

Best Interests, Durable Solutions and Belonging: Policy Discourses Shaping the Futures of Unaccompanied Migrant and Refugee Minors Coming of Age in Europe

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Word count: 9,888 (excluding abstract)

Key words: Unaccompanied minors; youth transitions; best interests; durable solutions; belonging

Funding: This work was supported by the ESRC under Grant ES/L009226/1

Disclosure Statement: No potential conflicts of interest are reported by the authors.

Abstract

This paper sheds light on the ambiguous position of children who migrate without a parent or guardian as they become adults in the European Union (EU). Through a critical analysis of three prevailing frames ('best interests', 'durable solutions' and 'belonging'), which largely inform policy and practice related to this group, it explores the tension between policy assumptions and what we know of the lived experiences and aspirations of these young people. It ultimately reveals a policy framework shaped by a state-centric view of migration, a static conception of belonging and a bias towards a political preference for return. Such a stance underestimates young people's agency and willingness to embrace risk in their efforts to secure a viable future. The net result is policy which fails to offer a 'durable solution' or act in the 'best interests' of individual migrant young people or of society as a whole.

Introduction

Over the last decade, academics have accorded substantial attention to documenting, critiquing and responding to the migration triggers, lived experiences and protection needs of 'unaccompanied' or 'separated' child migrants in Europe (Thomas, Nafees, and Bhugra 2004; Chase, Knight, and Statham 2008; Kanics, Senovilla Hernandez, and Touzenis 2010; Lemberg-Pedersen and Chatty 2015); and to comparing the policy responses towards children and youth across EU member states, Nordic countries and members of the Council of Europe (Kanics et al. 2010; EU Fundamental Rights Agency 2011; European Migration Network 2010). This focus on child migrants has been accompanied by a notable lack of consideration given to the experiences and outcomes for these young people once they turn 18. With a primary focus on the UK and Italy, this article juxtaposes the policy and legislative norms that seek to govern the lives of unaccompanied young migrants and refugees 'becoming adult' in Europe with their lived experiences. Particular attention is paid to the concepts of

‘best interests’ and ‘durable solutions’ and to the assumptions about agency and belonging that underlie them. In their introduction to this special issue, Menjívar and Perreira (2017) connect the current article with other bodies of work which address conflicting ideas of ‘best interests’ in relation to unaccompanied minors in the USA and Europe and how children and young people strive to retain control in response to the ‘best interests’ frameworks governing their lives.

Unaccompanied migrant minors becoming adult in Europe

As they make the transition to ‘adulthood’, institutionally defined as aged 18, unaccompanied young migrants frequently see the evaporation of the rights previously accorded to them as children (Kanics et al., 2010; Hammarberg 2010). This happens irrespective of whether they remain in Europe with or without one of a number of possible legal statuses, embark on secondary migration (within or beyond Europe), return to countries of origin, or re-migrate to Europe following deportation – all known possibilities for this group.

Uncertainty surrounding their futures has social and economic consequences for migrant young people and can have a substantial impact on their subjective wellbeing. Research with young people seeking asylum alone in the UK suggests that a sense of wellbeing is derived not just from feeling in control of current and past aspects of their lives, but from having a firm feeling of belonging and a projected sense of self within a future trajectory (Chase 2013). Other scholarship has similarly highlighted how migrant young people actively strive to secure futures over which they have autonomy and control (Chatty 2007).

Scholars have established an important connection in public policy discourse between the perceived future prospects for ‘youth’ and normative ideas about the potential success of nations (Boyden 1997; Griffin 2001); and between the future of nation-states and the risks

and opportunities associated with migration flows (e.g. Miller 2005; Castles, Miller, and Ammendola. 2005). The high number of unaccompanied young men fleeing to Europe in the context of the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015-2016, for example, has prompted fears of a demographic imbalance (Hudson 2016) and conjured associations of virility and violence which are seen as threats, not only to the harmony of individual member states, but to the EU as a whole (Allsopp 2017).

Combining a critical analysis of relevant European policy frameworks and insights from interviews conducted with young people and service providers in the UK and Italy, this article brings together these different threads of policy (youth transitions, migration and wellbeing) to reveal the dissonance between how the concept of ‘futures’ has been mobilised in contemporary European policies governing the outcomes of young people subject to immigration control as they turn 18, and young people’s own intentions for their futures. It interrogates three normative assumptions prominent within European policy responses to the migration of unaccompanied children and young people. Firstly, that unaccompanied young migrants and institutional actors can agree on a common idea of ‘best interests’; secondly, that returning young people refused asylum to countries of origin or previous residence is a ‘durable solution’; and thirdly, that these young people ‘belong’ in their countries of origin. The term ‘unaccompanied migrant young people’ is used to transcend the ‘under 18’ (child) / ‘over 18’ (adult) binary, as laid out in legal instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It recognises that whilst the policy landscape significantly shifts for young people across Europe as they turn 18, in reality the transition to ‘adulthood’ is shaped by many other intersecting social, economic and cultural factors. The UK and Italy were chosen as case studies because, while both are party to EU policy and legislation pertaining to unaccompanied young migrants and refugees, they apply these policies during the transition to adulthood at 18 in very different ways. While these policy divergences

provide important context and impact upon the decision-making of the young migrants in question, they are not the focus of this particular article (see rather Allsopp, forthcoming).ⁱ

