**Social work with unaccompanied asylum seeking young people: Reframing Social Care professionals as ‘co-navigators’**

**Abstract**

This paper explores the relationships between unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and the social care professionals who work with them. Based on interviews with both young people and professionals and analysed using a thematic narrative approach, the findings seek to reframe practitioners in this field as 'co-navigators'. Such co-navigators assist asylum seeking young people to plot a course through complex and uncertain social terrain, including the shifting and inhospitable terrain of immigration regimes. Viewing practice in this way brings into focus the interplay of agency and control in these relationships. In contrast to some previous conceptualisations, the agency of the young people here is expressed through relationships with professionals as many of the young people relied on social care to help them manifest their goals and aspirations; both through pragmatic assistance in navigating the complexity of institutional bureaucracy and through developing emotional, therapeutic bonds. Understanding social care professionals as 'co-navigators' allows us to understand the emotional value of practical forms of assistance as well as explore how agency might operate as such relationships evolve.

Keywords: Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people; child migrants; social navigation; agency;

**Introduction**

In the UK an Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child (UASC) is defined as someone under the age of eighteen who arrives in the UK to seek asylum without a parent or guardian (Home Office, 2002). Recent years have seen increased numbers of unaccompanied children arriving in the UK and other European countries due to ongoing global conflict and instability, although numbers in the UK decreased in 2017 for the first time in four years (Refugee Council, 2018). Social Care professionals often play a crucial role in supporting unaccompanied children from their arrival in a new country through to their transition into adulthood as care leavers. In the UK, social care professionals are responsible for assessing and meeting their financial, accommodation, health, educational and broader needs (Wade *et al.* 2012). Most UASC will be entitled to Leaving Care services as they transition to adulthood, although a rejection of their claim for asylum can lead to such services being withdrawn. These young people face possible detention and deportation unless they are able to launch a successful appeal or fresh claim for asylum.

A significant amount of research in this area is concerned with the relationships between social work services and unaccompanied children. In the UK context, there is a corpus of work in this field which is concerned with the uneasy relationship between social work values (in particular a professional commitment to the ‘best interests of the child’) and the restrictive, potentially oppressive nature of immigration controls (Humphries, 2004; Cemlyn and Nye, 2012). Kohli (2007), has reflected on the ‘limited and limiting’ nature of much of this research, stating that research studies in this field:

*…largely fall into a portrayal of professional ineptitude …. and the established furrow of telling social workers what they have not done, what they have done too little of, and what they ought to do is firmly followed. (*Kohli, 2007: 15)

Kohli is concerned to provide a counter narrative by providing a typology of practice with unaccompanied children which emerged from his interviews with social workers. He identifies three ‘domains’ of practice: the ‘domain of cohesion’, in which practitioners are concerned to offer practical day to day support to create routine for unaccompanied children; the ‘domain of connection’, in which practice is focused on ‘witnessing’ past trauma and engaging in a more emotional realm with the service user; and finally, the ’domain of coherence’, in which the practitioner engages in the co-construction of a new start based on a strong and enduring relationship between practitioner and service user (Kohli, 2006a). With this typology and further similar work (2011) Kohli provides nuanced and detailed accounts of the realities of social work in this field, engaging with the ambiguities and complexities of practice in order to move beyond descriptions of deficient and constrained practice.

Following Kohli and comparable work on the realities of practice in this field (Wade *et* *al*. 2012: Wright 2014), an evolving theme in research with unaccompanied children and young people is a focus on agency and control (Crawley, 2009; Chase, 2010; Beazley, 2015). A number of studies have sought to establish unaccompanied young people as agentic, often positioning young people’s agency in opposition to professional practice (Chase, 2010; O’Higgins, 2012). Chase and Allsopp (2013) point to young people’s ability to avoid systems and structures of control, concluding that the role of formal services is overestimated and the agency of young people underestimated. Chase (2010:2063) emphasises the way in which unaccompanied young people seek to resist ‘constant control and monitoring by social care and professionals’. O’Higgins (2012) suggests that unaccompanied young people may be denied support from professionals when they express their agency, and argues that professionals should do more to promote young people’s agency. Whilst importantly drawing attention to young people’s potential for agentic action and subverting constructions of unaccompanied young people as inherently vulnerable, this work has tended to consider agency as something that is potentially opposed, suppressed or ignored by professionals. These understandings of agency position it as a property possessed by individuals rather than something which can operate relationally and interdependently (Burkitt, 2016).

