Brief Report on a Pilot Implementation of the *Identity Project* Intervention with Unaccompanied Immigrant Minors in Italy

Abstract

Developing a positive cultural identity is crucial for unaccompanied immigrant minors' (UIMs) integration and adjustment. This study piloted an adapted version of the *Identity Project*, an 8-week intervention promoting cultural identity, among UIMs (N = 31, M_{age} = 16.64, SD = 0.76, 55% from Eastern European and 45% from Northern African countries) in Italian residential communities. Participants reported on their cultural identity exploration and resolution at pretest, posttest, and follow-up; focus groups were conducted post-intervention. Results indicated that the program was acceptable, feasible and appropriate, with suggestions for improvement. Heterogeneous individual trajectories for both exploration and resolution emerged. This study underscores the promising value of the *Identity Project* for UIMs and calls for further research to conduct large-scale efficacy trials.

Keywords: identity, intervention, unaccompanied immigrant minors, pilot study, Italy

Introduction

Unaccompanied immigrant minors (UIMs) are individuals aged less than 18 years who arrive in a foreign country without the care of a responsible adult (UNHCR, 1997). These minors represent a potentially vulnerable group due to the traumatic experiences faced before, during, and after migration (Garcia & Birman, 2022), with the lack of family support further complicating their situation (Daniel-Calveras et al., 2022). UIMs are at a pivotal stage in their identity formation, as the transition to adulthood involves a re-elaboration of personal values, familial roles, and peer relationships, along with major physical changes (Erikson, 1968). Dealing with both migration- and age-specific tasks can be viewed as a doubly disruptive challenge for adolescents with an immigrant or refugee background (Andersson & Øverlien, 2023). Indeed, the combination of traumatic migration experiences, post-settlement stressors, and the absence of parental figures can profoundly impact these youth's identity development process (Shahimi et al., 2024).

A salient component of identity, especially among minoritized/immigrant groups, is ethnic-racial identity (ERI), i.e., the beliefs, attitudes, and feelings concerning one's ethnic–racial group membership and the processes through which these aspects develop over time (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Research indicates that a positive ERI is linked to greater well-being and intercultural competence (Umaña-Taylor & Rivas-Drake, 2021). Yet, UIMs often encounter several challenges related to the resettlement process that may hinder their self-development and adjustment, such as identity confusion and negotiation of cultural norms within their original and host communities (Andersson & Overlien, 2023). Although supporting ERI formation is essential to boost these youth's successful integration and psychosocial outcomes, evidence-based interventions tailored for this population are still lacking.

The current study aimed to address this gap by adapting and piloting the *Identity Project* (IP), an intervention targeting ERI in adolescents (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017), with UIMs living in residential care communities in Italy. The IP is an 8-week psychoeducational curriculum originally designed in the United States to stimulate adolescents' reflection on ERI and, in turn, personal identity, psychological adjustment, and openness to people from different cultures. The weekly sessions comprise theoretical notions and practical activities to stimulate exploration (i.e., search, observation, and consideration of one's ethnoracial background) and resolution processes (i.e., awareness and clarity of one's ERI). Adolescents are prompted to learn more about their cultural heritage and reflect on how ERI is multifaceted, linked to various cultural affiliations, and changes over time and across contexts. Studies conducted in the US school context demonstrated the program's efficacy in fostering ERI exploration and resolution, which, in turn, were associated with positive psychosocial adjustment (Sladek et al., 2021; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018a, b).

In recent years, the IP has been adapted and implemented in several European countries due to its growing relevance in response to the increasingly multicultural composition of schools (Juang et al., 2023; Umaña-Taylor, 2023). Given the social, historical, and political differences between Europe and the US, cultural tailoring of this intervention to meet the unique needs of the local target populations was necessary to ensure its sustainability, participant engagement, and maximize efficacy (Barrera et al., 2017). For instance, the term "race" in Europe is considered taboo as it is associated with the history of racially motivated genocide during World War II; thus, ERI was replaced by "cultural identity" in most European adaptations (see Juang et al., 2023) and is also used in the current paper. Despite differences between the US and Europe, cultural identity remains a significant social identity category for adolescents in European

societies (Erentaitė et al., 2018; Juang et al., 2021) including Italy, where the sociohistorical context tends toward racialized othering (Musso et al., 2018). Indeed, an adapted version of the IP was successfully piloted with adolescents attending an Italian multiethnic school (Authors, 2024), and its efficacy in promoting cultural identity exploration was supported in a large, preregistered randomized controlled trial (Authors, 2023). However, the extent to which the program may be beneficial for underrepresented youth in non-formal educational settings, such as UIMs living in residential communities, is still unknown.

Consistent with recommendations concerning pilot implementations of psychosocial interventions (Pearson et al., 2020), this brief report describes the adaptation and piloting of the IP in a convenience sample of UIMs settled in Italy. Following the Implementation Outcomes framework (Proctor et al., 2011), we examined feasibility (the extent to which a program can be successfully carried out within a given setting), acceptability (the perception that a program is agreeable or satisfactory), and appropriateness (the perceived fit of the program for a given user/setting) of the adapted IP for UIMs, and described participants' reported changes in cultural identity exploration and resolution over time.

Method

Adaptation of the intervention for UIMs

Before implementation, the Italian version of the IP was adapted in close collaboration with UIMs, social workers and linguistic cultural mediators. While maintaining fidelity to the original objectives and activities, the adaptation included modifications to address logistics and content (see Online Supplement Appendix A1).

Participants and Procedure

After obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee of [blinded] (protocol n. [blinded]), we contacted the coordinator of a social cooperative from a previous collaboration (see Authors, 2023) to seek support with recruitment. We partnered with 7 residential care communities hosting UIMs in Northeastern Italy: 4 in Padua and 3 in Venice.

As of December 31st 2022, Italy hosted 20,089 UIMs (Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, 2023); of these, the majority (85%) were male and 68% were between the ages of 16 and 17. Once in Italy, UIMs are hosted for up to three months in specialized governmental structures, known as first-line reception centers, for initial tracing, identification, and status ascertainment. Then, they are transferred to second-line reception centers where they receive various services, including social, educational and training support (see Rania et al., 2018). When coming of age, UIMs are required to leave the reception system. However, the Italian law establishes that they may continue to receive support from social services for an additional period of 6 months after turning 18 or up to the age of 21, depending on the specific legal status and procedure.