Methodology

The article draws on the ESRC-funded research project ‘Becoming Adult’ⁱⁱ which explores the life trajectories and wellbeing outcomes of unaccompanied young migrants and refugees as they experience multiple and intersecting transitions to adulthood. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak 2011) of policy documents and legislation concerning unaccompanied minors and refugees at the EU level is the primary focus of this article (for an expanded analysis of European policy documents and legislation, see Chase and Allsopp 2013). We combine this policy analysis with emerging findings from our field research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with more than one hundred unaccompanied migrant young people (aged 16-25) from a range of countries of origin between 2015 and 2016 in the UK (n=60+) and Italy (n=40). Interview participants were identified through non-governmental organisations and snow-ball sampling via young people’s social networks. A team of young people with direct experience of unaccompanied migration were recruited and worked as core members of the research team throughout the project. Participants predominantly identified as male (8 UK-based participants identified as female) and had experienced a range of different pathways through the immigration and reception systems. The research received ethical clearance from the University of Oxford and University College London and ethical considerations were addressed on an ongoing basis over the course of the research. A range of outputs detailing the methodology, findings and analysis from the empirical research are forthcoming (e.g. Chase, forthcoming and Allsopp, forthcoming).

The ‘harmonization’ of European policy

Consistent flows of unaccompanied young migrants to Europe in recent years have prompted efforts to harmonise policy responses towards them. While numbers fluctuate between countries, until 2014 the EU received an average of between 11,000 and 12,000 asylum applications from unaccompanied minors a year (Eurostat 2016a). By 2014, however, this number had almost doubled and, by 2015, had risen significantly further to over 96,000 (Eurostat 2016b). Asylum claims aside, there is evidence to suggest that an unknown number of unaccompanied migrant young people do not claim asylum, may avoid detection by institutions altogether and are largely absent from any policy agenda (Bloch, Sigona, and Zetter 2011; 2014; European Commission 2012; Sigona and Hughes 2012). A proportion of this population seek to regularise their status outside of the asylum system, though possible routes to legal residence outside of the asylum system are inconsistent across EU Member States (Allsopp forthcoming), as are data collected on the number of unaccompanied minors in the care of authorities outside of the asylum system (Chase and Allsopp 2013: 10). Most young people who do apply for asylum in Europe are denied refugee status or humanitarian protection but are afforded temporary welfare support and care provisions under ‘discretionary’ leave to remain arrangements while they are ‘vulnerable’ children in need of international protection. This makes the transition to ‘adulthood’ at 18 years a time of acute change and uncertainty.

Since the late 1990s, like adult migrants, the lives of unaccompanied young people in Europe are largely governed by an increasingly unified Common European Asylum System which seeks to harmonise reception, integration and return procedures for migrants while synergizing immigration policies and strengthening economic and political collaboration between EU Member States (Lindstrøm 2005; Ruffer 2005; Schuster 2005). Many such policies have been criticised for normalizing discriminatory and exclusionary practices

(Düvell 2009; Watters, 2007; Uçarer 2001), including specifically in relation to children and young people (e.g. Eneajor 2008).

A range of non-binding treaties and guidelines have sought to harmonise and regulate procedures and protocols at the international level for unaccompanied migrant children (see, for example, the 1997 UNHCR Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in Dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum and the 2005 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment no. 6 on the treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin). The treatment of unaccompanied minors is also governed by a range of binding international legal instruments, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC 1989) and the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Geneva Convention 1951).

Couched within the discourse of the ‘best interests of the child’ and the need to find ‘durable solutions’, several Europe-wide tools and best practices for work with young people have been formulated including the Council of the European Union Conclusions on Unaccompanied Minors, adopted in June 2010, and a 2010-2014 EU Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors. A prime example of policy harmonization for unaccompanied minors is the Life Project planning framework (Drammeh 2010). This framework, adopted by the 47 countries in the Council of Europe (Recommendation (2007)9), is explicitly referenced within the 2010 Council of the European Union Conclusions on Unaccompanied Minors and it is similarly endorsed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2011).

The Life Project planning framework speaks to the prevalence of temporary legal statuses accorded to unaccompanied migrant young people, the common associated experience of ‘waiting’ and the inherent difficulties of planning for the future in a context of such uncertainty. The stated aim of the framework is to ‘contribute to finding lasting solutions for and with unaccompanied migrant minors that will help them to build life

projects guaranteeing them a better future' (Council of Europe 2007: 7). Prevalent in the Life Project planning framework are the concepts of 'bests interests' and 'durable solutions' which have come to dominate the discourse surrounding unaccompanied young migrants and refugees at the European level and which heavily influence practice at the national and local level. Below, each of the concepts is discussed alongside evidence from our qualitative research. We also interrogate a third, related norm prevalent in the European policy framework: belonging.

