Transitions, capabilities and wellbeing: How Afghan unaccompanied young people experience becoming 'adult' in the UK and beyond

Elaine Chase

Abstract

While much has been written about the rights and best interests of unaccompanied children arriving in the UK and Europe, there has been very little focus on what happens when 'children' make the transition to institutional 'adulthood' at 18. This critical time for young people can variously mark being granted legal status, facing indefinite periods of waiting and insecurity, becoming 'illegal', or being detained and subsequently deported, commonly followed by re-migration. Drawing on in-depth and longitudinal ethnographic work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young men from Afghanistan, the paper adopts a capabilities approach to explore what young people are able to 'do' and 'be' according to what they most value, and the intrinsic link between fulfilling these capabilities and a sense of wellbeing. It demonstrates a constant process of compromise and trade-off between what young people need to forego in the present in order to secure the viable futures they strive for.

Introduction

Throughout 2015 the variably termed 'refugee' or 'migrant' crisis unfurled, as did the controversial response to it by the European Union (Baldwin-Edwards et al 2018). As unprecedented numbers of people came to Europe in search of safety, the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people arriving rose from an average of 12,000 a year to almost 90,000 (Eurostat 2016). In the UK, just over 3,000 applications for asylum were made from unaccompanied children in 2015. The majority were aged 16-17 (57%) and 91% of them were boys and young men (Eurostat 2016). Children and young people from Afghanistan made up more than half of unaccompanied minors arriving in Europe and were the second largest group arriving in the UK in 2015 (after young Eritreans) and by 2016 had become the largest group of unaccompanied arrivals (Refugee Council 2017b).

In the UK most, 'unaccompanied minors' are not given refugee status but one of a number of time-limited periods of discretionary leave until they become 'adult'. The likelihood of being granted refugee status varies according to country of origin. In 2016 of a total of 1,656 decisions on applications for asylum in the UK from children under 17, 502 were accorded refugee status (28%) , 828 were given time-limited Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child (UASC) Leave; 260 were refused any protection and 66 were provided with other humanitarian or discretionary leave to remain (Refugee Council 2017a; 2017b). Young people from Afghanistan are more likely to be age disputed on arrival than young people from other countries of origin and, in 2016, only 20% were granted refugee status (2017b). Media and policy discourses in the UK continue to be centred on the 'unaccompanied' and by implication 'vulnerable' child in need of protection, largely ignoring the imminent transition

to 'adulthood' for many young people. As argued elsewhere (Chase 2016), it is paradoxically at this point that migrant young people may become increasingly exposed to risks and adversity through processes of politically-induced precariousness, that is when states may impose certain forms of real or symbolic violence or fail to provide adequate protections (Butler, 2009).

The ESRC-funded Becoming Adult project[i] sought to shed light on the wellbeing outcomes and futures of young people seeking asylum in the UK as they made this transition to 'adulthood' at 18 years. At this juncture, if young people have no secure legal status, their access to a range of rights and protections may be withdrawn, while at the same time they are confronted with new risks and uncertainties. Hence becoming 'adult' can involve losing access to education, social care, financial security, shelter and accommodation and legal support. Conversely, being granted indefinite leave to remain can be transformative, creating both a secure basis for wellbeing and the possibilities to fulfil the sorts of futures that young people aspire to for themselves and other family members.

This paper adopts a capabilities approach (Sen 1993) to understand what Afghan young people turning 18 are able to 'do' and 'be' according to what they most value and the intrinsic link between fulfilling such capabilities and a sense of wellbeing. At the time of writing, Afghanistan is defined as a 'safe' country by the UK government. Despite increasing evidence of a deteriorating security situation (Human Rights Watch 2018) and despite mounting pressure on the UK government to recognise the risks of return, the government continues to forcibly remove people to Kabul (Guardian 2018).

Conceptualising wellbeing through the capabilities approach

The *Becoming Adult* research project considered various wellbeing outcomes for young people in transition including their physical and mental health, education, housing, employment, legal status and family and community life. However, the primary intention of the research was to explore the concept inductively and determine what it is that young people had reason to value in relation to their own wellbeing in the context of their various migratory experiences (cf Wright 2012). The project sought to further develop previous work by the author which established the relationship between a sense of subjective wellbeing for migrant young people and their ability to imagine and construct viable futures for themselves (Chase 2013).

Taking a focus on what migrant young people value as they make the transition to 'adulthood' aligns this work with a conceptualisation of wellbeing contained within the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen and others. The approach has sought to conceptualise human development beyond a theory of human capital, through which people are viewed primarily as means of production. Drawing on ideas ranging from Aristotle's *Eudaimonia,* or human flourishing, to Marx's notions of human freedom and emancipation (Clark 2006), Sen argued that we should make the quality of people's lives the ultimate goal and see production and prosperity as a means to allow people to live the lives they value (Sen 1993).

The approach has been used as a normative framework in many different ways to conceptualise and/or empirically assess and evaluate individual wellbeing, development and wellbeing policies and interventions (Robeyns 2006; Sen 2005). It has also been at the centre of debates regarding its contribution to a theory and operationalisation of human rights (Nussbaum 2002; Sen 2005; Dean 2009; Shachar 2014), variably critiqued as adding value to

human rights frameworks and their application (Nussbaum 2002; Burchardt and Vizard 2011) or undermining and potentially limiting them (Dean 2009).

The capability approach provides an appropriate analytical tool (Robeyns 2006) for unpicking the factors identified in the study promoting or hindering the wellbeing of migrant young people. This paper speaks primarily to three aspects of the capability approach. The first aspect, is the fundamental distinction between capabilities and functionings. While capabilities capture the freedoms and opportunities that people have, or are denied, to be and do particular things of their choice, functionings compute to outcomes, indicating what people actually manage to do or be *in practice*. The problems with operationalizing the distinction between capabilities and functionings have been widely discussed (Walby 2012; Nussbaum 2002; Zimmermann 2006) and, given the complexities of defining or measuring opportunities or freedoms, the approach has been predominantly used to assess and evaluate development initiatives or their impact using quantitative methodologies and focusing on outcomes (Robeyns 2006). Nussbaum (2002) argues, however, that it is capability and not functioning which should be the appropriate political goal. In keeping with this view, the current work engages with the freedoms that migrant young people perceive they have to live the lives they most value.

