# Reconstructing Social Networks:
## The Importance of Friends and Family in the Acculturation of Unaccompanied Minors

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**Acknowledgements**

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## ABSTRACT

The main goal of this study was to explore how social network variables and social skills influence acculturation in a group of immigrants who came to Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. Acculturation, as measured by ethnic and host culture competence, is seen as a resource for the individual, and a necessity in order to be successful and have a sense of belonging in a given culture. Sixty-two youth who came to Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (UMAs) between the years 2000-2006 were recruited from 10 municipalities in Norway. The participants completed the questionnaire in group sessions in their local communities. In accordance with assumptions, analyses revealed relatively strong relationships between culture competence, social network variables and social skills. The study confirmed prior findings of an association between ethnic culture competence and relationships with peers of the same ethnical background. In contrast, the finding that the acquisition of host culture competence was dependent on number of Norwegian friends and social support from family abroad contradicted earlier findings. Social skills significantly predicted both ethnic and host culture competence. The results indicate that social skills are an important factor in acculturation, and that social networks may be of varying importance for different groups of immigrants in the acquisition of culture competence. Future studies should include this approach in longitudinal studies with larger samples to test whether the findings can be confirmed.

**INTRODUCTION**

Migration entails both voluntary and involuntary movement. It includes people who move to other countries to study or work, people who move to reunite with family that have migrated in the past, and refugees and asylum seekers. In 2005, there were 191 million international migrants globally with 34 per cent residing in Europe (United Nations, 2006), not counting children born in the country their parents have migrated to, so called $2^{nd}$ generation immigrants. In Norway, immigrants make up 8% of the population and they originate from over 200 different nations (Statistics Norway [SSB], 2006).

In a report produced by The Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM), the researchers concluded that the international community has failed to realize the potential of migration and solve the challenges associated with international migration. These challenges concern for instance the negative image of immigrants projected by politicians and the media, discrimination in the labour and housing markets, and racism (GCIM, 2005). The commission acknowledges the complexity of successfully integrating migrants, but stresses its importance and points to possible and actual consequences of integration failure. An extreme example of such a consequence is for instance the riots by immigrant youth in a suburb of Paris in 2005.

A small proportion of migrants constitute minors who have migrated without care of their parents or another adult. This thesis studies the adaptation of these youth, who came to Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (hereafter referred to as UMAs), and specifically to what extent social networks and social skills aid them in the adaptation to the Norwegian culture and society. It needs to be stressed that the youth in this study are no longer asylum seekers, as they have all been granted residence in Norway. The youth have been granted residence on varying basis and thus there is no one concept that encompasses all, and hence for the sake of simplicity I will refer to these youth as UMAs.

**Unaccompanied Minor Asylum Seekers in Norway**

An unaccompanied minor asylum seeker (UMA) is an "asylum seeker or refugee under 18 years of age who has no parents or others with parental responsibility in Norway" (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration [UDI], 2006a). Norway hence has a broader definition for unaccompanied children than that of the UN, which states that unaccompanied minors are those that are separated from both parents and relatives and is not under care from an adult (UNHCR, 2006). In 2003, 5.9% of those seeking asylum in Norway were unaccompanied

minors (UNHCR, 2004).The term asylum seeker refers to a person who, on his/her own initiative, seeks protection and recognition as a refugee; whereas a refugee is a person who has been granted asylum, protection or residence based on humanitarian grounds (UDI, 2006a). In the period 2000-2006, 4022 UMAs came to Norway, with a peak in 2003 with 916 UMA arrivals (UDI, 2007). Since then there has been an annual decrease in the number of arrivals, with 349 UMAs arriving in 2006 (UDI, 2007). The decline in minors seeking asylum is largely a reflection of the drop in the total number of asylum claims (UNHCR, 2004). However it could also be a reflection of the more accurate and reliable age assessment procedures implemented in the last few years (UDI, 2005). The majority of the UMAs originate from Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan (UDI, 2006b) and are between 16 and 18 years of age when they arrive in Norway (Ramin-Osmundsen, 2005). Around 70-80 % of the UMAs are boys, and this is partly due to the fact that in some conflict situations boys are more often in danger than girls. Additionally, in many cultures boys are ranked higher than girls, and it is also considered safer for boys to travel unaccompanied. Migration motivations include war, riots, famine, and other disasters (UDI, 2005). Some are also victims of human trafficking (IMDi, 2006).

When an UMA arrive in Norway he or she is placed in an asylum centre pending the decision on the asylum application. Many end up staying in the asylum centre for several months, even years, while their application is pending (PRESS, 2007). While in the asylum centre the youth attend language-classes to learn Norwegian, before they are enrolled in the Norwegian education system. Once the UMA has been granted residence, he or she is placed in a municipality and the authorities in the given municipality are now responsible for the settlement and care of the UMA. There are between-municipality differences in terms of settlement policies for the UMAs. The child services or the refugee office conduct individual assessment of the UMAs to find a residence suited to their needs. Some municipalities do not have government-funded living facilities and hence only grant residence to those UMAs who have family living in the municipality, and who can take them in. Those UMAs who do not have family in Norway, or do not wish to live with family, are placed in institutions, or share a living facility with other UMAs, or they live alone. In some rare cases they are placed in foster care, either with a Norwegian family or a family with the same ethnic background as the youth.

In terms of the ethnic composition in Norway, there are large differences between the municipalities in which the UMAs reside. In Oslo, 23% of the population consists of immigrants, as compared to the majority of other municipalities in Norway which have

between 0-6% immigrants (SSB, 2006). The access to ethnic communities is thus larger in Oslo than in the rest of Norway.

## Acculturation

The study of acculturation phenomena has increased over the last fifty years in line with the ongoing migration of people in the world. The definition of acculturation most widely cited today by researchers in psychology was proposed by Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits in 1936: "Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (as cited in Berry, 1997:7). At the group level acculturation could be changes in the social structure of the group or the group's political organization, whereas at the individual level acculturation is a change in the psychology of the individual, for instance in attitudes and cultural identity (Berry, 1997). Acculturation is a dynamic process between the individual and context, and thus an individual's adaptation to a new culture is in addition to personal factors dependent on aspects of the context and society of settlement (Berry, 1997).

Acculturation has formerly by many researchers been defined as a unidimensional construct (e.g., Cuèllar, Harris, & Jaso, 1980; Gordon, 1995), implying that individuals move along a single continuum ranging from exclusively heritage culture to exclusively mainstream culture (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000). Extensive criticism of the limitations of unidimensional models have led to the development of bidimensional models to reflect that maintenance and acquisition of cultural competence in the two cultures are separate processes (e.g., Berry, 1997; Ryder et al., 2000; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999), and most researchers today adhere to studying acculturation as a bidimensional construct.

Seeking to understand which factors contribute to the adaption to a new culture, Searle and Ward (1990) have suggested a distinction between psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation. Whereas psychological adaptation refers to psychological or emotional well-being and satisfaction during cross-cultural transition, sociocultural adaptation concerns the acquisition of culture appropriate skills needed to function and thrive in a specific culture. Although the two constructs have been demonstrated to be conceptually related, they derive from different theoretical foundations and are predicted by different variables (Ward & Kennedy, 1993b).

Berry & Sam (1997) point to the importance of migration voluntariness, mobility, and permanence of individuals and groups, and the effect this could have on the acculturation process. As opposed to for instance work immigrants who have voluntarily migrated, for refugees and asylum seekers migration is usually involuntary and may involve traumatic experiences and loss of material possessions, culture and social networks. Their future in the new country is uncertain, as they don't know if they will be granted residence in the new society, whether they will be sent back to their native country or need to seek refuge somewhere else. Refugee research has mainly focused on premigration stressors and their influence on the adaptation process and mental health outcomes (e.g., Dube, 1968; Kinzie, Sack, Angell, Manson, & Rath, 1986; Sack, Clarke, Seeley, 1995). In spite of this focus, researchers today recognize that refugees face many of the same intercultural issues as immigrants and sojourners (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). With regards to UMAs it is believed that these youth are at increased psychological risk, both due to the separation from their parents and family and experience of trauma, but also due to their age at the time of migration (Ressler, Boothby, & Steinbock, 1988).

