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Mediating a ‘Safe Space’ for Enhancing
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How to cite

Elia, A., Fedele, V. (2021). (Unaccompanied) Young Migrants and Football: Mediating a ‘Safe Space’ for Enhancing Subjectivities Systems. [Italian Sociological Review, 11 (5S), 691-714]
Retrieved from [<http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v11i5S.478>]

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v11i5S.478]

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3. Article accepted for publication

Date: April 2021

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*(Unaccompanied) Young Migrants and Football: Mediating a
'Safe Space' for Enhancing Subjectivities Systems*

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Abstract

The article focuses on the relationship between young migrants arriving as unaccompanied minors and hosted in SIPROIMI residential community and football, focusing, on the one hand, on the possibility for football to foster young migrants' insertion path in host countries, on the other hand, on the space football offers for young migrants to articulate their subjectivity. The reflection proposed is based on the preliminary results of a qualitative field research that involved four SIPROIMI centres in Calabria, between May and September 2020. Taking into account both the literature on sport and social capital concerning people with forced migration background, and the specific literature on accompanied migrants' insertion path in hosting centres, the analysis sustains that, while the nexus between football and the production of social capital sustaining their integration is questioned, it represents a safe space for young migrants' subjectivities to be expressed and enhanced.

Keywords: football; international migration; unaccompanied young migrants.

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1. Introduction

The wide range of scientific literature on sport and international migration, in particular that which is focused on the relationship between football and integration (Russo, 2016; Allison, 2007; Harris, 1998; Cimagalli, 2017; Coalter, 2010; Martelli, 2015) and the increasing literature on sport and people with a forced migration background (Spaaij, 2015; Jeanes, O'Connor, Alfrey, 2014; Whitley, Coble and Jewell, 2016), hardly focuses specifically on young migrants who arrive as unaccompanied minors and are hosted in reception centres. These minors, regardless of their migratory history – asylum seekers, refugees, humanitarian migrants –, once inserted in the reception system, are defined according to the specific category of Unaccompanied Minors, a subjectivity which is often underemphasized, squeezed between infantilization and forced adultization (Mai, 2011; Sigona, 2010). These young people experience the protection systems' ambiguities in the residential communities they are hosted in, on the one hand, as a form of vulnerability which becomes an essential requirement to guarantee their inescapability, and, on the other, as processes of insertion that are precarious and are likely to be interrupted. Furthermore, unaccompanied young migrants often have family responsibilities even in the middle of adolescence and have to renounce the right to follow their own aspirations. As a consequence, football is generally considered as a playful activity, like other recreational ones, but it plays a marginal role compared to the need for the economic integration and training, which are solicited both by the families of origin and by the systems of reception in which the minors are inserted. Instead, football, as an autonomous place to meet and confront with peers and a place for individual visibility and expression outside the directed paths of integration, could underline the different features of these young migrants' life course, as it is different from the image of lonely and isolated individuals, marked by the tragic nature of their experience.

Starting from these premises, this article highlights the meanings of football through the (unaccompanied) young migrants' migration; migrants who themselves are trying to verify if football can be a tool for creating networks and a capital, fostering a path for a virtuous insertion in the host society, or if it is a useful space for the re-articulation and enhancement of the young migrants' subjectivities. To this end, this article reflects on the first results of an exploratory survey aimed at investigating the relevance of football in the daily lives of young migrants who arrived as unaccompanied minors. The survey has involved young migrants still hosted in Calabrian residential communities (SIPROIMI), former guests therein who had recently turned 18, as well as community managers and operators.

2. Football and Forced migration: the challenge of unaccompanied young migrants

Analysis sustaining football's potential for promoting migrants' integration paths in host countries, viewing it as a privileged space for participation, rehabilitation and self and hetero recognition (Bottoni, Masullo, Mangone, 2016; Russo, 2016) consider that football, as a sport in general, represents one of the few areas where migrants can be visible and meet, confront and compete with non-migrants on an equal basis; these analyses also view sports practice as the place where many of the functions of civil society are implemented (Allison, 2007; Harris, 1998). As Cimagalli writes (2017: 32-33):

sporting practice, especially when it is inserted within a competitive context, is able to mobilize a powerful symbolic complex (...). For this reason, it appears capable of fortifying identity links within a community: participating in the dynamics of sporting life nourishes community bonds and helps to reduce differences within a social group (...). Thus, communities disintegrated as a result of processes of economic transformation, modification of the urban context or traumatic events of various kinds, can find in sports participation a terrain through which to build or strengthen social relations¹.

From this point of view, sport is a form of social capital which is expressed by determining integrations towards the inside of a group – *bonding* – but above all towards the outside, towards different groups – *bridging* – or different social spheres – *linking* (Coalter, 2010; Porro, 2013).

Beyond these theoretical perspectives, however – with respect to which Martelli (2015) underlines the scarcity of empirical evidence² – the virtuous relationship between football and integration is questioned by many authors: Waquant (2006), for example, argues that these potential elements are invalidated by the persistence of discrimination and racism in daily life and in key sectors of the society (institutions, work, housing, etc.). Therefore, football does not in itself promote the integration of migrants or of other discriminated groups, unless accompanied by specific institutional, social, economic and cultural anti-discriminatory policies. As Martelli (2015: 233) points out 'policies to integrate immigrants through sports and exercise are a facet, neither marginal but nor decisive in itself, of the social policies.'

