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Promoting social engagement for young adults living in social isolation in Sweden: social workers and health care professionals’ perceptions of success factors

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**ABSTRACT**

The number of young adults not in employment, education or training has increased globally and socially withdrawn young people have proven difficult to support. Therefore, this study aimed to explore what factors social workers and health care professionals find more successful in supporting socially withdrawn young adults. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2018 with 13 employees (nine women, four men between 35 and 60 years) from social services and outpatient psychiatric clinics in Sweden. Data were analysed using thematic network analysis. The results revealed that the participants tended to associate the issues of young adults with difficulties related to transition into adulthood and that successful factors to re-engage these young adults were based on an empowerment-oriented perspective. The focus needed to be on the young individual’s strengths and interventions had to be conducted in collaboration with different authorities (e.g. social services, employment agencies and schools). This study shows that a successful intervention to break the isolation of socially withdrawn young adults and meet their complex needs calls for early identification, an integrated and holistic approach, multifaceted interventions and individually tailored and flexible activities.

**KEYWORDS**

Collaboration; empowerment; integrated interventions; neet; social withdrawal

**Introduction**

Young adults (aged 16–30 years) who do not work, study and have little or no contact with society are at high risk of being permanently excluded from mainstream society (Bäckman and Nilsson 2015) and the number of socially isolated young adults is growing in many countries (International Labour Organization 2014; Li and Wong 2015; Tajan 2015). Although the group of socially isolated young adults is heterogeneous with varying needs and different living conditions (Eurofound 2012), experiences of poverty, trauma, violence, and discrimination are some common factors increasing the risk of being marginalized (Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National research Council (NRC) 2014). In addition, incomplete schooling, psychiatric problems, psychosocial difficulties and being in out of home care are common characteristics in isolated young adults (Berlin et al. 2020; Rodwell et al. 2018; Teo et al. 2015; Teo and Gaw 2010). Isolation from the social structures and networks is a problem (Li and Wong 2015) posing major challenges for authorities to detect these young adults (Liu et al. 2018) and motivate them to seek help (Kondo et al. 2011). Studies have shown that trusting relationships with mentors are supportive and contribute to feelings of belonging (Sapiro
and Ward 2020). Moreover, being met with acceptance, patience and commitment from service providers has been found to support young adults (Munford and Sanders 2015). Evaluations show that staff knowledge and personal involvement, geographical proximity to support, and individualized interventions based on a person’s unique needs and wishes are essential. Another positive factor is to engage young adults in activities with fewer people (State Office [Statskontoret] 2017, 5).

Currently, there is no universally accepted definition of marginalized young adults without work, study or training (Eurofound 2012). Therefore, the characteristics associated with the phenomenon vary between (and even within) countries (Li and Wong 2015). Internationally, the European Commission’s concept of NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) is used to describe young people outside the labour market and the education system and who live in an isolated social context (Eurofound 2012). However, criticism has been raised regarding the use of NEET as a definition of such a heterogeneous group (Elder 2015; Eurofound 2012; Furlong 2006; Yates and Payne 2007). Using the NEET definition risks simplifying the situation of the young adults who, in the transition to adulthood, face a variety of problematic situations (Furlong 2006; Reiter and Schlimbach 2015). The Japanese concept of hikikomori (acute social withdrawal) is another international definition to describe social withdrawal among young people (Tajan 2015).

In Sweden, young people withdrawing themselves from school or known school activities is often described as ’homesitters [in Swedish: hemmasittare]’ representing socially withdrawn or isolated individuals who stay home from school, often for long periods of time (Ministry of Education [Utbildningsdepartementet] 2015). The number of socially isolated persons in Sweden aged 16–30 years was about 127,600 in 2017. For a third of these young people, there is no known activity and thus they have not been in contact with any authority. There are currently extensive efforts on a national level to increase the societal participation of young people in general, as well as young adults who are socially withdrawn in particular (Swedish Government Official Reports [SOU] [Statens Offentliga Utredningar] 2017, 9).