 The second aspect of the approach discussed here is the notion of capability expansion (Sen 2003, Landau 2006; Landau and Duponchel 2011); and how this links to ideas of negative and positive freedoms. Nussbaum (2002) has criticized human rights frameworks for overly emphasising negative freedoms (protections from harm) rather than enhancing positive freedoms to do and be (Burchardt and Vizard 2011; Vizard 2007). Certain applications of the capability approach have led to criticism of it being hijacked to perpetuate neoliberal ideas of

development and wellbeing which prioritise choice over equality and which only focus on negative freedoms, such as the reduction of external constraints and interferences, rather than real opportunities for self-development (Walby 2012; Zimmerman 2006; Dean 2009). Nussbaum (2000; 2002) focuses on the importance of everyone having a capability set which is 'truly human', making each person able to nurture basic capabilities into high level capabilities. In a similar vein, Landau (2006) in the context of forced migration, criticises UNHCR's definition of protection for being reductionist; and humanitarian and welfare regimes for being premised on 'commodity fetishism' (Landau and Duponchel 2011) – providing protection but not engaging with people's skills and ambitions to move beyond 'animal functionings'. The current study is concerned with how protection might be redefined to incorporate opportunities for expanding human agency, enabling young people to move from basic capabilities to higher order capabilities linked to personal fulfilment, realization of dignity, dreams and aspirations.

The third aspect of the capability approach relevant to the analysis presented in this paper is the ontological distinction between wellbeing and agency (Sen 1983). Wellbeing relates to one's own life and its quality; agency, the freedom to set and pursue one's own goals and interests. Understanding the process elements of such freedoms is crucial and requires an analysis of the factors which either restrain or promote their realisation (Burchardt and Vizard 2011). Any assessment of wellbeing which focuses only on outcomes, therefore, ignores the question of agency and the factors which shape people's capacity to take action (Balcioglu, 2018). Sen himself (2005) reflects on the limitations of the capability approach in addressing the process elements of freedom. Similarly, Zimmermann (2006) has criticized Sen's ideas of agency as failing to recognise how the environment is constantly being co-constructed and transformed through the course of action. A pragmatist approach would, it is

argued, more usefully capture how the possibilities for action are shaped through interactions over time. Moreover, failing to engage with the interactional dimensions of agency means that power relations and struggles which determine what constitute 'genuine choices' for action are largely ignored (Dean 2009; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007).

The application of the capabilities approach to the field of migration has emerged in recent years (see for example Landau 2006; Risse 2009; Landau and Duponchel 2011; Preibisch et al 2016; Balciouglu 2018). It is taken up here in light of work which has highlighted the limitations of children's rights and 'best-interests' frameworks which have proved inadequate in responding to the realities of the lives of unaccompanied migrant young people transitioning to adulthood (Allsopp and Chase 2019; Otto in this issue), and often at loggerheads with state objectives of controlling borders or reducing public spending (Humphris and Sigona 2019). The current analysis considers the potential of the capability approach to better understand young people's own conceptualisations of wellbeing and the extent to which they have freedom to pursue their aspirations, bearing in mind the unique set of circumstances, structures and systems within which they are operating (Sen 2005; Dean 2009; Robeyns's 2017).

Methodology

The Becoming Adult project was a three year ESRC-funded study (conducted between October 2014 and December 2017). The project aimed to better understand a) how unaccompanied migrant young people becoming 'adult' understand and seek to realise their futures and maintain a sense of wellbeing; and b) the extent to which there is a fit

between young people's conceptualisations of their futures and the immigration and social care policies governing their lives.

The qualitative ethnographic fieldwork gathered longitudinal and retrospective accounts of migrant young people's migratory experiences. All participants had migrated alone to the UK as children or young people who were defined by welfare and immigration policy/control structures as 'unaccompanied asylum seeking minors' (UASC), and then made the transition to (institutional) 'adulthood' at 18. The research followed the varying wellbeing outcomes of more than 60 young people between the ages of 17-25 from Afghanistan, Albania and Eritrea.

Young people taking part in the study were purposively sampled through a network of non-governmental organisations, through the social networks of the research team (see below) and through snowball sampling. A total of 31 young people from Afghanistan participated, with the majority (n=24) interviewed several times over a period of up to 18 months or more.

Core members of the research team included eight young adults who had previously migrated on their own to England as unaccompanied children, including four young people from Afghanistan. Their extensive social ties, including their transnational and virtual networks, were crucial in facilitating access to research participants with varied legal statuses, diverse migratory experiences and living in a broad range of circumstances. Most of these participants would have been hesitant to engage in research through more orthodox access methods and research interactions were premised on trust, solidarity and friendship, points taken up in more detail later (Chase and Otto this issue).

While the Principal Investigator and other lead researcher met young people intermittently for the purposes of the research, the conversations and interactions between our Afghan research team members and the participants (co-located in the same cities) continued on a more regular basis, through phone calls and via Skype, Whatsapp, Viber or Facebook. This process helped sustain contact with young people (all of whom had previously been unaccompanied minors in the UK) in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Germany, Italy, France, Serbia and Afghanistan as well as in the UK. Regular meetings and residential sessions for the whole research team were opportunities for collective reflection on emerging themes and informed subsequent elements of the research including the inclusion of arts-based methods, such as photography, comedy, poetry, music, painting and drawing, considered by the team to be less intrusive and demanding research options for some young people (Chase and Otto this issue).

The majority of encounters with young people were recorded with prior consent of participants or alternatively detailed field notes were taken. Interviews were fully transcribed and then coded using Nvivo.

