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‘After god, we give strength to each other’: young people’s experiences of coping in the context of unaccompanied forced migration

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ABSTRACT

Young people arriving alone in the UK due to forced migration face significant hardships including, but not limited to, their history of experiences, current and future uncertainties, and cultural differences. This paper took a critical perspective of current dominant theories of refugee youth through in-depth exploration of lived experiences of coping. Following the authors’ involvement in a community youth project and consultation, five young people took part in individual interviews. The participants were living in semi-independent accommodation in or near London, and were all male, while four identified as Muslim and one as Christian.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a culturally relative understanding of coping was developed. These young people were found to be taking active roles in managing their lives in the context of extensive loss, and gaining independence through connection to others. Religious practices were important, with young people making sense of their experiences through worldviews shaped by religious beliefs. While religion was described predominantly in a positive and beneficial light, an area for further investigation is the experience of religious struggle, and how this may impact experiences and coping. Implications for support for young people both from services and in communities are suggested.

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Introduction

With increasing overall levels of global forced migration, there are significant numbers of displaced children and young people, including unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers: young people (under the age of 18) undergoing forced migration, who are separated from parents or usual caregivers. The number of such young people seeking

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Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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asylum in the UK reached 3,762 applications in 2021, following a previous peak of 3,775 applications in 2019 (Refugee Council 2022). Under UK policy, social care services are mandated to protect and support looked-after children (up to age 25), including unaccompanied children seeking asylum (Department for Education 2017; NICE 2010). However, studies have found that such young people in the UK were held in positions of uncertainty as they transitioned into adulthood (Allsopp and Chase 2019). Research has previously found that young people arriving in the UK aged 16–17 were placed into shared accommodation rather than foster care (Wade et al. 2012), as well as many found facing detention, deportation, or living in destitution (e.g. Pintér 2011), while others were missing or unaccounted-for (Simon, Setter, and Holmes 2016).

The present research sought to investigate the experiences of a small number of unaccompanied young people of non-European background developing into young adults in the UK, a country unfamiliar to them, following forced migration. Within a broad social constructivist stance, a position of cultural relativism (e.g. Locke 1944) was assumed; this meant giving recognition to the ways young people themselves make sense of resilience and coping, and that such perspectives may be different and equally valid to experiences viewed through the lens of another cultural background. We sought to contribute to current debates around how young people demonstrate resilience despite the likely hardships in their past, as well as ongoing situations of uncertainty due to asylum-seeking processes.

The paper contributes to the literature in three main ways: firstly, we found support for research finding that young people actively respond to their situation; secondly, we found that the young people value independence and that this is negotiated through continued connection with cultural roots and connection to others; and thirdly, we found support for the role of religiosity, with religious faith contributing to foundational worldviews through which young people make sense of their experiences.

Background literature

Recent studies in both the UK and international contexts raise important issues regarding the needs of young people arriving in western countries following forced migration. We briefly introduce recent literature that has typically focussed on the prevalence of trauma in young refugees; this is followed by reference to key psychological theories of acculturation and grief as these go some way to explaining the situation and task faced by these young people; and thirdly, we introduce the current, developing theories concerning resilience and coping in young unaccompanied forced migrants.

'Trauma' alongside coping

A substantial body of the research regarding care for young refugees is focussed on prevalence of symptoms and treatments for 'trauma'. This includes a systematic review finding that 19%–54% of 'child refugees' met diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bronstein and Montgomery 2011). 'Unaccompanied' youth have been found to report on average twice as many stressful life events, as well as a higher rate of traumatic stress reactions, when compared to children undergoing forced migration with their family (Bean et al. 2007). Young people from refugee backgrounds

were also found to have difficulties accessing, engaging in, and benefiting from recommended psychological therapies (e.g. Majumder et al. 2014; Michelson and Sclare 2009; Kohli and Mather 2003; Stanley 2001). However, many young people also demonstrate resilience and coping skills (Zoellner and Maercker 2006; Bensimon 2012). We found that some quantitative research literature has acknowledged a lack of culturally-validated measures for concepts such as 'coping' and 'resilience' (e.g. Völkl-Kernstock et al. 2014; Mcgregor, Melvin, and Newman 2015), which therefore, when seen in isolation, may be perpetuating limiting descriptions of young people's experiences.