In this study we adopted the framework of empowerment as the theoretical point of departure. In Sweden, the framework of empowerment-focused social work is often used according to each individual’s ability to take control of the situation through self-empowerment, i.e. by taking control of their lives, establishing meaningful goals and taking action to achieve those goals. The value orientation of empowerment allows people to be re-included in the community (Adams 2008). Central to empowerment is the closely related concept of agency, i.e. the psychological internal power and capacity of people to act independently and make their own free choices (Parsell, Eggins, and Marston 2017; Shankar, Sundar, and Smith 2019).

Similar to empowerment, the concept of agency is a multi-layered concept. Although ambiguous in nature (Loyal and Barnes 2001), agency is oriented towards the future and an individual’s capacity to reflect and evaluate the present situation (Parsell, Eggins, and Marston 2017). Empowerment is a process that covers individual (Porter and Bejerholm 2018) and societal aspects (Turunen 2020). It is closely related to resilience, a concept traceable to Sigmund Freud (Freud 1955), who theorized resilience as a personality trait. Resilience enhances the ability to adapt and recover from traumas and stresses of life though it is also thought to safeguard against vulnerability (Werner 1989, 2013). The concept shifted from being solely a personality trait to understanding resilience as an interactive protective factor in which context is a vital component (Bottrell 2009).

Several studies have shown that young, socially withdrawn adults are at increased risk of developing physical and mental illness compared with the general population (Benjet et al. 2012; Eurofound 2012) and peers who have already been established in the society (Nordenmark et al. 2015). Other studies, however, have suggested the opposite, i.e. that the phenomenon and the problems can be regarded as symptoms of underlying psychiatric disorders in which the difficulties are contributing factors to social withdrawal and isolation (Kondo et al. 2011). Exclusion from social life can promote mental illness, a risk factor for being left without employment or education and thus a determinant to social exclusion (Benjet et al. 2012; Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016; Välimäki, Kivijärvi, and Aaltonen 2019). Young people who neither work nor study and who
isolate themselves are often bullied at school, have high absenteeism and cause interruptions in school (Kondo et al. 2011; Lee et al. 2013; Teo 2010). School-related problems or failed schooling are generally regarded as a first step in the development of socially withdrawn behaviour (Ovejero et al. 2014; Saitō 2013). Socially withdrawn young people are also more likely to come from families and areas with low socio-economic status (Eurofound 2012; Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016). Unfavourable family background and parents with low socioeconomic status may increase the risk of young people being excluded from the labour market and education system (Pitkänen et al. 2019). Furthermore, social withdrawal has been linked to cultural and socioeconomic changes that have occurred globally and nationally (Saitō 2013; Suwa and Suzuki 2013).

The transition to working life, which has been characterized by security and predictability, has become increasingly prolonged and widened. Consequently, it has been replaced by an individual transition pattern characterized by flexibility and increased choice for the young (Furlong 2008). Education and social networking have become increasingly important, which are traits many socially withdrawn young people lack (Husu and Välimäki 2017).

Support interventions

Socially withdrawn young adults who lack employment are challenging to reach, support and engage. Many of these young people are dissatisfied with their withdrawn life (Lee et al. 2013). Researchers believe that, despite a reduction in social withdrawal, these individuals’ overall life situation can be improved, regardless of any psychological difficulties (Kato et al. 2012). However, existing research on the effectiveness of various interventions aimed at the target group is inadequate (Mawn et al. 2017; Oliver et al. 2014; Wong et al. 2017). The choice of methods and support interventions differs between countries (Kato et al. 2012). In Japan, for instance, it is common for socially withdrawn young people who do not work or study to be treated with psychotherapy, family therapy, occupational rehabilitation and exposure therapy to gradually increase their social contact with others (Kato et al. 2012; Teo 2010). In Western countries interventions mostly focus on education, work training and practice, with therapeutic interventions being less common (Mawn et al. 2017).

