Article

Comparing Expectations of Social Workers in Norwegian Trauma-Informed Care Institutions: Perspectives from Social Work Leadership and Young Unaccompanied Refugees

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Abstract

Research: Balancing the expectations of social work leadership and minor, unaccompanied refugees is a key part of the social worker's professional practice, in the context of Norwegian residential care institutions that have trauma-informed care at the centre of their work. Although there is some understanding in international literature about the expectations of social work leadership and the expectations that unaccompanied minors have of social workers, these expectations have typically been considered in isolation. The nature of any dilemma for social workers arising from conflict between these two sets of expectations is not yet fully understood. This study aims to understand these dilemmas, and we explicitly compare the expectations of social workers held by social work leadership with those held by unaccompanied minors, finding similarities, but also disagreements, which may cause tension for social workers in their practice with the minors in the institution.

Methodology: In an explorative, qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 young male Afghan unaccompanied refugees and seven social work leaders in two Norwegian municipalities. A qualitative thematic analysis was followed by a two-stage cross-comparison of the expectations held by social work leaders and unaccompanied minors to identify agreements and disagreements between expectations. These expectations were interpreted through Bath's trauma-informed care pillars, a well-established theoretical model for social work practice in Norway.

Findings: Both groups value empathy, respect, support, extra care, trust and a safe environment. However, different expectations about the flexibility of boundaries, and about emotional closeness, create dilemmas for social workers. By understanding the tensions highlighted in this article, leadership will be better equipped to identify and address the conflicting situations that social workers face due to mismatches between the expectations of leadership and those of young refugees. This study bridges the gap between the theoretical social work concept of trauma-informed care and real-world stakeholder expectations, thus supporting social workers' awareness on potential dilemmas arising from differing stakeholder expectations.

Keywords: Social work with unaccompanied refugees, trauma-informed care institution, social work leadership expectations, unaccompanied refugee expectations, dilemma in social work, comparison of stakeholder expectations

Introduction

Young, unaccompanied refugees in Norway

Young unaccompanied refugees (YURs) are children and young people under 18 years of age who came without parents or guardians to seek asylum in another country, and have received a residence permit (UDI, 2025). Although young, unaccompanied refugees are a resilient group (Sleijpen, Mooren & Kleber, 2017), they are also defined as an extremely vulnerable group among refugees (Kohli, 2007) because of past experiences, and the fact that many may suffer post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after war, social distress at home, their escape and their journey to Europe (Nordanger, Mjaaland & Lie, 2006; Oppedal, Jensen & Seglem, 2008; Oppedal, Seglem & Jensen, 2009). Their potential vulnerability continues after their arrival because of future uncertainty and major life-changes in the host country (Kohli, 2007). Front-line social workers working with these young refugees must understand the unique challenges that these young people face during their healing and integration, compared to other vulnerable minors.

In 2024, 420 YURs came to Norway as asylum seekers, the majority being young boys from Syria (246), Afghanistan (71), Eritrea (46), Ukraine (12) and Sudan (5) (UDI, 2025). The initial reception system for unaccompanied minors is divided into two in Norway, depending on the child's age: Unaccompanied minors of 15 years and older receive accommodation in suitable asylum reception centres, which the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) is responsible for. Children under the age of 15 are offered a place at a care centre for minors managed by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth, and Family Affairs (Bufetat). Once unaccompanied minors are granted refugee status and residence permits, Norwegian municipalities organize their support (IMDI, 2025). Although the 356 municipalities vary in settlement methods, most YURs are placed in residential care institutions, living in smaller units under the care of front-line social workers. These care institutions have trauma-informed care at the centre of their work (Amble & Dahl-Johansen, 2016; Bath, 2008, 2015; Bræin, Andersen & Simonsen, 2017).

Social workers expected to respond to stakeholder expectations

International research suggests that front-line social workers working in these care institutions at times face contradictory demands from different stakeholders, and have to balance how they address these needs and expectations in their practice. This is a key part of their professional practice (Healy, 2014; Ylvisaker & Rugkåsa, 2021).

Stakeholder expectations of social workers are defined as *'the norms, preferences, and beliefs'* (Biddle, 1986), describing how stakeholders think that social workers should work and behave in professional and social contexts (Borho, Hovland & Hean, 2023). These are aspirational statements and descriptions of how stakeholders believe social workers should act to support their care receivers in the best way possible (Borho et al., 2023), and in the best interests of the minor (UHCHR, article 3).