¹ Translated by the authors.

² See also Martelli, Müller, van Zoonen, de Roode (2008).

After the refugees' crisis of 2011, and particularly after 2017, analysis on sport and people with forced migration backgrounds, has been developed (Spaaij et al., 2019; Michelini, 2020), revolving around three main issues: health promotion, integration and social inclusion, barriers and facilitators to participation. From the specific point of view of integration and social inclusion, sport in general and football in particular are considered for young migrants as a space for articulating feeling of belonging, albeit their situational and dynamic value determine different levels of accomplishment. According to Spaaij (2015: 304-305), indeed, beyond:

any generalised claim that sport is a mechanism for 'good settlement' (...) sport provides a setting in which young people can express themselves through bodily practices, construct and perform social identities, and craft emotional closeness to, or distance from, other people (...). Playing or watching sport is something that many young people, and especially young men, do as a way of occupying themselves and socialising with each other. Moreover, being good at sports may be perceived by new arrivals a way to 'make it' in a new country, especially in host societies where sport is a key site of culture production and social prestige.

Playing in a team, therefore, can create conditions for inclusion into the broader community (Dukic, McDonald, Spaaij, 2017): while not all experiences are positive and different levels of inclusion/exclusion exist, considering both specific barriers for participation of people with a forced migration background, and the dark side of sport (Petroczi, 2009) – in terms of racism, discriminations, violence, exploitation – sport practices, especially when played in teams, can provide a social and physical space of belonging, and can foster bonding, bridging and linking capital as well as acculturation, enjoyment and feelings of belonging (Abur, 2016; Stone, 2018; Spaaij, Schlenker, 2014; Spaaij, 2015; Whitley, Coble, Jewell, 2016).

Abur (2016), in particular, recognizes five kinds of capital fostered by refugees' participation: physical capital – arising from the 'being able to play' (see Dukic, McDonald, Spaaij, 2017: 104); psychological capital – "the sharing of fun and joy during a competition"; cultural capital – in terms of meeting and exchange between different cultures; social capital – "including community cohesion and social connection that sport brings to community" (Abur, 2016: 18); and economic capital – in case sporting clubs can provide forms of payment. Dukic, McDonald and Spaaij (2017) use the concept of poly-cultural capital to describe the peculiar kind of capital migrants develop in their path of insertion in the host country, and that sport can foster, providing psychological relief, sustaining resilience practices, enlarging social connections. While young refugees are at the core of some of these analyses

(Spaaij 2015; Jeanes, O'Connor, Alfrey, 2014; Whitley, Coble, Jewell, 2016), young migrants, who arrived as unaccompanied minors, are rarely taken directly into account. However, they represent a peculiar analytical challenge, especially if the Italian hosting system is taken into account. The category 'unaccompanied minors' in Italy was created in 2000, acknowledging the presence of such people in the national welfare system, together with the creation of the '*Comitato Minori Stranieri Non-accompagnati*' (Unaccompanied Foreign Minors' Committee), a supranational body with the main task of registering and monitoring their presence and verifying their family situation. The caring of unaccompanied minors in a residential system is thus institutionalized, with the creation of specific second reception communities, linked to the protection system for asylum seekers and refugees (SIPROIMI)³, as well as of residential communities (*casa famiglia*) managed by local municipalities (Saglietti, Zucchermaglio, 2010). In the SIPROIMI residential communities, minors are received, notwithstanding their migratory situation and juridical status, according to Law 4/2017 that recognizes as 'receivable' all minors coming from non-European countries, without an adult responsible for them according to Italian Laws. Once accepted in the system, after the age verification, they are initiated on an integration path, finalized at obtaining asylum or a residence-permit for work reasons, being labelled as Unaccompanied Minors for the entire duration of the Reception Programme – around three years – regardless of reaching the age of majority, which usually happens within one year⁴. The category of 'Unaccompanied Minors' in this context does not indicate a homogeneous group of minors, but a heterogenous group of young people identified as minors upon their arrival and thus taken over by the residential community. Within the SIPROIMI system, the specific path of social and work insertion is sanctioned, in the first

³ SIPROIMI (Protection System for Beneficiaries of International Protection and for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors Decree-Law no. 113 of 4 October 2018, enacted as Law no. 132 of 1 December 2018) is an integrated reception services be provided to holders of a residence permit for special reasons, refugees and unaccompanied minors. There are two principal characteristics of SIPROIMI: 1) the public nature of the system, funded and managed by public bodies (the Ministry of the Interior; ANCI and local authorities); 2) the synergies between managing bodies (voluntary sector organizations and associations, NGOs, cooperatives) and local authorities which, through the National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services, implement integrated reception projects (cfr. <https://www.siproimi.it/la-storia>).