Acculturation and grief

Acculturation refers to processes of cultural adjustment experienced by people coming into contact with a new culture, typically in the context of migration. For example, Berry's (1997) model considers the degree of retention of cultural origins, alongside adoption of a new culture. However, these decontextualised dimensions of acculturation have been critiqued, with suggestions for integrating a relativist perspective (Ozer 2013); this would take account, for example, of political climate, socioeconomic, language, and community contexts (Schwartz et al. 2010).

It could also be argued that the context of being young, and of migration being forced, adds further difference, such as grief arising from the unchosen loss of home and familiarity (Papadopoulos 2002). A psychological theory of grieving, the Dual Process Model (Stroebe and Schut 1999) outlines the complexity of tasks that individuals face in coping with loss, and is developed in the vein of the traditional cognitive models of coping (e.g. Lazarus and Folkman 1984), while allowing for cultural difference (Stroebe and Schut 2010). This model tells us that coping involves *both* facing the pain of the past, while moving forward with a new life following significant loss.

Developing theories of resilience in young forced migrants

Studies across Europe have identified a range of themes in understanding how young people adapt following unaccompanied forced migration. Particularly relevant to young people, due to their life stage, is emerging identity at late adolescence and young adulthood, as well as the importance of social and peer support, housing and education. Studies have also found that political context, alongside cultural origins, are important factors in adjustment (e.g. Mels, Derluyn, and Broekaert 2008; Malmsten 2014; Thommessen, Corcoran, and Todd 2015). To make sense of these themes, two emerging theories are now described.

Firstly, Chase (2013) has introduced an important concept of *ontological security*, defined as security in one's sense of self now and in the future, i.e. the ability to sustain a biographical narrative, sense of belonging and safety with others, and beliefs that life has a purpose and future trajectory. Young people were found to experience constrained ontological security, and to manage this through giving value to things that enabled a sense of security or order, which were prioritised over the need for therapy for past 'trauma' (ibid). Alongside this, other studies have found that attachment to elements of the past and home culture are important: Sutton et al. (2006) found that religion, in addition to social support and other activities, had a role in enabling young

people to make sense of their past; and Ní Raghallaigh (2011) found that religion provided a source of comfort and meaning, a sense of continuity, as well as control within situations of uncertainty.

Secondly, Maegusuku-Hewett et al. (2007) contributed to the understanding that young people use 'coping' as an active response to situations of oppression, such as making explicit choices to retain aspects of identity, including language or dress. Allsopp, Chase, and Mitchell (2014) also elucidated active response strategies, such as resistance to political situations and experiences of oppression. These ideas are being developed in a 'capabilities' approach (Chase 2020); this outlines how young people actively respond to manage their wellbeing, such as through making choices in line with values, albeit with ongoing compromise in the face of ongoing precarious situations.

In summary

The literature has previously been dominated by a focus on 'trauma' in young forced migrants, and has overlooked both cultural relevance as well as context; few studies have therefore utilised psychological theories of grief, loss and acculturation to support understanding of the experiences and tasks faced by young refugees. The two emerging theories developing to understand experiences specifically of unaccompanied young people highlight two further important themes: the pressing need for safety and security, and the active approaches taken by the young people.

Aims

Given these developing ideas, we were especially interested in culturally relative understandings of how young people in the context of forced migration make sense of their experiences of coping. We aimed to involve young people who were living independently, and who were in the process of seeking asylum, without having been granted refugee status; refugee status is thought to provide a sense of security that may differentiate their experience from that of those seeking asylum.

This study explored the lived experience of a small number of young people who arrived in the UK alone due to forced migration, asking the question: How do young people experience coping following force migration?