Multifaceted support efforts are deemed necessary to help the target group (Henderson, Hawke, and Chaim 2017; Kondo et al. 2011; Wong 2009). To promote individual development interventions seeking to increase the young person’s interaction with other individuals and the rest of society are equally important as any support intervention (Wong 2009). To cover the broad problem spectrum characterizing young people who neither work nor study and who behave in a socially withdrawn manner various methods have been developed, including multi-component intervention models (e.g. Wong et al. 2017). These models often include a combination of some form of education or work training and internships that last for an extended period. Those efforts have proven to be the most effective (Mawn et al. 2017). The programmes that largely focus on the individual’s self-esteem and social needs have contributed to reduced social anxiety, increased self-esteem and a sense of employability in the socially withdrawn youth (Wong et al. 2017). Henderson, Hawke, and Chaim (2017) have further proposed that ‘integrated service hubs’ should be developed. Developing integrated service hubs is a solution to the need for multifaceted and coordinated efforts to establish common places in the local community where health care and social services are combined and integrated. Also of importance is to emphasize the promotion of young people’s access to resources that increase resilience and tailor interventions that consider cultural and contextual norms (Ungar and Theron 2020).

Early detection of and attention to young people who risk isolation and social exclusion are crucial (Eurofound 2012; Li, Liu, and Wong 2017). Innovative efforts are advocated for the young person’s continued development and establishment in society (Wong et al. 2017). Moreover, politics and organizations need to be characterized by flexibility for young people’s reintegration and inclusion into the community (Wong 2009). Social policy strategies are necessary to create
educational opportunities for these young people and facilitate their entry into the labour market. Such strategies, which help and support the development of young people’s social abilities, must be considered when designing efforts (Gutiérrez-García et al. 2017). A coordinated working method is also required that includes different employers to increase the number of internships. Collaboration with schools and health care has also been described as important (Henderson, Hawke, and Chaim 2017). The current work with the target group is mostly about supporting young persons to take responsibility for their situation, develop their abilities and increase participation in decisions concerning their life (Wong 2012). Involvement and participation in decision making that concerns the individual are expected to contribute to a sense of competence, which promotes wellbeing (Lögdberg, Nilsson, and Kostenius 2018). Another success factor in helping young adults to break their isolated state and reintegrate into social life is communication between the individual and the social worker (Wong 2012). Trusting relationships between a mentor and a young person based on mutual respect, acceptance and authenticity have been shown to be supportive for those experiencing loneliness, social isolation, or both (Greeson and Bowen 2008; Munson et al. 2010). In this respect the encounter with the young person focuses on building a trusting relationship characterized by continuity and openness (Li, Liu, and Wong 2017). Continuous professional support for more prolonged periods has also been shown to increase the social participation of young people (Kondo et al. 2011).

Often, the group of socially withdrawn young adults who lack known activity and have complex problems lack the ability, motivation or willingness to seek help, which impedes authorities to offer support (Kondo et al. 2011). Although the problem of socially isolated young adults has been described previously, the phenomenon is complicated and persists over time and thus needs to be continuously examined from different perspectives and in other contexts. Learning more about supporting socially isolated young people who feel disempowered and lack agency requires taking into account different perspectives. Moreover, more knowledge is needed on how professionals can provide appropriate help and support for those in social isolation. Therefore, this study aimed to explore what factors social workers and health care professionals find most successful in supporting socially withdrawn young adults.

Materials and methods

Study design

This is a qualitative study in which interviews were conducted and analysed using thematic network analysis.

Setting and sample

Thirteen professionals within social services (n = 9) and outpatient psychiatry (n = 4) in one region in central Sweden took part in the study. The inclusion criteria were that the participants, regardless of education, had to work with young adults and have experience and good knowledge of the target group. A purposive sampling method was applied (Etikan, Abubakar Musa, and Sunusi Alkassim 2016), i.e. a targeted selection of participants who could be expected to provide specific knowledge about socially withdrawn young adults. The study participants were asked about other possible key individuals. The 13 (nine women and four men) participants in the study were between 35 and 60 years. Most of those interviewed had a university degree as a teacher, pre-school teacher, social worker, psychiatric nurse, or psychologist and had 7–30 years of experience working with socially withdrawn young adults who did not work or study. All participants worked in organizations that were municipally run in the public sector. Of 13 participants, 4 were active in outpatient psychiatry. Outpatient psychiatric care in Sweden is readily accessible, located in municipalities and provides support and care within the public sector. Young people under 20 receive free care and those over
20 pay a small fee. The rest worked in various municipal projects or ordinary activities dealing with young people who neither work nor study and socially isolated from the community. Their main task was to increase social activity and enhance wellbeing in young people.