'Best interests'

Article 24 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights stresses '[in] all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests shall be a primary consideration.' This article is given legally binding force in The Treaty of Lisbon. The concept of 'best interests' emerged in the last three decades as part of a broader recognition of the rights of the child (Hart 1991) and it is enshrined in Article 3 of the CRC 1989. Article 3.2 links 'best interests' to the protection and care necessary for a child's wellbeing.

The CRC General Comment No. 6 (2005) is explicit that the state is responsible for protecting the rights and determining the 'best interests' of unaccompanied minors up to the age of 18. The 2005 CRC Comment outlines the need for states to find 'durable solutions' for unaccompanied minors once they come of age; and, more recently, research by the UNHCR (2014) and Council of Europe (2014) recommends that states introduce a 'transition category' for migrant young people turning 18 in order to inform appropriate policy responses. However, state responsibility for their 'best interests' post-18 depends on national legislation. A former unaccompanied minor in the UK, for example, may meet criteria to become a 'care leaver' through which particular rights can be extended under certain conditions until the age of 25 (see Allsopp, Chase, and Mitchell 2015).ⁱⁱⁱ

In practice, there is no clear definition of ‘best interests’ (Engebrigtsen 2003) and much ambiguity exists as to its usefulness in planning ahead for what happens when young people come of age. Some have argued that while in theory the best interests principle should extend beyond childhood up until the age of 25 or, in the context of a recent UK case (KA (Afghanistan) & Ors v Secretary of State for the Home Department [2012] EWCA Civ 1014), that there can be no ‘bright line rule’ around age when dealing with age-related persecution, in effect the ‘best interests’ principle appears largely redundant for young people once they turn 18 (Freeman 2005; Dixon and Wade 2007).

Two core assumptions appear to underpin normative ideas about ‘best interests’ with respect to unaccompanied migrant young people. The first is that European host states can agree on a common understanding of ‘best interests’ with the young people for whom they are responsible; the second is that young people will comply with the institutionally-defined version of their ‘best interests’. Our research suggests a frequent tension between the young person’s conception of their best interests and the requirements of the state, leading them to disengage with authorities and look to alternative resources and means to pursue their goals. Young people under 18 refused asylum in our UK sample, in particular, were often acutely aware that the same statutory actors looking out for them now may abandon them when they turn 18.^{iv} One social worker commented to researchers that in her experience minors in this position pursue one of two routes: disengagement; or ‘the ostrich’ (not thinking about the future). We know that around 2,000 former unaccompanied minors leave the care system in the UK each year (Pinter 2012), although we have little idea about what happens to them or what subsequent contact they have (if any) with immigration control structures (Gladwell and Elywn 2012). Our current work confirms the lack of institutional knowledge of the outcomes of former unaccompanied minors who have spent time in the care of local authorities across England (Humphris and Sigona, 2016b).

Whose 'best interests'?

Being 'counted' as an unaccompanied asylum seeking minor accords certain rights and entitlements in both the UK and Italy while simultaneously generating other forms of vulnerability (Enenajor 2008; this issue Humphris and Sigona 2017) and disempowerment (Bhabha 2003). Furthermore, the 'costs' of receiving support may accrue once the young person turns 18 and entitlements and services become contingent on moving to another location, remaining compliant with immigration procedures, having to sign up to voluntary return or rendering themselves liable to being held in immigration detention or deported. For those with no right to remain in Europe, 'best interests' dissolve and are trumped starkly by the imperatives of immigration control at the age of 18.

While young migrants rarely use the language of 'best interests', they frequently allude to their right to have a voice in decisions that affect them (as outlined in Article 12 of the CRC 1989). Some research participants described how their care providers had helped them to realise their goals and aspirations and others spoke of how the host country offered them opportunities for 'big dreams' (Chase 2013; Allsopp et al. 2014) that they had been unable to conceive of in their countries of origin. Others, however, expressed dissatisfaction with the level and scope of the care they received, sometimes indicating that their hopes and aspirations ran contrary to what they were allowed to do according to institutional guidelines and rules, thus creating tension between themselves and their social workers.

In keeping with Article 12 of the CRC (1989), it is anticipated that the 'expectations, wishes and perceptions' of unaccompanied minors will be taken into account in determining their pathways in the host country. However, the Life Project framework offers no counsel regarding the ethical and moral dilemmas arising in the not-uncommon situation in which the perceived 'best interests' of the young person and the institutional framework imposed by the state come into conflict (Bhabha 2003; Engebrigtsen 2003; Crawley 2006; Chase 2013). The

notion that Life Projects are negotiated ignores the structural constraints imposed by the legal and administrative systems which govern both the child rights framework and the migration control and security priorities of member states.