Method

To explore the lived experiences and perspectives of young people following forced migration, the first author conducted individual interviews with young people under local authority care who had arrived in the UK unaccompanied, and analysed the data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

Participants

The sample included five participants who had been in the UK for between six months and two years prior to data collection, having arrived aged 15-16. Participants included young people of Sudanese, Syrian, Eritrean and Kurdish origin. Four of the participants identified as Muslim and one as Christian. Participants were all male, living in semi-

independent living arrangements (shared local authority accommodation), and had no family connections in the UK. At the time of interview (March-April 2017), participants were aged 16–17 (although the pilot interviewee was aged 21). Potential participants were asked to confirm their age only after expressing interest in participation, due to age being a potentially distressing subject during the asylum-seeking process (e.g. Crawley 2007). Participants were included who had not obtained refugee status within the UK. The analysis of the pilot interview was included in the results as the findings were not in contradiction to the other accounts.

Procedure

Ethical approval was gained from the University of Hertfordshire Health and Human Sciences Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority (protocol number: LMS/PGR/UH/02452). Links were made with a Local Authority Leaving Care team located outside of London, and a small charity supporting young refugees and migrants within an inner-London borough. Approvals from the local authority Children's Board and confirmation from the management of the charity were obtained.

The author, a white woman, was completing a doctorate in clinical psychology, and volunteered for several months at the youth centre of the charity, to become familiar to the young people, and to develop some understanding of the social dynamics and context of young people following forced migration. She was consistently open about her identity and interest in a research project. The idea for taking part in the study was discussed in confidence with young people, and followed up with an information leaflet with those expressing interest, including the option to opt-out. Informed consent was formalised before starting interviews, through discussion with interpreters where required. To ensure anonymisation, names were changed to pseudonyms, and personally identifiable information was removed from transcripts. Data was encrypted, stored securely, and interpreters were required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Participants were given choice around location to meet, and all interviews took place in community venues, e.g. a meeting room at a local library. All participants were offered the use of a language interpreter, and three made use of this. Participants were remunerated with a one-off £10 high-street voucher, which was intended to not be over-incentivising but indicated that their time and participation was highly valued. The interviews lasted between 45 and 93 min.

An interview schedule was developed in consultation with an experienced caseworker from the charity, and used as a guide. This was tested in the pilot interview, with positive feedback and therefore no significant changes made. The interview schedule was designed to focus on strengths, coping, resources and resilience of the young person, including how they made sense of these concepts. The interview schedule provided a broad framework, with the researcher asking follow-up questions in areas the participant spoke about. Interviews included warm-up questions, such as the young person's favourite thing to do in the UK. They were also asked about what they do when difficult things happen or experience painful feelings, and why they respond in this way. They were asked about whether they have words to explain these responses, and whether these are translatable; from this, conversations arose that enabled co-constructed understandings about

their experiences. Where concepts were difficult to explain, participants were invited to give examples or draw what they were thinking.

It was also foreseen that participants may talk about distressing topics. Given participants' ages and likely past experiences, it was vital to put participants at ease, and participants were reminded that they could refrain from answering questions or pause the meeting at any time. In addition, an open discussion was held about the role of the interpreter where present (Patel 2003). Debrief information was provided, as well as contact information for services and support organisations, the researcher and research team, should distress arise following the interview.

Data analysis

To analyse data, IPA was used as it is idiographic, meaning that it concerns detailed understanding of experiences, and enables reflection on the context and shaping of unique perspectives. The social constructivist stance allowed for recognition that the researcher is interpreting the participant's account, who is actively interpreting their own experience, in a process known as the 'double hermeneutic' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.35). This process also implies theoretically that understandings can be constructed that go beyond awareness that individual participants might claim to have. The inclusion of interpreters added an additional layer of language interpretation, with the interpreter seen as an active contributor in the research. IPA enabled incorporation of researcher reflections throughout the research journey, and the use of consultation with interpreters and with youth centre staff. Empirical data came exclusively from the interviews, with the purpose of prior fieldwork to support and enable both ethical recruitment and researcher reflexivity.

