**"My Own Blood": The family relationships of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People in the UK.**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the family social networks of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in the UK. Whilst significant attention has been paid to their experiences, few studies have considered family relationships. The findings in this paper, based on empirical research with unaccompanied young people, suggests that they are engaged in complex and fluid family relationships both within the UK and transnationally. The young people in this study felt significant obligations towards family members and sought to provide care and support to those in the UK and abroad. However, they faced significant barriers to achieving these aims.

**Key Words**: asylum seeking, young people, care

**Word Count**: 7,9874

**Introduction**

The number of children and young people seeking asylum alone without a parent or guardian is globally increasing (UNICEF 2016). In the UK, such ‘unaccompanied asylum seeking children’ (UASC) and young people are taken into the care of Children’s Services and ‘looked- after’ by the state. There has been significant interest in this group of children and young people and a body of knowledge about their experiences has emerged, primarily focused on their individual needs and entitlements (Wernesjo 2012). However, the role of family relationships for these young people has received limited attention, despite recognition within broader studies of refugees that family links remain vital (Horst 2007; Baldassar et al 2007). This paper seeks to explore the complex web of family relationships which emerged during empirical research with unaccompanied seeking young people in the UK. Exploring family relationships challenges dominant representations of unaccompanied young people as disconnected from family. The findings demonstrate that unaccompanied young people are engaged in fluid and dynamic relationships of reciprocal caregiving within their families. Moreover, they may perceive themselves primarily as providers, of care and support. Whilst their ability to provide care to their families is often limited by their precarious immigration status, financial insecurity and individual history within the family, the young people in this study found ways to manage their obligations and desires to remain connected to family and continue to provide care and support for them across borders. For those young people who could not remain in contact with family members, family relationships were no less important but were experienced in the realm of the imaginary.

**The UK context**

In the UK, ‘Unaccompanied asylum seeking children’ (UASC) are defined as children who arrive in the country to seek asylum alone, without a parent or guardian (Home Office 2002). The UK received 3,175 UASC applications in 2016 out of a total 63,290 Europe wide ( Refugee Council 2017). Once they become known to the authorities, unaccompanied children in the UK will have their asylum claims assessed and be referred to the Children’s Social Care department, which is obligated to assess and meet their financial, accommodation, health, educational and broader needs (Wade et al. 2012). Once formerly accepted as UASC, unaccompanied children’s entitlements are the same as citizen children and they will be provided for as a ‘looked-after child’ under the Children Act 1989. The majority of unaccompanied children are placed into foster care, although there is evidence that foster placements are used primarily for younger children, with those aged sixteen and above on arrival likely to be placed in independent accommodation. Whilst some of their asylum claims will be accepted or rejected outright, the majority of unaccompanied children will be granted a temporary leave to remain in the UK until they are seventeen, at which point they must apply for an extension of their leave to remain in the UK or make a fresh asylum claim in the hope of achieving a more permanent immigration status (Refugee Council 2016). This coincides with the period in which they are leaving the care of Children’s Services. In the UK Children’s Services are duty bound to assess the needs of care leavers, provide assistance and keep in touch until they reach the age of 21 (or 25 if they are still in training or education). Unaccompanied children who have been ‘looked after’ children have the same entitlements, unless their right to remain in the UK expires, at which point their entitlement to Children’s Services will cease.

**Literature Review: Unaccompanied children and young people**

Internationally, a range of research has considered the needs of unaccompanied children and young people in terms of health, access to services, education, psychological well-being and immigration support (Hansson et al. 2017; Kohli 2011; Soderqvist et al. 2016;). Whilst this research has highlighted crucial issues, it has tended to portray unaccompanied children as detached from social networks, particularly family networks in the country of origin (Wells 2011). Unaccompanied children and young people are (by definition) categorised, understood and framed primarily in terms of their status as separate from their families. The physical dislocation from family which forms the basis of the legal category of ‘unaccompanied child’ is an important point of emphasis in the literature, and the starting position from which the current construct of the ‘unaccompanied child’ begins. They are frequently described as being ‘completely alone in the world’ (Devici 2012), ‘dislocated’ from family (Simmonds 2007), children who’s ‘parents are dead, disappeared or hidden from view’ (Kohli 2011: 317). Whilst these descriptions vividly capture experiences of trauma and separation they also serve to perpetuate the figure of the ‘lonely’ unaccompanied child (Herz & Lalander 2017) .

