators who speaks the languages of the minors (Arabic and Tigrinya), the other researchers made use of translators during the field work. Particular precautions were taken to vouch for the integrity of the interpreters, who were asked to also assist in a cultural interpretation of the questions to build a conducive environment for the research. For this, the translators received training.

In the Netherlands, the first three respondents were selected together with Nidos. The rest were introduced by the participants using snowballing technique. In total, 25 minors, 11 guardians, 7 mentors, and 2 regional managers of Nidos were interviewed. Most of the minors were 17-years old and were Christian Tigrinyans. Most of them came from rural southern and central parts of Eritrea. A few of them belonged to the Muslim Tigre ethnic group, from western rural parts of Eritrea. Only two boys came from the cities of Keren and Asmara.

The data consists of transcripts of interviews and notes of observations, workshops and focus group discussions. The data was analysed with the use of the qualitative analysis program Atlas.Ti. During the first phase of the analysis, coding sessions helped to create structure in the data. Thereafter, thematic coding sessions made it possible to find related and coherent issues. Relational concept trees and a structured database were used to analyse the data in a comparative way between the different areas (Bryman, 2012).

### **Ethical considerations**

Parental consent is key when talking about ethical research on children (Morrow & Richards, 1996, p. 90). The issue in this research was that the parents of the participants were absent. Therefore, the legal guardians were carefully informed and their consent obtained. In Hitsats, the research was carried out with the approval of ARRA and the Norwegian Refugee Council and, in the Netherlands, with the approval of Nidos. Secondly, informed consent was carefully obtained from all participants. In this way, the autonomy and safety of the individual was respected and it was ensured that the participants were fully aware of what they were participating in (Ellis, Kia-Keating, Yusuf, Lincoln, & Nur, 2007). In addition, unaccompanied Eritrean minors are often traumatised; hence, they are a vulnerable group that should be approached carefully and ethically conscious (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). Therefore, the interpreters and translators who assisted during the research received

training on how to be ethically responsible while conducting research on unaccompanied minors.

### **Ethiopia: Trust in the refugee camps**

When minors from Eritrea decide to cross the border into Ethiopia, they enter a trajectory in which they encounter new experiences and difficulties. As soon as they are collected by the Ethiopian military after crossing the border, they are brought to the Endabagoona Screening and Reception Centre. During a visit by one of the researchers to Endabagoona, there was a new group of approximately 80 refugees, many young children, but also adults and the elderly. Some had arrived after days of dangerous travel to the border and others after a walk of just a few hours without any difficulties. All people sat in the sand on the ground and were looking around expressing fear and uncertainty. After Endabagoona, most unaccompanied minors are redirected to Hitsats.

In Hitsats they encounter new structures and people from different organisations. The people who the minors feel most confident with are the social workers. The social workers are mainly young refugees themselves and hold positions such as team leader and community leader for the unaccompanied minors. In these positions, they monitor and motivate the minors to go to school and intervene when there are arguments between minors. They are mentor figures to whom the minors can go whenever they encounter a problem or have a question. They are employed by the Norwegian Refugee Council and are paid a small salary for the work they do. The comfortable relationship between the minors and the social workers highlights the importance of equal relationships in which hierarchical differences are less dominant. The social workers live with the minors in their communities and spend much of their time with them. This, together with the fact that they are refugees themselves, makes them feel like 'one of them'. Consequently, this feeling creates a relationship in which trust comes naturally.

Power differences between the refugees and staff – other than social workers – in the camp are evidenced by clear demarcations. In Hitsats, this demarcation is physical, in the form of an unpaved road that splits the humanitarian organisations (in enclosed compounds) from the refugee dwellings. At the end of the road is Hitsats town, which is only accessible to refugees before 9 pm. When camp residents were invited by the researchers into the compounds of the NGOs, they denied the invitation, preferring to wait outside on ‘their’ side of the road. It could be observed that the refugees did not feel comfortable going into the NGO compounds, evidenced by their reluctance to enter.