Data analysis was guided by the steps set out for IPA by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Quality standards were consulted, including that: the analysis should own the theoretical position, situate the sample, be grounded in examples, and achieve adequate credibility (Yardley 2008). The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the main researcher, enabling a high level of immersion in the data. Each interview was analysed in its own right, first by taking notes on three levels of interpretation: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual. This means that we looked at participants descriptions of how they cope, we looked for how they talk about coping, and we looked beyond the words to the concepts and how specific comments can be interpreted in the context of their whole interview. This stage was followed by reviewing all of the resulting notes, and drawing out relationships between data and notes, to build an initial conceptual map for each participant. The process continued with ongoing iterations- reviewing interpretations within each interview- while also noting the researcher's own assumptions. Finally, differences and shared concepts across interviews were examined, with each used to inform understandings of the others. At multiple stages, interpretations were discussed with co-researchers, and a presentation was shared with a diverse research group to gain further reflections and interpretations.

For the three interviews using professional interpreters, translation into English was at the point of data collection, and all subsequent analysis took place in English. Guidance and recommendations on the use of interpreters in research and in clinical practice were referred to (e.g. Plumridge et al. 2012; Squires 2009), and in line with constructivist theory.

For example, the semantics of important concepts were discussed during interviews, with interpreters before and after each interview, and interpretations were critically reviewed during analysis.

Findings and discussion

The account presented here is a co-constructed interpretation of meanings and experiences, and does not intend to present a conclusive explanatory model; however, our analysis highlights several areas of theoretical importance. We discuss in particular the three overarching themes, as presented in Figure 1, and how these advance our understanding of the existing literature: Engaging in a new life; Negotiating independence through connectedness; and, A religious worldview.

Engaging in a new life

The young people in this study spoke about the difficulties they came across in leaving behind families, painful journeys and ongoing difficult circumstances.

> 'Living by yourself when you are 16 years old, and then carrying on from there, and for the first time to be abroad (…) this is the hardest thing that you can imagine in life.' (Keren)

Participants referred to their contexts of extensive loss, the lasting impact this was having, and the sense of isolation, while also describing actions and ways to manage their situation.

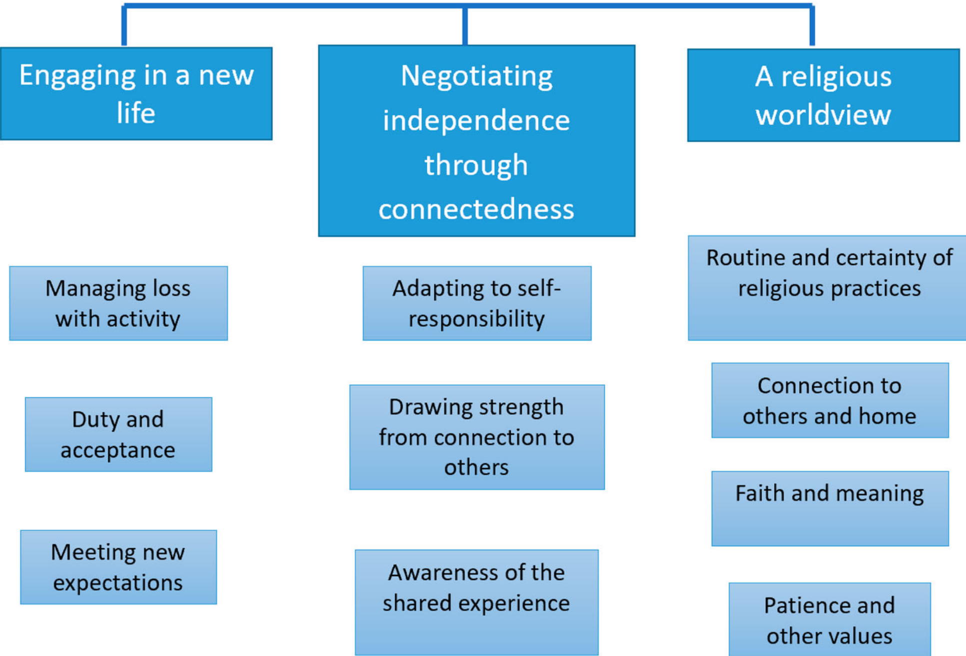

Figure 1. Key Themes and Sub-themes Developed with Young People to Make Sense of Coping Following Unaccompanied Forced Migration.