Whilst some studies have touched upon the importance of family and highlighted the desire of young people to remain in touch with their family where possible (Wade et al. 2012), the issue of family has remained a marginal concern within a literature which has been primarily focused on the pressing issue of service provision and resettlement experiences. There is evidence to suggest that unaccompanied children are reluctant to talk about their families for a variety of reasons, including the emotional pain of recalling lost family connections and fears of disclosing or revealing too much information about family members (Wade et al. 2005). This may partially explain why families are not discussed more widely within the literature.

The tendency of some literature to accentuate the dislocation of unaccompanied young people from their families may also partly be a consequence of the ‘victim discourse’ which surrounds refugees in general and unaccompanied children in particular (Horst 2007; White et al. 2011). Constructs of vulnerability and ‘victimicity’ may be employed to mobilise ethical and legal obligations and promote access to services (Brown 2014). However, they are also rooted in westernised constructions of children as passive and powerless (O’Higgins 2012). Whilst this vulnerability discourse may have some positive impacts it also interacts with a tendency to portray unaccompanied children and young people as primarily ‘in need’ of support, rather than social actors engaged in the mutual and reciprocal acts of social support that characterise families. Many studies in this field are therefore dedicated to assessing, mobilising and evaluating the formal support needs of unaccompanied children and young people, consequently portraying them as passive recipients of support. As Wells (2011:328) has stressed in her research with unaccompanied young people

*“There is still a tendency, marked in child saving institutions, of treating ‘the child’ as an individual radically severed from social networks and effectively alone and in need of rescue”*

Consequently, where families do appear in the literature, the focus is on creating ‘replacement’ families or family-like environments through foster care placements or residential settings (Soderqvist et al. 2016; Wade et al. 2012). For these potential reasons, the family relationships of unaccompanied young people, particularly transnational connections, have received limited attention

Some recent research, primarily originating outside of the UK, has begun to address the broader social worlds of unaccompanied young people and challenge their construction as passive and isolated (Kaukko & Wernesjo 2017). Wernesjo’s (2012) review of the literature on unaccompanied children points out the individualised orientation of research and the emphasis on the need for support and protection and her later empirical work seeks to avoid this (Wernesjo 2015). Herz & Lalander’s (2017) study explores the impact of the construction of the ‘lonely’ unaccompanied young person, finding that young people themselves reject this portrayal. Their findings suggest that unaccompanied young people maintain a complex web of relationships, including transnational family relationships, despite significant barriers to remaining in contact

**Literature Review: Refugees families and providing care across borders**

Whilst the family experiences of unaccompanied young people remain largely unexplored, there is a robust body of research which recognises the connectedness of refugee families more generally. This literature establishes both the importance, complexity and fluidity of refugee family networks which may span a large number of geographical locations, including family members in transit (McMichael 2011; Van Hear 2006). A significant theme within this literature is the exchange of care and support across borders. The exchange of emotional and material support are crucial elements of refugee family relationships. Research has established that the majority of refugees have culturally obligated financial commitments to family members which may include a web of monetary remittances (Baldassar et al 2007; Horst 2007) The role of providing emotional support and care within refugee families has also been explored (Baldassar 2008). Whilst a distinction is sometimes made between financial and emotional support, Al-Sharmani (2010) cautions against understanding financial remittances as purely a form of material support, recognising that remittances have meaning beyond the material and may hold potent symbolic meaning. Indeed, Baldassar & Merla’s (2014) influential concept of the ‘circulation of care’ defines care as involving practical, symbolic and emotional elements. The ‘circulation of care’ concept refers to ‘the reciprocal, multi-directional and asymmetrical exchange of care that fluctuates over the life course’ between transnational family members (Baldassar & Merla 2014:22).