Social work leadership and young, unaccompanied refugees (YURs) are two key stakeholder groups whose expectations need to be managed by front-line social workers in residential care institutions for YURs. We anticipate that these social workers are likely to try to respond to the expectations of both their social work leadership and their YURs (Biddle, 1986; Goffman, 1956; Turner, 2002). They may also want to bridge gaps between these expectations through negotiation and compromise, motivated to please each stakeholder group as much as possible (Goffman, 1956) within institutional rules and personal abilities. At the same time, social workers are at risk of experiencing 'being caught between a rock and a hard place', a situation described as cross-pressure (Ylvisaker & Rugkåsa, 2021), a dilemma (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 375), or a wicked situation (Lönngren & van Poeck, 2021; Rittel & Webber, 1973), when the expectations of their different stakeholders diverge significantly and make it hard for them to find an acceptable compromise.

Social work leadership expectations in trauma-informed care institutions

In the context of Norwegians trauma-informed care (TIC) institutions, social work leaders expect social workers to work in accordance with Bath's (2008, 2015) TIC-

pillars (safety, connection and coping) (Amble & Dahl-Johansen, 2016; Bath, 2008, 2015; Bræin et al., 2017). This has been the dominant social work concept in Norwegian care institutions since 2014 (Amble & Dahl-Johansen, 2016; Bræin et al., 2017; Lorentzen, 2020; Steinkopf, Nordanger, Stige & Milde, 2022):

Bath's first pillar 'safety' underlines the importance of providing physical security, meeting basic needs (Maslow, 1943), and creating an inclusive environment free from cultural discrimination, thereby allowing YURs to feel safe and accepted (Bath, 2015). This first pillar of 'safety' is linked to the second pillar of 'connections', because feeling safe can help YURs heal from inner pain (Anglin, 2002), build trust and re-connect to people (Bath, 2015).

Bath's second pillar stresses re-building 'connections' that are vital for YURs who have lost relationships due to displacement (Bath, 2015). Reconnecting with peers, trustworthy adults and the community, helps in healing, fostering a sense of normality (Anglin, 2002; Oppedal et al., 2008) and belonging (Bath, 2015; Herz & Lalander, 2017), which can be crucial factors for integration and social inclusion of YURs.

Trusting relationships with caring adults are essential for connection, understanding and co-regulation during crises, supporting in coping with challenges and pain expression (Bath, 2015). Bath's third pillar 'coping' involves helping YURs develop healthy strategies to manage negative emotions and avoid destructive behaviours (Bath, 2015).

Young refugee expectations of social workers

YURs living in the residential care institution are also, besides social work leaders, major stakeholders that social workers are expected to respond to, and their expectations need to be clarified, so that social workers can take account of them. YURs' expectations are likely to be influenced by their personal circumstances and past experiences with other social workers (Borho et al., 2023). Vulnerable young people in Scandinavian Child Care commonly expect social workers to act as responsible and predictable adults, providing support and meeting them with a positive, encouraging attitude adjusted to their needs and situations, and they should

also demonstrate trust and actively listen (Paulsen, Aune, Melting, Stormyr & Berg, 2017). These expectations were shared by young, unaccompanied refugees and asylum-seeking children (Borho et al. 2023; Herz & Lalander, 2017; Skårdalsmo & Harnischfeger, 2017). However, YURs particularly expect support in learning a new language, adapting to the local culture (Borho et al., 2023; Oppedal et al., 2009), overcoming loneliness (Herz & Lalander, 2017), and building new social networks while maintaining old ones to achieve social inclusion (Borho et al., 2023).

Aim of the study

While social work leadership is influenced by established concepts regarding social work expectations, YURs are often free from these conceptual frameworks. As a result, YURs may have additional or different expectations that social workers need to know about and address. Social workers must navigate both sets of expectations, but it is unclear how well these expectations align or conflict, which can impact social workers' practice (Leviton & Melichar, 2016).

Although there is some understanding in international literature about the expectations of social work leadership and the expectations that YURs have of social workers, these expectations have typically been considered in isolation. The nature of any dilemma for social workers arising from conflicts between these two sets of expectations is not fully understood, particularly in the context of residential care institutions for YURs.

Therefore, we explicitly compare the expectations of social workers held by social work leadership with those held by YURs. These stakeholder expectations of social workers are situated in trauma-informed care institutions (Bath, 2008, 2015), so we have interpreted them through the lens of this model to bridge the gap between the theoretical model and real-world expectations that social workers need to manage in this specific context.

Method and research design

This study is part of a broader research project examining the expectations of social workers held by young, unaccompanied refugees (Borho et al., 2023), social work

leadership and the social workers themselves. Fieldwork and interviews took place in 2019.