> 'When I'm thinking about my country, my family, the things I miss, it makes me lose interest in performing some stuff. It's not a physical feeling that I don't have the energy, most of the time I think I'm, you know, I'm alive and I can do things' (interpreter for Aran)

Participants described developing skills and opposing such isolation by engaging in activities, and building networks of support around themselves.

> 'Just sitting at home all the time, you just make some things worse. Going out, meet my friend -that makes things easy for me.' (interpreter for Bradley)

One participant explained that he had been unable to make contact with his family, and was uncertain of their welfare. He described the importance of being occupied and engaged socially or in education, in order to take his mind off the worry and uncertainty.

> 'College is like to forget about, to help me forget my family.' (Salah)

The participants also described making adjustments to fit into a different social setting. For example, Bradley described significant changes being required for everyday life compared to his life in the past.

> 'Life is different here … Here, you should prepare yourself, should go shopping yourself, you should manage. At home, there are common friends you can entertain outside, there's not much here. At home, you are with brothers and sisters, here I have no brothers and sisters.' (interpreter for Bradley)

Some participants described their new social activities in the context of their own political situation, conveying a necessity to move forwards and engage with a new life due to lack of alternatives.

> 'Even if it is not my culture, I have to do it because I'm living. So, this made me strong and patient, to go through the journey, and then to accept being here. Because if I have to go back, I don't know what it will be like, whether I would be killed or maybe put in prison (…) If you left the country with smugglers, then this is the situation. I have no option to go back so I have to accept everything that comes.' (Keren)

This theme was developed from the ways that participants described responding to their situation, playing an active role in moving forward with everyday life and working out ways to adapt to a new society, all in the context of loss. This replicates research finding the paradoxical desire to both forget and connect with home (e.g. Mels, Derluyn, and Broekaert 2008). Loss is a widespread theme in the general refugee literature (Papadopoulos 2002), and the term 'nostalgic disorientation' (ibid) has been used to describe the pain regarding loss of home. Loss experiences also echo Eisenbruch's (1991) theory of cultural bereavement, in which grief- for the loss of familiar social norms, language and dialect, customs and support systems- is a natural response.

Allsopp, Chase, and Mitchell (2014) described young refugees actively responding to their situation, and Majumder (2016) argued that the adverse experiences of forced migration contribute to resilience. The present research supported this understanding that young people are actively responding to their situation, using existing skills and developing new skills, while their accounts demonstrate that this does not make their loss any less significant. Such responses also tie in with established models of grieving, such as the 'dual-process' model (Stroebe and Schut 1999) in which grief entails the

balance of both attending to the loss experience alongside attending to life moving forwards.

Negotiating independence through connectedness

In this second theme, all the participants referred to the development of their own independence, both as a requirement and as a valued ideal. We found that, while such self-reliance was spoken about as necessary, the strengths to embody this were explained in relation to their connection with others, and connection to culture.

> 'You have to try to do best to solve your problems, no one else will do it for you, you have to do it - people have falls and they get up again, they have to get up again - this is life in general.' (interpreter for Yasin)

> 'I know very well that since I am here alone, I have to support myself, and stand on my own feet. And I shouldn't really rely on anybody else.' (interpreter for Aran)

Personal hardships were paralleled on a broader level by experiences of political struggle and persecution before and during the journey to the UK. The strong pull towards developing a personal sense of independence may also be interpreted in the context of such histories, such as pre-flight persecution, and current authorities holding power to grant or refuse asylum. Alongside striving for independence, participants did not lose the sense, nor importance, of connectedness to others; often the collective pronoun, '*we*', was used to demonstrate shared experience, both circumstantial and political.