In terms of gender differences in acculturation, evidence so far is inconclusive. Females are often considered cultural bearers as they through child rearing are responsible for the survival of their traditional culture (Sam, 2006). However, researchers have also suggested that especially younger females distance themselves from the traditional gender inequalities of their heritage culture and score high on host identification (Stevens et al., 2004). Indeed, Oppedal and colleagues (2004) found no gender differences in host culture competence, and in another study reported that boys scored higher on ethnic culture competence and family values compared to girls, in both first and second generation immigrant youth (Oppedal et al., 2005). Other researchers have reported gender differences in for instance school adjustment, behaviour problems (e.g., Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006b), mental health problems (e.g., Liebkind, 1993), ethnic identity crisis, discrimination (Oppedal, Røysamb, & Sam, 2004), and level of acculturation (Orozco & Lukas, 2000), whereas others have not reported such gender differences (e.g., Nesdale, Rooney, & Smith, 1997, as cited in Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001; Neto, 2002b).

*Theoretical approaches to the study of acculturation*

Research on acculturation is dominated by three major theoretical and empirical approaches: Stress and coping (affective), culture learning (behavioural), and social identification (cognitive), also termed the A, B, C of acculturation (Ward, 2001). A major focus in acculturation research has been to identify and categorize individuals based on how they score on the host- and ethnic dimensions.

*Stress and coping*

Within the framework of stress and coping, researchers focus on the psychological adaptation and well-being of the acculturating individuals. Acculturation is seen as a stressful experience and researchers search to identify which factors may foster or inhibit psychological adaptation. Within this framework, life changes, personality and social support variables have been linked to psychological adaptation (e.g., Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Searle & Ward, 1990). The pioneering work of Berry (1997) has been widely applied within this framework. Berry argues that immigrants' acculturation strategies can be evaluated in terms of their attitudes and behaviors towards two issues: maintenance of their cultural origin ('is it considered to be of value to maintain one's identity and characteristics?'), and the extent to which they should participate in the new host-culture ('is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with larger society?') (Berry, 1997). Based on the attitudes towards these issues, Berry (1997) has suggested four possible acculturation strategies that the individual can pursue in the acculturation process: assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization. *Assimilation* is the term used for people who adopt the customs of the new culture and don't wish to maintain their own cultural identity. *Integration* is a strategy where the person seeks to maintain contact with the cultural origin, while at the same time participating in the new culture. *Separation* is to an extent the opposite of assimilation, in that the individual holds on to the original culture and tries to avoid contact with people of other cultures. *Marginalization* implies a lack of desire to participate in either culture and the individual distances him-/herself from both the original culture and the new culture.

In an international study of 8000 youth residing in 13 different countries, results showed that the ethnic composition in the neighbourhood was associated with acculturation attitudes, with less support for integration and higher separation scores among adolescents living in neighbourhoods where almost everyone belonged to the same ethnic group, as compared to adolescents living in more ethnically diverse neighbourhoods (Berry et al., 2006b).

The acculturation strategies have been widely studied in terms of which proves most adaptive, usually with regards to psychological well-being (e.g. Kosic, 2002; Kosic, Mannetti, & Sam, 2006; Neto, 2002a; Sam, 1998; Zheng & Berry, 1991). The results indicate that integration usually is the most successful, followed by assimilation and separation, and marginalisation as the least successful. Although Berry's strategies have been widely accepted and applied by acculturation researchers, there has also been criticism as to the application value and measurement of these strategies (e.g., Lazarus, 1997; Oppedal, 2006; Rudmin, 1989, as cited in Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999; Rudmin & Ahmadzadeh, 2001; Schönpflug, 1997).

*Culture learning*

The culture learning framework is based on the assumption that adaptation problems arise due to difficulties with managing everyday social encounters (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). It is argued that adaptation comes in the form of learning the culture-specific skills necessary to thrive in a new culture (Ward et al., 2001). Within this framework, one focus of research has been on the cultural differences in rules and conventions that govern interpersonal behaviour and how this affects the acculturation process. Research studies have shown that the greater the distance between the cultures, the harder the acculturation process is (e.g., Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Ward & Kennedy, 1993b; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). A related focus is on the skills associated with sociocultural adaptation. For instance, host language ability is associated with less social adaptation problems (e.g., Neto, 2002b; Ward & Kennedy, 1993a) and increased interaction with members of the host culture (J. E. Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1966, as cited in Ward, 2001). It has been suggested that the relationship between language- and communication competence and social interaction is reciprocal, in that host language proficiency is essential to interact with host members and that this interaction again leads to increased language competence (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Bochner (1982) has argued that culture learning is a direct function of the number of friends from the host culture an individual has.

In terms of changes in sociocultural adaptation over time, research has shown that it typically follows a learning curve, with a marked increase between 1 and 6 months of residence and only slight improvement in the next six months (Ward & Kennedy, 1996; Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998).

*Social identification*

Within the social identification framework, the focus of research is on social identification and ethnic identity, and the processes involved in developing, changing and maintaining ethnic identity as well as the cognitive outcomes of ethnic identity and intergroup perceptions (Ward, 2001). Ethnic identity is a subjective sense of belonging to a group or culture (Phinney, 2003). Today, most researchers acknowledge that individuals can identify themselves with both the culture of origin and the host culture (Phinney, 2003). Research results show that individuals can identify themselves with both the national and the ethnic culture and thus have bicultural identities, and that bicultural individuals don't necessarily have a weaker sense of ethnic identity, as compared to individuals who only identify with the ethnic culture (e.g., Cuèllar, Nyberg, Maldonado, & Roberts, 1997). Studies have shown that ethnic language proficiency and interaction with ethnic peers is positively associated with ethnic identity (e.g., Berry et al., 2006a; Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001). Some researchers have incorporated the framework of Berry (1997) in the study of ethnic identity and acculturation and have suggested different types of profiles of acculturation (Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006).

When reviewing these theoretical approaches to the study of acculturation it becomes evident that the main focus is on adult migrants. The question then is; can these theories be applied to the study of children and youth? The bulk of acculturation research involves adult participants, but many researchers are now devoting attention to studying the acculturation of youth (e.g. Berry et al., 2006b; Neto, 2002a; Oppedal et al., 2004; Oppedal, Røysamb, & Heyerdahl, 2005; Sam, 1998; Stevens, Pels, Volleberg, & Crijnen, 2004). However, most studies are just an extension of the studies done on adults; in that they apply the same theories that have been developed on the basis of findings from studies on adults and "test whether these findings can apply to youth" (Berry et al., 2006a:305). Sam & Oppedal (2002) stress that neither developmental nor acculturation theories address the challenges encountered by children growing up in two cultures, and have thus suggested a model of *acculturation development* to study the acculturation of children and youth.

## Acculturation Development

Sam & Oppedal's (2002) model of acculturation development is a dynamic contextual model that incorporates perspectives from ecologically based developmental theories, as well as

cultural psychology's perspective on the dynamic relationship between context and the individual. They stress that rather than being two separate processes, acculturation is part of children's development. Sam & Oppedal define acculturation development as "a process towards gaining competence within two distinct cultural domains in order to have a sense of belonging and be able to participate successfully within both" (Oppdal, 2006:97). Oppedal argues that culture competence originates in the psycho-social dynamics of inter-personal relationships. During childhood, parents and the immediate family are the most important providers of cultural knowledge. With regards to UMAs, they all have experienced break-ups from family relationships and consequently have lost the daily interaction with their primary source of ethnic culture competence. Living away from family the question then is: Who are the sources of ethnic culture competence in Norway?