Another example that emphasised the distance between the camp residents and the personnel of the humanitarian organisations is that during the field work in the camp, humanitarian staff barely walked around inside the camp, nor were they seen spending time with the refugees inside their communities. The personnel of these organisations, usually entered the camp in vehicles that took them to specific places inside the camp where they had planned activities or meetings.

Furthermore, camp policies include regulations on the times that the staff of humanitarian organisations can and cannot enter the camp. After sunset, the personnel of the organisations are not allowed to enter the camp because of possible danger, but the camp is full of young children and vulnerable people who are supposedly not susceptible to these dangers. These rules give the impression that ‘danger’ means something different for people who work for an NGO than for people who live inside the refugee camp, and that refugees are valued differently.

In Hitsats, the first interview that was conducted was with R. This interview took place in the company of the case manager from the Norwegian Refugee Council, who is in charge of unaccompanied minor coordination. The interview was difficult and R’s distrust was noticeable in her attitude and behaviour. Answers were whispering and were mainly ‘yes’, ‘no’ or socially-desirable responses. R did not

dare to speak freely about difficulties in the camp or topics like education. The case manager from the Norwegian Refugee Council recognised the behaviour and admitted that more information would not be provided by the minors if the interviews were conducted in his presence.

A gap in communication existed between NGOs and the refugees in Hitsats. For the young refugees, there is a clear division between officials of humanitarian organisations and the residents of Hitsats. Although officials did their utmost to make the communication as inclusive and equal as possible, the gap was palpable. This sense of discomfort with NGOs was not directly acknowledged by any of the respondents; however, certain thoughts about UNHCR were expressed. During his interview, M made his opinion about UNHCR clear:

RS: *Is there anything you miss here in the camp, anything that you would like to have?*

M: *I don't have any relatives in the camp, and also no parents, so I would like to register for a resettlement case, a UNHCR case. That is what I really want.*

RS: *Didn't you do that yet?*

M: *No.*

RS: *Why not?*

M: *They are not serious about the under-aged children.*

RS: *How do you know that?*

M: *Because other children, friends of mine, they have already been registered for two years and they did not get any response yet.*

RS: *But won't you try it yourself then?*

M: *Yes... eh... no.*

RS: *How do you see your near future? What will you do in the next couple of years?*

M: *I am only looking forward to my resettlement registration at the UNHCR.*

RS: *Are you going to wait until you are 18 then?*

M: *Yes.*

(M., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 5 July 2017)

M's confidence in UNHCR was limited. Certain ideas about UNHCR were common among the minors, who had little or no confidence in their procedures. Additionally, information about procedures or other issues was mainly spread by the refugees among themselves. Whenever minors were asked where they got their information from, they always said: "from people" or "from friends". Most information about the camp was also spread via backchannels. This is confirmed by Kulu-Glasgow *et al.* (2018), who reported that these informal sources of information shape the expectations and perceptions of minors of life in Europe. In addition, the minors received information from ARRA who drive through the camp with speakers on their vehicles to make important camp-related announcements.

The respondents also said that they received information from social workers. Personal issues or more intimate concerns were discussed with the social workers. The minors were generally positive about social workers and stated that they trust them more than the other officials who work in the camp. In the interview with Y, the following came forward:

*Y: I decided not to go to Libya and stay here. I will wait for a legal process.*

*RS: Are you already registered for a legal process?*

*Y: No.*

*RS: Why not?*

*Y: Firstly, I don't know where the UNHCR office is. Secondly, I don't know how I have to speak with them – how to speak, how to listen to them, I just don't know.*

*RS: But what is your plan than in order to end up in Germany eventually?*

*Y: I have decided to go to the team leader, and together we will go to the UNHCR office to register my case.*

*RS: Did you do that already, or are you planning to do that?*

*Y: I am planning to first discuss this with my team leader.*

*(Y., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 7 July 2017)*

Y is 12 years old, this means that he has to wait another 6 years in Hitsats before he can apply for resettlement. When he is 18, the probability that Y will have a strong case and be eligible for

resettlement is small, which reveals the hopelessness of the situation for minors.