⁴ According to the Italian Minister of Work and Social Politics, in December 2020, around 67% of unaccompanied minors in the SIPROIMI reception centres are 17 (<https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/immigrazione/focus-on/minori-stranieri/Pagine/Dati-minori-stranieri-non-accompagnati.aspx>).

place, by the signing of the Reception Pact '*Patto di Accoglienza*', between the minor and the reception centre, framing the minors' process toward autonomy and his/her adherence to the services offered by the centre, such as language courses for example. In a second phase, an Individualized Educative Programme is designed crossing the young person's personal path – aspiration, migration history – with the reaching of the objectives concerning school and work inclusion. Analysis of young unaccompanied minors, in general, focuses on these objectives, as indicators of the 'public face' of integration (Ager, Strang, 2008) - employment, self-sufficiency, language acquisition, and housing (Atfield, Brahmbhatt, O'Toole, 2007; Ager, Strang, 2004; King, 2003; Phillips, 2006), while sport (including football) is considered a marginal 'socializing' activity. Being a space freed from the standardized insertion paths' requirement, sport could represent a useful site for highlighting some specificities of the aforementioned insertion process, and for evaluating further possible opportunities for 'social connections', arising spontaneously beyond structured processes.

3. Understanding unaccompanied young migrants' migration: the challenge of football

As analysis on unaccompanied minors rarely addresses the issue of sport and football, this can be framed also in a general lack of accounting for unaccompanied young migrants' subjectivities. Following feminist reflections, we understand subjectivity as the set of positions that a subject simultaneously occupies within a matrix of discourses and social structures (Moore, 1994). The latter influences but does not determine the subject as, in given social cultural economic and political contexts, they can identify or resist or transform the different possible positions (Moore, 2007). In other words, social positions can be elaborated by subjects in a longstanding and unpredictable process, in which they implement forms of agency (Ortner, 2005; see also Pinelli, 2013). While this perspective highlights the possibility for young unaccompanied migrants to act through their life path, specific studies focus on normative spaces, within which integration paths are established under the double pressures of both the families and the hosting system. It is a practical and a theoretical question: from a practical point of view, as underlined, sport is considered a marginal activity – one playful activity among others, (drawing, listening to music, etc.) – compared to job traineeships or language learning. Playful-recreational activities, and their socialization value, while considered highly relevant for the psycho-physical wellbeing of national "minors", are in general considered marginal in the case

of young unaccompanied migrants, sometimes seen as an obstacle to processes of emancipation from the protection system. Transition to adulthood, linked in this case more to a normative issue than to a strictly personal age one, becomes therefore a period of 'negative transition', in which the intervention of "minority experts" (judges, social services), contributes directly or indirectly to naturalize a homogeneous category, namely that of vulnerable 'minors' forced to reproduce the narrative of victims (Dal Lago, 2004). Furthermore, young migrants, in respecting the *Patto Educativo Individualizzato* (Individualized Educational Pact), accept the aims and objectives of the job-internships, of the language traineeships, and of a general process leading to their adultization according to tools and times determined by migration policies (Valette, 2015). Within this process, their subjectivities are taken into account only as an "ability to discern", and instrumentalized by both the policies directly concerning them - from repatriation to asylum requests - and in the institutionalized path of insertion in the surrounding society (Bolzman, 2020; Désormer, 2011).

This is one of the reasons why, in Italy, literature on unaccompanied minors focuses above all on the issue of emancipation, understood as an evaluation of young migrants' exit from the functional parenthesis of reception centres, with particular attention to its impact on local welfare systems (Giovannetti, 2008). The vulnerability of minors, a condition for entering the protection system, is, however, politically induced (Butler, 2009), and the 'ability to discern' often takes the form of subjective forms of agency (Elia, Fedele, 2019) that indirectly challenge the same reception system (Vervliet et al., 2014) and that are more likely to be expressed in those spaces - as sport - escaping or relatively crossing institutionalized paths of insertion.

Unaccompanied young migrants' perception of football, its role and significance through their migratory path, finds little space in the specific literature, as well as other dimensions of minors' subjectivity. More insights, in the Italian context, can be found in NGOs' reports and research, concerning the role of football in the trafficking of minor migrants, or the minors' right to sport practice, especially if it is limited by specific law barriers. In the case of football in Italy, the two issues were at least formally closely linked, considering that the *Federazione Italiana Gioco Calcio* (FIGC) provided, until very recently, a series of specific barriers that subordinate the registration of foreign minors to the presence of their parents. These regulatory barriers have been justified precisely by the need to stop trafficking through sports, which while numerically residual - around 10-15 thousand people - concerns unaccompanied minors in 80% of the cases (Anzaldi, Guarnier, 2014). Testimonies have been collected in this regard by NGOs, reporting cases in which self-proclaimed prosecutors have tried to benefit from the integration

paths provided for foreign minors by the Italian legal system so as to set up real trafficking networks. The phenomenon is also geographically connoted, mainly concerning Sub-Saharan Africans and Egyptians: according to Save the Children (2017), for example, a specific way of entry into Europe has emerged from the stories of Egyptian minors based on sports visas for participating in football competitions in some EU countries, including Germany and France, from where they reach Italy under irregular conditions.