The reciprocal nature of care emerges repeatedly as a vital aspect of transnational family relationships. Faist (2000), in his typology of transnational social spaces identifies ‘reciprocity’ as the primary resource within transnational family relationships. However, Baldassar & Merla’s (2014) concept crucially recognises how the ability to undertake family care practices may fluctuate over the life course. This is particularly relevant when considering young people and their emerging role within the family. McMichael’s (2011) research with young Karen refugees in Melbourne demonstrated that they saw themselves as having a critical role to play in maintaining family networks, despite facing multiple barriers. Similarly, Robertson et al (2016) consider how young people in refugee families utilise their skills with digital media to help stay connected to transnational family. In contrast to some of the literature on unaccompanied young people, this research does consider the value of the roles that young people undertake within refugee families as well as considering the difficulty of maintaining family across distance.

Crucially, refugees may have limited capacity to provide support to transnational family members, despite strong feelings of obligation (Baldassar 2008). As Kilkey & Merla (2013) have pointed out any “migrants position in the immigration – welfare/labour market nexus impacts the ability to provide financial and material support.” Refugees tend to occupy particularly vulnerable and precarious social, financial and legal positions which can prevent them from engaging in the exchange and circulation of care, at least temporarily. For example, the ability to travel to provide co-present support and care may be restricted by immigration regimes (Merla & Baldassar 2011).

**Methodology**

The findings in this paper are based on qualitative interviews with eighteen unaccompanied young people (aged seventeen to twenty-five) accessed through both statutory (N = 15) and voluntary services (N =4) in a large city in Northern England during 2014-2015. The young people were approached through a gatekeeper at each access site. The statutory service was chosen because it had a large number of unaccompanied young people in its care and significant experience with this group of young people. The voluntary service was chosen as it was the only local service which was still running a specific youth group for refugees and young people. Accessing participants through both voluntary and statutory agencies enabled the research to capture some young people who did not regularly access statutory services.

Selected participants represented a diverse range of unaccompanied young people in terms of gender, country of origin, current refuge status and length of time in the UK. Only three out of the eighteen participants were female which broadly reflects national ratios. The majority of young people in the study were from Afghanistan and Eritrea, with fewer numbers from other African countries and Iran. Nine of the participants had confirmed refugee status, five no longer had a legal immigration status in the UK and four were still awaiting a decision on an asylum claim. The lengths of time that the participants had been in the UK ranged from six months to ten years, providing a range of perspectives from across the asylum process.

The purpose of the study was to understand the social networks of unaccompanied young people as they transition to adulthood. Participants took part in initial interviews which included visual elements. Participants firstly created a ‘time tree’, a form of time-lining using the symbol of a tree to capture the past (roots) present (trunk) and the future (branches). Following a conversation about their ‘time tree’, participants created social network diagrams, and a social map (of their most visited spaces and places). This allowed participants more control over the pace and structure of the interview, as the questioning was led by what they created visually rather than a set schedule of questions (Sheridan et al. 2011). This allowed narratives and themes to emerge organically; crucial when considering sensitive topics. Participants were not explicitly asked about their biological families. Participants were free to choose the topics they wished to discuss through the creation of their ‘time trees’ and network maps. The interviewer followed the lead of the participants, only discussing topics and relationships which the participants chose to include.

Eleven of the participants took part in a follow-up interview which reflected on any significant changes to their circumstances over time. The remaining seven participants were not able to be contacted for a follow up interview as they had lost contact with the service through which they were originally accessed. This was more likely to be the case for those young people accessed through the voluntary service youth group, which was a more fluid and informal environment.