As the child is exposed to and interacts with members of the majority culture, the child learns other values and behavioural patterns as well. School is considered a particularly important early source of host culture competence. It is assumed that in general, interaction with peers intensifies during adolescence and peer relationships become more salient (Bö, 1994; Lerner, 2002a), and it becomes increasingly important for the individual to gain acceptance and be able to participate competently in the mainstream society (Oppedal, 2006). Oppedal and colleagues (Oppedal, 2006; Oppedal et al., 2004) argue that ethnic culture competence is associated with social support from the family and ethnic friends, whereas host culture competence is related to social support from sources of the host culture. Oppedal and colleagues (2004) reported that host and ethnic culture competence were beneficial for a healthy adaptation in a longitudinal study of immigrant children in Norway. Host culture competence was positively correlated with social support from the host society networks, and social support from classmates further reduced mental ill-health. Ethnic culture competence was positively correlated with social support from the ethnic network of family and friends, and social support from family further reduced mental ill-health. In another study, Oppedal et al. (2005) found that host culture competence predicted fewer overall problems, and that both ethnic and host culture competence predicted fewer peer problems. Higher levels of ethnic culture competence have also been linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression (Oppedal & Røysamb, in press). Considering these results, culture competence is thus seen as a resource for the developing individual.

## Definitions and Clarifications of Theoretical Concepts

### *Culture competence*

Culture competence comprises knowledge and skills about behaviour patterns, interpersonal relationships and communication. These skills are central markers of the competence necessary to take part in a particular group's activities and obtain a sense of belonging (Oppedal, 2006).

The behavioural scripts of the child's own ethnic group (ethnic culture competence) are inculcated through the interactions with the family and ethnic community (Oppedal, 2006). UMAs live outside of the social networks where ethnic culture competence primarily develops. The factors contributing to the development of ethnic culture competence in Norway are currently unexplored, and thus this study aims to produce more knowledge regarding this.

For children of immigrants growing up in Norway, the acquisition of host culture competence is partly dependent on the parents' ability and desire to impart Norwegian values to their children. As opposed to children of immigrants who are born and raised in Norway, and children migrating together with their parents, the UMAs are dependent on themselves to gain competence within the Norwegian culture. Additionally, they grew up outside of Norway and most of them migrate to Norway when they are between 16 and 18 years of age and thus are exposed to the Norwegian culture at a fairly late age. Many of the UMAs come to Norway alone and have no social networks in Norway. The school and peers are thus considered especially important sources of culture competence for the UMAs.

### *Social networks*

Relationships with others are central to an individual's development into a social being (Thompson, 2006). In early childhood, parents and the immediate family constitute the most important social network for the child. Research show that relationships early in the child's life lay the foundation for later social relationships (e.g., Ainsworth, 1979; Spitz, 1946) and are important for a child's sense of security (Thompson, 2006). As the child gets older, relationships with friends, classmates and teachers become more salient and hence also influence the development of the child (Lerner, 2002a; Oppedal, 2006). Research on social networks and social support highlight how relationships from an early age are developmental catalysts and avenues for enhanced knowledge, skill acquisition and emotional support (e.g.,

Cochran, Larner, Riley, Gunnarsson, & Henderson, 1990; Thompson, 1995; Thompson, Flood, & Goodvin, 2005). With regards to sociocultural adaptation into the host culture, research has shown that satisfaction with relationships with members of the host culture is important (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a). As culture competence involves knowledge of the values that guide behaviour and interpersonal relationships, social networks are also considered essential in the acquisition of culture competence (Sam & Oppedal, 2002; Tietjen, 1994).

*Social support*

Social support as a concept serves to identify and explain the nature, significance, and outcomes of social relationships (Mlynarczyk, 2003). Social support is conceptualized as a set of resources exchanged among members of a social network, and can be emotional, informational or instrumental (Gottlieb & Sylvestre, 1994). Social support has generally been studied in relation to its positive effect on mental health (e.g. Safdar, Lay, & Struthers, 2003; Ward & Kennedy, 1993b), however social support serves other important functions in addition to stress-reduction, and has been linked to for instance academic success (e.g., Levitt, Guacci-Franco, & Levitt, 1994; Lòpez, Ehly, & Garcìa-Vàzquez, 2002). Tietjen (1994) argue that social support networks are important learning arenas for culture competence, and this has also been supported by other researchers (Oppedal et al., 2004; Oppedal et al., 2005).

*Social skills*

Social skills incorporates showing emotional and social sensitivity and expressivity, making contact with other persons, expressing emotions, and specific verbal and nonverbal behaviours like eye contact, gestures and spatial behaviour. Social skills is a necessity in making contact with people, develop relationships and elicit support (Röhrle & Sommer, 1994; van Aken, 1994). Furnham and Bochner (1982) argue that many acculturation difficulties occur in social interactions and thus emphasize the importance of social skills in order to function in a new society. It is hence believed that social skills facilitate social interaction both between UMAs and their ethnic peers and their Norwegian peers.

In accordance with earlier findings on the importance of social networks and social skills in successful adaptation into a new culture, we follow up on these findings and seek to take the knowledge about the acculturation process a step further by investigating to what degree

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social networks, social support, and social skills contributes to the acquisition of ethnic and host culture competence.

### *The mediation model of social skills, social support, and culture competence*

A mediatior accounts for the relationship between a predictor and an outcome (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In other words, mediation is a hypothesized causal chain in which one variable (social skills) affects a second variable (social support) that, in turn, affects a third variable (culture competence). To establish mediation, Baron and Kenny (1986) suggest a series of regression models, where three conditions must hold: First, the independent variable must be shown to affect the mediator. Second, the independent variable needs to affect the dependent variable. Third, when the dependent variable is regressed on both the independent variable and the mediator, the mediator must be shown to affect the dependent variable, and for mediation to hold the effect of the independent variable must be less once the mediator is controlled for.

From a person-context approach to human development, children are seen as active producers of their own development, in that there is a reciprocal relationship of behaviour influence between the child and significant others (Lerner, 2002b). With regards to social support, the child's ability to elicit support is dependent on the child's possession of social skills. Of the personality factors studied in relation to social networks and social support, it has been suggested that social competence may play the most significant role (Röhrle & Sommer, 1994). Social competence is a concept encompassing several skills, such as perspective-taking, social problem-solving and social skills. A meta-analysis of studies on social support and social competence in adolescents and young adults revealed a substantial positive correlation between the two constructs (Röhrle & Sommer, 1994). In terms of the mediation model then, it is hypothesized that social support mediates the relationship between social
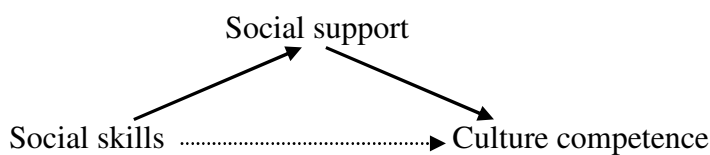
Social support

Social skills ............................................▶ Culture competence

**Figure 1** The mediation model

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skills and culture competence (Figure 1). Few studies have undertaken to study more specifically how acculturation outcomes are related to both individual resources (social skills) and environmental resources (social networks). The approach to testing the mediation model is exploratory, and both family social support and peer social support are included in this study.

## The Current Study

This was a preliminary exploratory study based on Sam & Oppedal's (2002) model of acculturation development. The aim was to investigate the influence of the psycho-social dynamics of inter-personal relationships on culture competence. More specifically, I wanted to explore how well the combination of social network variables and social skills explain the variance in ethnic culture competence and host culture competence. Gender differences will be explored in this study but no hypothesis has been formulated due to the inconclusive evidence on gender differences.

The study of acquisition of culture competence for adolescents who came to Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers is important for three main reasons. First of all, this is a group of immigrants who spent their childhood with their families in another country and a culture very different from the Norwegian culture. What separates them from other immigrant youth is that they migrated to Norway without their parents, and currently live separated from their closest family in a foreign culture, having to rely heavily on themselves to adapt to a new culture. Their childhood/adolescence is thus marked by break-ups in close relationships with their family and friends, and also from their culture and community. We currently do not know how this separation might affect the maintenance and further development of their ethnic culture competence. We also don't know how their relatively high age at arrival may affect the acquisition of host culture competence. This group of immigrants are widely understudied within psychology, and the few studies that have been conducted are mainly qualitative (e.g., Eide, 2000; Hushagen, 1998; Solberg, 1997; Wallin & Ahlström, 2005) or concern the distribution of mental ill-health among UMAs (e.g., Derluyn & Broekaert, 2007; Bean, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Mooijaart, & Spinhoven, 2006). Second of all, the development of culture competence has not previously been tested as to what extent interpersonal relationships and social skills can explain the development and acquisition of culture

competence, and third; studying acculturation in UMAs can contribute to our knowledge of acculturation development in general.

