CHAPTER FOUR

A BRICK IN THE WALL:
REFLECTIONS ON RELATIONAL ETHICS

TORUNN FLADSTAD

The objects of our inquiry are not neutrons, protons, and quarks; they are people whom we come to know through the trust they give us.

(Langness and Frank 1991: 6)

What are the needs in life of unaccompanied refugee minors, and what do they themselves define as their needs? I will highlight these questions by listening to Mohammed1 and his reflections on experiences and needs. Mohammed’s story about his life refers to trauma in Afghanistan, experiences on the long and dangerous journey, the waiting-time in different reception centres in Norway, and stressors in daily life as an unaccompanied minor. His focus is on how he tries to cope in everyday life, and what kind of support he needs. Though neither exhaustive nor valid for all unaccompanied minors, these are Mohammed’s reflections on his needs in life.

In the following discussion, Mohammed’s story forms the basis for my reflections on relationships and ethical dilemmas. The focus will be the relationship between ‘informant’ and ‘researcher’, ‘unaccompanied minor’ and ‘senior advisor’, Mohammed and me, through a contact that has lasted over two years. As a researcher I met Mohammed several times during 2012–2013, and asked him to tell me about his life. 2 As a senior advisor at RVTS South, I am project manager for a programme for competency-raising in several municipalities. 3 In addition, the contact with Mohammed has affected me as a human being. I have become involved as researcher, as senior advisor and as friend.

What I want to discuss is the following: Are these multiple relationships a problem? Or might it be the other way around: a resource both for Mohammed and for me? Mohammed’s story is the starting point here, and our relationship placed me far from the research ideal of ‘neutral observation’. In the following I will use the story about Mohammed and my relationship with him as a concrete reference point for some ethical reflections.

Mohammed

Mohammed says that he had to escape from Afghanistan and the Taliban, and that he had heard of Europe, where there was peace, freedom and justice. But when he first set foot on European soil, things were not quite like that. He arrived in Greece. He was imprisoned, beaten and abused, by the police and by members of the public. He was hungry. He needed a place to sleep. And he felt that he had no other option than to continue the flight. Italy turned out no better. Moving on, he eventually came to Norway.

After arrival in Norway he lived in various state reception centres for asylum-seekers. First in a transit centre for unaccompanied minors, then he was moved to an ordinary refugee centre for adults. Looking back, he tells about a difficult time at this centre, in what has been called ‘the waiting room for the welfare state’ (Justisdepartement, 2011). ‘They did not see us as human beings’: Mohammed explains that he felt un-cared for; his needs were not seen and met. He experienced being treated as ‘second-hand’, a second-class citizen. And there was so much focus on age: testing of teeth and hands to determine whether he was over or under 18 years of age. The testing was inconclusive. His teeth showed that he was over 18 years and his hands showed that he was less than 18. Or was it the other way round? He can’t remember what was over or under the critical age limit set by the government. First it was decided that Mohammed was over 18 years. His guardian intervened. Then it was decided that he was under 18. Mohammed was transferred to a reception centre for unaccompanied minors. The time in the reception centres, waiting for a decision on his application for asylum, was tough. Mohammed describes the experience:

We did not come here so that they could determine our age; we came because we have problems! I had problems, and it was

1 Pseudonym.
2 These interviews are part of a longitudinal study of Afghan unaccompanied refugee minors in Norway and Belgium (RBUP, ISF, RVTS South and Ghent University).
3 Southern Norway Regional Trauma Competency Centre.
Not age that was my problem. No one cared about us. They did not ask what kind of problems we had. No one was willing to listen to me.