By way of example, one of several reasons for absconding from child reception centres cited by young people in our Italy research was the fact that they were prevented from working. Bilal from Egypt, 16, explains how he moved between reception centres trying to find one that would accommodate his request to work, only to be met with the same response:

First I thought I'd come to Italy and work. I knew I'd enter a shelter [casa familia] but I thought I'd come and work on the second day. I didn't think I'd have to go to school and language lessons. I was surprised! I didn't want to do those things but it went like that. I went to the first centre and they said "go to school, go to school"; then the next one: "go to school, go to school, school," [laughs]. Then I came here and they said "study, study, go to school" [laughs]. In Egypt I did just five years of school!

Some young people described the immense pressure on them to work either to pay off the debts of their journey (cited by participants to average between 3,000-4,000 Euros from North Africa to Italy alone), or to send remittances to families who live in poverty back in their country of origin or who seek funds to flee themselves. Others, having worked since a very young age and accrued skills, felt frustrated when these went unrecognised.

Importantly, the negotiation of 'best interests' is often, from young people's perspectives, not simply between the individual and the state, but also involves other actors, such as their family or social networks. This idea of 'collective interests' may sit in tension with the individualistic conception of the child's 'best interests' advanced by EU policy norms. Some participants spoke of feeling torn between this collective obligation to their family and the attraction of more individualistic opportunities being offered to them in the

host country. These included pathways such as going to University, but also other life enhancing opportunities such as pursuing romantic relationships or new hobbies.

Compliance with institutional processes

While children ‘leant in’ to the support structures when they saw them as conducive to their ‘best interests’, they also ‘leant out’ when systems and structures limited their options. There is a growing awareness of young people’s abilities to evade systems of control (Chase 2010; Schuster and Majidi 2013; Bloch, Sigona, and Zetter 2011) and to negotiate and make measured decisions about the risks facing them in the migratory processes and what they perceive as their own ‘best interests’. It is well documented, for example, that many migratory young people evade detection as they pass through certain countries in order to make it easier to claim asylum or reunite with family members when they arrive in the destination state (Frontex 2010). They also take calculated risks (Williams and Baláž 2012) in moving from one country to the next: hiding in or under lorries, crossing oceans in unstable boats and subjecting themselves to the control of agents who transport them. Evidence suggests that young people engaged in formal state-led futures planning processes may simultaneously pursue alternative life projects which they may or may not share with social workers who seek to guide them (Chase 2010; 2013). A burgeoning field of research is exploring how a range of social networks may shape these plans (Wells 2011).

Data available at the national level confirm that as young people turn 18 in the UK, those without a legal right to remain may shield themselves from the possibility of deportation by purposefully disengaging from bureaucratic processes (Kohli and Mitchell 2007). This phenomenon of ‘disappearing’ has also been observed in other European states with active detention and deportation regimes, such as Norway and Sweden (Refugee Children’s Consortium 2013; UNHCR/Council of Europe 2014; Olin 2012). Bashir from

Afghanistan explained the dilemma he faced upon becoming appeal rights exhausted in the UK and how he came to make the decision to disengage from institutional processes:

I wanted to go and sign and submit my fresh application but I told my solicitor, ‘if I get detained are you responsible? – can you do anything?’ And she said, ‘no ... I cannot guarantee anything.’ And so I said, ‘I am not going to sign’ (at the Home Office). Because if you go ... there is very little chance to get detained in the first, second or third week to go for signing. But after that you will most likely be detained, you know? I wasn’t like strong enough to make that decision, to say ‘OK I am going to go for signing’ because I have seen so many of my friends that have been deported ... so I just decided, ‘I will stay and see whatever happens later on’, but thinking that by yourself you are going to go into danger ... obviously you are not going to do it. So that’s it... I just quit.

Importantly, a couple of years after living illegally in the UK with all its inherent difficulties, Bashir made the subsequent decision to make a fresh claim for asylum. This decision was based on his perceived rationale that the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan would make it less likely for him to be forcibly returned and more likely that his fresh claim for asylum – and a possible future – in the UK would be successful.

Five thousand of the estimated 10,000 unaccompanied minors who Europol claim to have disappeared across the EU in 2015 disappeared in Italy. Scant research exists regarding the circumstances of their disappearance, however the group is known to include unaccompanied children in transit seeking to reunite with family members elsewhere in Europe and individuals such as Bilal, above, who seek to enter the labour market, where they may be vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. Other young people in our research were disenchanted with their prospects in Italy and planned to head North in pursuit of an alternative.

Mohammed, from Mali, arrived in Europe in 2013 at the age of 14. At the time he participated in the research, he had permission to stay in Italy for the foreseeable future and was living in a shelter for unaccompanied minors in a city in the north of the country. He explained how he was weighing up his options as he approached his 18th birthday and faced the prospect of unemployment with minimal state support and moving to an overcrowded adult accommodation centre.