> 'We haven't had any freedom before … we haven't been in a good situation, so you have to adapt (…) when you don't have any options, you have to accept life, and you have to go through it, whether it is bad or good.' (Keren)

While describing the benefits of moving forwards independently, participants noted themselves that this contrasted with their home culture and their upbringings. They all described communities at home centred on norms of helping others, with giving-and-receiving of support. This participant explained poignantly this aspect of home culture:

> 'The help different is like, every day they're going to help; if I have something, like money or anything and then I give you. If I don't have a car, … they carry me, if I cannot walk.' (Salah)

Meanwhile, making friends, social support and sense of community were also seen as core for developing the skills to live independently; participants referred to the support they received from others, including caseworkers and friends. They also appeared to value the familiarity of something shared, and some sought out others with shared backgrounds.

> 'One friend … I met him in the park. We speak and he say he came from my country and so then, we are friends (…) he makes it feel like you stay with your family or your same friends, like real friends.' (Salah)

Yasin went further to illustrate the personal strength that he felt was acquired through others going through similar situations.

> 'After God, the people around you, they help you, and if I (was) alone, I might not have reached where I wanted to, but people being around me they gave me strength; we give

> strength to each other and you feel one of them … so it's that we have each other.' (interpreter for Yasin)

This theme demonstrates the perceived necessity to develop independence, and how young people negotiate this through connectedness to others, and in relation to their cultural roots and experiences. As authors, we were struck by the capacity for, and importance placed upon, becoming independent. Participants made explicit reference to the cultural differences they noticed and were required to adjust to. Whilst not wishing to be reductionist or oversimplistic, this brought to mind a fine balancing between the requirements to survive away from home in a more individualised society, whilst drawing on the more collectivist cultural values and practices developed in one's home and family. Developing independence could be understood as an important task of the acculturative process; in the absence of family, individual strengths were required, and drawn from support from friends, community, and culture. It is important to recognise therefore that safe spaces to meet and develop these connections are highly valued and not always available.

It is also acknowledged that this may not be solely a cultural adjustment, but could be experienced by young people finding themselves in any long-term situation in the absence of family or familiar people and customs. The experience here of being at the transitional life stage of maturing into adulthood intersects with the specific experience of being a forced migrant.

More uniquely to young migrants then, is a political context that these young people spoke of: experiences of collective oppression. In light of previous (and ongoing) experiences of disempowerment, young people emphasised their own individual freedoms. The development of independence could thus be further informed by Rappaport's (1987) ecological theory of empowerment, in which individuals take on power and strengths by virtue of the environment and available opportunities. In the accounts constructed here between participants, researchers and interpreters, the support mentioned by these young people, which is important to note varied between them, whether guidance from a teacher, an allocated caseworker through a charity, or simply knowing a peer in their same situation, was necessary in their development of independence. Thus, their current strengths could best be understood through ongoing connection to others.

A religious worldview

This final theme gives an account of the ways participants described religious activities and faith as an important sustaining and guiding aspect through life, foundational to the societies, communities and families they were born into. Our interpretation of the accounts of their current experiences included religion: providing a link to, and a way of making sense of, the past; a set of practices and values that provided a sense of stability, certainty and comfort in the present; and, a way of accepting or tolerating future uncertainty. This theme demonstrates that religion constitutes for these young people a lens through which everything else could be understood. This theme also raises questions of how young people cope when that belief system is called into question.

In daily life, religion provided participants with a guide of what to do – it brought some certainty and focus to the present situation.

> 'God gave us Islam and explained everything in Islam in the Quran, many things that life is about; he gave us our brain, to think, to know the right from the wrong, and you always have to follow the right things and do the right things, so this is what I'm trying to do all the time.' (interpreter for Yasin)

Participants gave detail about religious activities, for example, praying, attending mosque or church, and reading religious texts. Regular prayer in Islam was described as cleansing, and following prayer, one participant described feeling refreshed and calm.

Some participants also spoke about the knowledge that they were prayed for by family members. This could be a source of reassurance, and connection to family through a shared activity and beliefs. Religion was a support for managing loss from the past and future uncertainty, by providing focus on the present situation.