Inclusion criteria for this study were (a) being male, (b) being aged less than 18 years or having turned 18 within the past 6 months, (c) living in a residential care community for minors, and (d) being native speaker of Albanian or Arabic. Because the vast majority of UIMs in Italy were males at the time of data collection, criterion (a) was established to ensure homogeneity of the analytic sample. Criterion (b) was set in relation to the Italian law, but we included criterion (c) to make sure that the living conditions did not substantially differ among participants. Criterion (d) pertained to feasibility: because the activities during the sessions needed to be translated into the UIMs' native languages, including more than two language groups would have resulted in an excessive length and difficulty in interacting among the people participating

in the sessions. The two languages were chosen based on the most represented countries of origin among UIMs in the residential care communities. The only exclusion criterion was having a psychiatric diagnosis to avoid re-activating feelings of distress, given that the curriculum covered potentially sensitive topics (e.g., discrimination).

Following these criteria, 31 UIMs (M_{age} = 16.64, *SD* = 0.76, range = 15-18 yrs) from Northern African and Eastern European countries (i.e., Albania, Egypt, Kosovo, Tunisia, and Morocco) were recruited into the study. Before data collection, written informed consent was collected from the participants' legal guardians or participants themselves (if aged 18 years). UIMs were informed that their participation would not have any consequence on their residence permit procedure, and that individual responses would not be released to the authorities, the cooperatives' staff, or legal guardians. Sample characteristics are reported in Table 1 (Online Supplement Appendix A.2).

The pilot study was conducted between February and April 2023. The intervention was delivered during 8 sessions (1/week; 1 hour 30 minutes each) led by two facilitators per each of the 4 groups. Facilitators were the first and third author, together with a Psychology graduate student and a post-graduate student who had previously implemented the IP in the school context. Each session involved two linguistic-cultural mediators to support with translation in Albanian and Arabic, and one social worker who participated in the activities together with the UIMs. Self-report paper-pencil surveys were administered 1 week before the intervention (pretest, T1), 10 weeks after pretest (1 week after intervention end; posttest, T2), and 37 weeks after pretest (28 weeks after intervention end; follow-up, T3). Of the initial participants, 4 did not complete the IP program (*n* = 1 due to exit from the community, *n* = 2 perceived excessive emotional burden, *n* = 1 overlap of the sessions with internship shifts) and consequently did not

take part in the following assessments. Five other participants had come of age and left the residential communities by T3 and were unable to be reached. Hence, the analytic sample included *n* = 31 UIMs at T1, *n* = 27 at T2, and *n* = 22 at T3.

One week after T2, qualitative feedback was gathered separately from UIMs (*n* = 24), social workers (*n* = 4), and linguistic-cultural mediators (*n* = 3) through focus groups (duration = 1 hour 30 minutes each) that were carried out in person with UIMs, and online with social workers and linguistic-cultural mediators. After completing T3 surveys, UIMs (*n* = 22) also provided qualitative feedback via focus groups or online individual interviews (i.e., for those who could not attend the in-person focus group).

Data from this study is openly available in the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://osf.io/3jnzk/?view_only=117a6e71dc7c442c9d15394e9ccef12b

Measures

Sociodemographics. Social workers reported on UIMs' age, country of origin, length of time in the residential facilities in Italy, Italian language proficiency, family composition, educational level, pre-and post-migration occupation.

Cultural identity exploration and resolution. The main variables of interest were measured via the exploration (7 items, e.g., "I have participated in activities that have exposed me to my culture of origin") and resolution (4 items, e.g., "I understand how I feel about my culture of origin") subscales from the Ethnic Identity Scale (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Response options range from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 4 (describes me very well), and total scores are obtained by averaging item responses of each subscale, with higher scores indicating higher exploration/resolution. Before rating the items, participants were asked to write down their heritage culture (i.e., cultural background prevalent in their family) and answer the

questions referring to that cultural group. The questionnaire has good psychometric properties (Authors, 2023; Sladek et al., 2020). In the present study, Cronbach's alphas at baseline were α = .82 for the exploration subscale and α = .72 for the resolution subscale.

Positionality and reflexivity

The authors' diverse experiences and backgrounds hold relevance to the study, but also require a critical reflection on their own positionality with respect to the research being conducted. Authors 1 (postdoc researcher) and 3 (PhD student) are Italian-born psychologists with research and professional experience with unaccompanied minors, adolescents of immigrant descent and refugee young adults, but share the participants' cultural backgrounds or immigrant experience. Author 2, a professor and psychologist, immigrated to Germany during early childhood, and then returned to Italy in adolescence. While her academic and personal experiences with immigration offer valuable understanding, she does not share the participants' cultural background. Author 4, an Italian-born professor and psychologist, has research experience with internationally adopted children, but does not share the participants' cultural backgrounds or immigrant experience. Author 5 is a U.S. American developmental psychologist and professor who was born and raised by Latino immigrant parents in the USA. She has extensive expertise in adolescents' ethnic-racial identity development and created the *Identity Project* curriculum with her team. A majority of her work has been conducted with USA-based adolescents, including immigrant youth.

Results

Feasibility, Acceptability, and Appropriateness

Regarding feasibility, the expected timeline for study implementation was achieved, although some sessions had to be rescheduled due to logistic issues (e.g., absence of the

linguistic-cultural mediator). Attrition rate was 13% (*n* = 4) from T1 to T2, and 29% (*n* = 9) from T1 to T3. Attendance rate was high: excluding the 4 minors who did not complete the curriculum, the majority (*n* = 18) took part in all 8 sessions, while the remaining participants (*n* = 9) took part in 5 to 7 sessions. Furthermore, homework activities were completed by almost all participants thanks to the collaboration with social workers. Although the results suggest a generally successful implementation, some challenges emerged. Specifically, the duration of the single sessions did not always allow to properly cover all the activities, and several times the final group sharing of personal reflections had to be shortened, postponed, or skipped. Relatedly, social workers noted that the program's extended duration could hinder UIM's participation.