Recruitment of young, unaccompanied refugee interviewees

The interviewees for this study were young unaccompanied boys from Afghanistan living in residential care institutions, who came as minor, unaccompanied asylum-seekers to Norway more than two years previously. They had obtained refugee status and residence permits, and were therefore hoping for a more stable and permanent stay in Norway. For the study, they were recruited from two neighbouring municipalities, each selected because of its size and capacity to host unaccompanied minors. Recruitment was supported by two gatekeepers: One female, experienced social worker and leader, with the other gatekeeper being a 23-year-old male Afghan refugee who had himself come to Norway as an unaccompanied, minor asylum-seeker, and had lived in an institution. The sampling relied on a snowballing sampling method (Bryman, 2008) because of the difficulty in accessing these participants. It resulted in a relatively homogeneous group in terms of gender, age, religion and culture (male, Muslim, Afghans of Pashto and Dari origin). However, this reflects the reality of the demographic situation regarding the nationality and gender of young refugees settled in Norway at the time (UDI, 2025).

Eleven Afghan male (n=11) refugees between the age of 16-23 were recruited. All interviewees had experienced living in residential care institutions, and had rich experiences of encounters with Norwegian social workers for at least 2 years. They met social workers for the first time in Norway and so became familiar with the ‘profession’ of being a social worker. This profession is not yet acknowledged in their home country (Papell, 2015).

Recruitment of social work leadership

All the social work leaders recruited to the study were employed at a central government office overseeing Child Care institutions for unaccompanied children. The sample (n=7) ranged from age 30 to 50 years, all with professional backgrounds in social work or psychology. Five leaders were women, two were men, with all having at least two years of leadership experience in these Child Care

institutions. Five of the leaders were directly responsible for one of the institutions and the social workers employed there. The other two leaders were primarily responsible for the development of professional competence in the organization, and for professional support and guidance for social workers.

Qualitative Interviews

To explore the expectations of the leadership and the young refugees, a qualitative (Bryman, 2008) and generic methodological approach (Caelli, Ray & Mill, 2003) was chosen and operationalized through in-depth interviews and a semi-structured interview guide (Bryman, 2008) with each stakeholder group by the first author. The interviews lasted 30-90 minutes, and were held in Norwegian, including those with the young refugees. Because of the young people's good Norwegian language capabilities, the researcher and participants agreed that no translator was needed. However, the interviewer endeavoured to use a simplified yet clear language to facilitate the interview with the adolescents. Even though a simplified language could lead to a loss of some details, these face-to-face interviews without a translator were seen as a better way to create a trusting atmosphere within a short amount of time, which was especially important for the interviews with these vulnerable adolescents (Borho et al., 2023). With all the interviewees' consent, the interviews were audio recorded and supplemented with field notes, in addition to being anonymized and transcribed.

Both stakeholder groups held explicit and implicit expectations of the social workers. However, the two groups differed in their positional power based on their role in the institution, socio-economic status, cultural background, life phase and life experiences, and their agenda in the institution.

For the young refugees, the participants were asked about their negative and positive experiences and encounters with social workers, daily routines and needs for support (Borho et al., 2023). This was based on the premise that expectations that people hold can be found in their description of their experiences (Biddle, 1986), and on the young people's manner of expressing themselves (Borho et al., 2023).

In contrast, the first author could pose direct questions to social work leaders regarding their expectations of social workers working in the residential units. The interview language was more formal and professional.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Norwegian Data Protection Services for Research (SIKT, former NSD) (nr: 570373), with the research process following the principal ethical guidelines of scientific research (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). To help protect the participants' anonymity in a small community, no specific information was provided in the quotations, and names were changed.

To protect the young interviewees from re-traumatization, the nature of questions was constrained to the adolescents' expectations of social workers alone, as required by SIKT. This meant that possibly interesting follow-up questions could not always be asked.

The first author, experienced in social work and in interviewing in multicultural settings, kept a reflective diary of interactions with the young male Afghan interviewees. In meetings with social work leaders, the power balance was less of an issue than with the young interviewees.

Analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis of interviews

The extensive qualitative data from the anonymized interview transcripts were initially managed using NVivo. Subsequently, the data were analysed through a thematic analysis as recommended by Braun and Clark (2006), and coded using methods outlined by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). This process was facilitated by analysis tables (Granheim & Lundman, 2014) and mind maps to understand patterns of codes and the relationships between the codes (Braun & Clark, 2006). The analysis of the transcripts was conducted in the original Norwegian language, but quotations used to substantiate the themes developed have been translated from Norwegian to English. The identity, label and interpretations of codes and themes were explored by

the authors in face-to-face meetings, and cross-checked to achieve the confirmability of the findings.