But Mohammed was one of the ‘lucky ones’. He received a positive response to his application for asylum – which meant permission to stay in Norway and resettlement in a municipality. But there still remain many challenges in his life. He describes various health problems, related to problems with sleeping, nightmares and concentration. It can be hard to get up and go to school after a sleepless night, he says. But school is important for him, so even after nights with little or no sleep, he goes to school. When we meet I ask him how he is, and he usually answers: ‘Up and down’, or ‘there are good days and bad days’. Mohammed says that when he is depressed, he thinks a lot about his family in Afghanistan. He has no contact with them, and does not know anything about what has happened to them. Four years have passed without hearing from his family, and Mohammed worries about them – his mother and brothers. His father is dead. He does not want to try to get in touch with his mother and little brothers, because he thinks there can be a risk of putting their lives in danger. But sometimes the memories and worries create a pain inside him that is more than he can endure. He needs an outlet for the pain, he tells me, and describes how he can end up banging his head or his fists against the wall, or using a knife to cut his arms. Sometimes he exercises or plays football, and he hopes his body will get so tired that it will give him some peace, enabling him to rest. Some nights he feels overwhelmed by worries, he tells me. He turns over and over in bed, feeling restless and worried, and can’t calm down enough to fall asleep. Painful memories arise, and nightmares. In the daytime he is tired. Concentration is hard. He worries – and he is afraid of not being able to cope with life in Norway.

‘I have to do everything by myself, and it is too hard for me’, says Mohammed. And he compares himself with Norwegian youth:

Norwegian young people have a wall. By that I mean someone you can count on – the family – a society they have grown up in, where they feel secure and confident with the cultural codes – where they have someone to ‘lean on’. I must make the wall for myself.

He feels the burden of having to cope with everything by himself. He talks about school and the education he wants, and he worries about money. And he talks about his responsibility to be in motion, to have a goal and progress towards that goal. But he knows that he also needs support to cope in Norway; some bricks are lacking in his wall. The accommodation for unaccompanied minors where he now lives is important to his experience of safety. Religion and faith in God are also an important piece of this wall for Mohammed. ‘And if you are moving, progressing, then God will be there to support you’, he explains, referring to the Koran.

‘If you want to, you can! I believe that is true’, Mohammed says. But he also speaks a lot about his experience of how fragile life is, and the importance of someone caring – caring about him. In one of our conversations, he picks up his phone, to show me a short film cut that his guardian shared with him on Facebook. He starts a film called ‘Stop killing Muslims’. The film starts with a music track and a child’s voice is added. We can see people – children who are afraid, crying, in war situations. There are explosions and fires. And we hear a child’s voice urgently requesting this to stop. Mohammed tells me that the child’s voice could have been his. And when his guardian shares this film with him, he feels that she is showing that she understands what he has experienced in the past and how he is today. ‘She cares about me’, says Mohammed.

Mohammed tells me that he had frequent contact with his guardian when he lived in reception centres. It was an extremely difficult time, and he felt that no one else was interested in him and his problems. But the guardian kept in touch with him, and she still does, even now that he has been granted residence, lives in a municipality and is over 18 years of age. She is still accessible to him on ‘Free Family’ (phone calls for free) from another part of the country. They talk together about once a week now, says Mohammed. Sometimes he visits her and stays in her home during school holidays. And when they talk on the phone, sometimes she walks around in the house and tells him: ‘Now I am standing in your room.’ So Mohammed knows that he has a place in her home, and in her life. She also says that the relationship and friendship with Mohammed in many ways also has impacted on her perspective on life. For Mohammed this guardian is an important brick in the wall he is trying to build here in Norway: ‘When I am sad and talk with her, it helps me a lot’, he explains.

Mohammed is very much concerned about getting integrated into Norwegian society. He wants to be a part of Norwegian society, he wants to help and to be useful, his aspirations are high; but at the same time he is also terrified of the possibility of ‘ending at the very edge of society’ and ‘not achieving my goals’. He is afraid that everything can go to pieces. Life is and feels fragile. The guardian, and other people, can make a difference.

**Making a difference**

In the winter of 2013 I am on my way to Oslo on a work assignment with the team leader at RVTS South. We are driving along when the phone rings. It is Mohammed. The connection is unstable and unclear, but I hear the clear

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4 Religion as a resource is the theme of the last chapter in this volume (Overland).
desperation in his voice, and he asks me for help. I agree to call him back in the evening, to get a better understanding of what it is all about and how he thinks I can contribute. My team leader reminds me to be careful and not to confuse my many and various roles in working with unaccompanied minors. Arriving in Oslo I call Mohammed, and he tells me that he can’t sleep at nights and is unable to concentrate at school. For the first time since resettlement in the municipality, he could not get up in the morning and go to school, because he was completely exhausted after several nights with no sleep. He worries about the future, thinks a lot about problems, feels insecure, and his mental health is getting worse. He tells me that the pain inside him was so intense and needed an outlet, so he took a knife and cut his arm. Mohammed says he is afraid of “losing the chance to achieve my goals. I need help to be active in society!” The reason for his despair was a meeting with the childcare administration in his new municipality. After the meeting Mohammed was convinced that he would have to move out from the accommodation for unaccompanied minors, as he will soon turn 20.