The anti-trafficking ratio of the barriers to the registration of unaccompanied minors does not convince all observers⁵ and these barriers have been the object of protests and mobilizations of NGOs and legal associations, such as the *Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione* (ASGI), complaining of their negative impact on minors' right to play and the discrimination involved when comparing both Italian minors and foreign minors accompanied by their parents. Consequently, the FIGC has recently adapted the registration of unaccompanied minors to that of foreign minors in general⁶, promoting also a series of projects aiming at stemming the phenomena of trafficking and at enhancing the role of football in minors' integration paths⁷.

Investigating unaccompanied young migrants' perspective on football can be a useful tool for understanding the specificities of their migration. Football, as a sport, is 'an instrument capable of giving identity, of generating identification in individuals and, therefore, of enabling them to participate, also symbolically, in the same reality, to share and feel part of something common; ultimately, to live together' (Xavier Medina, 2002: 22). Reflecting on the role of football in a migratory context, Gasparini (2013) notes that it is a particularly interesting field of study for reflecting on expressions of identity and rethinking the integration of migrants through sport. In stadiums, gyms, public spaces where physical or sports activities are practiced, in reality, 'matches for identity are played. In fact, what is at stake is the kind of identity that can be built starting from the social positions available in different realities' (Zoletto, 2010: 45)⁸.

⁵ See Anzaldi and Guarnier (2014).

⁶ The latter requires a series of additional documentation with respect to that of national minors, including a certificate issued by schools assessing the minor's enrolment for at least 365 days prior to the application; the document of the person exercising parental authority; the declaration certifying any previous membership for a foreign Federation.

⁷ Among these, the "INRETE" project, since 2016 increasingly involving unaccompanied minors hosted in SIPROIMI (SPRAR) centres in a national competition (Madonna, Merolla, 2017).

⁸ Translated by the authors. See Russo (2016).

For these reasons, football can be a privileged observation point to better understand the articulation of unaccompanied minors' identities, a space within which autonomous identification processes are activated. As minors and migrants, their identity is under construction in a transnational context, where the countries of departure, the travel experience, and the host society help to define and question belonging, models and references. These young people carry out their path of identity formation within extensive social fields, complex networks of interpersonal relationships built in the encounters with young people from different backgrounds met in residential communities, or with adult parental figures, as well as with adults responsible for their protection in the hosting community (Eriksson, Wimelius, Ghazinour, 2018). Staying in the social micro-cosmos of the residential community sometimes allows them to reassess their personal trajectory, giving sense to migration according to what their erratic trajectories and border resistance practices attest. The phases of 'sedentarism' and 'nomadism' (Tarrus, 1993) within which minors' migratory experience is structured, allows us to read an identity framework made up of family migration strategies and personal aspirations, deployed between social norms of protection and emancipation projects, in relation to a plurality of living spaces. These spaces are contracted, from a symbolic and regulatory point of view, both with parents in the countries of origin and with reception operators, often not fully understood in their significance, marginalized as playful activities and possibly valued only as a moment of escape, useful to overcome traumas (Meyer Demott et al., 2017). So, in the case of sport in general and football in particular, even if minors are free to leave the centre to play in informal teams or by joining proper clubs, it is considered an activity directly linked to the reaching of the 'integration indicators' (Atfield, Brahmhatt, O'Toole, 2007; Ager and Strang, 2004; King, 2003; Phillips, 2006). If, instead, it is understood as a 'safe space' (Spaaij, 2015; Spaaij, Schulenkorf, 2014) outside normative procedures and economic needs, focusing on football, and on the strategies and the practices crossing it, 'by trying to capture some sense of their experiences and the meaning they attach to it' (Cohen, 1985: 38, cit.in Walseth, 2006), can offer a peculiar perspective on the articulation of young migrants' insertion paths, taking into account subjective forms of construction and deconstruction of pre-defined processes insertion paths and procedural destinies.

4. Methodology and research design

The scarcity of data and specific studies on the relationship between unaccompanied minors and football, specifically on the role of football in

articulating young migrants' subjectivity through migration, has guided the method chosen for the field analysis, starting from an exploratory survey, aimed at highlighting the cognitive dimensions of the phenomenon, orienting specific and subsequent insights. The investigation involved four SIPROIMI reception centres for unaccompanied minors in Calabria: Acri, Acquaformosa, Lamezia Terme, Casali del Manco. Calabria is particularly relevant when considering the presence of unaccompanied minors in Italy. According to data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, this region, in October 2020, was the fifth Italian region for reported minors (427)⁹. From 2010, when the first second reception centre for minors was born as an experimental project in the region, and over the years since then, the presence of migrant minors' has produced the assumption of institutional responsibilities and the experimentation of new professional skills by social operators, but also resulted in changes in local welfare systems, notably the activation of specific social inclusion measures.

The testimonies of 13 young migrants hosted in four SIPROIMI centres and two former hosts, between 16 and 20 years old, were collected. Ten of them are sub-Saharanians – coming from Gambia, Senegal, Sudan, Mali, Somalia – two come from Pakistan, two from Bangladesh and one from Egypt. Moreover, 7 operators of the centres (managers, social workers, cultural mediators) were interviewed between May and September 2020. A phenomenological approach has been used, focused on the social construction of reality: phenomenology is here understood as the study of what appears, manifesting perceptions with consciousness. The main aim of the analysis is, indeed, to verify the meaning that the interviewee gives to her/his actions, the frames of reference, more than the actual adherence of what is said about reality. As Schütz (1979) points out, reality is embodied in a series of experiences, which produce several finite provinces of meaning, among them the language. At the very moment in which an experience is objectified through language, it is inevitably distorted: in other words, the story of the experience is different from the experience itself. As the objective is to grasp the cognitive dimension of the experience itself, its transformation through language returns the experimentation of the world and on the world to the cognitive construction of sense and reality.