What young people value for their wellbeing

An overview of outcomes

As noted earlier, the institutional outcomes for Afghan young people varied greatly and included the following: protracted periods of waiting and uncertainty; becoming appeal rights exhausted (the point when they were refused and had no right to appeal on their original case for asylum); disengaging from all statutory services and living illegally; indefinite leave to remain (ILR) which granted them a degree of certainty about the future in the UK; and forced return to Afghanistan and subsequent re-migration. Engaging with the majority of young people over a period of time allowed some temporal analysis of their *capabilities* and *functionings* in relation to their wellbeing. While some young people's situations improved during the course of the research, usually as a result of a more secure legal status, the circumstances of others significantly deteriorated.

Of the 31 Afghan participants in the study, a total of 11 young people had been forcibly returned to Afghanistan at some time during the recent past. Of these, 10 had re-migrated and, at the time of the research, were variously living back in the UK, or in Indonesia, Germany, Italy, Bulgaria and Pakistan. Almost half (n=14) of participants from Afghanistan had spent at least some time living irregularly in the UK, often prior to being detained before return to Afghanistan. By the end of the research project, 12 young people had ILR in the UK, and two of these had gone on to secure full UK citizenship. While for some, gaining the right to remain had been relatively straightforward, for many it had been granted after periods of severe hardship, uncertainty and deprivation. The remaining 19 young people continued to live with uncertain legal status including temporary leave to remain, waiting for the outcome of an appeal or fresh claim for asylum, waiting for an extension of leave to remain, or appeal

rights exhausted which meant either living without documents in the UK or having moved to other countries following forced removal from the UK. Only one young person who had been removed to Afghanistan remained there by the end of the research.

The following sections of this paper shed light on what emerged as a result of using wellbeing as a conceptual lens or 'sensitising concept' (Blumer 1969) to capture what young people considered to be the constituents of wellbeing they most valued and their everyday strategies to strive for what they wanted to achieve. Within the edifices of immigration, social care and related institutions, young people were encountered opportunities and constraints which facilitated or hampered their aspirational goals. Pursuit of such goals, for many, involved a constant trade-off between risk-taking in the present so as to secure the possibility of enhancing opportunities in the future.

Safety, freedom and choice

Safety, freedom and choice to build and realise a 'better future' were capabilities to which all young people in the study routinely alluded. These ideas are commensurate with what Nussbaum (2002: 123-4) has referred to as the dignified human free to shape their own lives, rather than being pushed around by the world. Pursuit of these capabilities were central to young people's migratory decisions, the narratives surrounding their initial departures from countries of origin or residence and their subsequent journeys. But they also influenced their ideas about whether and how to engage with the range of systems and structures they came into contact with once they arrived in the UK, particularly as they made the transition to 'adulthood' at 18. Crucially, some young people experienced enjoying temporary safety,

freedom and choice, possibly for the first time in their lives, soon after they arrived. At this point, provided they were not subject to age assessments (see Feltz 2015), they experienced periods of foster care placements or supported accommodation, access to education and learning opportunities, health (including dental) care and financial security. Despite occasional tensions concerning choice about the types of institutional care arrangements made available to them, during this time most young people saw a clear synergy between their own conceptions of safety, freedom and choice and those offered by the services and agencies supporting them.

Such entitlements, however, are all contingent on having a recognised legal right to remain in the UK. If turning 18 coincided with a refusal from the Home Office, such privileges were often abruptly stopped and there emerged a growing chasm between young people's own understandings of the sorts of safety and freedoms they required for a 'better future' and what the institutions governing their lives considered to be in their best interests (Allsopp and Chase 2019). At this point, the contrast young people had previously drawn between the freedoms they had gained in the UK compared to lives back in Afghanistan became blurred. Yet they retained a strong sense of wanting to hold on to the gains that they had made and, in pursuit of safety, freedom and choice, some young people reflected taking significant yet calculated risks. Those with no right to further support from statutory services frequently sought their own versions of safety and freedom by, for example, disappearing from institutional structures and becoming invisible. Ghulam[ii], aged 22 who had arrived in the UK at the age of 14 explained his choice to 'disappear' at the age of 18 when he was refused the right to remain by Home Office and was being encouraged to agree to voluntary return to Afghanistan,

> *Foster carers, social workers to be honest they didn't know where I was and my friends, they did not know, the friends I used to have. I disappeared. Friends saw me – like the people I used to be in the shared house with, they were very friendly. And they saw me in the street … and they would keep calling to me but I wouldn't say anything, I would just carry on.*

Similarly, Kushan, aged 20 and having arrived at the age of 13, explained why he was in hiding and refused to be monitored by the Home Office.

> *I had to go to X (name of place) to sign but I refused it because I said if I get caught (detained) there, no one can help afterwards…and I know so many Afghan people and after 18 that's what has happened to them, they have been deported. My friend who was studying with me in the same school, same class, that's what happened to him …and another one I know from the community, that's what happened to him.*

In the short term, Ghulam and Kushan's decisions brought with them significant risk to their wellbeing including destitution, poor mental health, sense of burden on others and, paradoxically, insecurity, lack of choice and limited freedom. Yet, to varying extents, in both cases their actions paid off and enabled them to avoid what Wolff and de Shalit (2007) refer to as 'corrosive disadvantage' in the long term, in this case the prospect of forced removal to Afghanistan. Through friendship ties and networks within the Afghan community, Ghulam was introduced to a Christian organisation in another city. They supported him in making a fresh claim for asylum following his conversion to Christianity. And although his situation had not changed much when we met him again eight months later, a further year on he had finally been granted indefinite leave to remain.