Whereas confidence in UNHCR was low, whenever minors had relatives outside Africa, they assumed that eventually reunification would be realised. This was the case with A, he had been in Ethiopia for almost one and a half years and was waiting for reunification with his father in Germany:

RS: *You told me that you want to go to Germany, do you know how to get there?*

A: *My father, I am waiting for my father who will send a message to start the process. He will arrange it with UNHCR.*

RS: *So for now you will wait until you can go to Germany via the reunification process?*

A: *Yes.*

RS: *Do you know how long this will take?*

A: *One year.*

(A., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 5 July 2017)

This timespan was also estimated by many other interviewees, especially those waiting for reunification. Minors – as well as adults – do not have a clear idea of how long processes will take, because this information is not provided to them. Therefore, people guess how long it will take, based on the time it took the people around them to have their applications processed.

Regarding this issue, the data demonstrated that unaccompanied minors are too often left without an explanation about how legal procedures work. Therefore, they live in limbo, basing their understanding of the legal procedures and processes on guess work and asking peers or other refugees who are living in the same limbo for answers. These strategies for obtaining information are highly influenced by the way the minors feel – which determines the way in which information is perceived and processed (Schwarz, 2010).

The relative stability that minors had at home in their places of origin changes substantially when they arrive in the refugee camps. Back in

Eritrea, most of the children lived with their mothers and siblings. Their fathers were absent in their daily lives because they were serving in the National Service or had already left Eritrea. Back in Eritrea, the minors went to school, helped in the household and worked as shepherds or searched for gold. In Hitsats, they were usually unable to continue their education. They lived together with their peers and parental authority was absent. As only primary education was available in the camp at the time of the research, only the youngest children could go to school. However, there was no obligation to do so, hence, they could also decide not to go. If not attending school, the minors went to church, played with their friends or stayed in their houses.

In this setting, dependency and reliance on peers was evident. This reliance became clear in various situations. For instance, minors described how they supported and helped each other. The strong interdependence between the minors was expressed in several interviews. During one interview, M described how the young girls support each other:

RS: *Do you have any very bad experiences that maybe left a mark on your life, something very stressful?*

M: *I have a medical problem.*

RS: *Ok...*

M: *Whenever I am asleep, suddenly I wake up and walk outside. When this happens, my friends go outside and try to catch me and bring me back. When I am outside in the night a lot of stress is triggered.*

RS: *How has this left a mark on your life? Does it feel like a life-threatening situation for you? The sleepwalking I mean.*

M: *Yes. Sometimes I want to commit suicide.*

RS: *Does anybody know about this?*

M: *Yes, they know.*

RS: *Do you have psychological help?*

M: *No, but I use traditional water – like holy water. There is this religious place, traditional religious place, where they use this water, like a medicine. I am using this now for seven months.*

RS: *Is that helping you? Do you know the reason why you are so sad?*

M: *I think that... when I walk alone, someone is following me, like Satan; Satan is in me.*

RS: *Are you followed by Satan?*

M: *Yes.*

RS: *What does he do?*

M: *At midnight he makes me walk outside.*

RS: *Was this also in Eritrea or just here?*

M: *It started here.*

(M., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 6 July 2017)

The way M is dealing with her problem shows resilience. Stories like M's are not unique; other minors explained that friends of theirs were possessed by evil spirits such as *Buda* or *Zar*<sup>1</sup> and described how they help each other. One boy explained in detail how they tried to get a bad spirit out of their friend's system by using methods they had learnt back in their villages:

*When Buda attacks you, your friends have to grab you and ask you "who is the Buda inside you?". If you don't say who it is, they will punish you until you say it. We do it like this: We put water in your nose until you tell us, if necessary, we empty a whole jerry can in your nose! As soon as we know Buda's name, we will ask him to get out and leave.* (Focus group discussion, Schoenmaeckers with 4 respondents, face-to-face, Hitsats, 2 August 2017)