Since 2013 I've not been in work. That's three years without work. It's a lot, a lot of time...If I find work I'll stay, if not I will leave. You need work. And if you can't work it's like this: always moving around from one centre to the next. You ask yourself, what will I become living like this? You have to do something to improve your future ... It's better to go to France or Germany, other countries.

For some young people in Europe, the formal transition to adulthood at the age of 18 corresponds with what Roberto Gonzales (2011) has called a 'transition into illegality'; when the option of becoming illegal is preferable to facing detention and/or deportation to a country where they fear poverty, violence or persecution. Others, like Mohammed, may choose to forfeit the (more limited) rights and resources they can expect from adult status and abscond to seek better opportunities to 'improve [their] future' elsewhere (Allsopp forthcoming). While for the state, consideration of the child's 'best interests' stops at the age of 18, most young people make decisions taking into account what they perceive to be their own (and others') 'best interests' in the long run. For most young migrants and asylum seekers, their perceived best interests are linked to the possibility of a viable future. In refugee policy, this equates to the requirement for states to find a 'durable solution'.

‘Durable solutions’

European policy tools governing the treatment of unaccompanied asylum seeking children twin the ‘best interests’ of the child with the obligation to find a longer term ‘durable solution’; either in the host country, in the country of origin or in a third country. The third country option primarily concerns cases of family reunion, this facility having been strengthened under the Dublin III regulation (Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the Member States by a third country national or stateless person).

‘Durable solutions’ have been a central pillar of the international refugee protection framework since its inception. As outlined in the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol, they are a crucial part of the mandate of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR Statute 1950). Durable solutions are applied specifically to unaccompanied minors and separated children in the UNHCR’s 1997 Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in Dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum and in a 2005 Comment from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child which stresses the primary importance of finding a ‘durable solution’ for each migrant child, and *particularly* as they transition to ‘adulthood’.

In light of international norms, the 2010-2014 European Commission Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors and Council of the European Union Conclusions both stress that return should be considered as one of a number of possible solutions for unaccompanied migrant young people. This is in recognition of the fact that ‘the issue is [...] complex and multidimensional and there are clear boundaries to the Member States’ freedom of action when dealing with unaccompanied minors’ (European Commission 2010: 2).

For those children not granted asylum, however, the European policy framework appears to prioritise immigration control in its bias towards return as the optimal ‘durable

solution’ for those who have turned 18.^v The Stockholm Programme, for example, requires the European Commission to ‘examine practical measures to facilitate the return of the high number of unaccompanied minors that do not require international protection’. The emphasis on return is played out through bilateral return agreements between European host states and ‘countries of origin’, in addition to attempted cross-state initiatives, such as ERPUM (the European Return Platform for Unaccompanied Minors), a now stalled agreement between the UK, Norway, Denmark and Sweden which received significant financial investment (Lemberg-Pedersen and Chatty 2015; European Union 2010). The European Return Fund, which held unaccompanied minors as one of its primary targets, allocated 676 million euros for the period 2008-2013 (Official Journal of the European Union 2007). The ultimate failure of ERPUM does not detract from the likelihood of similar return procedures being put in place, particularly in the light of growing concerns surrounding immigration from outside of the EU (Lemberg-Pederson and Chatty 2015; Rasmussen 2016).

In the case of unaccompanied young migrants receiving negative asylum decisions, Life Project plans become part of a tool kit alongside inputs such as pre-departure counselling (European Union Council Conclusions, Article 28, 2010), recommended to prepare young people for their ‘voluntary return’ to countries of origin, the ‘voluntary’ nature of many such returns having been brought into question (Cherti and Szilard 2013).

There are two main challenges to the assumption that returning young migrants in this context is a ‘durable solution’. The first relates to what Matthew Gibney (2008: 149) has termed the ‘deportation gap’: ‘the gap between the number of people eligible for removal by the state at any time and the number of people a state actually removes (deports)’. The second relates to the long-term wellbeing outcomes and trajectories of returnees.

The deportation gap

Small studies based on particular European states suggests the un-workability of return as a durable policy solution. As noted above, rather than comply with processes of return, it is documented that many young people tend to abscond once all their rights to appeal for extension of leave to remain are exhausted (Wright 2014; Gladwell and Elwyn 2012); and that incentives such as cash payments, vocational training or tools and equipment to take with them do not make the prospect of return more acceptable (Kromhout 2011). Reflecting on the Dutch experience of attempting to introduce return as a de facto durable solution, Mariska Kromhout concludes,

The significant number of separated young people departing for unknown destinations instead of returning to their country of origin is a cause for great concern among Dutch politicians, welfare organizations, and NGOs [...] It is feared that they run the risk of ending up on the streets and being exploited by traffickers (2011: 27).