Cross-comparison of leadership and young refugees' expectations

We then conducted a two-stage cross-comparison to find (mis)alignments in expectations from both groups as follows: Firstly, the YURs' interviews were re-analysed using a template analysis (Brooks & King, 2014). For the template, the first author developed a coding framework based on themes we found in the thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2002) of the social work leaders' interviews. This framework guided the reanalysis of the YURs' interview data. Borrowing principles from the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and using analysis tables as tools, this comparison specifically explored where YURs' perspectives supported, extended or contradicted the expectations described by the social work leaders. Secondly, the leaders' interviews were also re-analysed using a template analysis (Brooks & King, 2014) informed by the themes arising from the previous thematic analysis of the YURs' interviews (Borho et al., 2023) as the basis for the coding framework. Again, we explored in a comparison whether these leader-themes supported, extended or contradicted the expectations described by the YURs.

By using both the leadership and then the YURs' themes as an underlying template, respectively, we ensured that all the areas of potential agreement and disagreement in expectations had been identified.

Results

Besides providing insights into the nature of the different expectations, the analytical comparison of expectations revealed several themes, in which leadership and YURs either agreed, disagreed or added to each other's expectations.

Expectations that leadership and YURs agreed upon:

Theme 1: Meeting YURs with an empathic and respectful mindset

Both leadership and YURs emphasized the importance of social workers' mindset when interacting with YURs. Leadership highlighted that YURs often carry emotional and mental baggage, including potential trauma and possible chronic distrust in

adults from their past life experiences, escape and journey to Europe. Leadership expected social workers to be aware of these possible struggles, not only in the past of the young people, but also in their present transition into a new life and society. Social workers should show understanding for these life circumstances, avoid judging young people, and approach them with empathy, kindness, patience and tolerance.

> ‘We cannot be these robots (..) we have to be human in that meeting with the young people.’ (Siv, social work leader)

This aligns with YURs' expectations that social workers meet them with a positive, friendly and patient attitude. YURs also acknowledged that it can be challenging for social workers to fully understand their experiences and situation.

Both leadership and YURs used the term ‘respectful’ to describe an expected behaviour of social workers, encompassing various aspects of their interactions with YURs.

> ‘Respect [means to me] we can talk to each other; we look at each other with a positive attitude(..).’ (Abas, unaccompanied minor)

YURs described the way they expect social workers to communicate and collaborate with them, in a positive, kind and polite way. Whereas leadership also added that social workers need a genuine interest in their work and an awareness of their position of power as elements of a respectful attitude and behaviour towards YURs.

> ‘Respect is also about equality, being interested, being appreciative.’ (Emma, social work leader)

Furthermore, leadership stressed that being respectful also means not pushing YURs to share their past experiences until they feel ready to do so, even though this may complicate social workers’ jobs and prolong the process because of limited background information.

> ‘Be interested and meet the young person where they are. But do not be intrusive then. Find the right balance between being a good caregiver, creating safety and trust.’ (Ingrid, social work leader)

Leadership stressed that pressuring YURs to open up increases the risk of re-traumatization. Instead, social workers were expected to create trust and a feeling of safety through empathetic and respectful behaviour, enabling YURs to eventually confide in them. YURs confirmed that they appreciated not being pressured to share information about their past.

For being respectful, also in crisis situations, leadership expected social workers to have self-awareness and self-control of their own feelings and reactions, and to avoid an abuse of power.

> ‘Respect also applies to power, how to exercise your role as a social worker without abusing the power you have.’ (Emma, social work leader)

> If you don't know yourself, your triggers and your feelings, it can be very difficult to meet this group of young people [because working with them] provokes emotions in us. Then it can be very challenging if you are not self-aware. (Siv, social work leader)

This was especially important for YURs in conflict situations, as they did not like to be shouted at by angry social workers.

Theme 2: Being supportive and provide the ‘little extra’

There was a clear understanding between social work leaders and YURs that one of the main tasks of social workers was to provide practical support with daily routines, such as helping with housekeeping, preparing food, helping with homework, doctors’ appointments, shopping for clothes and food. In addition, some YURs expected to derive favours from social workers. The frequency or necessity of these was often the subject of discussions between YURs and carers. Furthermore, both leadership and YURs expected social workers to support the young people in social inclusion and integration by teaching about the language, and local culture, and facilitating social activities.