**Ethical considerations**

This study was conducted under the Swedish Research Council’s ethical guidelines in which the basic requirements for individual protection are specified. Thus, ethical aspects were considered throughout the study process. The participants gave their informed written consent before being interviewed. The study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Dalarna University in the fall of 2018 (Dnr: 7.1–2018/853).

**Data collection**

Thirteen face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2018 led by an interview guide with open-ended questions based on specific question areas: the problems of socially withdrawn young adults and the efforts and working methods for the target group. The focus of this study was on factors that have proven to be effective in facilitating the social interaction of young people living in isolation, examining what efforts were made and how these were perceived to function. Thus, central to this study was to ask the participants what factors they found most successful in helping young adults out of a life of social exclusion. The interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Data analysis**

The data were analysed using thematic network analysis, an illustrative tool for interpreting and analysing qualitative material (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Thematic networks include three levels: basic themes, organizing themes and global themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Although both challenges and success factors were explored in the interviews, the data analysis focused on what the participants found successful, i.e. factors contributing to empowerment. Initially, the transcribed material was read individually by all authors to gain an overall understanding of the content followed by a joint discussion of their first impressions of the text. In step one the raw material was coded by the first author (MA). In the coding process, text segments, words, etc., were labelled. Codes were then critically discussed by all authors. In the second step themes were abstracted from the coded text segments and refined. In step three a network was built by arranging themes abstracted in step two. In step four the network was described and underlying patterns were explored. In step five the thematic network was summarized and the main findings were presented. In the final step patterns were interpreted and then presented and elucidated with verbatim quotes in the result section. The steps in the analysis were followed as described by Attride-Stirling (2001). To summarize the analysis process codes were clustered into basic themes and subsequently grouped into organizing themes. Finally, the organizing themes were clustered into one global theme, representing the central point of the text. All authors participated in the analysis.

**Methodological considerations and limitations**

Several aspects were addressed to evaluate the quality of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss the need for a reflexive and systematic process and rigorous analysis in. Each step is checked with the original descriptions to ensure results are firmly based on the collected data. All of the present authors conducted joint discussions for each step of the analysis. Each author’s separate reading and review of the coded transcripts and the interdisciplinary contribution from co-authors in creating the network were important in further increasing study credibility. To achieve confirmation each theme
is illustrated with verbatim quotes from the participants. The interview questions were open-ended and the participants could talk freely, all of which contributed to the rich and nuanced empirical data.

All authors in this study are social workers, university teachers and researchers in social work. Two of the authors have experience working with young people at school but none have worked directly with socially withdrawn young adults.

Results

In the interviews participants first described the problems and difficulties, which served as a starting point for describing successful factors of how to meet, support and manage the young adults’ complex needs. By considering the most prominent success factors, a thematic network was based on eight interconnected basic themes. These basic themes were grouped and formed three organizing themes. From these organizing themes, one global theme emerged that encapsulated the central points of the interviews: ‘To manage complex needs’, i.e. participants had to deal with complex needs and support individuals who were experiencing several problems simultaneously (Figure 1).

To manage complex needs

Work with the target group needed to provide the flexibility to meet each young person’s individual needs and for support to be succeed. The participants noted that despite some difficulties and sometimes feeling frustrated (e.g. when support did not provide the help they had hoped for), there was an optimistic view that change is possible if the young persons have access to proper and individually adapted support. Successful support work with the target group seemed to be partly about the professional’s ability to care and be there for the young person. Having time and space was necessary to be able to work with different issues, on several fronts simultaneously. All participants emphasized the importance of flexible and multifaceted interventions in which the focus of attention is on the individual. Cooperation with other actors was also considered central. Good organizational conditions and flexible frameworks to operate within were further means to achieve change.

