

## BEYOND VICTIMHOOD AND STIGMATIZATION

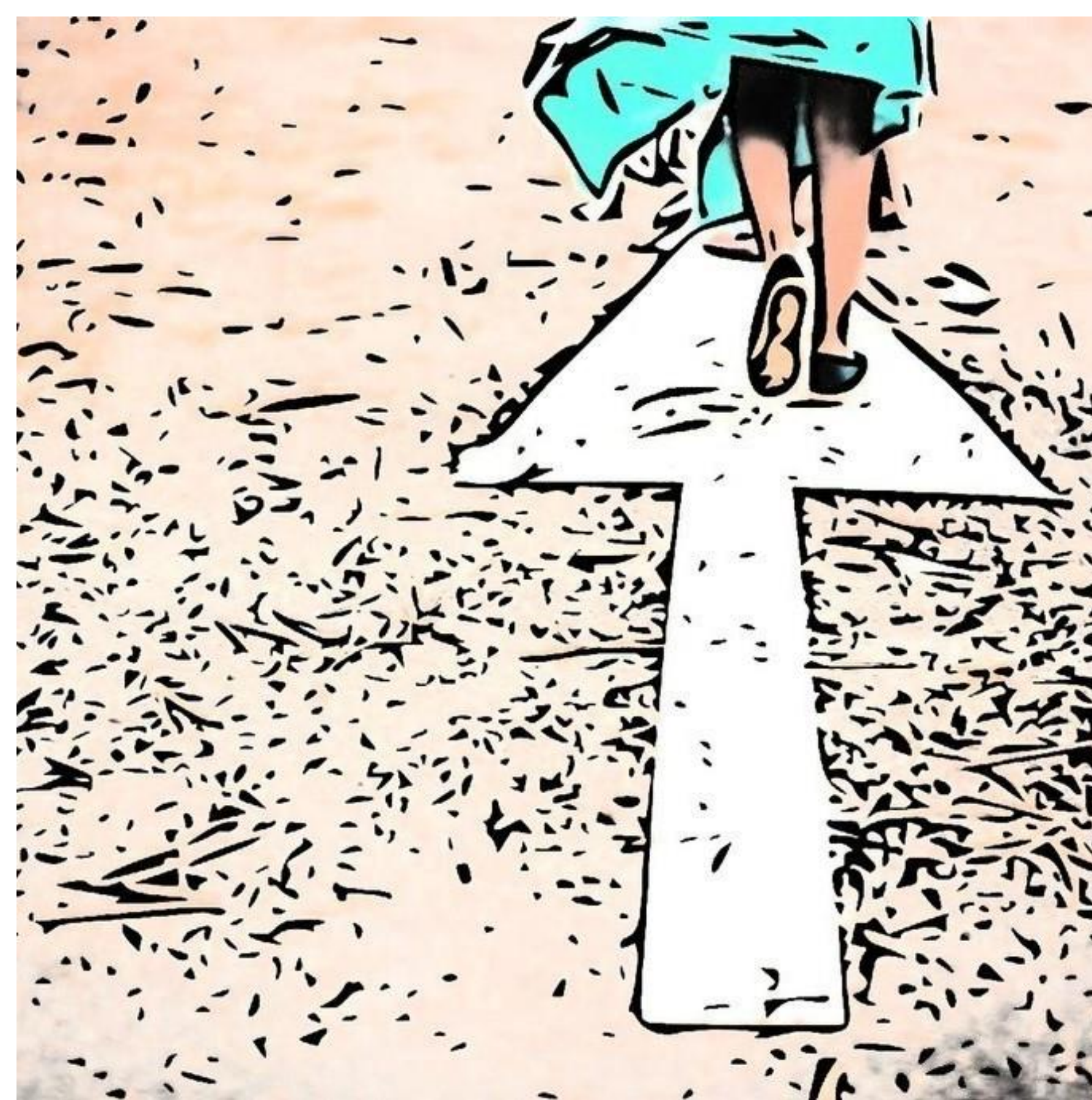
Trauma, Ruptured Memories and Agency  
in the Context of Global MigrationCoping Strategies of Unaccompanied Refugee  
Minors Shortly After Arrival in Belgium

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**Abstract and theoretical approach**

Unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) are a group in an especially vulnerable situation with heightened psychological suffering due to both traumatic life events and current daily stressors. Although it is important to recognize the stressful situations that URMs are confronting, it is as important to highlight the enormous resilience and agency that researchers have observed in this population. One concept that offers a window into the elements determining the psychological health of URMs is the concept of coping. Research has shown that certain **coping strategies** such as avoidance are especially relevant in a context that is dominantly perceived as uncertain and in which certain basic needs such as safety and stability are not (yet) met. Such an environment can have a significant impact on the processing of psychological trauma, as feeling safe is an essential precondition for healing. Conventional categorizations might thus denigrate and pathologize avoiding, distracting or silencing, even when these are actually meaningful coping strategies.

Next, it is important to recognize that models of coping with and healing from trauma that focus on individual psychological processes alone do not capture the outstanding significance of the **social context**, particularly in an intercultural context where mainstream perspectives may not hold true. We therefore conceptualize social support as an essential coping resource that these strategies tap into. Further, **daily stressors** (including material and social stressors) have been shown to have a great impact on URMs' mental health, but it is not clear how different coping strategies relate to specific stressors. The aim of this study is to shed light on the interrelations between coping strategies, coping resources, and targeted stressors for URMs shortly after arrival in a high-income country, and to make recommendations that are relevant for both practitioners and policy-makers.

**Research questions**

1. What coping strategies do URMs employ in the moments just after arrival in a high-income country?
2. What coping resources do these strategies rely on?
3. What stressors do they address?

**Methods**

79 URMs from various backgrounds were recruited in two first-phase reception centers in Belgium. Next to self-report questionnaires to assess stressful life events and current daily stressors, we conducted semi-structured interviews, if required with cultural mediators. Thematic analysis was applied to the participants' accounts to identify different coping strategies, to analyze what social support networks are involved in the process and what kind of stressors they target.

**Empirical findings**

Our analysis resulted in four clusters of coping strategies: Avoidance and distraction, continuity and coherence, reluctance, and positive appraisal and acceptance.

Avoidance and distraction strategies were often linked to social support from ethnic peers and targeted mostly stress resulting from stressful life events. Strategies related to continuity and coherence, such as cultural maintenance, typically involved the ethnic community, including family at home, and were used to cope with cultural loss, normalize traumatic experiences, and mitigate feelings of uncertainty. A certain reluctance to engage with others was apparent when participants relied on themselves or trusted others only for material support, and helped the participants to cope with their dynamic and ever-changing life situation. Finally, participants often coped by putting things in perspective or accepting things they could not change, often relying on their religious community or beliefs. Notably, some participants developed a strong sense of altruism and social justice, turning their aversive experiences into an asset, further highlighting the potential of coping resources located in the social sphere and within the (ethnic) community.

We conclude that practitioners and policy-makers need to support URMs in their coping efforts by facilitating contact with peers and family. Interventions should be tied in as much as possible with their existing coping strategies, including avoidance and distraction. Material and informational support from formal caregivers can be used as a gateway to rapprochement and trustful relationships.

**Motivation, Input Thoughts and Questions**

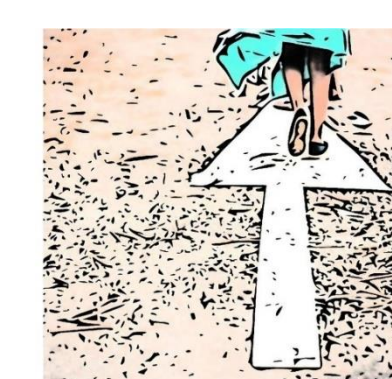
- Emic research has shown that avoidance is not integral to many cultural concepts of distress
- In a context marked by disruptions, continuity has been described as a building block of resilience
- Despite its significance for the mental health of migrants and refugees, the concept of daily stressors is still underdeveloped. Where do you draw the line to trauma?

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**Bio** Following his graduation in Clinical Psychology in 2015, Malte Behrendt started working in an emergency shelter for unaccompanied refugee minors in Berlin. After an internship with Zentrum Überleben, an NGO specialized in the treatment of victims of torture, he is now working as a PhD student in the ERC-funded research project "Childmove" at Ghent University.



**CHILDMOVE  
PROJECT**