The intention here is to suggest that social care professionals may act as ‘co-navigators’ with unaccompanied young people who are plotting their trajectory through unsettled and uncertain social environments. In doing so, the paper draws on the work of Vigh (2006; 2009) and the concept of ‘social navigation’. Vigh (2006; 2009) has primarily explored this concept in relation to young people navigating situations of conflict and social breakdown; but has noted its wide applicability to all social environments, particularly those experienced as fluid, alien or dominated by constraining social forces and structures. This is an apt description of the social environments faced by unaccompanied young people making their way through new and culturally divergent social landscapes whilst navigating unfamiliar and complex social structures such as immigration, social care and education. Indeed, Denov and Bryan (2012; 2014) have applied this concept to unaccompanied children in Canada, in order to explore how they navigate and negotiate the complex environment of migration and resettlement.

Social navigation brings an analytical focus to the way in which ‘agents’ plot a course through difficult and tumultuous environments and negotiate the intersection between their own agency and oppressive social forces (Vigh, 2009). In considering the experiences of both young people and professionals through this lens, the role of social care professionals in ‘co-navigating’ such environments becomes evident, and allows for an understanding of young people’s agency which is primarily relational rather than individualistic.

**Method**

The findings presented here are drawn from a study involving interviews with eighteen unaccompanied young people and twelve social care professionals in 2015. All the participants were accessed in one local authority (LA) area in Northern England. The purpose of the study was to explore the different aspects of unaccompanied young people’s social networks. A diverse range of unaccompanied young people participated; in terms of their country of origin, gender, age, immigration status and length of time in the UK. This diversity allowed the research to capture a broad range of experiences. However, all were aged between seventeen and twenty-five and were therefore current or former ‘care leavers’. The majority of unaccompanied young people were approached via a gatekeeper within the local authority, a senior social worker specialising in asylum seeking and refugee children. The gatekeepers role was to give information to the young people about the study and ask them to contact the researcher if they wished to take part. Four of the young people were accessed through local voluntary organisations in order to capture young people who might not be fully engaged with formal services. All the young people were able to speak English to a standard which meant they did not feel they required an interpreter and all had some ongoing contact with either statutory or voluntary services. This has implications for the findings, as this study was not able to capture the experiences of some of the most vulnerable unaccompanied young people who have not yet developed English language skills and/or are not engaged with any services. However, it was vital for the ethical integrity of the research that the young participants were known to have some access to support following the interviews, as social networks are a potentially sensitive and unsettling topic. Past research has shown that unaccompanied young people may have difficulty discussing social relationships due to feelings of isolation, fear of disclosing information to others and emotional trauma associated with the loss of family, friends and connections in the distant and recent past (Wade *et al*. 2012)

In the first phase of interviews the unaccompanied young people took part in a qualitative interview which involved constructing a ‘social network’ map (Kindermann, 2007). Participants were asked to place themselves in the middle of a diagram and then draw their network of social relationships around them. Creating a diagrammatical representation of the social network provided the foundation for the interview conversation and provided a piece of documentary data for the researcher to thematically analyse along with transcripts from the interview. In the second phase, eleven follow up interviews with young people were conducted. Follow- up interviews took place between six and nine months after the original interview and sought to capture any significant changes to social relationships that had taken place over time. The seven young people who did not take part in follow -up interviews either chose not to take part or were not possible to contact before fieldwork ended.