The methodology chosen for the research is consequently qualitative, using different techniques, without pre-established references, with the primary objective of giving relevance to the position of the interviewee by

⁹ <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/immigrazione/focus-on/minori-stranieri/Pagine/Dati-minori-stranieri-non-accompagnati.aspx>

creating the easiest conditions for its expression, from the setting to the conducting of the interview itself (Bichi, 2002; Cardano, 2011).

Starting from these assumptions, the investigation moved in two parallel directions: firstly, the testimonies of the operators of the centres were collected through focused narrative interviews, considering their contribution as a tool to frame the phenomenon in general (impact of sports trafficking, relations with the territory and local football teams). Secondly, minors and former guests of the centres were interviewed through free narrative interviews, determining only the topic of the conversation, letting it flow, giving relevance to topics emerging spontaneously. The interviews were conducted in groups, according to the preference expressed by the minors themselves. Moreover, to safeguard subjectivity, only those who freely wanted to participate in the research, proposed by the gatekeeper operator, have been interviewed. The emotional gratification of the interviewees (Cardano, 2011) also played an important role in the collection of experience: accustomed to answering questions (for research, but also from operators) that specifically focus on personal history, traumatic migratory paths, or strictly oriented towards an evaluation of curricular and motivational skills, talking about football, players, matches has stimulated a sustained qualitative participation. In addition, group interviews made it possible to highlight the intra-group dynamics, often helping even the most timid to participate in the conversation. The analysis of the interviews also proceeded from a phenomenological perspective, underlining features attributable to the “meaning” that the subject gives to football, highlighting useful profiles for in-depth analysis, but also the aspects considered relevant from operators. The latter are considered as a way to frame young migrants experience, considering that operators’ perspectives on football affect its inclusion in young migrants’ insertion path, and, as a consequence, its possible role in promoting the building of social connection or in providing a ‘safe space’ for expressing subjectivities.

5. Unaccompanied young migrants and football: preliminary results of a field research

Operators interviewed generally view football in two main ways: on the one hand, as a tool for young migrants for being visible on the territory, establishing a contact – even temporary – with their peers; on the other, as a possible obstacle to the implementation of a virtuous insertion path. From the first point of view, it should be considered that the SIPROIMI centres here taken into account are located in small municipalities, often far from the main

towns, mirroring the Calabrian reception system in general, and the possibilities of contact with national peers happens in school or, more likely, in informal activities, including sports, spontaneously organized in public places (fields, streets, squares).

We have organized football tournaments with locals to try to implement forms of inclusion. After the tournament, boys (migrants) continued to go to the pitch here with local boys. People came to eat the things they ate. It has had a fall-out and a continuity, because they all were involved in the thing. Therefore, if they subsequently passed by a shop, for example, and there were boys (locals) they stopped to talk. There was continuity at the level of knowing each other... or, at least, they didn't walk on the street and no one knew them (Operator).

This issue of creation of connections with peers is raised in the operators' interviews, together with the idea that football offers a ground for integration within the communities, among hosts themselves. The story of M. 17 years old from Bangladesh, who arrived in Italy about two years ago and who had been less than six months inside the SIPROIMI Centre, is particularly significant. At the time of the research, in the centre there were three under-18s who were compatriots, and eight boys from Sub-Saharan Africa. The compatriots, as the operators report, were clearly already oriented to working autonomously through personal contacts outside the region and showed little interest in the training and professionalization courses proposed. However, M. was very interested in studying, actively engaging in the search for internships that correspond to his working vocation – the field of catering – despite his compatriots and family of origin pushing him elsewhere. In this case, football provided M. with a communicative way to approach the sub-Saharan African guests of the centre. As already underlined, in general, the relevance of football also depends on the role it plays in the countries of origin and therefore on the degree of socialization of football imagery. As a consequence it is more important for those who come from Sub-Saharan Africa or North Africa, with a lower incidence for Asian minors. Despite his lack of familiarity with the game, and the considerable linguistic difficulties, M. spontaneously proposed to replace the goalkeeper of the SIRPROIMI team, in a local championship. The performance was not the best one:

It went badly. They eliminated us immediately, in the third match. We have never won a single match, since M. has been the goalkeeper! With L. we went all the way to the semi-final¹⁰ (O. Senegal, 17 years old).

¹⁰ The authors have translated all the interviews reported.