With respect to acceptability, during focus groups participants gave generally positive feedback regarding the topics addressed and the interactive modalities used. Both UIMs and social workers suggested to privilege practical activities over theoretical explanations due to differences in participants' levels of schooling and potential difficulties in approaching abstract concepts. Moreover, they especially recommended confidentiality when addressing issues of family and interpersonal relationships (e.g., let participants decide whether or not to share important people's names/degree of kinship). Participants mostly appreciated discussing stereotypes, developing coping strategies in the face of discrimination ("*It was important to enact an episode of discrimination, because it can happen to many other people and it's important to know how to react*"), and reflecting upon cultural identity changes over time. UIMs also enjoyed learning more about different cultures through the sharing of traditions and symbols, thinking about the influence of meaningful relationships on who they had become via the puzzles, and connecting with peers from other residential communities ("*I liked sharing this moment with people I did not know before: I felt comfortable, everyone was respectful*").

Finally, regarding appropriateness, adolescents confirmed the salience of addressing themes of identity and interculturalism, and some of them acknowledged how participation in the program could be relevant and useful for them in a long-term perspective: "*Maybe I don't need everything right now, but definitely in the future. It is a life lesson; it helped me to think that there is no right or wrong way to respond. The project gave me peace of mind!*" Various participants also emphasized the need to focus on cultural competencies that could help them in their integration process and suggested organizing an outdoor activity with Italian-origin peers to better understand the local culture.

Focus groups with social workers and mediators revealed a synergy of the IP objectives with the communities' educational goals. Social workers also appreciated the opportunity to interact with and observe UIMs through a different lens: "*Putting ourselves on the same level was helpful in identifying better with them and for them perhaps in finding commonalities with us*". Furthermore, especially for linguistic-cultural mediators, the sessions represented an opportunity to revisit and reflect upon their own identity journey ("*I noticed that I've been neglecting my culture of origin";* "*I am a foreigner and always will be... I am very close to my roots, that's what gives me balance*").

Changes in cultural identity exploration and resolution over time

Participants' reflections on changes in their cultural identity over time were explored during focus groups by asking whether they had noticed any differences in what they knew, thought, or felt in relation to their culture of origin, and how these changes had occurred. At posttest (1 week after intervention end), several participants reported that they had not perceived any relevant change: "*Egypt is always in my heart, so I have not discovered or felt new things about my culture*". Other participants saw the project as a chance to reflect upon things they had

once learned, explore them again, and possibly focus on new details: "*We do a lot of things about our own culture, like summer camps where you learn about the dance, the clothing, the food… However, the project brought back these memories that I hadn't thought about in a long time*". Another youth from Tunisia said he "*learned words from different dialects that I didn't know in Arabic thanks to the dictionary game*". Most importantly, participants emphasized the value of sharing their culture with others: "*Maybe we already knew some of these things, however this was different and I enjoyed sharing them with people from other countries*." Many UIMs had noticed more changes in their knowledge or attitude with respect to other cultures rather than their own: "*What's new for me is talking about other cultures, before I only talked about mine*"; "*I learned to be more sensitive toward other cultures, to ask myself the reason behind some things*"; "*The project helped us in changing our behavior toward other cultures*".

At follow-up (approx. 6 months after intervention end), UIMs showed a similar variety of responses: many reported no significant change in their exploration or sense of clarity with respect to their heritage culture, while others said they enjoyed and/or created more opportunities to explain and share aspects of their background ("*At work I've tried to teach some words in Arabic to my colleagues and learn some words in their languages*"). For others, participation in the IP inspired further curiosity toward their culture ("*Now I want to get to know the Kosovan culture better, I talk about it often with my Moroccan roommate*") or even concrete changes in their behavior ("*Before I didn't think about it much… After the project I started praying again and reading books about Egypt").* Some participants also emphasized the role of interpersonal/contextual cues in promoting this exploration process (" *It helped me to hear others talking about their culture, it made me want to know more about my culture too")*, as well as in

revealing one or another identity component ("*when I am with Tunisians, I become more Tunisian and with Italians, more Italian, so I can understand first-hand how Italians think*").

Regarding survey data, descriptive statistics for study variables are presented in Table 2 (Online Supplement Appendix A.3). Given the small sample size, we graphically depicted individual trajectories of cultural identity exploration (Figure 1) and resolution (Figure 2). For exploration, about half of the sample reported an increase in their levels of exploration from T1 to T2, with around 23% of the participants returning to initial or lower levels at T3. The remaining participants either remained stable or decreased in their levels of exploration over time. For resolution, participants appeared to be equally divided among the three trends (i.e., increase, stability, decrease), with roughly 25% of UIMs presenting ceiling scores at baseline and around 15% inverting their trend over time (e.g., decrease/increase from T1 to T2 and vice versa from T2 to T3).

Figure 1: Observed exploration data across time points by participant.