The method outlined above emphasises the need the minors feel to fight evil spirits and the effort they put into helping each other in such situations. Trust and loyalty between peers and friends was evident. As such, resilience, and reliance on each other carried the young refugees through difficult situations. Nevertheless, in the Ethiopian refugee camps, the unaccompanied minors from Eritrea live a life of uncertainty and hardship. The lack of basic resources (Schoenmaeckers, 2018) makes it even more difficult and is pushing

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<sup>1</sup> Buda and Zar are evil spirits that can take control of people. It is argued by Baye Berihun Asfaw that Zar is "haunting and controlling people and making them their own property" (Asfaw, 2015, p. 83). The Buda spirit is transmissible: "The evil spirit lives in people's the families. If a person is possessed by Buda, it takes seven years until one becomes capable of transmitting the evil spirit" (Asfaw, 2015, p. 84).

even the youngest refugees out of these situations. The next step many take is the dangerous and difficult journey to Sudan, Libya and Europe.

### **The Netherlands: Dealing with a new hierarchy**

In the refugee centres in the Netherlands the minors come across different hierarchical structures than in Hitsats camp. Minors in the Netherlands have to deal with many different practitioners: mentors, guardians, cultural mediators, translators, and lawyers, etc. This results in confusion in terms of roles and a distance between the minors and the (long chain of) caregivers. From the minors' perspective, the child-care system in the Netherlands is a fixed and structured hierarchy.

In addition, long and bureaucratic processes are encountered in the Netherlands. These processes bring with them difficulties for the minors in the new environment. The need of caregivers to fill in forms and documents in order to share a common guideline concerning guardianship is perceived as an imposition of the system on the minors. They reported feeling like 'objects of scrutiny', instead of subjects in charge of their own lives. Overly technical procedures, such as document finding and the filling out of forms, are experienced as alienating. Feeling like an object of scrutiny negatively affects these children. Consequently, such negative feelings might alter the information the minors receive from and about their caregivers, leading to a biased perspective (Schwarz, 2010).

Furthermore, the workload of guardians and mentors is experienced as too heavy, which makes spending quality time with their pupils an issue. The average caseload of one guardian can be up to 20 children. In the Netherlands, minors and caregivers reported that spending quality time and being around helps in building trust (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2018).

When the minors arrive in the Netherlands, the social context is completely new. For Dutch caregivers, the social context of the

unaccompanied minors from Eritrea is also new and relatively unknown. This dynamic brings with it misunderstandings, suspicions and, as a result, mistrust on both sides. The inability to understand and acknowledge each other's social context is explained in the words of the following two minors:

*If you question them [caregivers] about family reunification they say: bring the documents. But to get these documents [...] they don't know how we can, they don't have a clue about the problem. Our country's situation is extremely unique. They don't understand.* (S.A., interview with Al-Qasim, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 18 May 2017)

*We cannot talk to our parents, how are we supposed to get our documents here to start the procedures of family reunification? People here don't understand us. I don't think our mentors and guardians have a broad picture of our situation.* (SI, interview with Al-Qasim, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 19 May 2017)

These quotes show that the minors feel that they have to continually repeat the fact that it is impossible to obtain the documents required for the family reunification process, which leads to frustration and a feeling of being misunderstood. Additionally, it reveals the lack of familiarity of caregivers with the situation in Eritrea. However, these documents are required by law and caregivers can do little about this. The minors blame this requirement on the caregivers, which shows confusion in terms of their role and a lack of awareness of Dutch legal procedures.

The lack of information provided to the minors leads to 'one-way communication'. Minors are asked questions by the caregivers, but do not feel that they answer their questions. This leads to them feeling like an object of scrutiny:

*I tell you an instance: if you tell something to one mentor, she either writes it or tells it to her colleagues, even small things. In the complex where I live there is one mentor who keeps quiet and she is trustworthy. The others, if you tell them please do not tell, they would go straight and tell it: 'Bum'. But we know them one by one, who lies who keeps secrets and who is trustworthy. We study them like they study us. We*

*know them very well.* (B., interview with Al-Qasim, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 12 June 2017)

The minors said that they often feel that the caregivers give fixed answers. The following quote is an example:

*There is one bad thing about this country. They all operate at the same level. They share the information and they all know everything about us, they sit in a meeting and they talk about you only. And they agree with certain issues and on what to reply to you or what not to reply.* (B., interview with Al-Qasim, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 12 June 2017)

B and his peers assume that the information that they give is used against them. They feel that there is no room to manoeuvre in a system where caregivers share information with each other and give fixed answers. Additionally, unaccompanied minors from Eritrea bring their prior experiences of being intimidated by security officials in Eritrea to their experiences in the Netherlands, which generates fear and mistrust of Dutch officials. The result of the feeling of being scrutinised is secrecy on the part of the minors.

The guardians pointed out that trust is all about good communication. This begins with speaking the same language as well as cultural awareness. This was confirmed by the young respondents. The following quotes from two guardians clarified this:

*Sometimes we observe behaviour that we don't understand, also because of the environment they come from, Eritrea, is so different from the Netherlands, where I come from. So, what helps me is considering their behaviour and asking myself: why does she-he behave like that? For instance, I have felt like unaccompanied minors from Eritrea were rude while talking to me, later someone explains me that in Tigrinya there is a lack of words, therefore it is normal to express yourself like: "Do this! Do that!" This helps me all the time, I realise that this has nothing to do with me, but it is just their way of thinking or behaving.* (Guardian, interview with Al-Qasim, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 27 July 2017)

*Eating together or talking small talk in Tigrinya for instance 'Kemey alleka' – meaning how are you doing? 'Kemey haderka' – How was your night (did you sleep well) usually helps with getting close to each other.* (Guardian, interview with Al-Qasim, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 11 May 2017)

Cultural awareness is of the utmost importance in building trust (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2018). Caregivers gave examples of the causal link between trust and cultural awareness. They pointed out that there is a need for “[...] injecting culture in every bit of our thinking from the top down” (Guardian, interview with Al-Qasim, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 11 May 2017) and that avoiding labelling Eritreans as mistrusting, negotiating and ‘followers’ is crucial in building trust.

### **Resilience and aspirations: Strategic behaviour versus cooperation**

Kulu-Glasgow *et al.* (2018) point out that the majority of the unaccompanied minors envision a future in the Netherlands – no matter what the outcome of their asylum application is. This was also recognised by the researchers in this research; the minors did their best to integrate, participate and support each other where possible. Observations in the Netherlands, as well as in Ethiopia, showed how they support and care for each other in difficult situations. The minors help each other materially by lending each other money, but also psychologically during mourning rituals, by counselling each other and contributing financially in time of crisis when, for example, someone’s relative is the victim of human trafficking and ransom has to be paid. The respondents expressed hope and concern for their own and each other’s futures. One minor commented that:

*After a job interview, I realised that I have goals. I said to myself that I had to speak the language; that I cannot do without the language. Therefore, I took my schooling very seriously. I wanted to learn and be somebody.* (A., interview with Al-Qasim, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 11 May 2017)

The aspiration to take advantage of education opportunities to ensure success in the future was expressed by most minors. They were

concerned to be able to speak Dutch and English and had a sense of the need to prepare for future work and wellbeing in the host society.

Some emphasised the need to keep some private issues strategically to themselves. Such behaviour may be a legacy of their experiences of the political and social situation in Eritrea, where choosing secrecy and silence is considered a safer strategy than talking and self-revelation (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2018). However, the minors justified their approach as a strategy to deal with a system in which they feel scrutinised. For instance, one said:

*When it comes to holding secrets, mentors and guardians do not keep them [laughs]. In fact, they are right, it is their job. They must write reports. Personally, I don't talk or share some of my secrets with them.* (F., interview with Al-Qasim, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 9 August 2017)

Furthermore, the one-way communication that was experienced by the minors led them to study and observe mentors and guardians themselves. This behaviour was the minors' way to get the information they wanted. A guardian confirmed that minors did not want to share much with them:

*Sometimes their families are directly involved in the decisions they make here. Unaccompanied minors do not want to tell us the reasons for that, they don't want to talk about their families. So, when we say let's call the family together, they don't want to do it.* (M., interview, with Al-Qasim, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 25 May 2017)

Whereas some minors decided to not share much with their caregivers, others created narratives in order to find ways around the system. Such narratives were not always lies in order to obtain what the minors wanted, but were narratives created by family members or themselves that they had started to believe over time. One guardian explained:

*First, those are not lies. Sometimes, children have been sent away with a particular story which, as time passes, ends up being real in their mind even though the truth is*

*different. I give you an example: Once, something bad happened to a boy. In one hour, we got phone calls from everywhere, Italy, Austria, [...] asking what happened to the guy. When the boy came with us [Nidos], he stated: 'I don't have family, I am alone, help me'. When a boy claims that he doesn't have a family, I doubt it as I know it might not be true. (W., interview with Al-Qasim, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 4 May 2017)*

Such stories demonstrate that the minors deploy a range of coping mechanism aimed at preserving a degree of dignity and wellbeing. When the objectives of officials, humanitarian organisations and caregivers corresponded with those of the minors, cooperation from both sides was the chosen strategy. When the objectives of the officials and caregivers did not correspond with those of the minors, other strategies were observed. The imposition of the objectives of the officials of humanitarian organisations and caregivers on the minors resulted in the use of strategies to find cracks in the system. Such behaviour included secrecy and self-crafted narratives.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this research was to comparatively investigate the role of feelings in the development of trust in the personal relationships of unaccompanied minors from Eritrea in Ethiopia and the Netherlands by using the concept of feelings-as-information. It is important to remember that “There is nothing natural or automatic about trust. Trust grows and develops in every individual and is shaped by the environment in which a person interacts with other people” (Eisenhower & Blacher, 2006). Mutual understanding leads to connections between people (Jonas-Simpson, 2001). If people understand each other, feelings towards the other improve. Positive feelings lead to better judgements of life satisfaction (Schwarz, 2010).

The relationship with social workers in Hitsats (Ethiopia) were harmonious and based on trust. These social workers lived in the same situations as the minors, as they were refugees themselves. Mistrust appeared between unaccompanied minors and officials of humanitarian organisations in Hitsats, especially if information was

unclear and the objectives of what the care workers were doing was unclear to them. Information was spread among the minors themselves and they generally did not understand the procedures of the refugee agencies. They wanted to reach out to higher officials, but they did not know how and what they should tell them.

In the Netherlands, the minors, guardians and mentors were not all refugees themselves with the same rights and duties. The relationships of unaccompanied minors with Dutch caretakers in the Netherlands were more complex and mistrust between them was evident. Minors are not familiar with the roles of the caregivers in the Netherlands. Lack of understanding between them leads to feelings of frustration, being judged and disappointment – on both sides (Condon, 2010).

The relationship between the officials, guardians and mentors in The Netherlands was structured through a clear division in roles. The large number of officials and carers who wanted something from the minors seems to be the opposite from what was observed in Ethiopia, where attention from high officials was hard to get. This high degree of attention from officials in the Netherlands triggered distrust and a feeling among unaccompanied minors of being objects of scrutiny.

Distrust between officials of humanitarian organisations and minors, as well as between caregivers and the minors, was analysed through the theoretical lens of Schwarz (2010). Schwarz emphasises that the way information is received and processed is partly dependent on how someone feels. Hence, feelings are an important source of information. Negative feelings, caused by misunderstanding between different parties, was the main issue that emerged during the interviews with the minors and caregivers. Jonas-Simpson (2001) and Condon (2010) highlight that feeling misunderstood can lead to feelings of disappointment, betrayal or being judged. Feelings of being different and misunderstood were recognised among the minors, as well as among the caregivers. The way this information was subsequently processed led to mistrust among the minors and adults. This problem was greater in The Netherlands, then in Hitsats

(Ethiopia), where the cultural similarities were greater and where other refugees were involved as carers of unaccompanied minors. The resemblance of their situation helped to build trust amongst them.

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