Another main task expected by both leadership and YURs was the provision of care. However, the need for care varied across this heterogeneous group of YURs, and depended on their personality, age, maturity, health, context, and their trust and personal chemistry with the social workers, as indicated by their statements. Both leadership and YURs appreciated it when social workers were genuinely engaged in their job, willing and able to provide the ‘little extra’ in their caring work when YURs needed extra attention or help.

> ‘They asked us what they can help us with when we are in Ramadan (..) we come home from school very tired and exhausted. So, they help us to clean and to make food(..). They are very nice to us.’ (Azim, unaccompanied minor)

The ‘little extra’ is not a defined care term and can mean different things for individuals depending on the situation (e.g. providing extra attention, time or practical

help). However, leadership stressed that the overall aim of social workers' support should be to increase YURs' autonomy in the best way possible.

> 'We need to help them to master everyday life (..)So that they can become independent as much as possible with their prerequisites.' (Ella, social work leader).

Theme 3: Becoming someone YURs can trust

Leadership and YURs expected social workers to become/be someone that YURs felt they could trust, and could build a trusting relationship with. Leadership understood trusting relationships as a means to enable YURs to receive the care and support that social workers could offer them.

> 'The most important thing is to create a feeling of safety for the young people, create trust and work with the relationship (..) having a focus on this is a major task.' (Odin, social work leader)

How to achieve this trust was generally described through working relationally and communicating well with the YURs (also to overcome the chronic distrust in adults that many YURs suffered from because of experiences during their escape and journey to Europe).

YURs described the benefits of a trusting relationship as improved communication, collaboration and comfort when being with the social worker.

> 'I am friends with X, with her I can talk openly, I can be myself.' (Latif, unaccompanied minor)

They emphasized the importance of mutual trust, noting that feeling trusted makes it easier to trust the social worker. According to YURs, shared humour helped to build and maintain mutual trust, while the strict enforcement of rules could make them perceive a lack of trust between them and the carer. Reciprocity of trust was something they were longing to achieve; however, this was not expressed by leadership.

Theme 4: Establishing a safe and predictable environment

Leadership emphasized the importance of establishing an institution that felt like a safe space for young people, like a home, despite its temporary and institutional nature. Rules, routines and structure in the institution contributed to a feeling of predictability and safety for YURs, they explained.

> 'We are trying to create a home. It should not be just a place to stay.' (Emma, social work leader)

Regarding the rules in the institution, YURs expected social workers to have a controlling role, which they did not see as contrary to care. For many YURs, boundaries provided structure and predictability in an otherwise chaotic life situation.

But, both leadership and YURs also expected social workers to show accountability when having the control-function, such as apologizing for mistakes, and taking responsibility for the consequences of their decisions, and not shifting responsibility to others (e.g. municipality, colleagues).

Expectations that leadership and YURs disagreed upon:

Theme 5: Balancing flexibility in social workers' boundary and rule setting for YURs

Both leadership and YURs expected some control and boundaries in the institution, but disagreements on the nature of the rules (e.g. internet time, budgeting money, friends' sleepovers, frequency of driving favours from social workers) did arise, and needed to be negotiated by social workers in a manner that maintained harmony within the institution.

Leadership expected social workers to find a healthy balance between enforcing rules and being responsive and flexible when boundary-setting to meet the needs of YURs on both individual and group levels. Flexibility in boundary-setting involved adjusting institutional rules to make them more relevant and sensible for the individual YUR.

> 'We have a set of house rules and the expectations that the rules are followed, and [at the same time] that the needs of the young people are met.' (Siv, social work leader)

YURs also expressed their expectations of social workers being sensitive and responsive to their individual situation when setting boundaries and enforcing rules. Some YURs interpreted loose boundaries as a sign of trust from social workers, and strict rules as a lack of trust in them. However, YURs asked for more awareness that flexibility in boundary-setting could be perceived as discrimination and a lack of fairness if one YUR received different treatment from another, because these individual adjustments led to frustration and jealousy among YURs.

So, both stakeholder groups agreed about the necessity of flexibility here, but the main point of dispute was determining the right degree of flexibility that promotes YURs' well-being without compromising the institution's structure, routine and predictability, and without provoking tensions and disharmony in the institution.

> ‘Often there can be conflicts that when staff are flexible with young people and meet them in their needs, there is cross-pressure from the other young people, often more than cross-pressure from us [the leaders].’ (Elisabeth, social work leader)

For these reasons, social work leaders expected social workers to work as transparently as possible within given circumstances (and the duty of confidentiality), and to clearly communicate the justifications behind their actions and decisions.