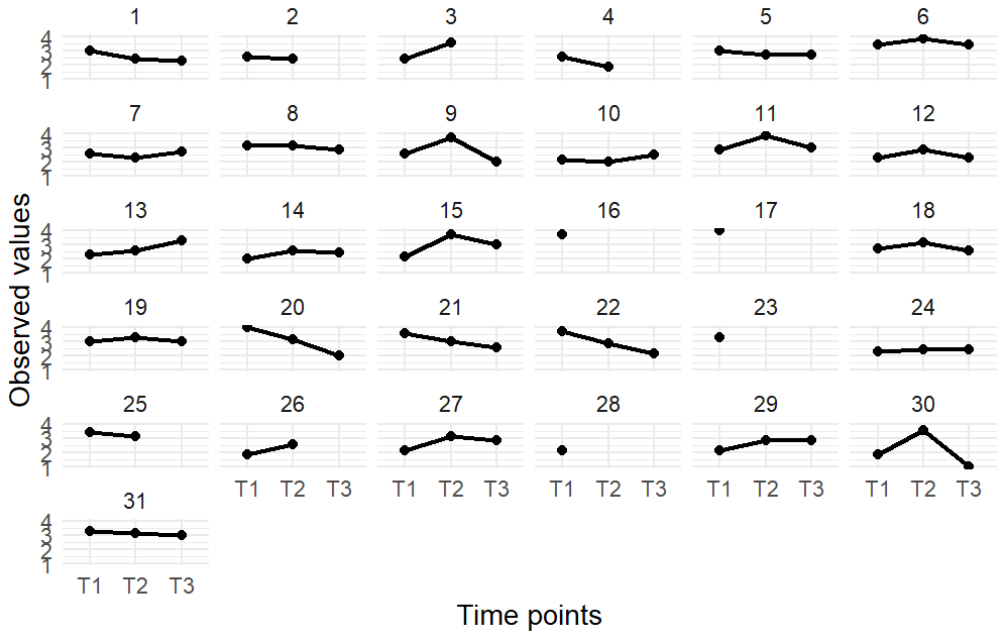
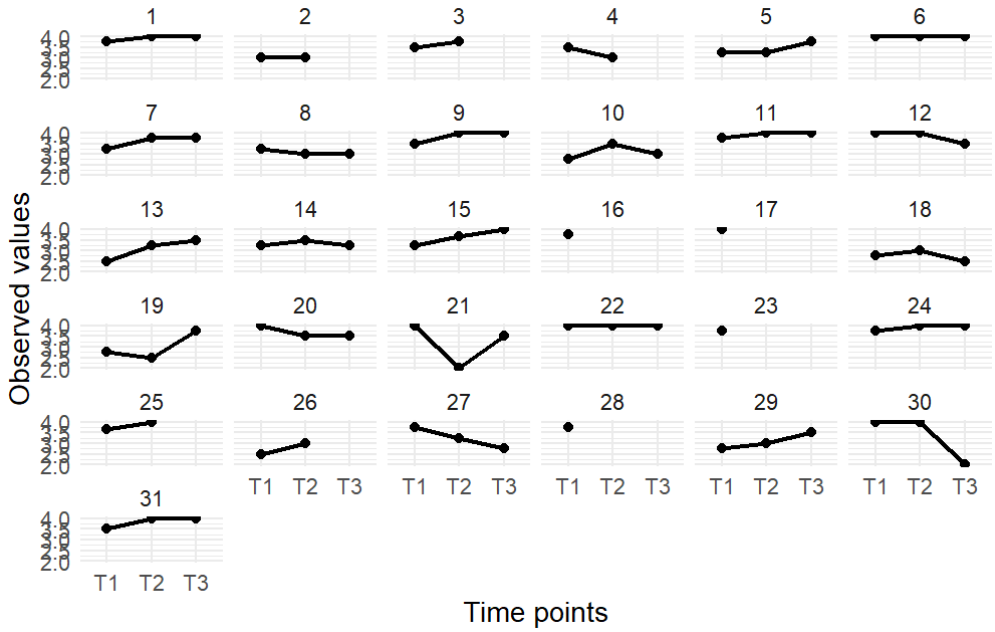


Figure 2: Observed resolution data across time points by participant.



Discussion

Although UIMs often encounter challenges in their cultural identity development, interventions targeting this relevant aspect of the self are extremely scarce. To fill this gap, the current pilot study sought to evaluate an adapted version of the IP intervention for UIMs living in residential care communities in Italy. Moreover, changes over time in cultural identity exploration and resolution were addressed. Qualitative findings supported the feasibility, acceptability, and appropriateness of the curriculum for these potentially vulnerable adolescents; descriptive analyses of survey data revealed large variation in UIMs' scores of exploration and resolution over time, with different patterns characterizing each of these processes.

Concerning implementation outcomes, the adapted IP proved to be feasible in a non-formal educational setting, showing high attendance, low attrition rate, and homework

compliance, although some challenges emerged (e.g., scheduling conflicts with participants' internship shifts). Focus groups confirmed the acceptability of the IP in terms of relevance of the topics, appreciation of the interactive approach used, and high levels of engagement and interest especially in activities addressing stereotypes, discrimination, and sharing of meaningful cultural symbols and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, social workers and linguistic-cultural mediators underscored the good fit of the program with the educational goals pursued by the communities' staff. Main suggestions for improvement concerned logistics, prioritizing practical vs theoretical activities, and focusing more on the Italian culture. Overall, these results support the importance of targeting cultural identity processes among UIMs, who undergo multiple developmental and contextual transitions that might heavily impact their sense of identity (Shahimi et al., 2024). The adaptation process was crucial to address the specific needs of this underrepresented population, fostering participants' engagement and ecological validity (see Bernal et al., 2009).

In relation to changes over time, qualitative findings yielded a complex and varied picture, with some participants not increasing in their individual levels of exploration and resolution, and others reporting perceived changes (e.g., heightened curiosity, reconsideration of their heritage culture, pleasure of sharing). This pattern was mirrored in the descriptive findings, which revealed the presence of large interindividual variability in these minors' scores over time. Although caution is needed due to the small sample size, our results suggest that individual differences (e.g., psychological symptoms, resilience, or temperamental traits) may influence or even obscure intervention effects (Könen & Karbach, 2021). This is particularly true for UIMs, who are a very heterogeneous group in terms of migration history, cultures of origin, and personal experiences, all of which can significantly influence intervention efficacy (Fazel &

Betancourt, 2018). Consistent with this view, prior longitudinal research has highlighted the role of individual differences in how ERI processes develop over time (Bañales et al., 2020), also in the context of European implementations of the IP (Abdullahi et al., 2024; Authors, 2024; Hölscher et al., 2024). The heterogeneity of intervention effects suggests that, as one size does not fit all, the program may be particularly beneficial for specific subgroups of UIMs. Hence, a sufficiently powered efficacy trial is needed to enable examining what works for whom and under what conditions.