> 'Actually, the whole Quran (…) gives you that the purpose of life is just to worship. And then there is too, there is God; he brought us (here) alive and now he is going to take us wherever he wants us, so even though I lost my brother, there is no guarantees for me, (to) know that I am going to live tomorrow; I may go tomorrow, so all I have to do is just pray for my brother and pray for myself.'(Keren)

And, in another participant's words, religion provided a source of reassurance for the future.

> 'In my religion if you have problem, then it's God, God helps you.' (Salah)

> 'You ask for something (…) and then He answers.'(Salah)

Bradley, the only Christian participant, similarly spoke of religious belief shaping his thinking, and verbalised thanks and gratitude to God.

> 'When I pray, I contact God as if by telephone. God has given me everything - how I came to England, (…) in the Sahara, in Libya, everything was God helping me. I believe in God 100%, that's why God is everything (…) I came to England, while some people died in the Sahara, died in Libya. I say every day, thanks God.' (interpreter for Bradley)

While four participants described a very positive role of religion, one participant had a more conflicted relationship to faith.

> 'The thing is I believe strongly in God and in Islam, and I think as a Muslim I should pray and you know, do the thing(s) that Islam requires me to do, but I don't do them. But, at the same time, how one can expect God to help him if He doesn't answer his call.'(interpreter for Aran).

Religious faith has a presence throughout research with unaccompanied young people following forced migration, although it has rarely been considered theoretically important or central. In one exception, Ní Raghallaigh (2011) created a model to reflect religion having relevance to each theme of their analysis; in line with the present research, religion was found to provide continuity from the past, meaning, comfort and a sense of control for young Christian and Muslim forced migrants from African countries seeking asylum in Ireland.

While religion was not asked about explicitly in this study, every participant, Muslim and Christian, spoke to its importance. When considered in conjunction with Chase's (2013) concept of ontological security, and the relevance of balancing the past with moving forwards in their lives, this research introduces religion as a lens through which

young forced migrants make sense of their past, focus their activities in the present, and tolerate anticipation of the future. Going further than these previous studies, this research interpreted faith as a foundation and a worldview, intertwined with culture, rather than a chosen method of coping as it is often seen from the perspective of secular societies.

The importance of religion in managing stress is also recognised in literature of non-refugee populations (e.g. Gall and Guirguis-Younger 2013). Furthermore, religious *coping* has previously been divided (somewhat reductively) into positive and negative (Pargament et al. 1998). A study in Iran, for example, found that the type of relationship a young person has to religion was significantly associated with depression (Sarizadeh, Najafi, and Rezaei 2020). So-called positive religious coping includes forgiveness, positive redefinition of events, seeking support, and comfort from God (Boss 2004). Difficulties are found to arise, however, with experiences of *religious doubt*, such as when experiences call into question one's foundational beliefs, for example, due to extreme hardship or grief (Burke et al. 2014).

The experience that may be referred to as religious doubt in the present study, was expressed alongside experiences of multiple losses and social isolation; however, the nature of this interrelatedness remains unclear. It may be important, for example, that in Islamic cultures and communities, disbelief is not always socially acceptable, and can further contribute to social marginalisation (Abu-Raiya and Pargament 2015). This is likely to make it extremely difficult for young people to talk about their religious doubts, but also importantly indicates that there may particularly be an increased risk of distress and isolation for young people where doubt creeps into the belief system.

Theory and research implications

The three themes in this paper are compatible with the developing theories of how young people cope after arriving alone in the UK due to forced migration, and are faced with ongoing hardships and tasks of acculturation, while approaching early adulthood. These patterns may be distinct from young people who arrive with family, where there is typically a strong theme of family cohesion and support serving a protective function (e.g. Pieloch, Mccullough, and Marks 2016).

Firstly, we have found further support for the theory that young people find active strategies to manage their experiences (e.g. Allsopp, Chase, and Mitchell 2014) and that this occurs in the context of significant loss, including personal loss and 'cultural bereavement' (Eisenbruch 1991).

Secondly, we have found that young people develop an important sense of independence, and that this comes about in negotiation and through connection with valued cultural roots and connection to others. This demonstrates an intersecting of the life stage of these young people alongside the task of acculturation, as well as responding to personal and shared experiences of oppression.