The questions I want to explore in this study are:

1. What level of ethnic culture competence and host culture competence do the UMAs possess?
   a. Are there gender differences in level of ethnic culture competence and host culture competence for UMAs?
   b. Is there a difference in ethnic culture competence scores between UMAs living in Oslo as compared to UMAs living in other cities in Norway?
2. To what extent do social networks, social support and social skills explain the variance in ethnic culture competence and host culture competence for UMAs?
3. To what extent does social support mediate the relationship between social skills and culture competence?

## METHOD

Data were provided by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, division of Mental Health. The study is based on the first wave of data collection in a longitudinal study intended to follow the youth for a period of five years. The study is approved by the Regional Committee for Reviewing Medical Research on Humans and the Norwegian Data Inspectorate, and was carried out in accordance with their directions.

### Sample Frame

This was a population based study involving all UMAs originating from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Sri Lanka, who were granted residence in Norway between the years 2000 and 2006, and who were 16 years of age or younger at the time of arrival.

The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration provided a list of 373 unaccompanied minors matching these criteria. Sixty-seven percent of the sample was boys and the youth resided in 98 municipalities all over Norway.

*Expansion of the sample criteria*

Refugee officials suggested that youth originating from other countries also be included in the sample. Also, as most unaccompanied minor refugees are between 16 and 18 years of age when they come to Norway it was advised to expand the age limit to get a more representative sample of the UMAs in Norway. Based on the refugee officials' consideration, the sample was expanded to include all unaccompanied minor refugees who were granted residence between 2000 and 2006. For the purpose of this thesis study, the sample frame was the youth who had participated in the data collection during the first four months where 10 municipalities were covered. The composition of the sample included in this study is described below.

## Participants in this Study

The sample consisted of 62 UMAs residing in different cities in Norway; including Oslo, Drammen, Asker, Lørenskog, Sarpsborg, Fredrikstad, Tønsberg, Stange, Bergen, and Stavanger. There were 49 boys (79%) and 13 girls. There were 24 participants from Somalia (38.7%), 11 from Afghanistan (17.7%), 14 from Sri Lanka (22.6%), and 1 from Iraq. The remaining 12 originated from other countries (Mongolia [1], Burundi [2], Kongo [1], Angola [1], Liberia [2], Burma [3], Ethiopia [1], and China [1]). The participants' age ranged from 12 to 22 (M=18.3, SD=1.95) and the participants age at the time of arrival in Norway ranged from 9 to 18 (M=14.2, SD=1.75). The duration of their time spent living in Norway ranged from 1 year to 8 years (M=4, SD=2.12). The majority of the participants were students (n=52), 7 worked in a full-time job, whereas 3 participants reported being unemployed. Of the youth working full-time, 6 of them were between 19 and 22 years old, and one person was 15 years old.

Many youth in the target group could not be reached, either because they were unknown to the officials or because they no longer resided at the last known address. During the 4 months of data collection that this study is based on, 187 youth were contacted to participate but as many as 45% of these youth could not be reached. Of the 102 participants that were reached during these four months, 61% agreed to participate, 18% did not want to participate and 21% did not show up to the appointed session.

**Table 1** Number of participants and participation rate in all included municipalities

| Municipality | Original list from UDI | Adjusted # of participants | Participation rate N (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Oslo | 92 | 92 | 18 (19.6) |
| Drammen | 10 | 13 | 7 (53.8) |
| Asker | 10 | 14 | 5 (35.7) |
| Sarpsborg | 3 | 6 | 4 (66.7) |
| Fredrikstad | 7 | 7 | 3 (42.9) |
| Lørenskog | 4 | 5 | 2 (40.0) |
| Tønsberg | 8 | 13 | 7 (53.8) |
| Stange | 5 | 10 | 5 (50.0) |
| Stavanger | 6 | 14 | 8 (57.1) |
| Bergen | 11 | 13 | 3 (23.1) |
| **Total** | **156** | **187** | **62 (33.2)** |

Table 1 includes an overview of the extended sample, and the participation rate. Sarpsborg had the highest participation rate, which is most likely due to the fact that the number of UMAs is low, and 5 out of the 6 UMAs resided together in a municipal group home. Oslo had the lowest participation rate, which probably was due to the large amount of letters that were returned to sender.

**Procedure**

It was considered imperative to engage collaboration with the authorities responsible for these youth in the different municipalities, in order to ensure a high participation rate. Prior researchers have reported that the UMAs are fatigued with the numerous requests about research participation and are suspicious of the purpose of research projects (Eide, 2000). Additionally, there is no incentive for the youth to participate in this study other than possibly helping other UMAs arriving in Norway in the future.

The refugee office and the child care department in the municipalities where the UMAs resided were contacted, and a meeting was set up with the officials. The officials assisted in the contact and recruitment of participants. For youth younger than 16 years of age, their legal guardian was contacted through a letter and phone call, asking them to inform the youth about the project and jointly decide whether to participate. All youth agreeing to participate were also asked whether they were in need of a translator to complete the questionnaire.

The data collection was conducted in one session, and the participants were gathered in groups of between three to eight persons in a premise familiar to the participants (e.g. a

meeting room at the refugee office or in the municipal group home residence) to fill out the questionnaire. Through group sessions, contact between the research assistants and participants was established, intended to ensure commitment to the project and feelings of security with regards to the following stages of the study. The questionnaire included questions regarding background information, social networks, prior and current living arrangement(s), mental health, problems, personality constructs, acculturation, years of schooling and current occupation. Project assistants, and translator(s) if requested, were present while the participants filled out the questionnaire to clarify difficult questions and assist participants with reading or concentration difficulties. The participants received a gift certificate of a 100 Norwegian kroner as a token of appreciation for their participation in the study.

**Measures**

*Background variables.* This included the variables of gender, age, age at arrival in Norway, occupation, current living arrangement and prior living arrangement(s). The living arrangements include: living with family, living with a spouse, living alone, living in a group home with other UMAs, and foster care. Length of stay in Norway was calculated by subtracting the participants' age at the time of arrival in Norway from their current age.

*Ethnic and host culture competence.* The indexes consisted of 9 items for ethnic ($\alpha$ = .86) and host ($\alpha$ = .88) culture competence related to interpersonal skills and communication (Oppedal et al., 2004; Oppedal et al., 2005). Examples of items for ethnic culture competence are "how easy is it for you to feel that you have a lot in common with children/youth from your country of origin?" and "how easy is it for you to speak your mother tongue?" Corresponding items for host culture competence were "how easy is it for you to feel that you have a lot in common with Norwegian children/youth?" and "how easy is it for you to speak Norwegian?" Answers were given on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from "very difficult" (1) to "very easy" (4). The culture competence indices are included in the Appendix.

*Social networks.* The items mapped both family network (abroad and in Norway) and network of friends (in Norway). Family abroad was based on a list that included the various family members, and a dichotomous variable was made distinguishing contact with parents abroad and contact with other family abroad. For family in Norway, only three participants reported having parents in Norway, and so a dichotomous variable was made distinguishing

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those who had contact with family in Norway and those who did not have contact with family in Norway.

The network of friends was mapped through two scale items, one for Norwegian friends and the other for friends with the same ethnicity as themselves. The scale was a 5-point Likert-type scale (*no friends [1], 1 friend [2], 2-3 friends [3], 4-6 friends [4],* and *more than 6 friends [5]*).