The individual in focus

The organizing theme ‘Individual in focus’ consisted of two basic themes: mobilizing individual power and functioning in everyday life. Placing the individual at the forefront was fundamental for
all participants. They emphasized the importance of conducting a detailed and holistic mapping of the individual’s circumstances at the beginning of the contact, which later acted as a basis for how to support the young adult. To achieve a change the participants believed it was essential to work from a holistic perspective, i.e. to consider different life aspects, such as family, school and work or physical and mental health issues. They further emphasized the importance to involving the young person already in the beginning and considering the individual’s view of the situation and thoughts about change. In the interviews the participants described how they focused on individual power mobilization and the implanting of ideas for change. This strategy included motivating the young person to make a change and trying to awaken a dormant interest, something that they perceived the young adults often missed. The participants sought to empower young adults to believe that they could influence what they do with their lives. Thus, motivation for change and finding something that the young persons were enthusiastic about were seen as useful (also perceived as the most significant challenges). An essential part of the work to help break isolation and reintegrate young adults into society was to centre on the young persons’ development of independence. For example, the young adults were encouraged to cope with things on their own, thereby increasing awareness that they could move forward while simultaneously supporting increased independence. The participants stated that working on the young persons’ unique skills made the young people come to realize that they were good at something.

Work on the abilities – make them understand that they are good at something. They continuously need to be encouraged so that they can move forward. After all, many people have dug themselves into a hole and become stuck in a lot of obstacles. So, it means making them see that they can actually do things (Participant 2, social services).

Self-confidence, according to the participants, contributes to influencing young people’s situation. The participants stated that they continually emphasized the young adults’ responsibility and made it clear that they could manage more things on their own. The participants explained that many young adults who did not work or study and who isolated themselves at home were lacking routines in their everyday lives. The participants felt that it was vital for the young adults to create a functioning everyday life (e.g. fulfilling basic needs, sleeping regular hours and having a sense of power) by establishing regularity and discipline.

They would need to have a little order in their everyday lives [. . .] To arrive in time, to get up from bed, make sure that you are clean when you go to work, that you can interact with other people, that you are faced with new situations (Participant 13, outpatient psychiatry).

The participants pointed out that the work of supporting young adults to achieve a more functioning everyday life required that they trained in several ways to face or deal with the outside world. Improving the young adults’ social situation and reducing social withdrawal were crucial factors to consider. Thus, the participants’ common goal was to break the isolation cycle to allow a gradual entry into the community.

Professional aspects

The organizing theme ‘Professional aspects’ was generated by the four basic themes: building on relational base, forward-thinking, flexible frameworks and a functioning collaboration. The professional approach was considered decisive for whether young persons were willing to receive help and wanting to make a change in their life. Therefore, the basic prerequisites for successful work with young adults entailed building a relational base in which security and trust were two key concepts. The participants also noted that continuity in contact was crucial regardless of whether the young person arrived at the scheduled appointments. Creating and sustaining a connection should be not only the responsibility of the young person but also the responsibility of the professionals. A significant part of the work relied on the professional’s ability to pay attention to avoidant behaviours and provide support to interrupt such behavioural patterns. The participants recognized
that the young adults needed to be guided by optimism, a positive attitude and forward-thinking given that they believe they often failed in life. To support hope for the future was crucial but also important are attentiveness, commitment and a genuine belief in the young person. Having patience and understanding of a time-consuming process were additional factors to consider by both the professional and the authorities within the organization.

There is so much potential in these young people – in every single one! But you must give them time; it has to take time and they have to feel that someone genuinely cares. I really think so - the right person in the right place who wants to do this, who can handle this when they [the young adults] fall and do not give up. (Participant 1, social services).

Although the long-term goal for young persons was often to get employment and leave home, the process should be done gradually according to the professionals. Setting reasonable requirements, seeing when to push and when not to and having a clear structure and acceptance if the young persons failed were considered crucial factors in the process. For this particular target group, the participants highlighted the need for professional creativity and flexibility to support the young persons to achieve a change, which meant being able to think differently, unconventionally or from a novel perspective and adopt a liberal attitude to their organization’s rules and guidelines. The participants especially recommended being adaptable and flexible regarding location and time and considering the young adults’ preferences when scheduling appointments. A well-functioning collaboration with other authorities was underscored as crucial as well as keeping a family perspective because involving family members is critical for sustained behaviour change, which also meant that the need for support and guidance of the parents had to be considered, and not just those of the young adults.