Kushan, on the other hand, had lived precariously but firmly supported by his 'community' for a period of more than three years at the time he first took part in the research. A year later, his situation had changed again and he had submitted a fresh claim to remain in the UK and was optimistic about its potential outcome. Asked about his rationale for this he commented,

> *The situation in Afghanistan is very bad – you see this through the media, through Facebook, the international news and photos. And the Immigration and Home Office know how bad things are in the country. I feel 80% sure that I will get my status but you never know and I don't fully trust the government to be honest. But they know that the situation in Afghanistan is difficult...it's getting worse… so this should help my fresh claim.*

Those young people granted secure legal status valued the safety, freedoms and choices that came with it. Over a period of 18 months we intermittently met and talked with Rokhan, aged 23 as the research drew to a close. He had arrived in the UK when he was 16 and was enjoying a highly successful academic career. He recounted the difference that being in the UK had made to his life,

> *Sometimes you know you just sit and think about it and you remember loads of stuff about your country, your home, what did you lose, your family, your parents, your friends, the place that you lived, your childhood, it's just all gone isn't it?. But I'm looking forward to see what happens in the future, see if there is any peace for Afghanistan. But I feel good to be honest, you know I'm happy to be part of this*

country, you know, they did a lot for me, so I'm looking forward to paying back, do something good for them. I feel so proud, like you are part of something now, belong to somewhere like, you can just have your own aims and like OK, and yeah, it's really great.

Those young people who, through their forced removal, were expected to find safety, freedom and choice back in Afghanistan, voted unequivocally with their feet, choosing instead to embark on a new phase of migration, even though such endeavours could have other unintended consequences.

Jamal was forcibly removed to Afghanistan after arriving in the UK as an unaccompanied minor at the age of 14. He spent his formative years in a city in England he considered 'home' and where his networks of friends remained. Following his return, he spent about 18 months in Afghanistan where he found life increasingly untenable and unsafe. Like many others in the same situation (see also Schuster and Majidi 2013; 2015, Refugee Support Network 2016), he left Afghanistan again in search of a 'better future'. Knowing that he could not return to the UK, Jamal attempted to find a new life in Australia only to be intercepted by Australia's off shore immigration control in Indonesia. A similar fate befell Abdul, who had arrived in the UK at the age of 16, was returned to Afghanistan and also decided to re-migrate. Both Abdul and Jamal ended up in the same immigration detention centre waiting to be considered under the UNHCR asylum quota system. Over the 18 months we were in contact with them very little changed for Jamal. By the end of the research he was still waiting to be granted refugee status (Chase and Sigona 2016). Having arrived before Jamal, Abdul was finally granted refugee status in Indonesia. However, the last time we spoke to him, he had been waiting for several months in a hostel, still with no work or secure accommodation, and still waiting to re-start his life. In the meantime, reflecting on his situation of still waiting to be considered for asylum, Jamal commented,

> *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.*

Other young people in the study were similarly sent back to Afghanistan, only to attempt return to the UK or, when they failed to complete the full journey 'home', remained in parts of Europe such as Italy, Germany, Bulgaria or Serbia. In each case, they talked about trying to get back to a place where they had begun to establish safe and secure futures, where they believed they could enjoy a level of freedom previously denied them and where they had options and choices about the type of lives they wanted to live. This strong sense of connection to the UK, despite it being a place of first refuge and then rejection, was striking. Young people spoke fondly of the landscapes and demographic make-up of the cities they had lived in, the process of fitting in and learning English, and the friendships and connections they had established, many of which survived their onward migration through facebook, Whatsapp and other virtual networks.

The actions of Kushan, Ghulam, Jamal and Abdul, among others, all run counter to the policies governing what should happen to young people at 18 if they have no refugee status and come from countries deemed as 'safe' by government authorities. Such policies assume highly normative ideas that young people 'belong' in their country of origin, that return offers them a viable future and that young people will comply with such policies which advocate their return (Allsopp and Chase 2019). In practice safety, freedom and choice are so fundamental to how young people perceive their wellbeing that they are willing to take significant risks in their pursuit.

Sense of belonging and identity

Notions of identity and belonging, while fundamental to young people's conceptualisations of their subjective wellbeing, are absent in legal and political frameworks and discourses governing their lives (Allsopp and Chase 2019). The two were found to be closely intertwined, with identity intrinsically linked with a sense of being part of the social, religious, economic and political spheres of the communities in which they lived. The young men in the study referred to multiple different social, emotional, ethical and political dimensions of belonging which transcended time and space (Yuval-Davis 2006).

Developing a sense of belonging and identity in the UK were crucially important to young people who described various forms of acculturation (Berry 1997), most commonly along the lines of integration and assimilation. They frequently spoke of how exposure to new ways of thinking, doing and being led to what was perceived as a reconstruction of 'self', that they felt different to how they were before, and how this could fundamentally impact on ideas of 'belonging' (ideas explored in more detail in Chase and Allsopp forthcoming). Izat, who had arrived at the age of 15 and by the close of the research was 23 and still awaiting the outcome of a fresh appeal, summed this up as follows,

> *What they don't know is that once you have adapted here you have a completely*
>
> *different lifestyle, different mind-set – everything changes. You are a different*
>
> *person, different thinking – the thinking is more important but they don't take that*
>
> *into consideration.*

And as important was the spatial connection with particular places. Azlan had come to the UK at the age of 16 and when we first spoke to him, almost 10 years later, he was 25 years old. During that time, he had been aged assessed, supported for one year by social services,

lived irregularly before being deported to Afghanistan and had returned to the UK (spending some time in Italy). Describing his sense of attachment to the UK city where he was living without documents, he commented,

> *Me, I feel like I grew up here anyways, I been here since I was 16 something like this. I grew up here so all my young time has been here. When I was in Italy I was always asking how is X (name of city). You don't want to miss anything. You just always can't wait to come back. X is the best city you know. You know everywhere, everything. We know the roads. Every street you know. It's very hard to be honest to leave. 10 years in one city, you don't want to leave just like this.*

The transformative impact of migration revealed certain disconnects between cultural norms with which young people had grown up and those they had come to understand and appreciate in the UK. Language, food, social and religious practices and notions of 'community' were all important in establishing and performing identity. Young people spoke of losing aptitude in their mother tongues while developing high proficiency in English, often with regional vernacular accents. For many, having grown up in largely homogenous cultural contexts, they reflected on the value of living in cross-cultural and integrated spaces. But belonging was not necessarily spatially bounded and in keeping with other work (Yuval Davis 2006; Krzynowski and Wodak 2008; Jackson 2014), young people frequently reflected on multiple senses of belonging (to the UK; to their country of origin; with friends in Europe or elsewhere in the world; and through virtual and online spaces).