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. A thematic narrative analysis approach was adopted in which each participant’s narrative was constructed from the various research outputs produced for each young person (Riessman 2008). Each narrative was analysed separately for its own internal themes before analysis occurred across the range of participants.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of York ethics committee. Written informed consent was captured at the outset of the research but a need for a continual process of informed consent was required. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to participants. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the young people and only information essential to the integrity of the findings has been included. For reasons of ethical integrity unaccompanied young people who did not speak a reasonable level of English were not able to take part in the study. It was not possible or desirable to use an interpreter for discussions of such a personal nature. It should therefore be understood that those with the most limited English language skills have not had their views and experiences represented in this research and they are likely to be amongst the most vulnerable asylum seeking young people. Similarly, accessing young people primarily through statutory agencies inevitably captures some of the most engaged and well supported unaccompanied young people. Whilst including some participants accessed through voluntary agencies rebalances this to some degree, the young people represented here are all engaged in some significant way with the local services. This is not always the case for unaccompanied young people who often disengage and disappear from official view.

**Findings**

*Family in the UK: Negotiated and reciprocal family care.*

Some of the young people in this study had experience of ‘kinship placements’, an approved placement with family and friends. Sophia had been placed with her aunt after a short period of time in emergency foster care. Her experience of reunification with family was overwhelmingly positive and hints at the unique sense of connectedness and belonging that being with family can inspire.

*“I found one member of my family. You know you are not going to live alone. It is important to find at least one member of your family when you are on your own … I was so happy to be found. Because I was lost”.* **Sophia**

Mariam, who was pregnant when she arrived in the UK, was initially placed with an aunt who resided in the UK. Mariam had difficulties within the placement, finding that she had little support and was made to feel like a burden on the family. She also left her kinship placement after a short period of time:

*“They were taking money from me and stuff so I didn’t like.. So when the baby is crying they are not happy with me. They keep telling me, we cannot sleep at night because your baby is crying and then that made me cry. I said to my social worker I prefer to stay on the streets than stay here anymore”.* **Mariam**

These very different experiences underscore the fluidity and heterogeneity of individual family networks, demonstrating the vast range of outcomes when reuniting with family members in hese circumstances.

A number of young people in the study discussed other relationships with family who were residing in the UK. The most significant relationships the young people described were with siblings. These relationships brought with them new roles, responsibilities and the need for a degree of self-sacrifice. Sohail’s brother was living in the UK but in a different area of the country. Although they were unable to see each other often, Sohail described the importance of his relationship with his brother and his plans to strengthen the relationship in the future. However, when asked if his brother was someone he felt he could rely on for support, Sohail expressed a degree of caution;

*“I don’t want to ask him for money. I don’t want him to give me money. He has a family and he is working all the time. We keep in touch on the phone. He makes my heart big … when I have some stuff or I’m scared or nervous, then he makes my heart big, but he is very busy. I don’t want to put stress on him.*” **Sohail**

Whilst Sohail values the emotional connection he has to his brother and the emotional support he might receive when he requires it, there is also reluctance to place too many concrete demands on the relationship, leading Sohail to carefully negotiate the boundaries of support within the relationship. However, Sohail was keen to live with his brother and his brother’s family at some point in the future, not only to remain connected to his brother, but to live within a family environment, highlighting the way in which siblings provide possible connections to wider family networks in the future.

Zahara was separated from her father and sister during their migration from Eritrea. When she arrived in the UK to seek asylum she did not know where they were or whether they had survived and found refuge somewhere in Europe. After six years of not knowing, Zahara had recently made contact with both her father and sister, who had settled in one of the Nordic countries. Her sister promptly moved to live with Zahara in the UK, whilst their father remained abroad. Zahara’s experience of reuniting with her family and bringing her sister to live with her gave rise to ambiguous feelings.

*“I’ve been independent for about six years now, I’ve got used to it. But when my sister came it’s nice to have someone. Someone who you can turn to and talk to. But it was strange. Living on your own, it’s like your own stuff, you don’t need to come back home, you don’t need to call anyone and ask if they’re alright. But now you’ve got someone, you have to come back to the place, you don’t do your own things now. You’ve got someone, you care about them*.” **Zahara**

Again, Zahara values the emotional support she receives from her sister, but also requires time to adjust to the physical closeness of her sibling and the attendant responsibilities to maintain and protect the relationship. Strikingly, it is having someone to care for, as well as having someone to care for her, which Zahara ultimately equates with her family reunification.