While it is currently impossible to determine in any systematic way how many unaccompanied migrant young people have been returned from states across Europe to countries of origin, the most recent data available suggest that in the case of the UK, since 2007 some 2,748 former unaccompanied minors were forcibly returned to countries of origin, the vast majority (in excess of 2,000) of these were returned to Afghanistan (Gladwell et al. 2016). Other small scale enquiries provide an impressionistic picture of the dynamics of attempting to impose such returns. A freedom of information request from the Refugee Support Network to the UK government in 2012 revealed that of the 2,000 former unaccompanied minors who leave care in the UK each year (Pinter 2012), just 100 were forcibly removed from the UK in 2011, while between April 2011 and April 2012, 107 former unaccompanied minors opted for voluntary return (Gladwell and Elwyn 2012: 10). Evidence gathered by the documentary film maker Margreth Olin in Norway revealed that of

the 20 former unaccompanied migrant minors she followed, only one was forcibly returned at 18 (and then later migrated back to Europe); the other 19, despite having participated in return orientation programmes, either ‘disappeared’ as far as the Norwegian authorities were concerned or moved to other countries in Europe (Olin, personal correspondence, 2013). Many Becoming Adult research participants in Italy with irregular status felt relatively protected from the prospect of forced return, in part because of resource constraints limiting Italy’s capacity for detention and deportation. One former unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan who had fled to Italy after becoming appeals rights exhausted in the UK commented that: ‘it’s not like the UK here, with CCTV and stuff. Here when the police get you, they let you go again.’

Despite the fact that many young people evade forcible return, it is difficult to see how the ensuing persistent precariousness of their situations constitutes any ‘durable’ solution for them, or works in the ‘best interests’ of such individuals or of society as a whole.

Long-term outcomes: life after return

For those who are returned, there is scant knowledge about their reintegration experiences, the factors facilitating/inhibiting (re)integration, the extent of re-migration, or their longer-term wellbeing outcomes (Cherti and Szilard 2013; Carrera and Allsopp 2017). We do not know whether, once returned, they are able to continue their education or secure sustainable livelihoods (Auerbach 2010; Gladwell and Elwyn 2012; Schuster and Majidi 2013; Clayton 2011). However, recent evidence for those returned to Afghanistan suggests outcomes characterised by high levels of precariousness, danger and insecurity (Gladwell et al. 2016).

Other evidence suggests that ‘return to country of origin’ has led to some young people being sent to countries which they left as part of their migration journey as young children, many years before they arrived in the ‘host’ country and, in some extreme cases, to

countries where they have never previously lived, leading to impossibilities for re-integration (Schuster and Majidi 2013). Growing evidence suggests that re-migration is becoming part of young people's self-designed 'durable solution' (Schuster and Majidi 2013; Gladwell and Elwyn 2012; Gladwell et al 2016). This finding supports Katy Long's argument that mobility should be understood in itself as an alternative to the more sedentary solutions of integration, resettlement and repatriation (Long 2014). Whilst it is important to note that evidence of re-migration may not necessarily equate to a failure of re-integration (and may, for example, point to possibilities to earn more money), it does suggest that return may not be 'durable' in the sense anticipated by the European sending state. Our own research suggests that after being forcibly returned, young people may go to great lengths to find a place of safety away from Afghanistan, even if this means coping with the inherent risks of migrating beyond the borders of Europe.

Jamal, now aged 23, spent his formative years living as an unaccompanied minor in a city in the Midlands of England. He spoke of his attempt to find safety, knowing that he could no longer return to the UK or Europe after having been forcibly returned to Afghanistan. In his attempt to get to Australia, he ended up in a UNHCR holding camp in Indonesia from where he was later moved to one of a number of immigration detention centres out-sourced and run by the Indonesian government as part of Australia's regional 'solution' to immigration control:

I do not know which county will pick me. I don't mind to go any country as long as I feel safe in whatever country pick me, I just want to come out of Indonesia and in this situation...My goal was to go to Australia but after July 2014 whatever ships went to Australia, they returned them back to Indonesia so therefore everyone got stuck in Indonesia. There is no way to go to Australia.

My luck! I thought I will go through to Australia quick time, in one year time or so. It is our luck, everything has changed now.

Ghendi was similarly deported to Afghanistan from England at the age of 19. When we spoke to him he was 22 and had recently arrived back in the English city where he had lived between the ages of 16 and 19 and which he described as 'home'. He explained how he felt upon arriving in Kabul:

It was a place from my point of view where I couldn't live. I mean everything was different, everything. It's really hard for me to stay in Afghanistan and to make a life...so yeah I couldn't make it and then we made a move.

Having spent time working in Dubai he decided to head back to England to recover his old life. But 'home', he explains with the remnants of a regional English accent, by this time had changed once more:

I feel like that I came back to a place where I wanted but now the feeling and everything...is completely different. It's like I've come to a place that's become the same as Afghanistan to me because I was away for three years and at the time I had my own work, my own flat, I had income support, I was going to college, I had lots of friends and now I don't have nothing. I'm staying with my friends, I'm moving around, I'm homeless, I don't have no job, I don't have no support, it's completely, everything is different now...