The possibility of being returned to Afghanistan elicited responses fraught with ontological insecurities concerning self and whether one could live and survive in places where they felt unsafe, alienated and no longer 'fitted in'. Frequent references were made to feeling, looking and acting differently to how they had before and how this would expose them as 'outsiders' should they be returned.

Bashir reflecting on his experience of return to Afghanistan after spending many years in the UK and, at the time of our meeting, living elsewhere in Europe after leaving Afghanistan for a second time commented,

> *But especially for the small, younger people… when they grow up here (in the UK), when they come under 18 and they grow up over 18, like 19, 20 and they get deported back…. It's too difficult for them to stay there. Because their accent, how the way you talk, how the way you walk are all different. There, people know all, they recognise the difference when they look at you, they know.*

Ultimately the temporal and dynamic aspects of identity and sense of belonging which young people described –ideas of 'becoming' or coming to belong (see Chase and Allsopp, forthcoming) –are not recognised in legal and political discourses surrounding migration which are bounded by what Malkki (1995) determines the 'national order of things' (an automatic twinning between country of origin and where people *should* be).

A sense of belonging was as fundamental to young people's conceptualisation of wellbeing as security and safety. Striving to gain legitimate membership of where one felt at 'home' was a key motivator in decisions made and actions taken as they transitioned into adulthood.

Constructing viable futures

Despite being constantly defined in institutional terms by their migratory status, like most other young people (Lems et al, this issue) those in the study aspired simply to getting on with their lives and becoming who they wanted to be. Institutional definitions of 'vulnerability' and the governed responses to it have significant implications for young people transitioning to 'adulthood'. At the complex juncture of shifting from the 'unaccompanied child' to that of 'adult' within immigration and social care systems, 'vulnerability' could take on very different economic, social and political meanings and associations. While young people may no longer meet the bureaucratic criteria of the 'vulnerable child' (in need of care and protection), paradoxically they could become more vulnerable as they encountered multiple changes and uncertainties as young 'adults' with undetermined immigration status.

Within this frame of politically-induced 'precarity' (Butler 2009) defined earlier, young people want to become 'adult', build their own independence and be and do what they most value. Hence they typically aspire to finding work and economic independence; establishing their own homes; building intimate relationships with others; furthering their learning and education as pathways to success; and achieving other more everyday pursuits such as learning to drive or opening a bank account. In practice, without secure legal status, the

systems and structures governing their lives often had the impact of stifling such personal growth and independence and forcing them to retain the characteristics of 'childhood'–such as institutional dependency; and lack of autonomy and choice over their lives. Where they no longer had recourse to any public funds, young people sometimes faced exploitation through forced illegal work and constantly living in hiding from police and immigration authorities – while any possibility for building 'futures' were put on hold. Azlan went on to reflect on his own sense of frustration about the limitations on his future and what he would achieve and contribute if he had documents,

> *I would be able to help this country, help myself, help other people….I would make my family, make my life you know. Grow up with my life but right now I can't make nothing. So I can't have children because if they send me back I'd have too much pain for example…my life has stopped. .. Right now if I got document I have people friends who can put me in business. They wanna help me but they can't. They said to me, 'you are a good guy, you can speak English, you can make business for me, I need you'. But I don't have document so they don't need me.*

Yet the tenacity of those with precarious status was striking given the prolonged uncertainty they encountered, sometimes spanning 10 years. Holding on to ideas of a viable future is what sustained young people throughout these times. For those with ILR, futures could be built on a far more secure footing. Some, like Rokhan, achieved exceptionally well in education and were continuing academic pathways; others had built technical skills and secured work and livelihoods connected with these; while others were still forging possible pathways for themselves. Sultan came to the UK when he was 16 and through an NGO

scholarship had gone on to successfully complete his university degree, having previously never had the chance to go to school. When asked how he saw his future he commented,

> *Ah, I think the future is… the future is bright … I am still young you know - there are still a lot of things to do, to make my family proud… I don't know. I want to like be able to give something back to the community that helped me to come this far.*

Mental health and wellbeing

Young people when referring to their physical health frequently made reference to their bodily strength, having adequate nutrition and taking regular exercise. Much more, however, was revealed and noted about their mental and emotional wellbeing and how this shifted over time. As noted by previous studies (Chase et al 2008; Jakobsen et al 2017), a sense of emotional wellbeing was commonly, though not exclusively, linked to a secure legal status. Anxieties surrounding the uncertainty of legal situations, the indefinite periods of time waiting for decisions, and the often debilitating impacts of being refused by the Home Office were found to be detrimental to young people's sense of subjective wellbeing and were particularly acute as young people approached their 18th birthday. A range of other factors too, such as reduced access to practical support, lower level financial allowances, uncertainty about accommodation arrangements or the end of educational opportunities all shaped young people's emotional wellbeing. The longitudinal work revealed important shifts in young people's mental health and wellbeing over time, often, but not exclusively in direct relation to their immigration status. Shamal had arrived at the age of 14 and was living with the ongoing uncertainty about his future. When we first met Shamal, almost two years earlier, he had been strikingly optimistic about his future in the UK and unaware of the precariousness of his legal

situation. Later, he described the impact on his mental health at not being able to do the things he had hoped for,

> *I am sad sometimes because the things that I want to achieve is really hard because I don't have any support from anyone. I get angry at myself most of the times because life is not easy and some type of things makes me angry and sad. Anger, depression, migraine, sadness all of these happens when you are not happy. Everyone wants to be happy and have the best moment of their lives. We migrants come to UK from across the world for a good reason and a better life but when we get in to United Kingdom we face the same or maybe the worst times in our lives here because we think that in this country you get justice and support but is not (what happens) most of the times. That's why we get depression, sadness and all of these things. I got to a point that I had to see a psychiatrist. The age I should be happy and always cheerful but things are opposite ways*

Such normative associations with youth as a time of carefree happiness, alluded to by Shamal, are perhaps symbolic of the new repertoires of youth which young people become exposed to and which may influence migration decisions (Christiansen et al 2006) and partly account for the anxieties associated with having new opportunities for freedom and happiness taken away again.