Finally, the participants' feelings of belonging in the neighbourhood were mapped. These items were made for the purpose of this study and included two items; 'how many families in the neighbourhood do you know and visit from time to time?' and 'how many children/youth from the neighbourhood do you talk to if you accidentally run into them?' ($\alpha = .68$). Answers to these items were given on a 4-point Likert-type scale (*none [1], 1 or 2 [2], 3 or 4 [3],* and *5 or more [4]*).

*Social support.* Both family social support and peer social support was measured by tapping different aspects of emotional support and instrumental help (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Ystgaard, Tamb, & Dalgard, 1999). Social support from family abroad included five items, such as 'I feel attached to my family' and 'I can count on my family when I need help'. Peer social support was measured by four items, such as 'I can count on my friends when I need help' and 'I feel a strong attachment to my friends'. Answers were given on a 4-point Likert-type scale (*totally disagree [1], partly disagree [2], partly agree [3],* and *totally agree [4]*). Cronbach's alphas = .86 (family support) and .64 (peer support).

*Social skills.* This variable was measured using the SSRS (Gresham & Elliot, 1980; Ogden, T., 1995). Based on alpha reliabilities and regression analysis the scale was shortened to 24 items (Mathiesen, 2006). The scale measures frequency of behaviours representing social skills and adaptive functioning, and includes measures of cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control. Examples of items are 'I can disagree with adults without arguing', 'I easily make friends' and 'I feel sorry for others when they experience something sad'. The items were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale (*never [1], rarely [2], sometimes [3], often [4],* and *very often [5]*). Cronbach's alpha = .89.

Mean sum score indices were computed for ethnic/host culture competence, social support and social skills (see Table 2), which included participants who had responded to at least 50% of the items for each particular scale. Missing responses were replaced with the mean score achieved from the participant's other responses. Subjects who responded to less than half of the scale items were excluded from the analysis (n=4).

**Statistical Analyses**

Independent t-tests were run to check for gender differences in mean scores for all variables. Bivariate correlations were carried out for all variables, and standard multiple regression was used to analyse the influence of the different predictor variables on the independent variables. The mediation model was tested using Baron & Kenny's (1986) recommended procedure, and the significance of the mediation model was tested using the Sobel test.

Finally, independent t-tests were run to test whether there was a significant difference in ethnic culture competence between participants residing in Oslo and participants residing in other municipalities in Norway.

**RESULTS**

**Descriptives**

The descriptive statistics of all the included variables are presented in Table 2. Means and standard deviations (SD) are presented separately for the total sample and for each gender. As can be seen in the table, the participants score relatively high on family social support (M= 3.30), peer social support (M=3.37), and social skills (M=4.00). They score higher on ethnic culture competence (M=3.38) than host culture competence (M=2.81). They also report having more ethnic friends (M=4.06) than Norwegian friends (M=3.48). Eight informants report having no Norwegian friends, whereas 2 report having no ethnic friends. None of the participants report having no friends. Around half of the participants (53%) have contact with family living in Norway. Thirty-one percent of the informants report that they don't have any contact with family members abroad. A larger percentage of the boys have contact with their parents abroad as compared to girls (38.8% and 23.1%, respectively).

The table shows gender differences on a number of variables, but analysis revealed no significant differences between boys and girls on any of the variables (p-values ranging from .11 to .58). Due to the absence of significant gender differences, the subsequent analyses were conducted for the total sample.

**Table 2** Means and standard deviations for main variables

| | Total sample n=62 | | Boys n=49 | | Girls n=13 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Mean** | **SD** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Mean** | **SD** |
| Ethnic culture competence | 3.38 | .53 | 3.35 | .52 | 3.48 | .56 |
| Host culture competence | 2.81 | .62 | 2.87 | .56 | 2.61 | .80 |
| # of years lived in Norway | 4.07 | 2.12 | 3.90 | .07 | 4.82 | 2.27 |
| # of friends from home country | 4.06 | 1.24 | 4.15 | 1.18 | 3.77 | 1.48 |
| # of friends from Norway | 3.48 | 1.38 | 3.60 | 1.41 | 3.08 | 1.26 |
| Social support family | 3.30 | .92 | 3.40 | .88 | 2.98 | 1.02 |
| Social support peers | 3.37 | .58 | 3.34 | .62 | 3.48 | .45 |
| Social skills | 4.00 | .56 | 3.95 | .58 | 4.19 | .42 |
| Feelings of belonging in neighb. | 2.16 | .94 | 2.23 | .99 | 1.86 | .55 |
| Contact with family in Norway[a] | 53.2% | | 55.1% | | 46.2% | |
| Contact with parents abroad[a] | 35.5% | | 38.8% | | 23.1% | |
| Contact other family abroad[a] | 58.1% | | 59.2% | | 53.8% | |
| Living with family/relatives[a] | 24.2% | | 20.4% | | 38.5% | |

Note. a – Dichotomous variable. Percentage given for the answer 'yes'.

## Correlations Between Predictor and Outcome Variables.

Correlations between all variables are presented in Table 3. Looking at ethnic culture competence and its predictor variables, the results revealed that there are significant positive relationships between ethnic culture competence, and three of the predictor variables: social support from friends ($r= .43$), social skills ($r= .33$) and number of friends from the same ethnic group ($r= .49$). There was also a significant relationship between social support from family and social support from friends ($r= .36$). We hypothesized that the relationship between social skills and culture competence is mediated by social support, and the correlation matrix shows a significant relationship between social skills and social support from friends ($r= .53$); however the correlation between social skills and social support from family did not reach significance ($r= .22$, $p= .09$). The correlations between host culture competence and its predictor variables indicate significant relationships between host culture competence and feelings of belonging in the neighbourhood ($r= .26$), social support from family ($r= .30$) and number of friends from Norway ($r= .26$). There was also a significant relationship between feelings of belonging in the neighbourhood and social skills ($r= .30$). Due to the small correlation between host culture competence and length of stay in Norway, correlation between the items measuring language competence and length of stay was

**Table 3** Correlations between all variables

|  |  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Ethnic culture competence |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2 | Host culture competence | .07 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3 | Length of stay in Norway | .03 | .13 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4 | Living with family/relatives | .01 | .03 | -.02 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5 | Belonging in neigbourhood | -.00 | .26* | -.09 | -.17 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6 | Contact family in Norway | .16 | -.09 | .13 | -.32* | -.08 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7 | Contact parents abroad | .14 | .06 | .08 | .06 | -.08 | .02 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 8 | Family social support | .22 | .30* | .09 | .00 | .04 | .26* | .25 |  |  |  |  |
| 9 | Peer social support | .43** | .13 | .24 | .06 | .04 | .15 | -.09 | .36** |  |  |  |
| 10 | Social skills | .33** | .34** | .00 | -.06 | .30* | .02 | -.12 | .22 | .53** |  |  |
| 11 | # of friends, same ethnicity | .49** | .19 | .19 | -.15 | .00 | .27* | .18 | .39** | .23 | .20 |  |
| 12 | # of friends from Norway | -.04 | .26* | .25 | -.18 | .15 | .16 | -.04 | .20 | .15 | .16 | .41** |

*p < 0.05; **p< 0.01

computed. Results revealed a positive relationship between host language competence and length of stay, r= .44, p= .001.

## Ethnic Culture Competence

A standard multiple regression was performed where ethnic culture competence was regressed upon contact with family in Norway, number of friends with same ethnicity, peer social support, family social support and social skills. Results of regression analyses revealed that more than one third of the variance in ethnic culture competence is predicted by number of friends with same ethnicity, social support from peers and family, and social skills, $F_{(5, 51)} =$ 6.89, p<.001, adjusted $R^2 = .34$. Table 4 shows the unstandardized (B) and standardized regression coefficients (β), standard errors (SE), $R^2$ and adjusted $R^2$. As can be seen from the table, only social skills (β= .28) and number of friends with same ethnicity (β= .38) contributed significantly to regression. Family social support (β= -.01, p= .89) and contact with family in Norway (β= .04, p= .69) contribute little to the variance in ethnic culture

**Table 4** Standard regression of social network variables, social skills and social support on ethnic culture competence

| Variable | B | β (beta) | SE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Contact family in Norway | .04 | .04 | .11 |
| # of friends same ethnicity | .15** | .38 | .05 |
| Peer social support | .16 | .19 | .11 |
| Family social support | -.01 | -.01 | .07 |
| Social skills | .25* | .28 | .12 |
| **R squared** | **.40*** | | |
| **Adjusted R squared** | **.34** | | |

* p< .05 ** p< .01 *** p< .001

competence. Although the bivariate correlation between ethnic culture competence and peer social support was statistically significant (r= .43, p=.001), peer social support did not contribute significantly to the variation in ethnic culture competence when the other variables where controlled for (β= .19, p= .17).