The present study provided a valuable opportunity to field-test the key logistics and identify challenges and resources connected to the adaptation and implementation of the IP in a new setting and reaching an underrepresented population. Nonetheless, the findings should be interpreted in light of some limitations. First, our sample was small and exclusively composed of male minors from a few countries sharing the two same native languages (i.e., Albanian and Arabic), which limits the generalizability of the results. It should be noted, however, that the sample characteristics mirrored national statistics (Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, 2023) and that sample size was due to the high mobility and difficult accessibility of this population, which reduces the amount of data that can be collected at a reasonable cost (see Lakens, 2022). Second, several content changes were made to the school-based version of the IP protocol, and some activities had to be shortened or could not be completed due to time constraints. It cannot be ruled out that such variations might also have contributed to the variety of participants' responses in terms of changes of cultural identity over time, for instance by not adequately prompting the exploration process. Third, the absence of a control group leaves open the possibility that the results are attributable to other factors beyond UIMs' involvement in the program, such as measurement limitations or specific participant characteristics. Experimental

designs (e.g., randomized controlled trials) are needed to test efficacy of the program, possibly assessing additional variables at the personal and contextual level that may influence intervention effects.

Building on this pilot experience, the intervention efficacy trial should aim to enlarge the sample size by including UIMs from other countries hosted in the Italian reception system and use fidelity checklists to ensure implementation quality. Albeit further adaptations are needed, this study supports the feasibility and relevance of intervening in identity and cultural affiliations among UIMs and paves the way for further implementations of the IP in non-formal educational settings.

References

Abdullahi, A. K., Syed, M., Juang, L. P., Berne, S., Hwang, C. P., & Frisén, A. (2024). Evaluating a School-Based Intervention on Adolescents' Ethnic-racial Identity in Sweden. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-024-02046-y

Andersson, E.S. & Øverlien, C. (2023). Navigating cultural transitions during resettlement: the case of unaccompanied refugee minors. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1080072. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1080072

Bañales, J., Hoffman, A. J., Rivas-Drake, D., & Jagers, R. J. (2020). The development of ethnic-racial identity process and its relation to civic beliefs among Latinx and Black American adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 49*(12), 2495–2508. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-020-01254-6

Barrera, M., Jr., Berkel, C., & Castro, F. G. (2017). Directions for the advancement of culturally adapted preventive interventions: Local adaptations, engagement, and sustainability. *Prevention Science, 18*(6), 640–648. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-016-0705-9

Barrera Jr, M., & Castro, F. G. (2006). A heuristic framework for the cultural adaptation of interventions. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 13*(4), 311–316. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2850.2006.00043.x

Bernal, G., Jiménez-Chafey, M. I., & Domenech Rodríguez, M. M. (2009). Cultural adaptation of treatments: A resource for considering culture in evidence-based practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 40*(4), 361- 368. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016401

Daniel-Calveras, A., Baldaqui, N. & Baeza, I. (2022). Mental health of unaccompanied refugee minors in Europe: A systematic review. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 133*, 105865. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105865

Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. WW Norton & Company.

Erentaitė, R., Lannegrand-Willems, L., Negru-Subtirica, O., Vosylis, R., Sondaitė, J., & Raižienė, S. (2018). Identity development among ethnic minority youth. Integrating findings from studies in Europe. *European Psychologist, 21*(3), 185–199. https://doi.org/10.1027/10169040/a000338

Fazel, M., & Betancourt, T. S. (2018). Preventive mental health interventions for refugee children and adolescents in high-income settings. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2*(2), 121-132. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(17)30147-5

Garcia, M. F., & Birman, D. (2022). Understanding the migration experience of unaccompanied youth: A review of the literature. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 92*(1), 79–102. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000588

Höhne, E., Swantje van der Meer, A., Kamp-Becker, I. & Christiansen, H. (2022). A systematic review of risk and protective factors of mental health in unaccompanied minor refugees. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 31*, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-020-01678-2

Hölscher, S. I., Schachner, M. K., Juang, L. P., & Altoè, G. (2024). Promoting Adolescents' Heritage Cultural Identity Development: Exploring the Role of Autonomy and Relatedness

Satisfaction in School-Based Interventions. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-024-02017-3

Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (2023). *Unaccompanied foreign minors in Italy. Semiannual report*. Retrieved from: https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/immigrazione/focus-on/minori-stranieri/Documents/Rapporto-approfondimento-semestrale-MSNA-31-dicembre-2022-ENG.pdf

Juang, L. P., Moffitt, U., Schachner, M. K., & Pevec, S. (2021). Understanding ethnic–racial identity in a context where "race" is taboo. *Identity, 21*(3), 185–199. https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2021.1932901

Juang, L. P., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Schachner, M. K., Frisén, A., Hwang, C. P., Moscardino, U., Motti- Stefanidi, M., Oppedal, B., Pavlopoulos, V., Abdullahi, A. K., Barahona, R., Berne, S., Ceccon, C., Gharaei, N., Moffitt, U., Ntalachanis, A., Pevec, S., Sandberg, D. J., Zacharia, A., & Syed, M. (2023). Ethnic-racial identity in Europe: Adapting the identity project intervention in five countries. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology, 20*(6), 978-1006. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2022.2131520

Könen, T., & Karbach, J. (2021). Analyzing individual differences in intervention-related changes. *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science, 4*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2515245920979172

Lakens, D. (2022). *Sample Size Justification*. Collabra: Psychology.

Musso, P., Moscardino, U., & Inguglia, C. (2018). The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure–Revised (MEIM-R): Psychometric evaluation with adolescents from diverse ethnocultural

groups in Italy. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, *15*(4), 395–410. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2016.1278363

Pearson, N., Naylor, P. J., Ashe, M. C., Fernandez, M., Yoong, S. L., & Wolfenden, L. (2020). Guidance for conducting feasibility and pilot studies for implementation trials. *Pilot and Feasibility Studies*, *6*, 167. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40814-020-00634-w

Proctor, E., Silmere, H., Raghavan, R., Hovmand, P., Aarons, G., Bunger, A., Griffey, R., & Hensley, M. (2011). Outcomes for implementation research: conceptual distinctions, measurement challenges, and research agenda. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, *38*, 65-76. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-010-0319-7

Rania, N., Migliorini, L., & Fagnini, L. (2018). Unaccompanied migrant minors: A comparison of new Italian interventions models. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *92*, 98–104. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.02.024

Shahimi, F., Block, K. & Alisic, E. (2024). Sense of identity among young people with refugee backgrounds: A scoping review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 157, 107378. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107378