Mental health difficulties frequently described by young people ranged from generalised anxiety and depression through to attempts at self-harm and suicide. Some people also referred to over use of alcohol, drugs and gambling, all of which could create additional social and economic difficulties. Yet, there were important practical, cultural and emotional challenges, such as fear and lack of trust, in accessing mainstream services to seek support

with mental health. Some young people spoke of how they struggled with the reasoning of being prescribed anti-depressants and the perceived negative effects that taking the tablets had on their lives. They questioned the controversial logic in the clinical use of anti-depressants and other drugs to manage their anxieties and depressive conditions which were essentially socially and politically constructed.

There were also clear structural constraints to young people accessing the health services they needed. In keeping with evidence of the increased everyday bordering, (the devolution of immigration control) within public services (Yuval-Davis et al 2017; Strasser and Tibet this issue) there emerged a clear blurring of boundaries between health services providing 'care' and at the same time 'surveillance'. Some people could only access health and dental services via 'safe' spaces brokered by non-governmental organisations. This involved often lengthy administrative procedures requiring form filling and waiting for a card to arrive before an appointment could be made. One young person spoke of having chronic tooth pain for weeks while he waited to see a dentist.

Rasheed arrived in the UK at 14, studied hard and did exceptionally well with his General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) exams two years later. His transition to adulthood and aspirations to study public services at college coincided with being forced to leave foster care and receiving a negative decision from the Home Office on his right to remain in the UK. From there he described a situation of escalating mental health problems and feelings of wanting to end his life. After an attempted suicide, he was admitted to a psychiatric hospital unit. It transpired that the hospital notified the Home Office about his immigration status and he subsequently received a letter asking him to pay for his medical

care and to leave the country immediately. The intervention of an NGO means that, at the time of writing, he remains in the UK although his legal status is still precarious and he is still acutely unwell.

Sustaining friendships and connections

Freedom to build and sustain relationships with others was central to young people's ideas about wellbeing but, once again, such bonds were contingent on wider political and legislative factors. When young people were forced to move on, they frequently referred to missing the connections that they had with friends and the memories these conjured. Such ties were first established in multiple spaces including the Mosques or other community spaces which brought people together; or at youth groups or safe spaces created by NGOs where young people could hang out and seek advice, support and guidance. These were also sometimes spaces where old friends found each other again after long absences. Such ties and connections were vital to being able to cope with practical and emotional problems but were also significant sources of enjoyment, laughter and fun.

Equally many young people experienced 'family' in the UK when they were placed in foster care. Relationships with foster carers, when they worked well, frequently transcended young people's departures from care at 18 and as noted elsewhere (Wade et al 2012) became vital sources of support as young people became 'adult' irrespective of their legal status.

Young people with no legal status frequently referred to being cared for or supported by 'the

community'. In most cases, this referred to the Afghan community where others understood their difficulties and offered them shelter and other practical, emotional and moral support. Whether or not these acts of kindness were purely pragmatic responses to need, purposeful acts of subversion in response to perceived injustices, or a combination of both is not entirely clear. For those who had made the transition to a position of legal security, giving 'back to community', understood more broadly as the local multicultural society in which they were living, was an important part of their narrative.

Establishing intimate relationships was also central to how young people saw themselves becoming 'adult' and building their futures. For some this became complicated when relationships were dogged by the insecurities of their legal status and what would happen next in their lives. And there were complications in relationships where one person had no secure legal status. For those with legal security, relationships with partners were seen as a normal part of their life course. They frequently involved cross-cultural unions involving complex navigation through differing cultural norms and values.

While young people strived to establish an anchor in the UK or, failing that, wherever else they could in Europe, they simultaneously derived a sense of subjective wellbeing from their transnational ties and personhood (Al-Ali et al 2001). Connections were simultaneously sustained with family and friends back in Afghanistan, those living in other parts of Europe and those experiencing ongoing migration. Such ties were both emotional and practical, often influencing ongoing migratory journeys or providing mechanisms to remit resources back to family. Facebook, Viber, Whatsapp, Phone App games and other virtual platforms sustained friendships, created spaces of learning and keeping up with news from 'home', enabled

political engagement and debate, and facilitated transnational philanthropy – through organising collective efforts to generate financial and other resources to send to compatriots.

Whether young people performed the transnational elements of their lives from the safety and security of a future in the UK; or whether they were forced to physically embody transnationalism, it emerged as a key theme in their lives. The ability to fulfil the responsibilities and expectations of others elsewhere in the world was a source of strength and comfort; being unable to do so was a source of stress and anxiety.

Discussion

The paper demonstrates the intrinsic link between young people's sense of subjective wellbeing and certain capabilities as freedoms in the context of complex migration and other institutional transitions. Capability reflects a person's freedom or genuine opportunity to be and or do certain things and to choose between different ways of living. Unaccompanied children and young people from Afghanistan arriving alone in the UK are but one thread in a complex mix of people's movements and how they intertwine with European and global migration governance systems (Baldwin-Edwards et al 2018). Their lived experiences and challenges, while on the surface presenting as personal 'troubles' are in fact major 'issues' (Wright Mills 1959) for contemporary societies across the world.

This paper has discussed some of the core capabilities associated with young people's sense of wellbeing. They start with the primal need for safety and security and, from that basis, desires to put down new roots, create a sense of belonging in the UK from which to build a future. Being able to find a balance in terms of emotional wellbeing and mental health

emerged as core to a sense of wellbeing as did building and sustaining a sense of connectedness with others – both in their immediate lives and beyond.