In the time that followed, I stayed in contact with Mohammed by telephone. He also mobilised his guardian, therapist and his special contact in the accommodation for unaccompanied minors. A meeting was arranged in the municipality where he lives. He wanted me to attend this meeting and explain his experience of the situation and his fear of not getting the necessary support.

Mohammed and I met before this meeting, so that he could explain in greater depth what this kind of decision meant for him. He explains that the uncertainty created around the housing situation threatens his experience of safety. Nightmares are so strong and can be totally paralysing, so he needs someone there, night and day. His aspirations are high, both concerning education and getting a job where he can be in position to help others. He wants to study at university, he wants to take part in and be useful in the society in which he now lives. Integration in Norwegian society is important for Mohammed, and he has expectations as to his own contribution. But now he is very worried and has many ‘bad thoughts’. Quietly he tells me that if the turmoil and pain become stronger, he is afraid he will not be able to stop inflicting harm on himself.

At the meeting I argued, among other things, that a decision concerning the housing-arrangement for Mohammed in this situation was a question that related to mental health. Afterwards, when I asked him how he experienced the involvement of others and myself, in clarifying his housing situation, he replied: ‘It was good! I felt that someone cares for me, in a way.’

Relational Ethics

When Mohammed called me in despair and asked for help, not intervening was really not an option for me. I felt obliged to do so, and I wanted to. I wanted to be a brick in that wall he is building, and I wanted to support him. Both my wish and obligation to support him were strongly felt, so I went, as his friend, to the meeting and explained what he needed in order to feel safe. It was an explanation of his experience of safety, not of what others define as ‘safe enough’, and what he defines as necessary in life, for the wall he needs in order to succeed in building a new life in Norway (see e.g. Bath, 2008). And because of the trust he puts in me, and my belief that I could make a difference, that I could be a little brick in the wall he builds, I experienced an emotional obligation to act. For me, Mohammed means a lot more than an informant who provides interesting data. I think my relationship to my ‘informant’ is rather like what McBeth describes: ‘Essie is not the object of my study, but the subject of our collaboration, and she is also my friend’ (in Bretell, 1993: 162).

Our relations are the pivotal point, relations that are both instrumental and emotional, and because of that, trust and feelings of commitment will be a central part. Langness and Frank (1981) highlight the foundations for this feeling of commitment and obligation:

Maybe nobody ever will have the understanding that you have of this person and his or her situation, and maybe nobody will be in a role to make constructive change. And if you don’t grasp the opportunity, it’s going to be lost. But you only feel the obligation if there is a close relationship (Frank 1980, cited in Langness and Frank, 1981: 133).

In this research project and longitudinal study of Afghan unaccompanied refugee minors, I think the method we use is illuminating for some ethical issues and reflections. I have been doing follow-up studies of four Afghan boys over two years. We have met several times, and gradually these meetings create relationships of trust. In trying to grasp what is pivotal to them, trust is also instrumental in creating enough openness to collect good and relevant data. In this kind of researcher–participant relationship, it is not uncommon to feel an obligation to give something back, to show oneself worthy of trust. But mutual trust, reciprocal obligation and closeness in relations – these are far from the positivist ideal of the distant and neutral observer. These themes are essential for reflexivity, both in relation to what and how and we constitute data, and for ethical considerations concerning these multifaceted and complex relations.6

Ethical issues concerning this kind of longitudinal method have been discussed with reference to what has been called relational ethics:

5 Gaurbye (2013) has discussed the roles of researchers in refugee’s lives in more depth.
Vervliet describes the complexity in this kind of research, since it was because of the duration of the relationships and the mutual bonds that the various appeals emerged and the need to respond felt so strong. The connectedness intensifies the emotions we experience when confronted with participants’ problems. And there is a situation of reciprocity when we as researchers are dependent on creating such mutual bonds because these bonds are also functional for conducting research, since continued participation and enough openness can yield good, relevant data. So the wish to give something back to unaccompanied minors, to meet their appeals and needs, to demonstrate that we as both researchers and human beings are worthy of their trust, is quite understandable and relevant as a kind of data in itself. But we have to invite our readers to join in this kind of empathic research process. We have to write in such a way that the readers can follow us in the steps and considerations we make.