The third phase involved interviews with twelve Social Care professionals including social workers, personal advisors, team managers and an independent reviewing officer (residential care workers were not included). A range of professionals with different roles in the care of unaccompanied young people were chosen to capture a holistic view of the complexity of practice in this area and in recognition that the practice of social work is undertaken within teams of professionals with a variety of roles. The Personal Advisor role is of particular importance as when unaccompanied children and young people turn sixteen, they will become ‘care leavers’. At this point, their primary contact with services will be through their Personal Advisor (a statutory entitlement of the Children Leaving Care Act (2000). Whilst Personal Advisor’s do not need a Social Work qualification, they form a crucial part of the service provided by the LA to unaccompanied young people as they leave care. Team managers and the Independent Reviewing Office play crucial roles in the oversight of the services provided to unaccompanied young people and the decisions made about them..

The professional participants took part in in a one to one interview with the researcher. The interview schedule was designed following the interviews with unaccompanied young people and based on exploring professionals responses to some of the findings that arose from the first two stages of the data collection. This particular LA did not have a specialist team for unaccompanied children. However, all the professionals interviewed identified themselves as having significant experience of working with unaccompanied children and young people.

The data was analysed using a ‘thematic’ narrative approach, in which emphasis is placed on the thematic content of narratives, rather than their construction (Leiblich *et al.* 1998; Reissman 2004). The holistic narrative of each individual was analysed for emergent themes initially, before cross-referencing across participants for themes. The focus was on understanding how participants made sense of their relationships with others and the place of those relationships in their past, present and future lives. Three distinct ‘domains’ of social networks were identified.

The findings presented here pertain to the formal domain which comprised relationships with social care professionals. As themes emerged within this domain, links between the data and Kohli’s (2006) domains of practice became evident. His three domains of practice became primary themes around which the data was interrogated and organised. Whilst Kohli (2006) does not set out a set of criteria for identifying these domains, he does provide detailed analysis of the hallmarks of relationships which might be categorised under these themes which were used as a means of categorising and analysing the data presented in the first section here.

Ethical approval for this research was sought and granted by an approved institutional body. All participants gave informed written consent for each phase of the research they took part in.

**Reframing social work professionals as social navigators**

Many of the participants in this study recounted relationships which adhered to Kohli’s (2006a) domains of cohesion and coherence. Within the domain of cohesion strong bonds akin to familial ties were developed which blurred the boundaries of professional relationships

*Y’know they are just like part of my friends, they’re not social service or anything, she* (social worker) *is just like friends.* **Idris**

*She* (personal advisor) *is like a mother to me when I have no family*. **Mariam**

Others described relationships which were more consistent with Kohli’s (2006) domain of connection, characterised by the ability of professionals to ‘witness’ the traumatic experiences that young people carried with them. Indeed, professionals were often extremely moved by the stories of the young people they worked with.

*I told him [personal advisor] all about what happened to me. It is very upsetting for me. You will see if you look at my file that it is a very horrible story. But I did tell him about it*. **Aziz**

Other young people preferred to maintain less emotionally connected relationships with professionals. Crucially, these young people still valued professional relationships highly, based on the workers’ effectiveness, professionalism and ability to take action for the young person.

*The relationship is like, professional. It’s like that. But he* [social worker] *is very important to me. When I say I have a problem, I know that he can sort it out for me and help me with it. He has been very good person to me and I feel close to him because of that. Even though it is like professional relationship.* **Makhda**

Past research with care leavers more generally has highlighted the importance they place on reliability, effectiveness and ‘getting things done’ (Hojer and Sjoblom 2010; Morgan, 2012). For the young people in this study, the ability to problem solve and access crucial resources and entitlements could be just as important as the development of a more therapeutically based dynamic. Some of the professionals described offering this type of practice, which might be considered as working within Kohli’s (2006a) domain of cohesion, in which practitioners seek to bring order and routine to young people’s lives through tangible forms of helping.

*It’s mostly practical stuff, knowing we are here to turn to. But we’re always here. The emotional side of it -they just get on with it.* **Social Worker**

Whilst individual relationships operated across the ‘domains’ of practice identified by Kohli (2006a), the uniting theme of all the relationships uncovered in this study was the ability of professionals to help young people navigate perplexing and complicated social environments. Where stronger attachments and bonds had developed, they often evolved through or were underpinned by more practical forms of helping. Regardless of the type of relationship with professionals, young people’s accounts of their relationships were dominated by stories of assistance in interacting with formal institutions and processes. As one social worker pointed out, the primary need that professionals can meet is support with the complex bureaucracy which many unaccompanied children and young people are unfamiliar with.