### *Group differences in ethnic culture competence*

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the ethnic culture competence scores for participants living in Oslo (n=19) and participants living in other municipalities (n=43). There was no significant difference in scores for participants living in Oslo (M= 3.42, SD= .42) and participants living in other municipalities [M= 3.36, SD= .57; t(59) = .41, p= .68]. Although the mean score was higher for participants living in Oslo the magnitude of the difference in the means was very small (eta squared = .003).

### *Test of the mediation model for ethnic culture competence*

To test for mediation, the three regression equations recommended by Baron & Kenny (1986) were conducted. Peer social support was included as the mediating variable, as this was the social support variable that contributed most to the regression model. The undstandarized regression coefficients (B) between the variables can be seen in Figure 2. All the conditions for mediation were satisfied, however the effect of social skills on ethnic culture competence was only scarcely reduced once peer social support was added in the regression model. When both the mediator (peer social support) and the independent variable (social skills) was included in the regression model, only social skills contributed significantly to the explained variance in ethnic culture competence (p= .02), whereas peer social support approached significance (p= .06). There was a larger reduction in the B of peer social support as compared to the B of social skills. To test the significance of the mediation effect, an online Sobel test calculator based on Goodman's approach was used (1960; as cited in Preacher & Leonardelli, 2006) which showed a significance value of p= .07. These results imply a partial mediation of peer social support on the relationship between social skills and ethnic culture competence (Baron & Kenny, 1986); however the mediation effect only approached significance.
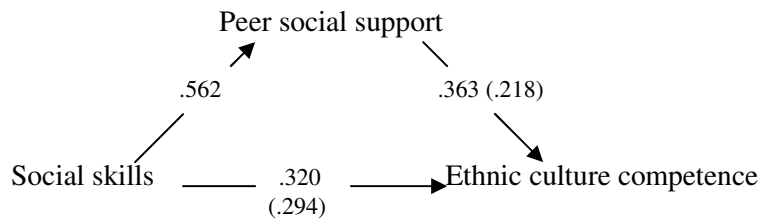
**Figure 2** Mediation model for ethnic culture competence that shows the unstandardized regression coefficients (B) between the variables. Numbers in brackets show the Bs once ethnic culture competence has been regressed on both the independent variable and the mediator.

## Host Culture Competence

A standard multiple regression was performed where host culture competence was regressed upon feelings of belonging in the neighbourhood, number of Norwegian friends, peer social support, family social support and social skills.

Results of the regression analyses revealed that 32 percent of the variance in host culture competence is predicted by these variables, $F(5, 49) = 6.06$, $p<.001$, adjusted $R^2 = .32$. Table 5 shows the unstandardized (B) and standardized regression coefficients ($\beta$), standard errors (SE), $R^2$ and adjusted $R^2$. As can be seen from the table, only number of Norwegian friends ($\beta= .29$), family social support ($\beta= .33$) and social skills ($\beta= .38$) contributed significantly to regression. Feelings of belonging in the neighbourhood contribute little to the variance in host culture competence ($\beta= .07$). Although the bivariate correlation between host culture competence and feelings of belonging in the neighbourhood was statistically significant ($r= .26$, $p< .05$), feelings of belonging in the neighbourhood did not contribute significantly to regression ($p= .55$). Peer social support did not contribute significantly to regression either ($\beta= -.16$, $p= .25$).

**Table 5** Standard regression of social network variables, social skills and social support on host culture competence

| Variable | B | β (beta) | SE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Belonging neighbourhood | .04 | .07 | .07 |
| # of Norwegian friends | .12* | .29 | .04 |
| Peer social support | -.16 | -.16 | .14 |
| Family social support | .22** | .33 | .08 |
| Social skills | .39** | .38 | .15 |
| **R squared** | **.38*** | | |
| **Adjusted R squared** | **.32** | | |

* p< .05 ** p< .01 *** p< .001

*Test of the mediation model for host culture competence*

To test for the mediating effect of social support between social skills and host culture competence, the same regression equations were performed as with ethnic culture competence. Family social support was included as the mediating variable, as this was the social support variable that significantly contributed to the regression model. The undstandardized regression coefficients (B) between the variables can be seen in Figure 3.

All the conditions for mediation were satisfied, and the regression coefficient for social skills was reduced once both the independent (social skills) and mediator (family social support) variables were included in the regression model. Both family social support and social skills contributed significantly to the explained variance in host culture competence, p-values = .03 and .01, respectively. The significance of the mediation effect was tested using the online Sobel test calculator based on Goodman's approach (1960; as cited in Preacher & Leonardelli, 2006) which showed a significance value of p= .15. These results indicate a partial mediation of family social support on the relationship between social skills and host culture competence (Baron & Kenny, 1986); however the mediation effect was not significant.
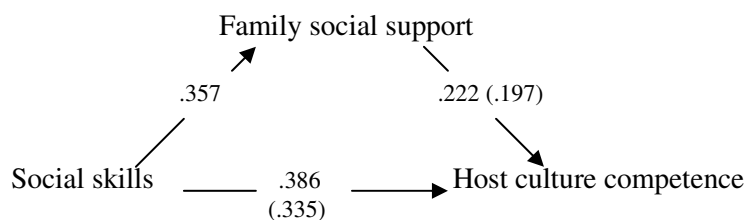
```
                Family social support
              ↗                      ↘
        .357                      .222 (.197)
      ↗                                ↘
Social skills  _____  .386  _____→  Host culture competence
                        (.335)
```

**Figure 3** Mediation model for host culture competence that shows the unstandardized regression coefficients (B) between the variables. Numbers in brackets show the Bs once host culture competence has been regressed on both the independent variable and the mediator.

## DISCUSSION

This was a preliminary exploratory study based on information from the first 62 informants of a population based study. The main goal of this study was to explore how social network variables and social skills influence the acquisition of culture competence in a group of immigrants who came to Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. As this is a group of immigrants we have little knowledge about, and which is greatly under-studied, I wanted to explore whether the results from this study were similar to findings reported in earlier studies

on acculturating youth, and specifically whether the model of acculturation development could be confirmed with this group of informants. Although many researchers view acculturation as a stressful experience, the focus of this study is on the positive aspects of acculturation by which an individual develops competence in a given culture and as a result is able to thrive in that culture. Culture competence is thus seen as a resource for the individual, and a necessity in order to be successful and have a sense of belonging in a given culture. The focus of this study was to what extent social skills, relationships with ethnic family and friends and Norwegian friends affect the acquisition of competence in both the culture of origin and the Norwegian culture.