Sladek, M. R., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., McDermott, E. R., Rivas-Drake, D., & Martinez-Fuentes, S. (2020). Testing invariance of ethnic-racial discrimination and identity measures for adolescents across ethnic-racial groups and contexts. *Psychological Assessment*, *32*, 509-526. https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0000805

Sladek, M. R., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Wantchekon, K. A., McDermott, E. R., & Updegraff, K. A. (2021). Contextual moderators of a school-based ethnic–racial identity intervention: The roles of family ethnic socialization and ethnic–racial background. *Prevention Science, 22*(3), 378–385. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-020-01166-8

Umaña-Taylor, A. J. (2023). Promoting adolescent adjustment by intervening in ethnic–racial identity development: Opportunities for developmental prevention science and considerations for a global theory of change. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 47*(4), 352–365. https://doi.org/10.1177/01650254231162614

Umaña-Taylor, A. J., & Douglass, S. (2017). Developing an ethnic-racial identity intervention from a developmental perspective: Process, content, and implementation. In N. J. Cabrera & B. Leyendecker (Eds.), *Handbook of positive development of minority children and youth* (pp. 437–453). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43645-6_26

Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Douglass, S., Updegraff, K. A., & Marsiglia, F. F. (2018a). A small-scale randomized efficacy trial of the Identity Project: Promoting adolescents' ethnic–racial identity exploration and resolution. *Child Development, 89*(3), 862–870. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12755

Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Kornienko, O., Douglass Bayless, S., & Updegraff, K. A. (2018b). A universal intervention program increases ethnic-racial identity exploration and resolution to predict adolescent psychosocial functioning one year later. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 47*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0766-5

Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Quintana, S. M., Lee, R. M., Cross, W. E., Jr., Rivas Drake, D., Schwartz, S. J., Syed, M., Yip, T., Seaton, E., & the Ethnic and Racial Identity in the 21st Century Study Group. (2014). Ethnic and racial identity during adolescence and into young

adulthood: An integrated conceptualization. *Child Development*, 85(1), 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12196

Umaña-Taylor, A. J., & Rivas-Drake, D. (2021). Ethnic–racial identity and adolescents' positive development in the context of ethnic–racial marginalization: Unpacking risk and resilience. *Human Development*, *65*(5–6), 293–310. https://doi.org/10.1159/000519631

Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Yazedjian, A., & Bámaca-Gómez, M. (2004). Developing the ethnic identity scale using Eriksonian and social identity perspectives. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, *4*, 9-38. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532706XID0401_2

UNHCR (1997). *Guidelines on policies and procedures in dealing with unaccompanied children seeking asylum.* Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR.

Brief Report on a Pilot Implementation of the *Identity Project* Intervention with Unaccompanied Immigrant Minors in Italy

Supplementary Material

Online Supplement Appendix A1

Cultural adaptation for unaccompanied immigrant minors

The cultural adaptation of an evidence-based intervention can be defined as the systematic modification of such intervention to make it compatible with the cultural patterns and meanings of the new context and/or of the new target group with whom the intervention is meant to be implemented (Barrera Jr et al., 2013; von Thiele Schwarz et al., 2018). The adaptation process aims at maintaining the efficacy of the original intervention while developing a version that aligns with the beliefs, worldviews, and norms of that particular context/target group (Sidani et al., 2017). Existing literature supports the importance of cultural adaptations, evidencing how adapted interventions show overall a higher efficacy as compared to non adapted ones, and also respond to a host of ethical and scientific purposes (Beelman et al., 2018; Hall et al., 2016; Perera et al., 2020).

Considering the unaccompanied immigrant minors (UIMs) target group, a cultural adaptation appeared especially relevant in terms of (i) specificity, i.e., taking into account values specific to their respective cultural groups, rather than imposing the ones shared by the Italian majority group; (ii) ecological validity, i.e., the possibility of generalizing the intervention to an underrepresented sample and tackling the dearth of efficacy studies conducted with minoritized groups; and (iii) feasibility, by promoting participants' engagement and responding to the ethical responsibility of providing equal access and the best possible intervention to everyone (Bernal et al., 2009).

Aligning with prior school-based adaptations in Europe (see Juang et al., 2022), our research team based the adaptation process of the *Identity Project* (IP) intervention for UIMs on two main frameworks. Overall, we complied with the best practices suggested by Knight et al. (2009), such as translating materials and procedures in participants' languages and considering their cultural contexts of origin to inform adaptation thanks to the collaboration with "representatives" of the new implementation contexts (i.e., UIMs, social workers, linguistic cultural mediators). More specifically, we followed a sequence of steps described in international guidelines regarding the adaptation of evidence-based interventions with minoritized groups (Barrera Jr & Castro, 2006). These steps are: 1) information gathering, 2) preliminary adaptation design, 3) preliminary adaptation test, 4) adaptation refinement, and 5) cultural adaptation trial. The last step is currently in progress, and therefore will not be described here.

Step 1: information gathering. The main goal of this step was to examine and compare the new target population and context (i.e., UIMs residing in residential care communities) with the ones of the previous Italian study (i.e., high school students with and without a migration background) to identify which components of the intervention required modifications. In addition to a literature search concerning UIMs' identity and developmental challenges throughout adolescence, we aimed to gather direct, qualitative feedback from potential participants and other professionals in the field.

To this end, in October 2022, we conducted two focus groups in Padua and Venice that involved n = 13 UIMs. The participants were male, aged between 16 and 18 years, and had been hosted within the reception system for a period ranging from 2 to 12 months. We selected only participants who spoke Arabic or Albanian based on the established inclusion criteria for our pilot study (see Method section in the manuscript), and those who participated in the adaptation phase focus groups did not take part in the pilot study. The focus groups were facilitated by two members of the research team (who then facilitated the IP sessions as well), with support from two linguistic cultural mediators, i.e., one for

each language. The questions addressed topics such as the participants' connectedness to their culture of origin, as well as their needs in daily life. Following a brief introduction to the project, opinions and suggestions concerning the proposed activities, their relevance, and potential modifications were collected.