> ‘Young people need an explanation, what makes us do what we do. (..) There are some young people who have a huge need for control, it should be predictable.’ (Odin, social work leader)

The aim of this transparency was to ensure that YURs perceived social workers’ actions as reasonable and not random, helping to avoid conflicts and jealousy to some extent. However, the degree of acceptable flexibility for each part was unclear.

Theme 6: Finding a healthy emotional closeness in professional relationships between social worker and YUR

Both leadership and YURs acknowledged the positive aspects of fostering a trusting relationship between social workers and YURs. However, leadership emphasized the importance of maintaining professionalism and a healthy emotional distance in their collaboration.

> ‘(..) professional relationships do not mean that they [the social workers] are cold, it means that we are responsible for them [YURs]’. (Ingrid, social work leader)

Leaders suggested keeping an emotional distance by clearly separating professional and private life, such as avoiding social media contact with YURs, and not involving one's own family in activities with YURs. The reason the leaders gave for this concern of becoming too close came from the transient nature of the social worker-YUR relationship: social workers leaving their job, taking a break, falling sick or the YURs being moved to other institutions or private accommodation. Leadership understood emotional distance as a way to protect YURs and social workers from emotional trouble.

> ‘We have seen that different ‘pain expression’ appear if there is someone [social worker] who leaves, who goes on maternity leave (..). That's just another break of relationship for them.” (Magnus, social work leader)

> 'We had situations where young people have come too close [to social workers]. Then it has gone too far, and there have been too high expectations of who you are as an employee. Then it becomes too great a loss for the young person.' (Ella, social worker leader)

For these reasons, leaders were concerned that YURs might perceive unavoidable changes and breaks of relationships as yet another betrayal by trusted adults. They advised social workers to explain to their YURs that organizational policy is the reason why they would not reach out for personal contact in public or through social media as private people. Leaders stressed the importance of avoiding situations where YURs could feel personally rejected and hurt.

YURs also reflected on the impact of the social workers' discontinuity in their lives. They did not like the 'coming and going' of social worker staff, and it did affect them emotionally. But, in contradiction to leadership recommendations, the YURs described some social workers inviting their own families to the institution for dinner with the young people. YURs valued these initiatives highly.

Furthermore, YURs did not understand why they could not make social media contact with social workers. They described how they felt offended by social workers when they ignored them in coincidental encounters in public spaces, and they did not understand the reason why they would do so. YURs never mentioned emotional closeness between them and social workers as something negative or worth avoiding.

Discussion

Summary of findings

The findings revealed that both YURs and social work leadership agreed on the importance of empathy, respect and support from social workers, who should also provide extra care, build trust and create a safe, predictable environment. However, they differed on the flexibility of boundaries and rules, and the appropriate level of emotional closeness in professional relationships. Balancing these aspects can pose a potential dilemma and source of tension for social workers.

Table 1: Summary of findings

LEVEL OF CONGRUENCE	THEME 1	THEME 2	THEME 3	THEME 4
AGREEMENT	meeting the YURs with empathic and respectful mindset	social worker being supportive; providing the little extra	social worker being someone YURs can trust	Institution: a safe and predictable environment for YURs
	THEME 4	**THEME 5**		
DISAGREEMENT	degree of flexibility in boundaries and rules	degree of emotional closeness in professional relationships		

Relating leadership and YUR expectations to Bath's TIC pillars

We discuss each identified expectation, and interpret them through Bath's (2008, 2015) three pillars of trauma-informed care. Aligning our findings with these pillars contextualizes these expectations within a well-established theoretical model. This alignment is crucial, as the TIC model guides everyday practice (Steinkopf et al., 2022) to meet the real-world expectations of both leadership and young refugees that we identified. This approach will help us become aware of potential dilemmas that may arise when social workers attempt to work in line with TIC pillars, and respond to the related stakeholder expectations.

Empathy and Respect (Theme 1): Both YURs and leadership agreed that social workers should meet YURs with empathy and respect on a day-to-day basis, but also in crisis situations, because this mindset ensures positive interactions between social workers and YURs. An empathic and respectful attitude of caregivers towards care receivers is a main ethical value in social work in general (Banks & Gallagher, 2009), and in trauma-informed care (Amble & Dahl-Johansen, 2016; Bath, 2008, 2015; Jørgensen & Steinkopf, 2013). It is a relational ideal with minimal institutional cost.

This expectation aligns with Bath's Pillar 1, which emphasizes the significance for young people of feeling safe with caregivers. Pillar 1 is closely connected to Pillar 2, which focuses on re-connecting. Pillars 1 and 2 to help build the foundations for Pillar 3, which describes how social workers can support YURs in navigating internal and external challenges.