*Their problems are with bureaucracy. They can have practical skills and confidence that are brilliant. But it’s the knowledge of the systems and the way society works because we operate very differently.* **Social Worker**

Previous research with unaccompanied young people suggests that the practical skills acquired pre-migration and during migration may be very different to those required to manage in the UK, resulting in the need for high levels of assistance with managing bills, bureaucracy and officialdom (Sirriyeh, 2013).

*All these letters, every day, through the post box more and more letters. And so many appointments. You get so many letters in this country. In my country there are no post boxes. Not these letters all the time. It is very simple life. I thought about gluing my letter box shut but I didn’t know if this was illegal and I would get into lots of trouble so I didn’t. Friends are not always very useful for that. But social services are the best place. They understand all those things.* **Sohail**

Further, young people routinely described their positive relationships with professionals in terms of their perceived levels of power to affect change and advocate for young people in complex systems. Sophia expressed this in the clearest terms when discussing her relationship with a social worker.

*She is powerful for me. She is very strong and very powerful.* **Sophia**

Sophia continued to put this statement into context, providing examples of the occasions on which her social worker had successfully argued for resources or helped her manifest important aspirations, such as accessing college. Such instances were common in the experiences of both the young people and professionals.

*She* [personal advisor] *is trying very hard right now to sort things out with college. They are saying I cannot progress onto the next level. But she has arranged to meet with them and I know she will sort it out for me.* **Mariam**

*A young girl who was at school was crying because the school was being racist. So, I rung and sorted that out for her. They sorted it right out. They thought she had nobody and so they didn’t really treat her right. But when I got involved they sorted it out.* **Personal Advisor**

. Viewing young people’s relationships with professionals through the lens of ‘social navigation’, professionals can be understood as co-navigators, helping young people steer a course through the complex, treacherous and often alien terrain of societal institutions, including social care and immigration systems. Indeed, Vigh (2009) has noted the way in which Western bureaucracies have a tendency to create the uncertain environments they set out to mitigate against. Some of the professionals understood their practice in this way and hinted towards their navigational role:

*We are like a stepping stone. A means to an end. To get them to a place they need to be. Hopefully with their refugee status and an education.* **Social Worker**

*The unaccompanied young people. Often, they know what they want. They know where they are going in life, they know what their future goals are and we just help with that.* **Personal Advisor**

Importantly, the concept of social navigation concerns not only the ability to act, but to imagine future goals (Denov and Bryan, 2012). Vigh (2009) notes how social navigation requires movement through immediate obstacles but with a simultaneous orientation towards more distance goals. The professionals quoted above appeared attuned to the need for unaccompanied young people to imagine such futures and envisaged their role as one that acted in support of realising goals.

Understanding professionals as co-navigators across difficult terrain requires us to think critically about how the agency of young people is understood and conceptualised in such circumstances. As Orgocka and Clark-Kazak (2012) have pointed out, vulnerability and agency are not mutually exclusive and can be considered and explored as interactional. In this vein, Burkitt (2016) proposes a relational approach to agency. Locating individual approaches to agency in a Western reification of autonomy, individualism and personhood, he suggests that no person is ever completely agentic. Power, the ability to act, affect change and make choices is reliant on relations of interdependence. Building from this and applying this view of agency to Vigh’s (2006; 2009) concept of ‘social navigation’ allows the role of social care professionals in ‘co-navigation’ to be explored in different ways, paying attention to the dynamics of power and control within these shared journeys. What becomes clear from the findings in this study is that expressions of agency are not limited to the resistance of controlling aspects of systems and structures often represented by professionals, but can involve an active engagement with professionals who are perceived to have the power and ability to affect change and successfully co-navigate young people through challenging terrain.

Mariam’s experiences provide an example. Mariam was placed in a kinship placement with family members which she found difficult and challenging. Mariam approached her social worker and told her she wanted to live independently, but the social worker refused to help her.