Kamal fled Afghanistan as a teenager and was followed a couple of years later by his younger brother, who also sought asylum in the UK. Kamal initially became his brother’s guardian and kinship carer. The relationship with his younger brother displays the ways in which the young people provide care and support to siblings which is negotiated and fluctuates over time:

*He is young and I look after him. I keep him with me for three years, but then when he was eighteen he wanted to go and I say ok no problem, get your own house. We still see each other a lot. I wanted him with me when he was young because he needed me.* **Kamal**

These accounts of sibling relationships position unaccompanied young people as potential supporters and carers of family members in the UK, particularly attuned to responsibilities to protect siblings. These relationships are fluid and negotiated over time, with different types of support being offered or required at different times, as Baldassar & Merla (2014) have noted of transnational families more generally. They are also reciprocal. Even where limited tangible support is offered or received, a mutual emotional bond of irreplaceable value may be exchanged, summed up by Sohail when he talked about his brother.

*“He is like my right hand. My own blood. You can’t find this love anywhere else”.* **Sohail**

**Transnational Family Relationships: ‘Futured’ reciprocity**

The concern to protect and take responsibility for siblings which emerged as a vital factor for those with siblings in the UK, was echoed throughout the stories of young people with siblings residing elsewhere, either still in the country of origin or a variety of other countries. A key difference was that helping siblings abroad was not yet a tangible reality, but something delayed for the future, temporally reoriented by the consistent use of ‘when’ and ‘if’ in young people’s discussions of their imagined futures.

Mariam had escaped both national conflict in Eritrea and gender-based violence within her family. She was concerned for her mother and the young brothers she had left behind. She was determined to succeed in her education in order to earn enough money to support her young siblings.

*“When I start working I can help them with school. That’s the only way I can help them from here there is nothing else I can do”.* **Mariam**

Eran, the only member of his family to escape from Afghanistan was also concerned for siblings and hoping to use his migration as a means of extending refuge to his family.

*“If I had refugee status I would get my family here. I’m thinking a lot about my siblings. They are the future”*. **Eran**

The theme of responsibility to family members expanded beyond sibling relationships to encapsulate the whole family network, however that was composed. This sometimes entailed a concern for extended family who had often helped the young people to migrate. More commonly, young people were preoccupied with concerns for their parents.

*“I’m just really worried about my mum, she’s getting old now and there is nobody to look after her. I should look after her*.” **Yousef**

All the young people who had family abroad were concerned to engage in supporting and caring for them. This was often framed in terms of bringing family members to safety in the UK if they require it, but also through the exchange of emotional, practical and financial support. Baldassar & Merla’s (2014:22) emphasis on the fluctuation of care over the life course usefully points to the most striking aspect of the young people’s accounts of relationships with family abroad; the ‘futured’ nature of the care they hope to practice. The need to engage in caring for and protecting family is keenly felt yet has limited scope for realisation and is therefore ‘futured’, deferred to some later point in time, when their immigration status is resolved, or they are more economically stable.

Where young people wish to be a conduit for bringing family members safely to the UK, immigration status can act as a substantial barrier to their goals. Unaccompanied young people are particularly disadvantaged within the immigration system with regards to reunification (Home Affairs Committee 2016). Even more immediate aims of providing some financial assistance to family abroad may be thwarted by a combination of restrictions placed on education and work through the immigration system and the economic and labour market position of unaccompanied young people. As Baldassar et al. (2016) have recently noted, the specific position of migrants in relation to migration systems, welfare and employment regimes directly affects their ability to engage in transnational care practices. Understanding the ‘futuring’ of family care requires an extension of the notion of family practices and the way in which young people ‘do’ family, to account for the less tangible aspects of family connections. The specific positioning of these young people along the timelines of both their life course and migration trajectory affects their ability to engage in caring for family members directly. However, the futuring of such practices within young people’s narratives can be understood as an active engagement with family care. As Smart (2007: 4) has suggested, we need to engage not only with families as ‘doing’, but with ‘the family relationships that exist in our imaginings and memories’.