In short, the exploration of one's own culture was deemed relevant, but also accompanied by an eagerness to explore Italian culture. The culture of origin remained important, and this connectedness was maintained through contact with the family of origin. Italian culture was relatively unfamiliar to the participants due to their condition of isolation from the majority peers. Furthermore, there was considerable interest in topics such as stereotypes and discrimination, together with a recognized need to make these discussions as practical as possible by proposing strategies to address discrimination and similar issues. Many participants were reluctant to discuss their families, with this tendency varying across cultural groups; for instance, Albanian and Kosovar youth exhibited a more positive attitude than North Africans, possibly due to conflicting experiences with their families of origin and cultural factors.

As a subsequent step, in November 2022, separate focus group with social workers (n = 12) and linguistic cultural mediators (n = 3) were conducted. Questions addressed UIMs' relationship with their culture, interethnic group dynamics, interpersonal relationships with peers in the housing facilities, and suggestions regarding project activities. Given the racist attitudes experienced by the linguistic cultural mediators in Italian society, as well as the "ethnic hierarchies" sometimes in place in the communities themselves, addressing topics of prejudice and discrimination within the IP appeared to be particularly relevant. This aimed not only to enhance the quality of intercultural relationships among UIMs, but also to provide tools to constructively address past, present, and potential future experiences of discrimination. Moreover, social workers emphasized the importance of minimizing abstraction, providing numerous examples and practical activities, and significantly simplifying the project as

compared to its original version designed for schools. In this regard, it appeared crucial to reduce written stimuli as much as possible, considering minors' potential reading difficulties.

Step 2: preliminary adaptation design. This step aimed to integrate all collected information to identify and develop relevant changes/edits, and involved the translation of all written materials used in the intervention. Hence, after collecting feedback from UIMs, social workers, and linguistic cultural mediators, we proceeded with both logistic and content-related modifications.

At the logistic level, we redefined the number of participants, group composition, duration and setting of the sessions. Specifically, participants were divided into small groups of 6-8 participants, as compared to the 20-25 students per class in the school-based version. Moreover, sessions were extended from 55 minutes (i.e., 1 school hour) to 1.5 hours. This allowed all participants to express themselves, enabled the inclusion of more practical activities that required more time to complete, and provided sufficient time for translation of each discussion into all necessary languages. In addition, differently from the classroom setting, this new implementation took place in a non-formal educational setting. For both locations (i.e., Padova and Venice), a private room in a social cooperative was chosen, as it was familiar to participants (e.g., they attended Italian classes there), but it was not part of one of the residential care communities they were living in. Finally, in addition to the participants and the 2 facilitators (who were members of the research team with a Psychology background), we included other professionals in the sessions: 2 linguistic cultural mediators (one for each language, i.e., Albanian and Arabic) and 1 social worker. The inclusion of the linguistic cultural mediators was essential not only to ensure that participants less proficient in Italian would understand the intervention content, but also to allow them to express themselves in their native languages with regard to personal and sensitive topics. Moreover, their bicultural and migration experience could serve as a point of reference for the minors undergoing the same process. As for the social worker, their active participation in the IP was

meant to provide a “representative” of Italian culture for the UIMs, as well as to encourage social workers themselves to reflect upon their cultural affiliations and connected feelings and attitudes toward different cultures.

In terms of content, the most significant changes concerned sessions 3, 5, 6, and 7. Session 3, which addressed the topic of discrimination, was restructured to be less theoretical and more experiential. We used the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology, an expressive-based therapy developed by Augusto Boal in the 1960s. This approach encourages participants to enact real-life events they have experienced, and then collaboratively explore potential strategies for changing those realities. In the case of the adapted IP for UIMs, real-life events concerned experiences of discrimination, lived first-hand or witnessed by participants, and adolescents were encouraged to think of and enact strategies for the victim(s), bystander(s), and perpetrator(s) to improve the outcomes of the situation. As regards sessions 5 and 6, that in the original intervention concerned respectively family relationships and the sharing of cultural symbols, we decided to reverse the order of the two sessions to allow for more time before addressing the potentially sensitive topic of family. In addition, in the “new” session 6, the focus shifted from family to interpersonal relationships. In the Italian school-based version, the activity involved using a tree to represent significant individuals within one's "family tree," with specific meanings assigned to the roots, trunk, and branches. In the adaptation for UIMs, we aimed to avoid the potentially sensitive connotations of family roots for those who had left their families in their home countries. To this end, we replaced the term “family” with “meaningful relationships.” Additionally, we substituted the symbol of the tree, which references roots and family, with the figure of the human body and the metaphor of the puzzle, emphasizing how the individual is influenced by the people around them. In this session, participants are invited to think about the people who contributed to the formation of their identity and relationship with meaningful cultural affiliations and include them as pieces of a puzzle in the figure of the human body, which represents them as

individuals. Finally, session 7 originally featured a video in which second-generation youth were interviewed about the evolution of their cultural identity over time. To better tailor the session to the specific target population, we created a new, shorter video (7 minutes compared to the original 15 minutes) comprising interviews with two first-generation immigrant youth: one boy who had moved from Afghanistan to Italy, and one boy who had moved from Italy to the UK. These individuals reflected upon their migration experiences and the cultural differences encountered, and how these aspects shaped the way they viewed themselves and their sense of belonging toward their heritage vs host culture. Additionally, we introduced a more practical activity by asking participants, at the end of the video, to create a timeline highlighting changes in their cultural identity before and after migrating to a new country.

As part of the preliminary adaptation design phase, the translation of self-report measures assessing our variables of interest in Albanian and Arabic was also carried out by linguistic cultural mediators, with the support of members of the research team, using standard translation-backtranslation techniques. To prevent participants' fatigue and facilitate survey comprehension and completion, linguistic cultural mediators were invited to simplify the phrasing of items. The survey was also shared with social workers to obtain their approval with respect to the topics addressed.