*She said I couldn’t live independently. She said I had to stay with family until my baby was older because I couldn’t look after him on my own and I needed family. I told her I would rather live in the street than live here any longer and that I was going to leave anyway. In the end, I found another social worker and she helped me straight away. She said it was fine and she would help me to live on my own with the baby.* **Mariam, aged 19**

Mariam had experienced some of the more controlling aspects of professional practice, that chime with previous findings that young people can become increasingly vulnerable when they are not listened to, and their agency is constrained (Huijsmans, 2011). Whilst Mariam described acting alone in deciding to resist the first social worker’s decision, it was the recruitment of a more sympathetic professional that assisted Mariam in achieving her aim. Within Mariam’s experience are complex interactions of multiple constraining mechanisms. Mariam is positioned as vulnerable and in need of care within a family, due to the intersectional effects of her age, asylum-seeker identity, gender and status as a young mother. However, it is ultimately her connection with another professional which helps guide her out of the situation, reflecting the dependence that many young people have on professionals to act as a conduit for manifesting their aims and goals.

For another young person, Zahra, her social worker navigated her through both a literal and emotional journey to visit her father and sister, whom she discovered were living in another European country. The social worker was involved in tracing the family, establishing who they were and where they were. The social worker also arranged for Zahra to visit her family and escorted her on the journey.

*It was so great that she* [social worker] *came with me. I was so scared. I’d never been on a plane on my own before. And then at the airport it was really stressful. They were not gonna let me travel because there was some problem with my documents and I was just crying. I had no idea what to do. But she talked to them and explained. It took so long. I don’t know what I would have done if she wasn’t with me. And I wanted her with me when I first saw my dad and my sister again. She had been there from the beginning for me. I needed her there with me.* **Zahra, aged 20**

Zahra’s story highlights both the practical role of the professional in leading the way through systems and processes that may be unfamiliar and overwhelming for young people, but also draws attention to the emotional connections that are built over time as journeys, both literal and metaphorical, are taken together. As Burkitt (2016) suggests, interdependency has an emotional relation and cannot be fully understood simply as an interaction or transaction. In Zahra’s relationship with her social worker we see the complexity of social navigation, in that it involves the confluence of practical tasks with emotional journeys. What could be seen as practical assistance is rarely purely practical, and successful navigation of seemingly pragmatic obstacles will inevitably have emotional impacts on both the young person and the worker, as demonstrated by the social workers account of her journey with Zahra:

*It was very emotional for her and for me. I don’t know who cried the most when we first found her dad. It was a very special thing for me to be a part of. We just cried and cried together. And then I had a lot of work to do to organise the trip for her to meet her father and get all the funding for that. Being able to see them reunite makes it all worth it. It’s the best that it gets in this job.* **Social Worker**

This section has presented findings which suggest practice with unaccompanied young people can adhere to Kohli’s ‘domains of practice. Kohli’s original typology was based solely on interviews with professionals. The findings here include the experiences of young people themselves, giving additional validity to understanding practice in this way. Building from this, Vigh’s concept of social navigation has been employed to cut across Kohli’s domains and understand how each type of practice can operate within this framework. The following section considers how the concept of social navigation can aid us in understanding the potential and limitations for practice which must operate within the confines of oppressive immigration controls.

**Navigating the hostile terrain of immigration controls**

One of the most challenging areas to navigate for both young people and professionals was the complexity and uncertainty of the immigration system. A number of previous studies have represented children’s services as complicit in oppressive state immigration practices, and therefore mistrusted by young people suspicious of the connections between social care and the Home Office (Humphries 2004; 2006; Chase 2010). Experiences that might be interpreted in this way were glimpsed fleetingly and rarely within this study. Professionals suggested that young people might not always be able to tell them the truth if it would jeopardise their asylum claim, but viewed this without suspicion and understood it as a form of functional distrust (Kohli, 2006b) and a vital mechanism for self-protection that could be broken down as trust developed:

*They can’t always tell you everything. I understand that. But over time they realise that we are not the Home Office.* **Social Worker**

*I’m sure some of them have secrets. They have to. Our position has to be that they are children first. That’s how we approach it. They are children with needs, not asylum seekers.* **Senior Social Worker**

Support with immigration was one of the most pressing concerns of young people and professionals, especially where young people had unresolved claims or exhausted all their appeals. At the sharp end of immigration control, social services were often the last refuge for young people.