Nonetheless, the group takes it as a joke, showing a particular internal harmony. This experience, limited from an athletic point of view, has a strong symbolic and socialization value: it allowed M. to identify with his companions' path, and also, in parallel, to find a way to assess his own life choices, appropriating, albeit slowly, in an autonomous way, his migratory path, for example, deciding to follow his vocation in catering, instead of joining his compatriots' path oriented to leaving the centre. Unaccompanied young migrants pass through reception centres for a short period and the intra-group relationship depends on many factors, including the time spent sharing common spaces, but also the ethno-national dimension (Jovelin, 2007; Bolzman, Jovelin, Montgomery, 2020). Several operators report that rivalries, stereotypes and forms of inclusion/exclusion on a national basis reappear within the centres and that pre-existing national networks are fundamental in the construction of young migrants' personal paths, often guiding and orienting migration. However, unlike adult migration, these young people more easily break the bonds of close solidarity and control mechanisms over their individuality (Bolzman, 2011), opening up to more open and flexible intra-ethnic relations. In this case football can be a way of consolidating friendships, beyond the dynamics of given belongings.

From the first point of view, recalling Cimagalli's (2017) reflections, the stories collected show that football, as a team-based sporting practice, is a tool for unaccompanied minors for creating social capital more inwardly – towards the group of people hosted in the community – than outwardly – towards the host society. Sport, and here we are thinking specifically of football, indeed, 'is a set of games and symbols, schemes and flags, competitive performances played on some field and memory, myths and rituals. For this reason, it is capable of fortifying identity links within a community: participating in the dynamics of sporting life nourishes ties and helps to reduce the differences within the social group' (Cimagalli, 2017: 33)¹¹. Nationality and ethnic dimensions, thus, can be set aside to create a shared social space among unaccompanied minors. As a social worker says:

Football integrates them on the territory and with other young people of the town, but it also integrates them among each other, beyond ethnic differences, even if some are more talented than others ... football always brings the whole group together.

¹¹ Translated by the authors.

Social capital as *bonding*, more than as *bridging*, therefore, prevails in the stories of young migrants, for whom the creation of autonomous social spaces in the migratory path determine the possibility of negotiating their own life choices, with respect, on the one hand, to the family of origin, and, on the other hand, to the centres' operators.

Nevertheless, this 'football bargaining space', is not always perceived as positive by operators. According to most of them, the cases in which football has been the main motivation behind migrating exist, but are rare. Nevertheless, in these cases it is often difficult to reconvert minors towards more plausible goals, leading them to escape from the reception system.

Some unaccompanied minors arrive with this football-obsession, some of them arrived precisely prepared by false prosecutors. Two years ago, a Malian boy who came here with the idea of being a professional player met a person who created false expectations for him ... "I know this, I know that, I'll make you do it, I'll make you say"... but in reality the boy did not know how to play football. But he was blocked with this person, who had completely blocked his path. The boy kept on saying that "sooner or later I'll do this" and he did not commit to anything. So, then he arrived close to the age of 18, having nothing in his hand (social operator).

One of these [minors] was brought to Italy by a friend who told him he was going to play football. And since he had arrived at _____ he had already been included in a youth football team (...). These are contacts that they don't tell you clearly...as far as I have understood, a friend of his from his country got in touch with an Italian friend who is in touch with this football team... Then he was moved here with us and therefore the thing got a bit lost, because... he made me talk to this person and ... I didn't like his way of working, because he was still a minor, there was a need for a series of authorizations and he didn't care (...) then in the end the whole thing fell away. The boy then ran away, because he said that we won't let him play football, this is because he was really obsessed with this football thing (social worker).

However, the loss of contact with the minor is considered a risk, regardless of the plausibility of an individual's aspirations, even if these minors are not properly received by reception operators, some of whom, according to the interview, can diminish the very value of the sports experience, tracing it back to a minors' lack of awareness.

We cannot feed unrealizable dreams. Football can be a turning point only if the boy undoubtedly has skills. Conversely, they need to understand that football is a parenthesis of sociality (...). We do not deny them sport, but

we help them to give it the due weight. Because if you really are a phenomenon you will be able to make a living from this passion, otherwise you will hardly be able to do it (SIPROIMI Coordinator).

It is already difficult for a local boy, let alone if they can succeed...Access channels are what they are and it is difficult for migrant boys to reach high levels.... (Social operator).

In general, therefore, beyond the possibility that participation in tournaments can support the visibility of migrants in reception contexts or create spaces for socializing among peers, the operators involved in his research consider young migrants' willingness to join a structured path in football with scepticism, somehow re-proposing the idea that sport is not able to create that poly-cultural capital (Dukic, McDonald, Spaaij, 2017) supporting virtuous integration paths.

At the same time, in interviews with young migrants, football is never solicited as an element of creating bridging social capital, and playing football is not associated with the idea of establishing relationships with non-migrant peers. Moreover, the young people involved confirm the subordination of football aspirations to the institutionalized path that should lead to a quicker economic return. Asking 'what would you like to do when you grow up?', we found out that, in general, the young people encountered find it difficult to imagine a future detached from the integration paths proposed by reception centres' project and from the (economic) family project: 'I just want a job, any job.' (O. Senegal, 17 years old); 'I want to be an electrician, I am doing an internship' (S. Bangladesh, 18 years old); 'I want to be a chef, I'm doing a course' (M. Mali, 18 years old). Only after specific solicitations by the interviewers (*'but what is your greatest dream?'*) are they able to articulate answers about their dreams that do not correspond to any job opportunities of the training or internships in which they have been involved. But then, the idea of being a football player in a European league is the most recurring aspiration. Even if they are aware of the need to subordinate this dream to fulfilling the role of breadwinner with respect to their families, football continues to be central to their life experience:

We play with each other every so often, with friends, we play together every now and then. I used to play in a team myself, then I went to play with another team when I turned 18. Then I could not continue, because I had to work. But we still organize matches from time to time and whenever there is the possibility, every week at least once or twice, we all go to play together (O. Gambia, 18 years old).