Thirdly, the present research has provided further depth of understanding to the significance of religion, and in relating this to emerging theories. We have found support for previous findings that religion permeates all areas of experience (Ní Raghallaigh 2011), and beyond this that cultural and religious beliefs provide a guide and foundation for making sense of and responding to their situations. There is also, however, indication that young people can experience religious struggle; this experience has also been

observed in other populations, and may increase risks of social isolation. This important finding warrants further investigation to further understand what contributes to religious struggle and how help may be offered in this situation. Studies are required that take into account the perspective of religion as a cultural norm, rather than assumptions of religion as a chosen 'coping' method.

This research did not aim to focus solely on males, and so it would be pertinent to undertake further investigation into the experiences of young women who have experienced forced migration as they are likely to have had different experiences, perspectives of culture, and may utilise different coping resources (Mohwinkel et al. 2018). Research should continue to consider language and cultural barriers to participation, and could establish collaboration with community workers, interpreters, and religious leaders.

Practice implications

This research speaks to the importance of community support for young people following unaccompanied forced migration, and of holding in mind the strengths and adaptive coping processes that young people bring. This is not to say that mental health and formal services or culturally-competent therapies are never valuable, but that individualised interventions should not be over-relied upon. Due to possible risks of increased isolation amongst young people experiencing significant loss and religious struggle, support to create connection, and to access places of religion are important.

Policy-makers should therefore recognise these two important points:

Firstly, ensuring that there are safe spaces for young people to meet, respecting the value of connections to each other and to home cultures, and secondly, recognition, space and support given to religious practices.

Strengths and limitations

The IPA methodology contributed idiographic understanding that does not claim to apply to the experiences of all young people following forced migration, but enabled thorough analytic and interpretative understanding of the experiences of participants of this study. The research involved dialogue between participant perspective and researcher, rather than passive representations of participants' voices (e.g. Fine 1994b).

A drawback of the approach is that a small number of participants could be included, although the strength of IPA is that these accounts are analysed with significant depth. We depended on young people who were willing to participate in research, which may then have excluded the experiences of those who experience greater struggle with acculturative experiences or with trust. IPA depends upon, and acknowledges, the researcher's interpretations of data and willingness to reflect and seek the reflections of others in order to stand back from their own assumptions. As qualitative researchers, it is important to be mindful of how participants experience the researcher and their social differences (Burnham 1992); as a white female, interviewing younger non-white males, such experiences of difference may influence the information shared, and the research findings. A further drawback is power imbalance, with young people as participants rather than collaborators of the research, as well as a neglect of analysis of broader societal discourses and how these influence experiences of being a forced migrant in the UK. These points

were reflected on throughout the research process, alongside consultation supporting researchers to recognise their awareness limitations.

This research did not exclude on the basis of language ability, and substantial consideration was given to the construction of meaning through the interpreting process (e.g. Tribe and Morrissey 2003), however, it was not possible to determine the full extent of the influence of translation.

Conclusion

This research has contributed to the growing literature about young people who are unaccompanied forced migrants to the UK, adding culturally-relative interpretations of coping shared by the young people in interviews. In line with prior research and developing theory, we found importance in active strategies and capabilities of young people (e.g. Chase 2020), as well as the significance of religious faith (Ní Raghallaigh 2011). Coping was construed by young, forced migrants as ways of developing their lives in a new social setting and in the context of significant loss. We found importance in young peoples' accounts of becoming independent, developed through connection to others, and in the context of shared experiences of hardship and oppression. While the benefit from religious belief and practice was multi-fold, including strategies for managing present situations, accepting the past, and dealing with future uncertainty, religion was interpreted in the present study less as a coping strategy than as a foundational worldview that informed all experiences. However, there were also circumstances where the significance of distress outweighed and called religious belief into question, circumstances which may then increase isolation and risks to young people. We recommend that this particular area is investigated further, with young people as active participants in the research. We also suggest that support for young people following forced migration takes account of the importance of safe spaces to connect with others, celebrates culture, and provides respect and support for religious beliefs and practices.

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See manuscript with author's details

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