We have seen how, for young people with no secure legal status, their lives are typified by a constant striving for such freedoms against structures and systems which systematically thwart their efforts, akin to what Ansems de Vries and Guild (2018) have referred to in the context of migration as the 'politics of exhaustion', and what Wolff and de Shalit (2007, p121) refer to as' corrosive disadvantage' in encounters with welfare systems. Yet, paradoxically, such structures generate new ways of 'being' and 'doing' as young people attempt to fulfil aspirations when their original plans are stifled. This reclaiming control over chance and circumstances shifts the perception of young people away from being purely passive and 'vulnerable' victims of the vagaries of geopolitics and subsequent immigration and welfare governance systems. Instead, it recognises them as agentic beings striving for the capabilities and freedoms which they most value.

The examples throughout the paper demonstrate a constant process of compromise and trade-off by young people with respect to what they need to forego in the present in order to possibly have greater freedoms and opportunities in the future. They are, for example, willing to gamble the security of accommodation when it constitutes an 'undue cost or risk to other functionings' (Wolff and de Shalit, 2007. 81) such as the freedom to remain in the UK. Judging what is a genuine opportunity or freedom, compared to one masquerading as such, thus becomes integral to how young people navigate their transitions at 18, particularly when they have uncertain or precarious status. This assertion of agency at the cost of elements of wellbeing typifies how, particularly in the context of migration, the goals of agency and

wellbeing may come into direct conflict (Abujarour and Kasnova 2017; Landau and Duponchel, 2011).

The lens of the capability approach has a competitive advantage over other analytical frameworks in understanding wellbeing from the perspectives of migrant young people. One of the acknowledged strengths of the approach is its capacity to recognise the diversity of human beings and the complexity of their circumstances (Dean 2009), particularly those who are most marginalised (Burchardt and Vizard 2011). Applying the approach in the context of migration shifts its application beyond stable populations to consider the position of non-citizens and the duties and responsibilities of different national and international actors. However, there are also some limitations to how the capability approach has been applied to date, indicative of how perhaps it could be refined going forward.

Previous applications of the capability approach which have configured a core set of required capabilities or freedoms for human wellbeing (Nussbaum 2000; Berchardt and Vizard 2011) come close to those identified by young people in the current study. However these formulations do not engage with the centrality of the freedom to have a viable and imagined future. Neither do most applications of the approach critically reflect on who is actually positioned to participate in the deliberative scrutiny advocated for the establishment of meaningful capability sets (Sen 2005). How, for example, can disenfranchised migrant young people engage in such processes which are bounded by normative ideas of citizenship and membership, inclusion and exclusion (Shachar 2014). This work has also shown the inadequacies of the approach in capturing the temporal dimensions of capabilities and their dynamic interactive nature (Zimmermann 2006), what do freedoms and capabilities look like in the process of transition and constant change over space and time?.

29

Nevertheless, the approach has helped shed light on the dynamic and complex factors which enhance and undermine migrant young people's capabilities to lead the futures they aspire to. Responding to the constraints on capabilities, rather than measuring or assessing what these young people have achieved, needs to remain the political goal (Nussbaum 2002) moving forward. Similarly, the work demonstrates how in the context of youth migration, there needs to be a move beyond the provision of basic needs and protection of children and a critical assessment of the freedoms they require to enter adulthood, take command of their environments and create the futures they aspire to.

Adopting a capability approach to the analysis of young people's life worlds and experiences helps us to free the possibilities for their lives from the limited repertoire of highly normative ideas about what should happen to them once they 'become adult'. It not only illustrates the disconnect between these aspirations and contemporary hegemonic policy frameworks and discourses attempting to govern young people's lives, but offers new ways of conceptualising notions of their 'best interests' and 'viable futures' from the actualities of who they are and what they intend to do and become.

References

Abujarour, Safa'A. and Hanna Krasnova. 2017. 'Understanding the role of ICTs in promoting social inclusion: The case of Syrian refugees in Germany'. Twenty-Fifth European Conference on Information Systems (ECIS), Guimarães, Portugal.

Al-Ali, Nadje, Richard Black and Khalid Koser. 2001. Refugees and transnationalism: the experience of Bosnians and Eritreans in Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration studies*, *27*(4): 615-634.

Allsopp, Jennifer and Elaine Chase. 2019. 'Best interests, durable solutions and belonging: future prospects for unaccompanied migrants coming of age in Europe'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies Special Issue: Undocumented and Unaccompanied Minors.* 45 (2): 293-311

Ansems de Vries, Leonie. and Elspeth Guild. 2018. 'Seeking refuge in Europe: spaces of transit and the violence of migration management'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies. Special Issue.* DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1468308

Baldwin-Edwards, Martin, Brad K. Blitz and Heaven Crawley (Eds). 2018. Against the Evidence: Europe's Migration Challenge and the Failure to Protect. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.* Special Issue. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1468307

Balcioglu, Zeynep. 2018. Agency, forced migration and social capital. In *Youth, Gender and the Capabilities Approach to Development*. *Aurora* Lopez-Fogues, and Firdevs Melis *Cin.* (Eds). London: Routledge. PP163-176

Berry, John. W. 1997. Immigration, Acculturation and Adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46 (1): 5-68

Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method.* New Jersey, Prentice-Hall

Burchardt, Tania and Polly Vizard. 2011. '"Operationalizing" the Capability Approach as a Basis for Equality and Human Rights Monitoring in Twenty-First-Century Britain.' *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 12(1): 91-119.

Butler, Judith. 2009. *Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics*, available online at www.aibr.org/antropologia/04v03/criticos/040301b.pdf.

Chase, Elaine, Abigail Knight and June Statham. 2008. *The Emotional Wellbeing of Unaccompanied Young People Seeking Asylum in the UK.* London, BAAF.