*They are all I have. They are everything now when I am in this position.* **Yousef, aged 18(who had exhausted all his appeal rights)**

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One of the interviewees was Kamal, who had just received a final refusal letter from the Home Office after being in the UK for over ten years. Although Kamal had long since ceased receiving leaving care services, having ‘aged out’ the system, his first action on receiving the bad news from the Home Office was to contact his former social worker.

*I came here to see* [former social worker] *and she is trying to help me. She is looking through the papers they sent me. And y’know. She’s trying. But I don’t know what she can do really.* **Kamal**

Whilst most young people were aware of the limitations of the professional power of social services in such situations, their best hope of finding a guide through the adverse and confusing environment of immigration control was social services. The quote below comes from Aziz’s second interview at which his immigration status was not resolved.

*Without help from social services I would be totally lost right now. Totally lost. Because I have no idea what to do. No idea what happens next. But I am happy because they will continue to help me.* **Aziz**

These findings suggest that the role of professionals as co-navigators is particularly crucial for guiding young people through the intricacies of the immigration regime. For some, this process is not limited to periods of crisis with immigration concerns. Many of the professionals considered guiding young people through the immigration system as one of their primary roles from the start. Importantly, building trusting and positive relationships with young people was seen as an inherent part of this process:

*If they don’t trust us and we don’t do good interviews and get the information about their past then we are limited in how much we can help when it comes to appeals. We need to work on that over the years. That is their main need, to get their claim accepted and we need to focus on that main need.* **Social Worker**

The views reported here by both young people and professionals differ significantly from the ‘culture of disbelief’ and Home Office complicity portrayed in some studies. However, this is not to suggest that young people did not have any problems at the intersection of social care and immigration. Some of the young people had struggled to access assistance with the immigration system. Aziz described having to beg a social worker to attend court with him. Whilst she did agree to attend in the end, Aziz remained disappointed that she hadn’t immediately agreed.

There were also notable inequities between the service young people received when they exhausted their appeal rights. Whilst it was local policy to continue to provide basic financial and accommodation assistance to young people who had their claims rejected, at least for a period of time, some young people received substantially more support than others. This discrepancy appeared largely related to the different relationships with professionals that young people developed, as well as the effectiveness of the professional. One young person who was struggling to get support had been through numerous workers, and had no settled long-term personal advisor with whom he had built a relationship. Conversely, another young man in similar circumstances received more funding and resources. He had built strong relationships with a social worker and personal advisor over many years. This highlights how the power young people have to express and enact their agency can rest largely on their interdependency with others (Burkitt, 2016). The professionals appeared aware of this inequity and explicitly linked it with the effectiveness of individual professionals:

*If you want extra support for a young person you have to be able to make a very good case to the manager.* **Personal Advisor**

*Packages are individually tailored, dependent on the potential of the young person, what they aspire to achieve. It definitely helps to have a worker who is able to make a strong case.***Independent Reviewing Officer**

Research has previously highlighted that levels of support for unaccompanied young people can vary considerably dependent on the allocated worker (Chase, 2010; Wade *et al.* 2012). However, the findings here suggest also that levels of support are also dependent on the ‘potential’ of the young person. Particularly where young people have uncertain entitlements and higher levels of support become largely discretionary, additional support (with education in particular) was linked to the presumed potential of young people.

O’Higgins (2012) has previously explored how unaccompanied young people might be required to present in particularly ‘victim-like’ and vulnerable ways in order to receive support from professionals. Whilst this was not the case in this study, young people who presented as aspirational, dedicated to education and having ‘potential’ certainly seemed more likely to be able to access the highest levels of care and support. This suggests the potential for some young people to be labelled as more ‘deserving’ than others and for professionals to take ‘extra risks for the right kind of young person’ (Chase, 2010: 2013). As one of the personal advisors explained:

*You have Saturday people and Monday people. That is, young people who if they ring you on a Saturday you will pick up and others who can wait until Monday.* **Personal Advisor**