**Organizational aspects**

The organizing theme ‘Organizational aspects’ contained two basic themes: innovative working methods and a supportive working climate. All participants claimed to use innovative and integrated working methods. They emphasized the need to be open to alternative approaches and not just base the work on their rules and guidelines. The majority recommended the establishment of an activity or a youth centre where different structured activities were combined and integrated. Young adults should be offered the opportunity to have a social context and a place to visit daily.

And that they can take and be part of such activity [...] where you can develop yourself with an individual plan, but you have to be in a secure and stable setting and be there every day to have employment (Participant 4, social services).

Structured activities, a clear individual plan of action, close cooperation with other actors and professionals – all integrated under the same administrative system were regarded as necessary factors for success. Engaging and opening up for closer cooperation with the employers to help create an environment where young adults could receive support and feel safe were viewed as important for young adults to succeed. The participants felt that help and support at an early stage could prevent the socially withdrawn young adults from progressing in isolation and consolidating the withdrawn behaviours. In this connection they emphasized the importance of working outreach in municipalities by marketing support in diverse ways. According to the participants, having well planned and adapted communication strategies, mixing different contact paths and clarifying what help and support efforts were available were crucial when reaching out to the target group.

No, but I think the only way to reach the so-called home-sitters is to spread the rumour in some way and that they cannot be contacted via any predetermined channel. Trying to figure out roughly what the movement patterns look like for these people, the little ones they have, and being there [...] And since we started with that, that inflow has increased dramatically, if you see it as a percentage (Participant 6, social services).
To summarize, three main organizational themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis: Individual in focus, professional aspects and organizational aspects, which constituted a frame to work with and manage the complex needs of young socially withdrawn adults.

Discussion

This paper explored factors social workers and health care professionals find most successful in supporting young, socially withdrawn adults’ involvement in society. Although the participants worked in different organizations, they shared many similarities in what they considered effective interventions to support young adults. The participants emphasized the importance of working towards an independent and adult existence, things that require a genuine interest and commitment in both the professionals and young adults. Participation and influence over one’s life, related to the empowerment concept, were also advocated in the interviews. All the professionals in this study, regardless of profession, used empowerment as a theoretical framework to describe approaches and working methods that accelerate the support young adults. Adams (2008) suggests that empowerment means creating conditions that enable individuals to take control of their life. Patience, creativity and flexibility were considered important and the professional was a substitute to self-determination that represented hope and alternative ways of thinking. The work with the target group thus appeared to be permeated by an empowerment-oriented approach as a key to change in social work practice. As reported by the social workers and health care professionals in this study, an important component of the work was strengthening the internal power of young adults. Confidence in one’s ability is increased by the power of being involved and taking responsibility for one’s life choices and actions, which can then contribute to improved wellbeing (Lögdberg, Nilsson, and Kosteniuk 2018; Wong 2012). The participants described the goal of professional work as being committed to providing a functioning life context for young adults. It included breaking the isolation cycle, thereby improving the young adults’ mental wellbeing so that reintegration into society was possible. Our participants felt that efforts must focus on both intrapsychic factors and the social context. As described by Shankar, Sundar, and Smith (2019), fundamental to improving an individual’s health and development via psychological and behavioural approaches is an interactive understanding of people and their surroundings. The participants indicated that they build on individual agency as their unit of analysis, which centres on the psychological ability to reflect and overcome adversity in various socio-cultural and situational contexts. Shankar, Sundar, and Smith (2019) suggest that agency-based empowerment encompasses an individual’s socio-cultural and situational context and contributes to psychological strength and improves individual agency. Ungar and Theron (2020) propose that promoting positive development and resilience largely depends on culturally relevant resources available to individuals in their social settings, as well as the individual’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours. In collaboration with families and communities schools serve as a socio-ecological system that can improve young people’s resilience (Ungar et al. 2019). Thus, early identification is vital in giving young people achieve academically as well as socially. To improve the individual’s living conditions studies have suggested that being in isolation at home must be reduced and interaction with the society increased (Kato et al. 2012; Wong 2009). This proposal concurs with the present results in which breaking the isolation habit was perceived to be a significant part of the work to change and improve the young adults’ life situation. According to some, respectful and empathetic relationships with others (e.g. mentors who provide emotional support, encourage and motivate) can contribute to the recovery of marginalized young people (Sapiro and Ward 2020). The participants believed that widening the individuals’ contact field was necessary so that they have a place to go for daily activity and that empowers participation in society and contact with others. A youth centre where authorities could collaborate was proposed as one solution among others. The creation of shared environments consisting of efforts in cooperation has also been emphasized (Henderson, Hawke, and Chaim 2017). Individual solutions are advocated (Nordenmark et al. 2015; Wong 2012), and consistent with that suggestion, the participants in
this study pointed out that, because of the heterogeneity of the group, efforts designed according to the complex needs of the young adults and conditions were required. The participants argued that having an individual plan with balanced requirements for young adults and offering group activities or internships in combination with individualized support were important. In addition, the participants maintained that cooperation between young people, their parents and authorities was an important component of the process according to the participants. Similar to our results, parent-centered support in which relatives are given guidance on how to manage the situation and avoid inhibiting the change process has also been described as favourable (Suwa and Suzuki 2013). The participants in this study further noted the importance of drawing attention to the target group by working preventively and for authorities to outreach in the municipalities. Innovative communication strategies were required to reach out to the target group. The importance of being proactive has also been described in the literature. In this regard, the Internet has been considered a viable option to reach home-sitting and socially withdrawn young adults (Li, Liu, and Wong 2017; Li and Wong 2015).