Steps 3-4: preliminary adaptation test. These steps, which are described in the current study (see manuscript), include the implementation of a pilot study and collection of feedback to evaluate the intervention's feasibility and inform possible changes/refinements. Pilot studies are an effective tool to field-test the key logistics (e.g., data collection, recruitment and consent procedure) of a prospective study, especially randomized controlled or clinical trials (Kistin & Silverstein, 2015). They represent an opportunity to understand potential barriers and facilitators to intervention implementation, and consequently address and/or integrate these aspects into the study planning and design (Pearson et al., 2020). Indeed, carrying out a randomized controlled trial without a preliminary implementation may

seriously undermine the results due to unforeseen difficulties related to the design or acceptability of the intervention (Kistin & Silverstein, 2015). In this perspective, pilot studies encompass the main function of feasibility studies (i.e., addressing the question of whether the study at issue can be done and how), but they might also highlight the need to add a specific design feature (i.e., conducting a future study on a smaller scale; Eldridge et al., 2016). More detailed information regarding the feedback collected by participants, social workers, and linguistic cultural mediators after intervention end, together with suggestions for further changes, can be found in the Results and Discussion sections of the manuscript.

References

Barrera Jr, M., & Castro, F. G. (2006). A heuristic framework for the cultural adaptation of interventions. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, *13*(4), 311–316. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2850.2006.00043.x

Barrera Jr, M., Castro, F. G., Strycker, L. A., & Toobert, D. J. (2013). Cultural adaptations of behavioral health interventions: A progress report. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *81*, 196 –205. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027085

Beelmann, A., Malti, T., Noam, G. G., & Sommer, S. (2018). Innovation and integrity: Desiderata and future directions for prevention and intervention science. *Prevention Science*, *19*, 358-365. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-018-0869-6

Bernal, G., Jiménez-Chafey, M. I., & Domenech Rodríguez, M. M. (2009). Cultural adaptation of treatments: A resource for considering culture in evidence-based practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *40*(4), 361- 368. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016401

Eldridge, S. M., Lancaster, G. A., Campbell, M. J., Thabane, L., Hopewell, S., Coleman, C. L., & Bond, C. M. (2016). Defining feasibility and pilot studies in preparation for randomised controlled trials: development of a conceptual framework. *PloS one*, *11*(3), e0150205. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0150205

Hall, G. C. N., Ibaraki, A. Y., Huang, E. R., Marti, C. N., & Stice, E. (2016). A meta-analysis of cultural adaptations of psychological interventions. *Behavior Therapy*, *47*(6), 993-1014. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2016.09.005

Juang, L. P., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Schachner, M. K., Frisén, A., Hwang, C. P., Moscardino, U., Motti-Stefanidi, M., Oppedal, B., Pavlopoulos, V., Abdullahi, A. K., Barahona, R., Berne, S., Ceccon, C., Gharaei, N., Moffitt, U., Ntalachanis, A., Pevec, S., Sandberg, D. J., Zacharia, A., & Syed, M. (2022). Ethnic-racial identity in Europe: Adapting the identity project intervention in five

countries. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 1-29. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2022.2131520

Kistin, C., & Silverstein, M. (2015). Pilot studies: a critical but potentially misused component of interventional research. *Jama*, *314*(15), 1561-1562. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2015.10962

Knight, G. P., Roosa, M. W., & Umaña-Taylor, A. J. (2009). *Methodological challenges in studying ethnic minority or economically disadvantaged populations*. American Psychological Association.

Pearson, N., Naylor, P. J., Ashe, M. C., Fernandez, M., Yoong, S. L., & Wolfenden, L. (2020). Guidance for conducting feasibility and pilot studies for implementation trials. *Pilot and Feasibility Studies*, *6*, 167. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40814-020-00634-w

Perera, C., Salamanca-Sanabria, A., Caballero-Bernal, J., Feldman, L., Hansen, M., Bird, M., Hansen, P., Dinesen, C., Wiedemann, N., & Vallières, F. (2020). No implementation without cultural adaptation: a process for culturally adapting low-intensity psychological interventions in humanitarian settings. *Conflict and Health*, *14*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-00290-0

Sidani, S., Ibrahim, S., Lok, J., Fan, L., Fox, M., & Guruge, S. (2017). An Integrated Strategy for the Cultural Adaptation of Evidence-Based Interventions. *Health*, *9*, 738-755. https://doi.org/10.4236/health.2017.94053

von Thiele Schwarz, U., Förberg, U., Sundell, K., & Hasson, H. (2018). Colliding ideals–an interview study of how intervention researchers address adherence and adaptations in replication studies. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *18*, 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0496-8

Online Supplement Appendix A2
Sample characteristics

Table 1. Sample characteristics, *N* = 31.

	n	**%**	
Country of origin			
Albania	11	35.48%	
Egypt	7	22.58%	
Kosovo	6	19.36%	
Tunisia	5	16.13%	
Morocco	2	6.45%	
Religion			
Muslim	30	96.77%	
Christian (catholic)	1	3.23%	
Educational level			
No education	1	3.23%	
Attended or completed primary school	4	12.90%	
Attended or completed middle school	24	77.42%	
Attended or completed high school	2	6.45%	
Occupational status			
No occupation	1	3.23%	
Student	24	77.42%	
Student and intern/worker	5	16.13%	
Intern/worker	1	3.23%	
Time since arrival in residential care community (months)	5.68	4.79	1-18

Online Supplement Appendix A3
Correlations and descriptive statistics for study variables

Table 2. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Exploration T1		.21	.12	.48**	-.02	.40	-.07	-.01
2. Exploration T2			.05	.34	.24	.04	-.20	.22
3. Exploration T3				-.42	-.27	.42*	-.09	-.25
4. Resolution T1					.46*	.14	.23	.48**
5. Resolution T2						.27	.16	.43*
6. Resolution T3							.22	.41
7. Time since arrival in residential care community (months)								.09
8. Age								
M	2.78	2.96	2.59	3.46	3.48	3.51	5.68	16.65
(SD)	(0.64)	(0.55)	(0.52)	(0.48)	(0.54)	(0.56)	(4.79)	(0.76)

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Note. $N = 31$ for correlations among variables assessed at T1 (i.e., exploration T1, resolution T1, time since arrival in residential care community, age); $n = 27$ for correlations including variables assessed at T2 (i.e., exploration T2, resolution T2); $n = 22$ for correlations including variables assessed at T3 (i.e., exploration T3, resolution T3).