## Level of Culture Competence

The participants in this study scored higher on ethnic culture competence than host culture competence. This finding is in accordance with other studies measuring culture competence in immigrant youth (Oppedal et al, 2004; Oppedal et al., 2005: Oppedal & Røysamb, in press). In the study of Berry and colleagues (2006b), results showed that the ethnic profile of acculturation was more common than the national profile. Although the study was based on a different theoretical model, the findings are comparable to those found in this study. We do not know whether the youth in this study have lived away from their families in other countries before they came to Norway, however it is plausible to believe that most of the participants in this study have spent a greater part of their lives in the native country than in Norway, and the results are thus likely a reflection of this. However, it could also be due to the youths' ethnic social network in Norway, which has been shown in earlier studies to be important for ethnic identification (e.g., Berry et al., 2006a; Phinney et al., 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1993b). The UMAs scored relatively high on host culture competence. This could be due to the fact that they attend school in Norway and possibly have been enrolled in school shortly after arrival. School is an important arena for acquiring culture competence (Vedder & Horenczyk, 2006; Wilkinson, 2002), and also to interact with host peers and adults (i.e., teachers). It is also likely a reflection of their network of Norwegian friends; as many as 87% of the participants reported having one or more Norwegian friends. Culture competence is measured by self-report, and thus is a subjective perception of level of culture competence. This could result in a mismatch between perceived and objective level of host culture competence. There could also be some degree of social desirability in the responses. Girls scored higher than boys on ethnic culture competence, whereas boys scored higher on host

culture competence. This is in line with earlier postulations of girls as cultural bearers (Sam, 2006; Ward et al., 2001). This result was not statistically significant. However, the female sample is too small (n=13) to produce a significant result. The gender difference could be a reflection of the fact that boys report having more Norwegian friends than girls. Also, it was more common for girls to live with family in Norway than for boys. The results showed that living with family had a negative influence on the number of both ethnic and Norwegian friends the youth has. It could hence be that those living at home have stricter rules regarding socializing with friends. As friends had such an important impact on the acquisition of culture competence in this study this could be one possible explanation for the reported gender difference. No effect of living with family in Norway on ethnic and host culture competence was found. However, there may be gender differences regarding the effect of living with family. Due to the small number of girls this hypothesis could not be investigated in the current study.

The exploration of differences in ethnic culture competence scores between participants residing in Oslo and participants living in other municipalities did not yield significant differences, even if Oslo residents scored slightly higher on ethnic culture competence. The study of Berry and colleagues (2006b) reported of acculturation attitude differences as a result of the ethnic composition of neighbourhoods. However, the two studies are not comparable. Berry and colleagues mapped the ethnic composition of the neighbourhoods the participants resided in. This was not done in our study. Although one could argue that it is likely that access to ethnic communities would enhance ethnic culture competence, we have no indication of the extent to which the participants in this study take part in the ethnic community. Additionally, ethnic friends were the most important source of ethnic culture competence in this study. Access to a large ethnic community may not in itself be a necessary condition for ethnic culture competence in youth. Suffice that there are peers with same ethnicity available.

Surprisingly, there was only a small correlation between length of stay in Norway and host culture competence. Prior studies have shown that length of stay is negatively associated with social difficulty (e.g., Ward & Kennedy, 1993b; Searle & Ward, 1990). Length of stay did however correlate relatively high with host language competence, which is a basic dimension of the host culture competence construct. This indicates that length of stay predicts language competence, but not the other aspects of culture competence. Length of stay in Norway also correlated significantly with number of Norwegian friends, and number of Norwegian friends

further correlated significantly with host culture competence. In line with prior suggestions (Masgoret & Ward, 2006) it is thus likely that as UMAs become more fluent in Norwegian with time, they more easily can engage in social interactions with Norwegian peers and consequently gain more host culture competence.

### Social Networks, Social Skills and Culture Competence

There were relatively strong relationships between culture competence and social network variables. With regards to ethnic culture competence there was a clear distinction between the influence of relationships with adults and relationships with peers, where peers appear to be particularly important. Living with family and contact with family in Norway, as well as contact with parents abroad all showed weak relationships with ethnic culture competence. This result was surprising, as family is considered one of the most important sources of ethnic culture competence (Oppedal, 2006). Since about half of the youth have family in Norway it was expected that this network would be of importance. However, more information about the quantitative and qualitative aspects of contact with family in Norway is needed to better understand why contact with family in Norway didn't yield a stronger relationship with ethnic culture competence. It could be that they have little contact with family members, or that there are conflicts. Although family social support showed a similar relationship with ethnic culture competence as that reported by Oppedal and colleagues (2004), it contributed very little to the explained variance in ethnic culture competence in the regression model. This could be due to the family and youth living far apart and thus family members are not part of the youth's daily life. This separation and lack of daily interaction possibly reduces the influence of the family on the youth's behaviour.  It could also be that with regards to ethnic culture competence, peers are more influential than family during adolescence. However, this hypothesis needs to be investigated with other immigrant youth in order to establish whether this is a phenomenon relevant particularly for UMAs, or whether it applies to immigrant youth in general. Surprisingly, this study yielded a significant positive relationship between family social support and host culture competence. The findings from this study contradicts earlier suggestions that greater identification with the host culture is associated with less social support from ethnic sources (e.g., Zambrana, Scrimshaw, Collins, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1997; Contreras, Lopez, Rivera-Mosquera, Raymond-Smith, & Rothstein, 1999). Family social support thus seems to be important for the UMAs to gain competence in the Norwegian culture. This may be seen in relation to the migration motivation, as many of these youth are

urged by their family to migrate in order to escape war and other disasters, and to pursue opportunities not available in the native country and thus hopefully get a better life. The family probably sees the importance of engaging in the host culture in order to be successful in the new culture and hence provides important support for the youth in the process of integrating into the Norwegian society.

The importance of peer relations in the acquisition of culture competence was expected, as peer relationships are especially important during adolescence (Oppedal, 2006), in addition to the fact that most of these youth don't live with their families. Regarding the relationship between peer social support and ethnic culture competence, this study seemed to yield a higher correlation than reported by Oppedal et al. (2004). This is probably due to the fact that most of the youth in this study don't live with their families and hence spend more time with their friends than with their families. Peer support therefore may be especially important in the adaptation process for the UMAs as a sense of security through cultural similarity and sources of information. The relationship between peer social support and host culture competence was weak however. In line with prior research the results show that what's important for acquisition of host culture competence is the number of Norwegian friends the youth has (e.g., Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, 1993b). These results indicate that the number of Norwegian friends an UMA has is more important for host culture competence than peer social support. As peer relationships are very important during adolescence, Norwegian friends serve as cultural information sources and are thus important learning channels for the acculturating youth (Horenczyk & Tatar, 1998). Number of Norwegian friends could also be a sign of being accepted by the host society and indicate a certain success within and belonging to the host culture. As this study didn't differentiate between peer social support from ethnic and Norwegian friends, it is uncertain whether ethnic or Norwegian friends are the main sources of peer social support for these youth, and as such these results can't be compared with the results reported by Oppedal et al. (2004), who found that host culture competence was correlated with social support from the class and teacher(s).

In summary, the results show that peer relationships are especially important in the acculturation process of UMAs. With regards to ethnic culture competence, only relationships with ethnic peers predicted the acquisition of ethnic culture competence in Norway. The acquisition of host culture competence was dependent on number of Norwegian friends and social support from family abroad.

Social skills correlated positively with ethnic and host culture competence, and it was a significant predictor of the variance in both ethnic and host culture competence. Keeping in mind that culture competence comprises knowledge and skills about behaviour patterns, interpersonal relationships and communication, the results are in line with earlier suggestions regarding the importance of social skills to successfully interact with other people (Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Röhrle & Sommer, 1994; van Aken, 1994).

*Gender differences*

The small female sample makes it difficult to assess gender differences. However, the data reveal tendencies in the responses that deserve some mentioning. Girls score higher on ethnic culture competence and lower on host culture competence, as compared to boys. Girls also have fewer ethnic and Norwegian friends than boys; however they report that they receive more social support from peers than boys do. Girls also report that they receive less social support from family abroad than boys. Prior studies measuring social support in immigrant youth have reported varying results on gender differences regarding family social support and peer social support. Oppedal & Røysamb (2004) reported similar family social support scores for immigrant boys and girls. Boys reported more social support from peers than girls however. In another study, Oppedal et al. (2004) found no gender differences in either family social support or social support from peers. The current finding unfortunately does not paint the picture any clearer. Research on UMAs with larger samples of girls need to be conducted before we can speculate as to why this gender difference occurs.

Although the evidence on gender differences in acculturation are inconclusive (Vedder, van de Vijver, & Liebkind, 2006), the above mentioned results indicate several differences between boys and girls. Separate analyses for boys and girls should be undertaken when the dataset for the study is complete, to test for gender differences with regards to the variables contributing to culture competence.