The current study indicated that flexibility and creativity regarding time and space were essential elements in achieving success with the target group. The intensity of the work with the young adult and the requirements should be adjusted based on the individual’s position in the process. In focus was the professional’s ability to care and be there for the young adults and manage their complex needs. Shapiro and Ward (2019) underline the facilitative link between youth and others, the importance of marginalized young people to feel understood (and appreciated) in their relationships and having mentors or supportive adults who understand the challenges and complexity young people face today. In the event of psychiatric problems, the role of a professional could mean that contacts could be arranged with the appropriate professional body. This presupposes knowledge and close cooperation and collaboration with other professionals. To promote the work and enable customized solutions based on the needs and conditions of the young adult cooperation between different authorities was vital. The importance of a firm commitment and close collaboration were also addressed in studies and evaluations of interventions aimed at this type of problem (e.g. Li, Liu, and Wong 2017). Moreover, the importance of maintaining continuity of efforts seems important, and e.g. Kondo et al. (2011) reported that social participation seemed to improve if the support interventions were ongoing for a longer period.

**Study limitations**

In this study only the perspectives of the health care professionals are explored; the standpoint of the young adults is not assessed. Quite plausibly, their opinion and experiences will differ from those of professional health care workers.

One limitation of this study is that the participants were a homogenous group of Swedish social workers and health care professionals and therefore the results might be different in another population of people. The findings of this study are not generalizable because Sweden, as a Nordic country, has a well-developed welfare system to which all citizens have an equal right to publicly funded health care.

**Conclusion**

This study identifies factors from the perspective of professionals that help young adults recover from social isolation. Extensive and coordinated efforts are required that are characterized by a holistic approach based on the theory of empowerment in which young adults’ unique needs are considered. To break the isolation professionals need to take a proactive stance, i.e. attentiveness and early awareness of the problems and motivate young adults to be involved throughout the process to gain agency. Further studies are needed to examine how socially isolated young people perceive their situation and what kind of support they prefer. Based on the responses of the
participants, successful intervention requires multiple elements, including early identification, an integrated approach, individually tailored interventions with flexible activities and an adaptable approach to meet youth needs.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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