*Maintaining family connections*

Whilst the care of transnational family members could become both frustrated and ‘futured’, young people were often still engaged in ‘doing family’ (Morgan 1996) across geographical distance by maintaining regular contact. Where it was possible, continuing the connection to family members though the use of communication technologies could provide comfort to young people and assisted the maintenance of family bonds over distance. However, maintaining contact with families could equally be challenging and problematic. Mariam’s experience of family contact was particularly arduous and she identified this as one of the main issues in her present situation .On migrating, Mariam left behind an abusive father, with whom her mother still lived. She sought to maintain discrete contact with her mother whilst avoiding any contact with her father, who she entirely rejected, stating:

*“He is not my father. He is dead to me. I have nothing to do with him.”* **Mariam**

Further complications emerged when Mariam explained that she had also left behind an abusive partner (and father of her son) whom was still deeply embedded in the family network in her country of origin. Maintaining her relationship with her mother and young brothers in such circumstances was fraught with clandestine contact, and fears that her mother might come to harm for keeping in touch with Mariam. Mariam’s experience, whilst not common within this study, does draw attention to the potentially adverse and distressing family relationships young people may have experienced prior to migration (Bossin & Demirdache 2012).

Whilst many unaccompanied young people are known to have left stable and caring family situations (Wade et al. 2012), for a minority of young people, the act of migration represents not just a refuge from national war and conflict, but from dangerous and violent family situations. Mariam’s account suggests the need to be attuned to the different family situations that young people have experienced, as well as the dynamics of families, which cannot easily be conflated into a single unit that young people are connected to. Individual relationships with family members can be differentiated, with young people seeking contact with some family members whilst actively cutting off others.

More commonly, young people felt a strong need to remain connected to family where they could. However, even where family connections were broadly positive, contact had multiple complexities. The wish to protect family members emerged again as young people reported that they tended to withhold information that might provoke anxiety for their family. They were therefore more likely to limit contact when they were struggling and might be most in need of family support. Sometimes, the withholding of information related to a discomfort with questions about immigration status when the young person had bad news, or no news at all. Delays and problems with attaining Refugee Status could therefore act to distance young people from their transnational family networks. The ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild 1983; Baldassar 2007) of continued contact with family members, particularly anxious mothers, was also a factor that led some young people to withdraw from family contact.

*“I used to talk to my mum on the phone a lot but now I try not to. She asks me too many questions. It’s really hard. She misses me and she cries a lot. That’s really hard. And she asks me if I’m too cold. She worries a lot that it’s too cold”.* **Mehdi**

Keeping in touch with family abroad can be understood as a form of reciprocal care which allows family connections and practices to be maintained over distance (Baldassar & Merla 2014). However, the asymmetrical and fluid nature of care highlighted by Baldassar & Merla (2014) is relevant here as a number of young people began to withdraw from family contact over time. Whilst it was clear that some young people felt unable to offer their families both the emotional support they needed as well as the tangible progress with immigration concerns that family often expected, emotional distance was occasionally considered more positively as a coping mechanism and an indication that young people were learning to manage alone. Idris had been in the UK for eight years at the time of his interview and had, quite recently, begun to adjust to the reality of a limited family life.

Interviewer: *You’ve spoken a lot about your family in relation to the past, but you haven’t put them in your ‘future’ section of the tree*

Idris*: I used to speak to my family all the time, at first. But now, I don’t need them as much. I mean, I still miss them and I still need them. But I can cope better now. I’ve got used to it, being without them*.

Zahara’s account of contact with her father draws together a number of the themes that have been explored so far in the paper. Zahara became separated from her family during their migration journey. Her father and sister claimed asylum in a different European country. They regained contact after a number of years apart and her sister subsequently moved to the UK. When Zahara was asked about her current relationship with her father she explained;

*“Now my dad calls me every day, and I’m like ‘dad, don’t call me, I’m in an exam’ and he’s like ‘oh, your sister – why is she not picking up the phone. I am on my own’. He phones and says ‘my heart is not well’. He can’t manage … when you’ve got a family they can control you so much and my dad is like ‘I’m older that you, I know most things’. If he comes to live in the UK I will move to a different city for university”.* **Zahara**