Support and Extra Care (Theme 2): Both YURs and leadership agreed on the importance of social workers being supportive and providing extra care. Social workers are expected to go beyond minimal tasks, offering the care, emotional and practical (extra) support that individual YURs need. Providing care and being genuinely engaged in the practice of social work, are central aspects of being a professional social worker (Banks & Gallagher, 2009). This expectation aligns with Bath's Pillar 1, which emphasizes the importance to young refugees of knowing that basic needs will be met, and of receiving additional help from caregivers they feel safe with. It also aligns with Pillar 3, which calls for support for emotional regulation. Through the relationship established in Pillar 2, social workers can build connections that enable them to understand and respond to the unspoken needs of YURs.

Trust (Theme 3): Both YURs and leadership agreed that social workers should become individuals whom YURs can trust. For YURs, trust is seen as mutual, whereas for leaders, it is typically described as something the young person should feel towards the staff. This asymmetry in trust may reflect broader societal narratives about young refugees, including assumptions about their credibility or 'thin' life stories (Kohli, 2006; Watters, 2012). Trust emerges as both a foundation and an outcome of successful social work with YURs (Amble & Dahl-Johansen, 2016; Bath, 2008, 2015; Eide, Lidén, Haugland, Fladstad & Hauge, 2018). Trust is also essential in the practice of trauma-informed care, particularly for young people with histories of disrupted relationships (Amble & Dahl-Johansen, 2016; Bath, 2008, 2015; Kohli, 2007). Research highlights how such relationships, when grounded in reciprocity and care, can have therapeutic benefits (Amble & Dahl-Johansen, 2016; Bath, 2008, 2015; Rogers, 1959). Trust is related to Pillar 1, feeling safe with social workers, and to Pillar 2, encouraging YURs to establish trusting relationships with social workers, which make it possible for social workers to reach the YUR on a deeper level for healing and growth, as suggested in Pillar 3 (Bath, 2008, 2015).

Safety and Predictability (Theme 4): Both YURs and leadership agreed on the importance of establishing the institution as a safe and predictable space. Both leadership and young refugees expected boundaries and rules in the institution, and appreciated the predictability this provided - in contradiction to critiques of TIC institutions, as not being 'authoritative and boundary-setting enough' (Lorentzen, 2020). The emphasis on the predictability of the environment speaks to the YURs' need for emotional, physical and relational stability after often-chaotic life experiences, so that YURs can settle and let down their guard (Bath, 2015). Leaders may prioritize predictability as a foundation for institutional functioning (Lawler & Bilson, 2010). This expectation reflects Pillar 1 safety, stressing a mutual understanding of the importance of routines, rules and secure environments as a foundation and necessity for Pillar 2 re-connecting and Pillar 3 support with emotional regulation.

Balancing Flexibility (Theme, 5): Both YURs and leaders expect social workers to demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness when setting boundaries and rules: bespoke care with fairness and without neglecting the house rules, routines and established structure in the institution, but adjusted to the young person's individual situation. We see different perspectives from leadership and YURs on what constitutes a 'reasonable flexibility' that benefits the individual without provoking disharmony in the group. Social workers' flexibility can become instrumental - on the one hand to control YURs, and on the other to show them trust and increase their autonomy. Social workers are in a position of power to decide how to respond to YURs' requests. At the same time, they are expected to listen to recommendations from leadership. Trauma-informed care invites social workers to be flexible (Amble & Dahl-Johansen, 2016; Bath, 2008, 2015), and to apply professional discretion (Grimen & Molander, 2008) to respond in the most beneficial way for the young people (UHCHR, article 3). Cherry-picking from elements of trauma-informed care seems to be common in care institutions (Steinkopf, et al., 2020). However, attempting to fulfil the expectations of both leadership and young people (Biddle, 1986; Goffman, 1956) can place social workers in a difficult dilemma (Engeström & Sannino, 2011), where they are trying to find the right degree of flexibility for each individual. Flexibility can be related to all three of Bath's pillars: rules should be set in

a way that makes sense for the YURs to achieve a feeling of safety, to enable them to connect and build trust, and to accept help with regulating their emotions and reactions.