The bias towards 'return home' as a future option for unaccompanied migrant young people, and the lack of follow-up or accountability following their return suggest that, like 'best interests', 'durable solutions' are primarily contrived to serve the state rather than the individual. Once returned, whether voluntarily or through force, the Life Project which the young person has embarked upon in the host country ceases to have any relevance and the state which has been responsible for initiating it becomes unaccountable for its outcomes.

Several European member states continue to deport individuals to Kabul, despite clear warnings from Afghan officials that they are not able to uphold the rights of returnees (Lemberg-Pedersen and Chatty 2015; Schuster and Majidi 2013; Gladwell et al, 2016).

This rigid focus on returning young migrants to ‘countries of origin’ once they become ‘adult’ is deeply incompatible with their own migratory experiences and life plans. The growing number of ‘invisible’ young people, as a result, has unintended consequences for states as well as individuals, as evidenced by young people’s propensity for re-migration.

Belonging

That the long-term ‘best interests’ of migrant young people are best served through their return to their countries of origin is predicated on two further normative assumptions regarding membership and belonging which do not necessarily reflect young people’s lived experiences: firstly, that young people ‘belong’ in their countries of origin; and secondly, that belonging is a static characteristic not affected by the experience of migration. Unlike the focus on ‘best interests’ and ‘durable solutions’, ‘belonging’ is not explicitly referenced in European policy frameworks; nonetheless the assumption that young people ‘belong’ back in their ‘country of origin’ is implicit in European policy discourse and practice devised for this group (Chase and Allsopp 2013).

Multiple belongings

The European policy framework appears to assume that migration is a linear, episodic, reversible process which can be tackled from the point of arrival in the host state. This normalised twinning of nationality and belonging – what Lisa Malkki (1995) has called the ‘national order’ of things – has contributed more broadly to the normalizing of returns policies across Europe (De Genova and Peutz 2010). It is also linked to the ‘Westernised’ (Engebrigtsen 2003) premise that family reunification is generally in the ‘best interests’ of

the child. This perspective fails to consider that the young person's migration may be part of a 'family life project' (see above); or, by contrast, that they may be fleeing domestic violence or family-related persecution (Allsopp 2017), as was the case for several young men from West Africa and Albania in our sample.

Additionally, the family itself may be part of a diaspora that does not map neatly into traditional geographical mappings of the 'nation'. The assumption that young people ultimately belong in their countries of origin generates a 'betwixt and between' subjecthood; an expectation that there should be a degree of integration into the host state, but 'not too much'. This is operationalised through a provision in the Life Project planning framework for 'multiple planning' (Wade 2011). 'Multiple planning' requires young people still being processed by immigration procedures to plan for different scenarios in their futures as well as cultivate multiple senses of belonging, affinities and possible selves as a key part of preparing for their future. In the Life Project Handbook, multiple planning is framed as an advantage which will help young people to become 'confident and independent world citizens' (5) and 'future citizens of the world' (Drammeh 2010: 65). This terminology spatially and temporally projects a young person's citizenship status away from the present and from the European host country where he/she currently resides and is tantamount to the host state's assigning of responsibility for their future outcomes elsewhere in the world; what Nathalie Peutz (2010: 390) has termed, in relation to deportees, a kind of 'forced transnationality'.

Policies which require young people to 'multiple-plan' in relation to their lived experiences of membership may fuel feelings of non-existence, rather than global citizenship. Whilst some young people may feel a strong affinity to their home country and seek one day to return, others may experience multiple, intersectional belongings (Yuval-Davis 2011) and feel that they belong in the host country, or indeed have no sense of belonging at all. Jamal, cited earlier, reflected on the sense of home and attachment he felt in the UK,

I love London and I love England, I really love to come back again but I have finger print in UK and the government will find my finger print and will send me back to Afghanistan. I especially missed X (city in the UK) a lot, I grew up there and I have so many friends. X is like my home town...I really miss the place. I really wish to come back but I know there is no point to come back because I will be sent back to Afghanistan. That is why I made decision to try different country.

Despite the principle that the ‘best interests’ of unaccompanied minors should be negotiated, in practice young people’s exercise of control and choice over their future pathways – and future selves – may be extremely limited. This has significant implications for the ‘best interests’ of migrant young people, since an important link has been drawn between young people’s wellbeing and their attachment to future selves which are dependent on membership of certain communities (Dixon and Wade 2007; Chase et al. 2008; Chase 2013). As they become ‘adult’, many young migrants wish to remain in their host state where their private life, including educational aspirations and meaningful relationships, are rooted (Refugee Support Network 2012; Allsopp and Chase 2014).