## The Mediation Model

The mediation effect by social support on both ethnic- and host culture competence was relatively weak and not significant. It was hypothesized that social skills' relationship with culture competence was mediated by social support; however there was a greater reduction in the regression coefficient for peer social support (mediator) than for social skills (predictor),

when ethnic culture competence was regressed on both variables. Although the mediation effect approached significance (p=. 07), the fact that both the mediator and the predictor regression coefficients were reduced can be seen as a support of the assumption that the relationship between social skills and social support is reciprocal (Röhrle & Sommer, 1994; van Aken, 1994). Social skills may be a prerequisite for building supportive networks, but the social support system also plays a crucial role in developing different social skills. Hence the mediation model could just as appropriately be reversed; that social skills mediates the relationship between peer social support and culture competence. The longitudinal design of the study makes possible future analyses of change in social support, and how this change might affect acculturation development. For host culture competence, social skills did not significantly predict the mediator, family social support (p= .09). This indicates that social skills might be a more necessary prerequisite to establish peer social support, as compared to family social support, at least for UMAs. It could be that the separation fosters social support from the family. The contact with their family abroad is likely very important for both the UMAs and their families to feel a sense of closeness in spite of the large distance separating them. The family tie and love for each other likely surpass the importance of social skills in these circumstances.

## Implications for Acculturation Research and Future Directions

The model of acculturation development (Sam & Oppedal, 2002) has through this study been shown to serve as a valid theoretical basis for studying one aspect of acculturation development (culture competence) in young immigrants arriving in Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. In line with suggestions of sociocultural adaptation as best understood from a social learning-social cognition framework (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a), the results from this study show that interpersonal relationships and social skills are important in the acquisition of culture competence. Previous findings with adults have also acknowledged the importance of interpersonal relationships in relation to sociocultural adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992, 1993a, 1993b). However, prior studies with adults have failed to show the link between social support and sociocultural adaptation. These studies have for the most case only researched the importance of social support with regards to mental health. This study indicates the importance of social support in relation to other aspects of adaptation than mental health. It could be that social support is especially important for youth, and perhaps for UMAs in particular, and thus future studies

involving youth should include social support as a predictor of adaptation to test whether the findings from this study can be replicated with other samples.

It is probably of value to study this group of youth independently from other immigrant youth, as the acculturation process is likely very different from those immigrants who are born and raised in Norway, and those who immigrate together with their parents. At a very young age UMAs have to rely on themselves to create a new life for themselves. They have experienced break-ups in most, if not all, of their social relations and have to start a new life in Norway, both in terms of learning a new language, customs and "way of life", and establishing social networks.

*Comparing ethnic groups.* Prior studies have investigated differences between ethnic groups, and results have revealed differences in mental health (e.g., Oppedal et al., 2005; Sam, 1998) and sociocultural adaptation (e.g., Oppedal et al., 2005; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). It might thus be fruitful for future studies to research possible differences between ethnic groups in UMA samples as well. Due to the small sample size, differences between ethnic groups could not be investigated in this study.

*Comparing age groups.* Within the framework of acculturation development future research should study acculturation in different age groups. Due to the large age span in this study (12-22), with a larger sample size it would be appropriate to compare age groups on culture competence and the variables contributing to the acquisition of culture competence. Future studies should also consider applying longitudinal designs to study causal relationships and the development of culture competence.

*Control groups.* To gain more knowledge about the acquisition of culture competence, future research should include other groups of immigrant youth to test for possible differences in predictors of culture competence, and to improve the generalizability of the results.

*Alternative mediators.* In this study social support was included as a hypothesized mediator on the relationship between social skills and culture competence. As the results of this study indicate, social skills is an important resource in order to establish and engage in social interactions, and as mentioned previously, future studies should research whether the mediation model could be reversed; that is whether social skills is a mediating factor in the relationship between social support and culture competence. There are likely other personality factors that affect the acquisition of culture competence as well, and research on aspects of personality affecting sociocultural adaptation have reported relationships between factors of the Big Five PI and sociocultural adaptation, such as for instance greater extraversion (e.g., Ward & Kennedy, 1993b; Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004), less neuroticism, greater

agreeableness and conscientiousness (Ward et al., 2004). It has also been linked with high self-monitoring (Kosic et al., 2006), among others. However, studies have revealed mixed results (Ward et al., 2004; Kosic, 2006), and Ward & Chang (1997) have suggested that the relationship between some personality characteristics and adaptation are dependent on the "cultural fit" of the individual and the host-culture norms, however also the cultural fit hypothesis has yielded mixed results (Ward & Chang, 1997; Ward et al., 2004). Future studies on acculturation development could benefit from including other personality variables in addition to social skills that could further explain the development of culture competence.

## Limitations

The imbalanced gender and ethnic composition of the current sample limits the generalizability of this study. Although the gender distribution in this sample reflects the gender distribution in the UMA population, the female sample was very small (n=13) and thus any significant gender differences were not detected. The representation of ethnic groups in our sample did not reflect the population distribution, in fact only 1 informant was from Iraq. Although Iraq is one of the major sending countries of UMAs, the reason for the low rate of Iraqis is due to the fact that there were few Iraqis residing in the municipalities included in this study. Additionally, because there was such a large percentage (45%) of UMAs in our target sample that we couldn't get a hold of, it is appropriate to consider whether the findings represent the true picture of the population of UMAs in Norway. The youth in our sample either go to school or work and have a seemingly large network of friends in Norway, and hence seem well adjusted into the Norwegian culture. The fact that we couldn't get in contact with so many UMAs does not necessarily mean that they don't fare well in Norway, although this is probably true for some. Due to the above mentioned reasons, the findings from this study should not be generalized beyond this sample.

The data in this study were cross-sectional, and hence could not address any developmental changes or causalities. Another issue is language comprehension, as some of the informants seemed to have lower comprehension of Norwegian than they acknowledged and hence might have had trouble understanding fully all questions they were answering. Some of the informants (n=8) were also dependent on a translator to complete the questionnaire, and thus some of the scores could be influenced by the formulations used by the translator.

## Conclusion

The research on youth could benefit from studying acculturation in light of developmental processes, and the special circumstances of UMAs should encourage researchers to study this group in order to get a richer picture of acculturation developmental trajectories of immigrant youth. Although one should be cautious about generalizing the findings from this study, knowledge has been gained about the importance of social networks and social skills in the acquisition of culture competence, and in comparison with prior studies has shown that social networks may be of varying importance for different groups of immigrant youth. This hopefully will generate more studies involving different groups of acculturating youth, and similar research needs to be conducted in the future with larger samples to test whether the findings from this study can be confirmed.

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# APPENDIX

## Questions measuring ethnic and host culture competence

| **Hvor lett er det for deg…** | 1<br>Veldig<br>vanskelig | 2<br>Ganske<br>vanskelig | 3<br>Ganske<br>lett | 4<br>Veldig<br>lett |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| … å snakke på norsk? | | | | |
| … å få nye venner blant norske elever på skolen? | | | | |
| … å være sammen med norske barn/ungdommer? | | | | |
| … å føle at du har mye til felles med barn/ungdommer fra hjemlandet ditt? | | | | |
| … å få nye venner blant elever på skolen fra samme land som deg? | | | | |
| … å snakke på morsmålet ditt? | | | | |
| … å spise middag hos norske venner? | | | | |
| … å trives sammen med barn/ungdommer fra samme land som deg? | | | | |
| … å føle at du har mye til felles med norske barn/ungdommer | | | | |
| … å føle at norske barn/ungdommer forstår deg? | | | | |
| … å være sammen med barn/ungdommer fra samme land som deg? | | | | |
| … å bli med hjem til venner fra hjemlandet ditt etter skolen? | | | | |
| … å skrive på norsk? | | | | |
| … å skrive på morsmålet ditt? | | | | |
| … å trives sammen med norske barn/ungdommer? | | | | |
| … å føle at barn/ungdommer fra hjemlandet ditt forstår deg? | | | | |
| … å bli med hjem til norske venner etter skolen? | | | | |
| … å spise middag hos venner fra samme land som deg? | | | | |