In addition to ethical issues concerning method, there are ethical questions regarding the specific situation for unaccompanied refugee children. They are alone, young and separated from their parents, they have experienced hardships in their lives – in their homelands, in fleeing and in exile, and this intensifies our feelings of responsibility for them. They need care, as all youngsters do. Mohammed, like my own sons at the same age, needs someone who cares, and cares for him. And when we as researchers, as advisors and human beings learn that the needs of children and young people are not being met, and their rights are not being fully respected, we should and have to act. On several occasions this is just what I have done. Here it is important to stress that my aim is not to ‘take over’ the agency of the unaccompanied refugee minors, but rather to be of support.

The focus in this research project is the lived experiences of the unaccompanied Afghan refugee minors: their conceptualisations of life today and aspirations for the future. As researchers we try to understand the world from the point of view of the Afghan boys we meet. Not to treat refugee children as a homogeneous category, but to try to understand how individuals like Mohammed try to find sense and make choices, and to support them in their life-projects and what they need in order to fulfil their goals in life, is an obligation for us – as researchers, as various kinds of helpers and as human beings.

The balancing act between being a researcher, or an advisor, and a responsible and empathic human being will be a continuous and ongoing process. There is no definite answer to what is right and what is wrong. Some researchers or practitioners may be so narrowly ‘professional’ that they fail to realise their potential to intervene (see Introduction). But it can also be the other way around: we may lose our trustworthiness as professionals if we intervene too much. It is a balancing act and a process:

The concrete interpretation of our responsibility is not fixed; we should decide on this ourselves. This implies a continuous, active process of searching and negotiation: what are ‘good’ actions, and for whom; and what are the boundaries of our responsibilities? (Vervliet 2013: 208)

This responsibility will be at various different levels: in relation to Mohammed and the unaccompanied refugee minors we meet, but also at a political level, to highlight the rights and needs of refugee children. Research and work in this field are indeed political.

Political, yes – but also personal: Langness and Frank (1981) argue that, through the work of writing about lives, we can humanise ourselves.

The acts of empathy that arise in attempting to understand the reality of people sometimes very different from ourselves can be a transformative process (…) Such an empathic perspective on the world today may be of benefit in the face of narrowly defined sectarian interests’ (ibid: 154).

In the writings of the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1982), who worked on life histories among elderly Jews in the USA, this kind of research method is described as an exercise in patience and reflectiveness, in listening and continual selection – and it is a transformative process for ourselves.

In the trauma literature, there are many writings about secondary traumatisation: the burden of closeness to traumatised human beings. This is not an attempt to underestimate the burden, but could the converse also be true? Can we speak of a secondary transformative process of growth, a secondary PTG? In Myerhoffs’ vocabulary, working with lives and life histories, gives us as researchers possibilities to develop our human potential. This is ‘work in moral development’, an exercise in listening, patience and reflexivity: ‘We know it is a learning tool. We know it is therapeutic. We know it is profoundly validating. We know it makes for human connections’ (Myerhoff, cited in Langness and Frank 1981: 155).

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6 PTG (Post traumatic growth) is characterized as positive personal change after experiences of difficult events that challenge previous assumptions about the world. (Siqveland, Hafstad & Tedeschi, 2012; Sandvik, 2012.). In the literature this can be related to aspects like relationships with others, increased confidence in one’s own skills, spiritual development, appreciation of life and attention to new opportunities.
By telling about his life and sharing his life experiences, Mohammed wants to make a difference and contribute to the lives of others:

Mohammed: ‘If I tell and you write; if something happens then it’s fine.’
Me: ‘If it helps someone, it’s fine?’
Mohammed: ‘Yes!’

For my part, I know that I have learnt a lot from Mohammed.

References