Healthy Emotional Boundaries (Theme 6): YURs and leadership disagree on the right degree of emotional closeness in the professional relationship between social workers and YURs. While YURs value emotional closeness, leaders emphasize the importance of maintaining a professional emotional distance, so that social workers can protect themselves emotionally and maintain control on the one hand, while on the other hand, to avoid YURs getting emotionally hurt in the face of staff turnover or discontinuity. Leaders suggest that relationships should be close enough to build trust, yet not so close that emotional detachment becomes difficult. Social workers must navigate this ambiguity by offering relational warmth (Thrana, 2016) without overstepping institutional expectations – this suggests a potential dilemma for the social worker (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). The YURs' desire for closeness may reflect a fundamental need for recognition, worth and dignity in everyday interactions (Johansen & Bendixsen, 2023). Meanwhile, leaders emphasize care rationality (Eide et al., 2017), which balances emotionality and professionalism. Trying to find a healthy and individual balance of emotional closeness can influence all three pillars: Pillar 1, making the YUR feeling safe; Pillar 2, building connections between social workers and YURs that are robust and trusting enough for the young people to accept help from social workers to regulate emotions and impulses, as in Pillar 3.

In conclusion, relating the expectations of leadership and of YURs to Bath's (2008, 2015) trauma-informed care pillars showed that these stakeholder expectations need to be operationalized through all three TIC-pillars, because the pillars are interconnected and interdependent. Each pillar can be ascribed several stakeholder expectations confirming a strong inter-connectedness between all elements, where they build on each other, and reinforce each other. In consequence, the reality that social workers meet is complex and, at times, it might be difficult to foresee the consequence of a single decision taken by the social workers for the well-being of YURs. This complexity and uncertainty are part of their daily social work.

However, it can be helpful for social workers to be aware of where, in their practice, they are likely to face additional challenges responding to differing stakeholder expectations. In our findings, these occur when trying to find a flexibility in practice with individuals that is perceived as fair and reasonable by the group, and in finding an emotional boundary between the young people and the social worker that is been perceived as healthy by all involved, while responding to the individual, contextual, situational and in-flux expectations and needs of YURs (Borho et al., 2023).

As Steinkopf et al. (2022) note, the inherent flexibility in trauma-informed care can lead to fragmented or inconsistent application. Social workers need support from leadership in negotiating how to prioritize the model's pillars in practice, and need awareness of its interplays and reinforcing dynamics. This complexity highlights the need for conscious, reflective social work practice in care institutions for YURs (Ferguson, 2018; Schön 1987). Social work leadership needs the awareness to support social workers in these difficult balancing acts of reasonable flexibility and healthy emotional boundaries in their trauma-informed care.

Limitations

Our sample of young refugees and leaders was small and located in Norway, where social work with unaccompanied minor refugees follows a specific structure. Future mixed method approaches and comparisons with other national contexts could reveal whether tensions faced by social workers are national or generic. Additionally, our interviewees were all Afghan males. Future research should explore the expectations of female unaccompanied refugees and those from other national origins.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored if social work leadership and young, unaccompanied Afghan refugees (YURs) agreed or disagreed in their expectations of social workers working in residential trauma-informed care institutions in Norway. We anticipated that conflicting stakeholder expectations could potentially produce critical dilemmas for social workers in their practice with YURs.

This comparison of expectations reveals several key findings: Both YURs and leadership agree on the importance of empathy, respect, support, extra care, trust and establishing a safe and predictable environment. These shared values highlight the foundational principles that are essential for effective social work practice.

However, there are notable differences in expectations and therefore potential dilemmas for social workers regarding the appropriate level of flexibility in boundary and rule-setting for individual YURs, and the balancing of emotional closeness in the professional relationship between social worker and YUR.

Relating the empirical real-world expectations that leadership and YURs have of social workers, to Bath's (2008, 2015) theoretical social work concept of trauma-informed care, which is prevalent in Norwegian residential care institutions for vulnerable groups dealing with potential trauma, reveals that these expectations must be operationalized through all three interconnected and interdependent trauma-informed care pillars (safety, connection, coping) described by Bath (2008, 2015). Each pillar encompasses multiple stakeholder expectations, confirming their strong inter-connectedness. Consequently, social workers face a complex and intertwined reality, making it difficult for them to predict the impact of individual decisions on overall practice and the well-being of YURs. This complexity and uncertainty are inherent in their daily social work.

However, by being aware of the tensions for social workers highlighted in this article, leadership will be better placed to recognize and address the cross-pressured or conflicting situations for social workers that arise from mismatches between the expectations of leadership and those of young refugees. Leaders should support social workers by granting them the flexibility in their boundary-setting and individualized support to young refugees, they need. Additionally, leadership should offer guidance, particularly in finding the right balance of emotional closeness and professional distance in their relationships with young refugees. This balance is crucial for the growth and development of the young refugees living in the institution, and aligns with a trauma-informed care mindset.

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