Social membership

Forcibly returning young people to their country of origin, projected as their legal and rightful place of belonging, also negates what political philosopher Joseph Carens (2009) has termed ‘social membership’ – the de facto belonging which people develop through ‘time’ spent and ‘ties’ developed in the host country (and something that he contends to be especially acute during one’s formative years). The option of remaining in the host country past the age of 18 in order to pursue education or a vocational career (alongside ‘a determination to integrate in the host country’) is discussed in Article 26 of the Council of Europe Life Project Recommendations. Thomas Hammerberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights 2006-2012, explains the need for such a provision thus:

[I]n the absence of a mechanism that could allow young adults to remain in the country, they are sometimes forced to interrupt their studies or begin an underground life. This interruption of the residence permit has obvious consequences as a child may have spent a long time in the country and made efforts to integrate into the host society. All the efforts made by the child and social workers – learning the language, finding appropriate accommodation, assimilating in the host culture and developing a social network – risk being undermined. This should change. Separated children who have successfully integrated should be granted an extension of their residence permit when they come of age (2010: 178).

However, Hammerberg's concession yet again reveals a one-dimensional and linear conception of belonging. Such proposed extensions are anticipated to be time-limited, dependent on the young person completing a certain 'stage' in their life project with the expectation of a subsequent 'return'. In practice, examples of such discretionary extensions of leave are few and far between (EU Fundamental Rights Agency 2011; Kanics et al. 2010), but where they do exist, such as in Italy (see Allsopp forthcoming), they can prove beneficial to certain individuals.

Shami, aged 20 at the time of writing, arrived unaccompanied in Italy at the age of 16. At 18, he was able to extend his permit in order to pursue a tailoring apprenticeship (he worked as a tailor in Bangladesh as a boy). The company has since employed him, meaning that he can now stay in Italy on a worker's visa. 'I've been through so much ... but now I try to look forward', he remarked. 'It's hard for other guys ... there's a lot of homelessness, but I already had this skill so it's easier for me'.

Rather than being framed as a right to membership in Carens's sense, these ad hoc extensions of leave are presented, in European discourse, as illustrations of humanitarian

goodwill or short-term economic sense on the part of the state: they still assume the possibility of future return. As such, they accord young people no prospective rights claims against the host state by virtue of their having spent their formative years there, and by virtue of having embarked on a life project for which the long-term, as well as short-term goal, may be unequivocally linked to the host state. Hence, the episodic conception of the migration journey appears echoed in the episodic understanding of the Life Project, or rather, of life itself. The default twinning of belonging and national membership prompts Member States to prescribe return as the default policy option for minors refused asylum when they turn 18; meanwhile, young migrants' complex experiences of belonging shape their own subjective pathways, prompting them to alternate between conforming with and resisting 'the system'. That the sentiment of 'belonging' should be an intrinsic element of the negotiated future for any young person is largely ignored in the institutional discourse. Yet any 'solution' which fails to take account of young people's lived experiences of belonging is unlikely to achieve the goal of being 'durable'.

Conclusion

This article has argued that prevailing European policy instruments which seek to direct the futures of independent young migrants as they 'become adult' at the age of 18 rest on highly normative and flawed constructions of 'best interests', 'durable solutions' and 'belonging'. The 'best interests of the child' framework ceases to have relevance at the age of 18 at which point it is usurped by immigration control with its bias towards enforced return as a supposedly 'durable solution'. Yet, the gap between young people's lived experiences and policy intentions at this important juncture of 'adulthood' means that in practice many former unaccompanied minors struggle to pursue livelihoods post-return, 'disappear' into their host societies or pursue strategies of secondary migration.

Contemporary policies underestimate young people's agency and willingness to embrace risk as part of a migration strategy to fulfill their self-defined future plans; plans which transcend the age of 18 and the 'best interests' framework. Such assumptions, it has been suggested, lead to ineffectual policy outcomes which are not in the 'best interests' of, nor offer a 'durable' solution for, individual migrants, host states or society as a whole. Our on-going research continues to engage critically with these debates and to seek alternative policy frameworks and approaches that promote greater synergy and bridging between policy intentions regarding unaccompanied migrant young people and their lived experiences, aspirations and future goals.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank Dr Nando Sigona for his support with this paper.

ⁱ Some important policy differences should be stated. Italy, for example, has a separate legal route for unaccompanied minors not seeking asylum, whilst in the UK all unaccompanied migrant minors go through the asylum system.

ⁱⁱ Further information about the project and methodology is available at: www.becomingadult.net.

ⁱⁱⁱ In some areas, such as access to higher education, powers in the UK are devolved. This leads, for example, to different rules governing higher education provisions for former unaccompanied minors in Scotland and England.

^{iv} In practice, they may not experience as stark a cut off as feared at the age of 18 due to ongoing appeals processes, during which they can still access certain rights.

^v Again, differences in national practice should be stressed here. Both France and Italy, for example, give unaccompanied young people turning 18, who have not received asylum, the possibility to extend their permits as part of an 'integration pathway' into education or into the labour market (see e.g. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2011).

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