Migration and adolescent refugees

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Unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents are an important group amongst the total refugee and migrant population in the world. While all refugees and migrants encounter specific challenges in their migration processes, such as hard and difficult experiences in their home country and during their flight, uncertainty about their future and challenges in creating a new life in the new country of arrival, unaccompanied minors are in a particular situation because they go through all these experiences without the support and guidance of their parent(s). As a consequence, many of these unaccompanied young refugee experience high levels of mental health problems, evoked not only by the past traumatizing experiences before they arrived in the host country, but also by the daily material and social stressors they encounter (such as bad housing, lack of income and experiences of exclusion and discrimination) and the limited social network they have. This latter aspect, social support, has been widely recognized and documented as an important protective factor in the wellbeing of people, especially when confronted with challenging situations. This symposium therefore wants to deepen the existing knowledge and good practices around social support structures, both formal and informal, to support unaccompanied refugee adolescents in their arrival and integration processes. Each of the papers here presented will elaborate on particular aspects of this theme, on different levels (policy, reception structures, social networks and individual wellbeing) and from different country and methodological perspectives.

PRESENTATION 1: Comparative analysis of care and reception structures for URM

in Greece, Italy and Belgium

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Since 2015, large concerns are expressed regarding the important numbers of refugee children who are travelling on their route to or through Europe. A considerable number of these young people are travelling without their parent(s) or caregiver(s) and are referred to as unaccompanied refugee minors (URM). Despite shared agreements on protecting URM's rights and providing effective protection as key priorities for EU Member States, the care and reception structures available for URM largely differ in various States, and keep on challenging many Member State authorities.

Building on a typology of services developed by Watters and Hossain (2008) and based on document analysis and extensive observations during field visits, this paper compares care and reception structures for URM in Greece, Italy and Belgium along Watters' & Hossain's multiple dimensions, including participation in services, services' structural dimensions, levels of control, and state versus NGO involvement. Further, the paper investigates whether for this particular type of care structures, the existing typology needs to be complemented with additional dynamic or static dimensions, including URM's profiles, states' welfare regimes and societies' social climate and opportunities available for URM's in the societies. As such, this elaborated typology can help to understand particular differences between care structures, also for other refugee and migrant groups.

PRESENTATION 2: Foster care, recognition and transitions to adulthood for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in England and Ireland

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Policy in England and Ireland emphasizes the use of foster care for unaccompanied refugee minors (URM). Research has highlighted the predominantly positive experiences of young people in this form of care. Drawing on 'recognition theory' (Honneth, 2012), this presentation examines the role of foster care in supporting URM transitions to adulthood. Young people are likely to have had traumatic and challenging experiences prior to their arrival in England and Ireland. They also face the challenge of settling into life in a new country, while often experiencing difficulties and stigma related to their identities as asylum seekers, but also as young people in care. Meanwhile, their transitions to adulthood are overshadowed by uncertainties about the future.

Recognition theory identifies emotional, social, and legal recognition in human relationships as central to developing and maintaining people's well-being (Honneth, 2012; Warming, 2015). We argue that foster placements can provide the conditions necessary to support these three elements of recognition and, by doing so, can support transitions to adulthood. This argument is based on findings from two studies, in England (2012) and the Republic of Ireland (2013), which explored experiences of URM in foster care. Qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted with young people living in foster care, their foster carers, and with social workers.

Ultimately, the findings of these studies, suggest that even when URM do not continue to live with their foster carers after the age of 18, the impact of the care will endure and often the relationships will too. Thus, enabling foster carers to excel in their roles, by providing them with intensive and ongoing training and support is crucial. Equipping them to be able to foster emotional, legal, and social recognition will mean that URM are more likely to bring self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem with them as they move into adulthood. It is important to acknowledge that although foster carers can significantly support young people's transitions to adulthood, they are ultimately constrained to a large extent by the wider care, after care and asylum systems and by the interactions between these. The role of foster carers will be enhanced and transitions to adulthood smoothened, if after care services are prioritized and if URM are viewed as young people rather than as asylum seekers when they turn 18. By doing so, their needs can be met more holistically both during care and during the transition to adulthood.