In another interview with a personal advisor the issue of agency, control and navigating though immigration systems overshadowed her story. An extract from the interview is worth reproducing here:

*One young person has been in trouble with the police and I’ve warned him that he is at risk of just being picked up and taken into detention. Nothing I can do. I want to reinforce to him what might happen, with immigration. When he was at college and doing well, I would tell him to keep going, I told him I’d fight tooth and nail to keep him here. But now. It just depends on how he’s doing when I see him and how my emotions are with him. I’ve been to court with him. I always go to court with him. I really fought for him. And now he’s just getting in trouble with the police. When I think of what I’ve been through with him. I know it’s my job. But the emotions. When I see him not doing the right things. I just go cold.* **Personal Advisor**

Here the professional is oscillating between two opposing positions in response to the behaviour of the young person. Whilst initially projecting herself as a protector and advocator, she then flips to presenting herself as powerless and complicit with the Home Office. The professional here can be viewed as using the uncertainty of the immigration system as a tool to try control the young person, and may also be perceived as withdrawing support when the right kind of young person suddenly becomes the wrong kind of young person. However, there is much greater depth to her experience than that interpretation allows. Crucially, the personal advisor alludes to the emotional journey that she has taken with the young person, referring to all ‘that she has been through with him’, leading us back to the concept of social navigation and the emotional interdependencies that may develop between young people and professionals. Relations of agency and control in this narrative are highly complex and located within emotional attachments, suggesting that close bonds and attachments between young people and professionals does not necessarily strengthen young people’s agency and negate issues of control, and indeed can complicate power dynamics. As Denov and Bryan (2012) suggest, the notion of social navigation helps us to chart the ways in which child migrants move through systems of power which they can never entirely overcome. The findings here position professionals as potential allies in social navigation due to their heightened authority, power and understanding of the landscape. However, the findings also draw attention to the fluid and negotiated relationships developed throughout the journey in which power, agency, control and emotions collide in nuanced ways that may produce, reproduce or transform the social environment and differential power relations.

**9.2.2 Unchartered territory: The limits of ‘co-navigation’**

Continuing with the concept of social navigation, this final section considers ‘unchartered territory’, a term used here to describe the limits of the co-navigational role that professionals can take up. The section considers the impact of leaving care and ageing out of services. Professionals were only able to navigate young people for a limited period of time, acting in many ways like social convoys, formations of support which change throughout the life course (Antonucci *et al.* 2010). For some young people, navigating alone was problematic and represented a betrayal of the promises some professionals had made to finish journeys with young people:

*They* [social services] *said they would stay helping me. They said they would carry on helping me until immigration stuff was sorted, because I was having big problem with it at that time. But they didn’t. After eighteen, I didn’t see them again*. **Faizal**

For Faizal, services were cut off due to age-graded entitlements and left him without support to navigate the asylum system. Indeed, some of the professionals questioned when the role of social workers should end:

*There is definitely a question about when the role should end. Young people really need support right through the immigration process. Right to the end. Even right up to the point of leaving the UK if that is the outcome. Policy needs to rethink that.* **Independent Reviewing Officer**

However, some young people believed that professionals would continue to play an informal role in their social networks beyond the formal boundaries of their involvement:

*They said they would still help me. After. Even after I turn twenty-one. I think they will. But maybe the workers will change and get new jobs. I don’t know.* **Sohail**

Despite Faizal’s experience of losing support abruptly at the age of eighteen, there was evidence that young people continued to receive support beyond age cut-offs, as demonstrated by Kamal’s return to seek support many years after leaving care. How commonly such on-going support was received is difficult to gauge as only two of the young people (Faizal and Kamal) had aged out of Leaving Care services at the time of the interviews. However, professionals reported that they often had continued contact with unaccompanied young people and considered that they were always available to help those who had left the service.

*They know even after support has ended my number never changes. I got a new phone and they tried to change my number and I don’t want to change it in case clients from a few years ago can’t get in touch with me.. So you just never know when they’re gonna ring up for help*. **Personal Advisor**

Indeed, it was sometimes professionals who struggled to end the relationship, highlighting the mutuality and interdependence of the relationships that are built over time and the emotional attachments that professionals formed with young people.