Zahara is engaged in providing family care and support to her father across distance, and in this account is positioned as the primary provider of support to her father. A gendered, patriarchal aspect to the family relationship emerged as Zahara discussed her father’s potential to exert control over her. When she had tried to move further away from her (male) cousins who lived locally, a rift had emerged within the family

*“ My dad said I would not be his daughter any more if I moved out, and I said that’s fine by me. But he knows he can control me though, because I do what my dad tells me to do. But my dad and my cousins are the type that think women should be cleaning all the time.”* **Zahara**

Whilst this particular disagreement was resolved, Zahara remained cautious of her father’s ability to constrain her actions. After many years of physical separation, Zahara is wary of living in close proximity to her father and to some degree seeks to reject the demands of care and support that are placed on her, highlighting again the negotiated nature of family care and the asymmetrical power relations inherent within such family practices (Baldassar & Merla 2014). Research by Barnet et al. (2015) has previously suggested that family reunification can be a perplexingly complex emotional experience in which immediate feelings of connectedness may not emerge as expected, particularly where a number of years have passed. Furthermore, Burton (2007) describes the ways in which young migrants who are reunited with parents may experience either infantalisation or premature adultification. Zahara reported experiencing and negotiating both simultaneously.

The need for periods of physical co-presence is considered vital to the maintenance of family connections across distance (Merla & Baldassar 2016: Urry 2003) but may be inhibited by restrictive and securitised immigration regimes (Bailey 2013; Merla & Baldassar 2016). Roshaan, a young man from Afghanistan was unable to return to his home country to attend the funeral of his younger brother described the devastating impact of such restrictions as he felt he had been unable to fulfil his role to support his family when there most in need. However, Roshaan was one of the few young people who had been able to meet with his family in a third country shortly after the funeral. He described how difficult meeting with family during this period of grief had been, suggesting that even when physical distance can be overcome, emotional distance may be less easily traversed..

*“I don’t feel like I really met them. Y’know. I say that I saw them, but I didn’t really meet them. They were in too much of bad state at that time.”* **Roshaan**

Whilst the loss of family is often framed as a one-off event that occurs for unaccompanied young people at the time of migration, Roshaan’s experience reminds us that family loss may not be limited to pre-migration or the act of migrating itself. Losses may continue to accumulate as family members age and continue to reside in dangerous situations. The process of reunification, whilst desired by most, is a process through which family members can be both found and lost.

Maintaining contact with family was found to be a crucial but complex activity for young people to participate in. They were often engaged in providing care and support to families across distance which could be a struggle to maintain, either because of the emotional burden of care, the practical restrictions on co-presence or the difficult negotiation of family expectations and power relationships which shifted over time. Contact with family carried with it ambiguous emotions and a continual conflict between the desire to connect with family and the need to reconstruct ruptured family dynamics in the context of significant obstacles and complexities.

*Lost family relationships and ambiguous loss***.**

Whilst the majority of young people maintained some form of contact with family members in the UK or abroad, a significant number had suffered the loss of family members in some form. Most commonly, young people had lost family members in the most literal sense – they did not know where they were or what had happened to them. Boss (2006) describes this phenomenon as ‘ambiguous loss’, which describes the particular feelings associated with having a family member who is not physically present but is psychologically present, either because it is unclear whether they are alive or dead, or because of an overwhelming awareness of the perpetual risk and insecurity that a loved one continues to be subjected to. Aziz was only thirteen when he fled Afghanistan, leaving behind the only member of his immediate family, his mother.

Interviewer: *So, what are you feeling about the present, your present situation?*

Aziz: *I just feel lost*

Interviewer: *Why do you think you feel lost at the moment?*

Aziz: I *don’t know what happened after I left. It was just my mum who was alive and I’m not sure if she is alive because at that time she was coughing and had sickness, maybe heart disease. So, I’m not sure what happened to her. That is why I’m totally lost.*

Here, Aziz experiences the loss of family contact as a loss of self, an overwhelming disorientation when the anchor of the family cannot be found.

