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Exploring the psychological needs of cross-border unaccompanied minors in Johannesburg: how cross-border unaccompanied minors are challenging psychosocial programmes

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Abstract:

Background:

This research investigates the psychosocial needs of cross-border unaccompanied minors (UAMs) within urban Johannesburg, a city that attracts nearly half of all the cross-border migrant population in South Africa (Landau and Gindrey, 2008). The focus of the research is dual; firstly, it explores what the prime psychosocial needs of UAMs are by eliciting them from the UAMs themselves via participatory research workshops. South Africa, by law, has an obligation to all UAMs to provide for them. By ascertaining these needs, this study reveals discrepancies between existing psychosocial programmes designed and provided by the government or service providers and the needs of the UAM. Secondly, the research examines how UAMs are trying to satisfy their psychosocial needs. Identifying the psychosocial needs of UAMs and their coping mechanisms gives us a better understanding of the nature of the issues UAMs face, as well as their subjective perception of and priority they place on those issues. This can consequently contribute (a) to providing constructive suggestions on designing psychosocial programmes by governmental, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and non-profit organisations (NPOs) and (b) valuable input to further research on livelihood-seeking UAMs, a group that is currently under-represented in cross-border UAM studies, unlike asylum seeking or refugee UAMs.

Aims:

The aim of this study is to understand the psychosocial needs of UAMs and how they are meeting those needs in Johannesburg. This will provide insights on the nature of the psychosocial needs of UAMs that will ultimately be helpful both to government agencies as well as NGOs and NPOs responsible for programme planning, legislation, and execution of policies regarding cross-border UAMs. Finally, the study aims to draw attention to livelihood-seeking UAMs and to encourage further research on this particular group of UAMs. Therefore my research question is: what are the psychosocial needs of cross-border UAMs in Johannesburg?

Methods:

In this study, a qualitative research approach is used with the aim of uncovering the psychosocial needs of cross-border UAMs. This was done by using participatory action research and a visual methodology. The data was elicited via two participatory workshops, the first with 36 cross-border minors participants and the second with 12 cross-border UAM participants. This was followed by a series of group discussions after the workshops. Afterwards, a comparison between the participants' visual inputs with their narratives and responses allowed me to extrapolate their psychosocial needs and ways in which they meet those needs. Adding to the study, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with service providers from various organisations, both non-governmental and governmental. Finally, the data was compiled from both the cross-border UAMs and service providers to answer the research question and objectives.

Conclusion:

This research identifies and discusses the following psychosocial needs of cross-border UAMs: **family, a care-giver, documentation, fitting-in with their South African peers,** security, schooling, better life quality (economic and social advancement), counselling, and playing. The four themes in bold text represent psychosocial needs, which continue to be unmet or unfulfilled by service providers current responses. Although the basic (ontological) needs of cross-border UAMs seem to be met (i.e., food, housing, clothing), psychosocial needs - those needed for emotional well-being - are undermined because service providers do not see them as fundamental as basic needs.

One conclusion from my study is that NGOs can better cater to UAMs' psychosocial needs due to their flexible infrastructure that can accommodate personalisation and prompt redesigning of programmes offered, in contradistinction to the recalcitrant governmental infrastructure. Currently service providers, such as governmental departments, NGOs and NPOs use the law (such as the Children's Act (2008)), regulations or psychosocial programmes to aid cross-border UAMs, but these laws and programmes are manufactured for either homogenous groups or very specific groups such as refugees and asylum seekers. However, there are persisting gaps in the services available. These gaps are due to the varied nature of psychosocial needs that each 'child' has to meet, which is also contingent on their own background and personality. Under the Children's Act (2008), minors are categorised as a homogeneous group and therefore individual needs are overlooked. Organisations both governmental and non-governmental have tried to incorporate child friendly practices, although in most of the interviews it was mentioned that policy, such as the Children's Act (2008), is not necessarily 'child' or 'family' friendly.

Overall this research indicates that NGOs and NPOs are well-equipped to cater to the psychosocial needs of UAMs, such as school, family reunification and basic needs. Certain psychosocial needs, however, such as 'fitting-in', are still unmet. In these cases, UAMs resort to catering to their own needs (lke living on the street in self-appointed families), relying on service providers for emotional support and/or basic needs.

Keywords: Unaccompanied Minors (UAMs), Children, Johannesburg, Psychosocial, Separated Children, Migrant Children, Migration in South Africa