Oh well, the one that can play well and believes that football can become his future, he continues. But my friends and me have not continued football too much, for football to become our future. We just like to play every now and then. Once I joined a team, as I got to know a man, I told him I like to play football and he helped me, and I played with them for a year and a half. (...) But in the end I couldn't continue with them: I had to work, I had to do other things, and I didn't have time to continue. But others who had the time continued (U. Gambia, 21 years old).

At least every now and then ... growing older it is difficult to play football in a team. I continue to have fun with football (...) but I have to work and to be able to build a future and help my parents (M.Mali, 19 years old).

I want to be a football player! Now let's see when school starts, when work starts... if I can do both. Because I start working at 6.30 p.m., I am a cook's assistant and the team I was going to play with started the training at 6.30 p.m. So you're already half here (...) let's see, if I can do both, it wouldn't be bad. (B. Gambia, 18 years old).

However, when family expectations and the constraints of the institutionalized insertion path into the centre are stringent, beyond individual aspirations, for young unaccompanied minors football is above all a free space, a 'safe space' (Spaaij, 2015; Spaaij, Schlenker, 2014), the place to escape from daily pressure, a space within which to make one's dreams come true, even when they are not accomplished in the real life.

In general, if I play football, it's because I'm happier. If I stay on the football pitch, I feel better. I like it. Even if the training is hard, it is something I like, and if you like something, you like it even if you get tired (B. Gambia, 17 years old).

The idea of well-being associated to playing on the pitch makes football an important place to evaluate some meanings that young migrants give to their own life experience, highlighting forms of subjective construction and deconstruction, articulation of aspirations and preferences, elaborations of their personal path, often linking past and future. As Dukic, McDonald and Spaaij (2017: 105) underline indeed, 'in this way football is more than just a diversion from oppressive conditions; it offers a return to a younger, happier sense of being.'

From this point of view an interesting element, at the crossroads of aspirations and identity self-definition, emerges from the discussion around the international teams supported by unaccompanied minors, and their favourite players. The names recalled are those of the international top-players

– Ronaldo, Messi, Dybala – but the reason for supporting a specific player is also due to the specific account of his personal history:

I support Liverpool, because one of our national plays, that is Salah! He is like a brother. (...) I like his humility, before football, first of all. Because in any case he has grown, indeed he came out of ... more or less, from the same situation as ours, he is a player who has done a lot, he has made many sacrifices to arrive. Maybe there are... most of the players, they are already born... let's say, they are enough ... well they are fine! Instead he started his way from zero, let's say. He was playing in a team that wasn't very strong and Egyptian top-teams didn't even want to recruit him, they said he wasn't at their level. Instead, seeing his entire career here, at first, he played with Basel, he went to Chelsea – they didn't let him play that much at Chelsea – then he went to Fiorentina, then from Fiorentina he went to Rome, then from Rome he went to Liverpool, and is already the English top scorer. Because being in the English league, among the best players in the world, the highest paid in the world, it is not that easy ... then perhaps he is the first African player who made this 'boom' in football. But the first thing is his humility! That is the first thing ... he is a great example for all players, because in the end, for example, it would be very nice if they could help too, if they'd participate in the association, because there are people who are not well. And they are actually paid enough, they are paid by minutes, not by the hour! So, he... he helps people, he has made an association for street-children. He has built a school... in short, he has done enough. Even those who wanted to get married and couldn't manage the wedding expenses, he helped them' (S. Egypt, 20 years old).

I like Mané, because he started like us. He had dreams like us, like now... he started alone, like we all started alone, and look where he is now! He had all thoughts, all dreams as we do. He always played football even when he was a child and then he became famous and talented (B. Gambia, 18 years old).

Sometimes I support Senegal because of Mané, who plays for Liverpool; he is a very good player. His story... he was one of us in Africa! He was born out of poverty, in poverty he slowly made his way there and, in the end, he found the opportunity to grow, grow and then, in the end, he found his team at Liverpool, where he has an important role. Last time, he scored two goals, with these two goals he scored, he brought the team to victory. His lifestyle, I like him, because he remembers the poor. The rich must remember the poor. And I liked this a lot, because he has an i-phone with a broken screen and they interviewed him and asked, "Why does a rich man like you use a phone with a broken screen?" He said that he can use a broken screen, because he remembers the poor and in his neighbourhood

there was poverty and thanks to him, he built schools, he built many things to help the city (U. Gambia, 21 years old).