PRESENTATION 3: How can we prevent mental health problems in refugee children?

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Over half of all the refuges in the world are under the age of 18 years. Many travel to neighbouring countries and a small proportion come to high-income countries either with their families or unaccompanied. In these new environments, they are often able to thrive but for a proportion, the cumulative effects of exposure to different potentially traumatic events can have negative consequences for their mental health. How to prevent mental illness needs to be considered across multiple sectors that influence all potential determinants of health, including housing, education, economic opportunities, and the larger policy and political context including immigration. Interventions of note will be described that are delivered to individuals as well as parenting and school interventions, and broader socioeconomic and cultural interventions. The multidimensional and collective character of challenges facing refugee children and families calls for comprehensive psychosocial interventions through which healing the psychological wounds of forced displacement is complemented by restoring and supporting their social and physical environment.

PRESENTATION 4: UK Iron Rod Welfare versus Italian Colander Welfare:

How Unaccompanied Minors Challenge the Myth of a Common Asylum Policy in Europe

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The experiences of unaccompanied young migrants and refugees challenge the myth of a common European asylum policy but also show that traditional welfare typologies used to account for differences in welfare across states fail to account for the lived experiences of this group. They fail to consider the shifting categorizations of young migrants in institutional terms and how the stratification of social rights plays out over time. Moreover, welfare typologies come with a sedentary bias and give inadequate attention to the increasing intersection of welfare access and immigration control. This paper draws on qualitative longitudinal research in England and Italy to explore how the lived experiences and decision-making processes of unaccompanied young migrants and refugees are shaped by institutional determinants as they come of age, and how they experience risk and opportunity in this context. Three structural factors are identified to develop a typology of how this population variably experience the welfare-immigration policy nexus across the two countries over time as 'iron rod welfare' in England, and 'colander welfare' in Italy: (i) the labour market and opportunities for regularization; (ii) the generosity of and role of the state in the welfare mix; and (iii) the intersection between welfare and immigration enforcement. The latter aspect is a particularly central component of how welfare is experienced for this group and a key determinant of whether they 'go missing', and how they interact with statutory and non-statutory welfare over time.

Research question: How and why do unaccompanied young migrants interact with and understand statutory and non-statutory forms of welfare?

Description of methods: Semi-structured interviews with unaccompanied young people over the age of 18 (England n = 12; Italy n = 15; total N = 27) plus semi-structured interviews with service providers (England n = 11; Italy n = 16; total N = 27) and participant observation in two support centers for unaccompanied migrant and refugee young people in two cities in England and Italy for periods of 8 (Italy) and 7 (England) months respectively between 2015 and 2016.

Implications: The issue of unaccompanied young migrants and refugees 'disappearing' in EU countries has been a source of international concern in recent years. 10,000 unaccompanied children were estimated to have disappeared in 2015 alone, 5,000 of whom 'disappeared' in Italy (Eurostat 2016). The majority are young men between the ages of 16 and 17. Many more unaccompanied young men disappear as they turn 18 and lose access to the rights previously accorded to them as 'children'. To date, this phenomenon is scantly researched and poorly understood. This paper is part of a studentship linked to 'Becoming Adult' (PI Dr Elaine Chase, UCL), the first large-scale research project to explore this phenomenon in Europe.

Becoming Adult explores how unaccompanied young migrants seek to realize their 'life projects' in interaction with Europe's intersecting welfare, asylum and immigration regimes. Statutory and non-statutory welfare structures and labour markets impose direction on what 'should be' the projects of unaccompanied young migrants; moreover, they attach norms of 'truth' and 'deservingness' to the narratives articulated by the young people as they relate to the past, present and future. These norms serve to channel the young people into pathways, assign them labels and grant them access to different constellations of rights which may be perceived to help or hinder the life projects of their own making. The tension between these subjective and structural compulsions is the thread which runs throughout the work.