*You can keep it open-ended and you can still offer advice. I had one girl I was very close to her and after I stopped working with her I rang and asked her if she wanted to meet for a coffee. I arranged to meet up but she just didn’t turn up. There was some disappointment because I thought we got on better than that. She was always glad to meet for a coffee when I was working with her. We’d have a chat and a laugh. To go from that to nothing was hard.* **Personal Advisor**

Indeed, many of the professionals felt that young people often wanted to move on from social services and did not want to maintain contact unless they had very specific immigration issues, suggesting again that navigation through the complex systems of immigration can be the primary role of the professional.

**Conclusion**

This article has explored the role of social care professionals in the lives of unaccompanied young people. It has primarily sought to engage in balancing perceptions of professionals as controlling and limiting (Humphries, 2002; 2004; Chase, 2010; O’Higgins, 2012) with the nuances and dilemmas of practice uncovered by others (Kohli 2006; Wade *et al.* 2012; Wright, 2014). In doing this, relationships were evident that support Kohli’s (2006) typology of ‘domains’ of professional practice which range from the creation of strong emotional attachments to largely practical and concrete forms of assistance. Cutting across this typology, professionals were reframed as ‘co-navigators’ who are especially valuable for unaccompanied young people in navigating the complex, unpredictable and adverse terrain of institutional bureaucracies and systems. This co-navigational role unearths the interdependency of young people and professionals, which stands in contrast to previous work which has not often engaged with the agency of young people in this way, preferring to understand young people’s agency as individual and oppositional rather than interactional.

In positioning professionals in this way the article does not seek to undermine the agency of young people in navigating their own journeys, or to suggest that professionals are the sole companion of unaccompanied young people through immigration and resettlement processes. Chase (2010) in particular has cautioned against perceptions that positive outcomes are mediated by bureaucrats and professionals rather than the action taken directly by young people. Wright (2014) has also drawn attention to the limitations of the professional social work role and emphasises the importance of a broad range of voluntary services, which can offer less time-limited and policy-constrained support, particularly in the transition to adulthood. Unaccompanied young people are also likely to have a wide range of support from peers and community members, which is not often recognised (Wells, 2011).

The purpose of framing professionals in this way is therefore not to privilege their relationships with unaccompanied young people above other relationships, but to unearth the possibilities for practice in this area. Navigating the terrain of social care, immigration and education institutions with young people emerged as vitally important, regardless of the type of relationship between the young people and professionals. Viewing professionals as social navigators also brought into view the interplay of agency and control. The findings presented here move beyond an understanding of professionals as either controlling or enabling, to consider the fluid and negotiated nature of power dynamics throughout the journeys of young people. The practice of professionals can either reproduce existing relations of power created through oppressive immigration systems or transform them by understanding their own relative (though still limited) positions of power as a conduit for the agency of unaccompanied young people.

Emotional attachments to professionals could be imbued with intricate power relations that shifted over time, and in response to the volatile terrain of social relations mediated by immigration controls and local policies, and as young people attempted to forge their own individual pathways that were sometimes at odds with the hopes and aspirations that professionals had for them. This draws our attention back to the environment in which such relationships operate; the terrain which is to be navigated. Whilst viewing practice as social navigation has clear benefits which have been outlined here, it remains vital not to obscure the often overwhelming and insurmountable power of the immigration system which creates unique and significant vulnerabilities for unaccompanied for young people. As Denov and Bryan (2012) have argued, the concept of social navigation helps to chart how child migrants move through systems of power which they can never entirely overcome.

Importantly, social care professionals are also plotting their way through difficult and uncertain social landscapes within their work with the young people. They too are seeking to negotiate the interplay of their own agency as professionals and the constraining social forces in which their practice operates, particularly in terms of the complex and often shifting immigration regime. The use of the term ‘co-navigators’ has particular salience when this is considered. It is not intended to convey any sense of equal power relations between the young person and professional; but to emphasise the mutual ground that is traversed when journeys; short or long, successful or abandoned; are taken together.

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