The young migrants interviewed refer to football players as models with respect to their own migratory path, identifying with those perceived to have the same trajectory: escaping from poverty, but also from the lack of opportunity and recognition of talent and potential in the country of origin – as in the history of Salah – who have migrated to Europe, considered a space for the enhancement of one's aspirations and abilities, but above all helping people and families in the country of origin. The latter point concretizes the greatest aspiration of the young people we met: to realize themselves and, at the same time, the needs of their families. The stories of Salah and Mané – but also of Messi – are told giving space, above all, to their interventions with respect to collective and individual needs – from the building of schools to individual financial aid. The interviewed minors stress the felt ability of these players to remain faithful to themselves – humble, with strong values, honest, faithful – despite having faced the difficulties connected to a migration, that despite it being easier than theirs, is perceived as a compelling choice for the realization of one's own life course. Football players' biographies, while unfolding in different migratory and personal contexts, are therefore valued as a sign, they are narrated as if they were the mirror of the unaccompanied minors' stories, giving a further insight into the strategies of meaning and practices that minors put in place to articulate their own path.

6. Conclusions

The main argument of the article is that football can represent a possible space for articulating young migrants' subjectivities, for constructing and deconstructing pre-defined insertion paths, space for re-appropriating and expressing themselves outside of any hetero-definition determined by the migration itself, especially compared to the normativization of the reception path. The first results of the research have highlighted the relevance for young unaccompanied migrants of football as a 'safe space', in which being young itself is valorized, where a sense of self is recovered. In this sense, also a gender approach should be taken into-account considering how football and its imaginary can represent a way to re-appropriate and reinstate ones' own masculinity, while considering migration as a disempowering and emasculating experience (Jaji, 2009). The choice of the player to support reveals the link that young migrants make between the player's history and their own personal history, as players become life models (and also possible gender models),

carrying a perceived history of migration and redemption, that is at the same time individual and communitarian, always tracing their belonging to the family and territory of origin. From this point of view, the motivations behind supporting national and regional teams during international competitions, showing the imaginary articulation of the bond with country of origin, or choosing to support European national teams, possibly showing the request for recognition, would require a further in-depth analysis.

Nevertheless, the analysis highlights that the space of football, considered a playful and marginal activity compared to the integration paths dictated by reception projects and the need to meet their transnational families' expectations, can be considered a free space which represents a useful tool for young migrants in the re-articulation and in the subjective appropriation of their life projects, and a 'safe space' in which to also develop tools to resist external pressures and affirm themselves as a protagonist of their own migration. Playing football allows young people to regain their own personal dimension, one in which they are not only victimized and vulnerable, but also open to relationships and experiences. In the interviews collected, the image of football frequently emerges as a space to elaborate and express dreams and passions and even to glimpse in football a chance for life and citizenship in the place of arrival. In this case, the activity of football could be a concrete resource for the future, also manifesting a process of resistance to the re-education processes of the protection systems, necessarily oriented to produce concrete results from the point of view of training and work integration.

The research underlines the traces of continuous mediation processes conducted by young people to become active subjects in interactions with adults, both in residential communities and in connection with their families. In the first case, not only playing football, but also watching and supporting football becomes a way to regulate everyday life in the residential community, activating an autonomous form of communication more or less supported by social workers, that traces new patterns of belonging. Concerning the families' economic mandate, driving the migration process, this generally pushes the young migrants to leave their dream in the background. Even in that case, football can be a tool to project them into the future, while remaining anchored to their own role as breadwinner. However, it should be considered that Calabria is usually considered a transit area and, at the same time, is quite outside the main football recruiting systems, so it would be interesting to evaluate the relationship between football and economic integration in long-term residence contexts, and in regions in which the real possibility of playing professional football could be easier. This could be interesting also for properly evaluating the possibility for football to help build social capital. From the research, it emerges that usually both receptions' centres operators

and young migrants evaluate football as a tool to gain visibility, sometimes as some recent research underlines, to build intra-ethnic social connections (Eriksson, Wimelius, Ghazinour, 2018).

Young migrants can find, through football, a legitimacy in the public space, in a meeting place on an equal footing with other peers: in the different reception centres' experiences analysed, young people, while rooted in their transmigrational experience, make football play the role of an instrument of inter-ethnic dialogue, enhancing the value of new and unexpected relationships, that answer young people's need to strengthen community ties and to create space for peer sharing, and that also can be functional to gain support and resources for their future or to confront and support themselves during the settlement.

But the possibility that these social connections enhance the creation of social bridging and linking capital, beyond a structured path of insertion, is not clearly highlighted. While analysis on unaccompanied young migrants show ethnic and intra-ethnic personal networks can support young migrants in their migration process, and can be used as a tool for autonomously finding a means of insertion or to plan travel to other places, (Elia, Fedele, 2019; Jovelin, 2020; Bolzman, 2020), in the case of football, apart from consolidating temporary relationships inside reception centres, networks do not emerge as relevant toward the outside. In Calabria, a longitudinal analysis (Spaij et al., 2019) in this sense, is complicated by the fact that for young migrants the region usually represents a transition toward other destinations, but the involvement in the research of other stakeholders, as for example president and coach of football clubs, that have recruited young migrants could highlight the fall-out of professional and semi-professional playing on long term insertion paths, highlighting relationships built on the football pitch that can influence a proper integration.

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