Whilst this paper is concerned to refocus attention on the primacy of family relationships for unaccompanied young people, it is important not to undermine the scale of loss that young people have experienced and continue to experience. As Wernesjo (2012) has suggested, whilst unaccompanied young people are principally defined by their separations, the actual separation from family is rarely discussed in research beyond assertions that separation and loss is evidently traumatic. Understandably, young people seldom wish to revisit such difficult experiences and grief. What emerges when they do is not only the on-going profundity of their multiple losses, but also the on-going centrality of the memory of lost family members in their lives.

*“You can’t forget your parents and your family.”* **Sophia**

*“I used to cry when I thought about them, but even if you cry, you can’t see them”.* **Zaki**

Where young people were unsure if family members were dead or alive, the ‘futuring’ of family care and relationships discussed previously was again a prevalent theme in young people’s narratives, reiterating the importance of going beyond what families ‘do’ in the present to how the imagined family is projected into a future stage of the life course. When Zula was asked what he planned for the future, his first thoughts were of his family;

*“I think what I will do is go and find them. That is what I will do when I am settled. I will go and find my family*.” **Zula**

For others, less confident that their family members could be found or reunited with, future families were no less important, but were envisaged as new families that the young people would create for themselves.

The final thing to emphasise is that across all the differing and varied experiences of family that the young people revealed, the most salient and consistent finding was the central position of family in the young people’s social networks, whether they were present, distant or existent only in the imagined past and future. For all these young people, the cycle of losing and finding family members was fundamental.

**Discussion**

Many current understandings of unaccompanied children and young people centralise the act of migration as a singular rupture in time, space and the family network; a ‘ground zero’ from which new lives and families are rebuilt. The findings from this research present a picture in which multiple continuities as well as discontinuities are evident within the young people’s family networks. Far from being ‘radically severed’ (Wells 2011) from family networks, this research suggests that family relationships may remain crucial to unaccompanied young people’s social worlds, despite the traumatic physical separation from family that they have experienced. Unaccompanied young people do not just originate from countries of origin, but also from within families. No longer living with family can be the overriding experience of their migration. Re-establishing, renewing and reunifying these dislocated relationships was a dominant concern for many of the young people in this study, particularly as they transition into adulthood.

Drawing on insights from the transitional families literature (Baldassar & Merla 2014) and studies of refugee families (Horst 2007; Al-Sharmani 2010) this paper has emphasised the fluid and negotiated nature of family relationships over time, with family in the UK and abroad. From this vantage point, unaccompanied young people emerged as active participants in the family network, engaged in giving, receiving and negotiating care, often across distance (Baldassar & Merla 2014). Crucially, much of this care is based on unique emotional connections to family and kin, however kinship is defined by the young person. For unaccompanied young people ‘the circulation of care’ within families manifested in particular ways. The restrictive policy context within the UK asylum system and their relatively powerless position as young migrants limits the amount of practical and emotional ‘care’ and support they can give within families. Baldassar & Merla’s circulation of care concept is particularly useful here as its focus on care circulating over the life course allows us to understand the way in which care practices may become deferred to the future. Immigration restrictions, problematic labour market and educational positions and unique and complex family and cultural obligations all play a part in determining if unaccompanied young people are willing or able to play an active role in their family networks. Young people engaged in a variety of strategies to manage these barriers, perhaps the most significant of which was the ‘futuring’ of the reciprocal care they and support they desired to provide to at least some family members. Even where no family remained to care for, the desire to create and be part of a family remained in the narratives, again re-orientated to a hoped-for future. Even where young people have no knowledge of where family members are or if they are alive, they continue to hope for reunification and populate their ‘family imaginary’ with loved ones who may no longer be a physical presence in their life (Taylor 2002).

**Conclusion**

This paper has considered the complex family relationships of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in the UK and the barriers they face to engaging with family care and support. Family has been an under-explored aspect of the literature in this area. However, the findings presented here have demonstrated the intricacy of this topic and the importance of family for the young people themselves. Many aspects of these family networks appear to warrant further exploration, particularly in terms of beginning to understand how national immigration policies may help hinder unaccompanied young people in this crucial aspect of their experience.

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