Chase, Elaine. 2013. 'Security and subjective wellbeing: the experiences of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum in the UK'. *Sociology of Health and Illness* 35 (6): 358-72

Chase, Elaine**.** 2016. The health and wellbeing of former unaccompanied minors: Shifting contours of vulnerability and precarity. In Felicity Thomas (Ed) *Handbook of Migration and Health.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar

Chase, Elaine and Nando Sigona. 2016 'Lost in the world: young people shunted around a global asylum system', *The Conversation*, available online at http://theconversation.com/lost-in-the-world-the-young-people-shunted-around-a-global-asylum-system-55991.

Chase, Elaine and Jennifer Allsopp. 2019. (In press) *The Politics of Wellbeing in Transition.* Bristol: Policy Press/ Bristol University Press

Christiansen, Catrine, Utas Mats and Vigh Henrik. 2006. *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: Social Becoming in an African Context*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet

Clark, David. 2006. *The Capability Approach: Its Development, Critiques and Recent Advances*. Global Poverty Research Group Working Paper. Available at: http://www.gprg.org/pubs/workingpapers/pdfs/gprg-wps-032.pdf

Dean, Hartley. 2009. 'Critiquing Capabilities: The Distractions of a Beguiling Concept.' *Critical Social Policy* 29 (2): 261-278.

Eurostat. 2016. *Almost 90,000 unaccompanied minors among asylum seekers registered in the EU in 2015.* Press release (with data links). Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7244677/3-02052016-AP-EN.pdf/

Feltz, Viviene. 2015. *Age Assessment for Unaccompanied Minors: When European countries deny children their childhood.* Doctors of the World. Nates: France.

Guardian Newspaper. 2018. 'UK under pressure over Afghan asylum seekers amid civilian deaths'. Monday 19 February 2018. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/feb/19/uk-under-pressure-over-afghan-asylum-seekers-as-civilian-deaths-rise

Human Rights Watch. 2018. *World Report: Afghanistan Events of 2017.* Available at

https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/afghanistan

Humphris, Rachel and Nando Sigona. 2019. 'Outsourcing the 'best interests' of

unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the era of austerity'. *Journal of Ethnicity and*

Migration. 45 (2): 312-330

Jackson, Lucy. 2014. 'The Multiple Voices of Belonging: Migrant Identities and Community

Practice in South Wales'. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space,* 46 (7): 1666-

168

Jakobsen, Marianne, Melinda DeMott, Tore Wentzel-Larsen and Trond Heir. 2017. 'The

impact of the asylum process on mental health: a longitudinal study of unaccompanied

refugee minors in Norway'. *BMJ Open,*7 (6): 1-8

Krzyżanowski Michal and Ruth Wodak. 2008. Multiple Identities, Migration and

Belonging: 'Voices of Migrants'. In: Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard and Rick Iedema

(eds). *Identity Trouble*: *Critical Discourse and Contested Identities*. Palgrave Macmillan,

London

Landau, Loren. 2006. 'Protection as Capability Expansion: Practical Ethics for Assisting

Urban Refugees.' *Forced Migration Working Paper Series*, University of Witwatersrand.

Landau, Loren and Marguerite Duponchel. 2011. 'Laws, Policies, or Social Position? Capabilities and the Determinants of Effective Protection in Four African Cities.' *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24(1): 1-22.

Lems, Annika, Kathrin Oester and Sabine Strasser. this issue." Introduction to the Special Issue Children of the Crisis: Ethnographic Perspectives on Unaccompanied Refugee Youth in and En Route to Europe", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*

Malkki, Liisa. H. 1995. 'Refugees and exile: From 'refugee studies' to the national order of Things'. *Annual review of anthropology* 24: 495-523.

Nussbaum, Martha. 2000. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Nussbaum, Martha. 2002. 'Capabilities and Social Justice'. *International Studies Review* 4(2): 123-135.

Preibisch, Kerry, Warren Dodd and Yvonne Su. 2016. 'Pursuing the capabilities approach within the migration-development nexus'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies,* 42 (13): 2111-2127

Refugee Council. 2017a. *Asylum Statistics Annual Trends.* Available at: https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/1242/Asylum_Statistics_Annual_Trends_Aug_2017.pdf

Refugee Council. 2017b. *Children in the Asylum System.* Available at

https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/2380/Children_in_the_Asylum_System_Nov_2017.pdf

Refugee Support Network. 2016. *After Return: Documenting the experiences of young people forcibly removed to Afghanistan.* London: RSN

Risse, Mathia**.** 2009 *Immigration, Ethics and the Capabilities Approach*. Human Development Research Paper. NY: UNDP.

Robeyns, Ingrid. 2016. 'Capabilitarianism'. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 17 (3): 397-414

Schuster, Lisa and Nassim Majidi. 2013. 'What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans." *Migration Studies* 1(2): 221-240.

Schuster, Lisa and Nassim Majidi. 2015. 'Deportation stigma and re-migration'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41(4): 635–652.

Sen, Amartya. 1983. 'Development: Which Way Now?' *Economic Journal*, 93, (372): 745-62.

Sen, Amartya. 1993. Capability and Well-being, in Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.), *The Quality of Life*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 30–53

Sen, Amartya. 2003**.** Development as Capability Expansion. In: Fukuda-Parr S, et al *Readings in Human Development*. New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press

Sen, Amartya. 2005. 'Human Rights and Capabilities.' *Journal of Human Development* 6 (2): 151-166.

Shachar, A. 2014. "Introduction: Citizenship and the 'Right to Have Rights'." *Citizenship Studies* 18(2): 114-124.

Strasser, Sabine, and Eda Elif Tibet. This issue. 'The Border Event in the Everyday: Hope and Constraints in the Life of Young Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers in Turkey.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.*

Vizard, Polly. 2007. 'Specifying and Justifying a Basic Capability Set: Should the International Human Rights Framework be given a more Direct Role?' *Oxford Development Studies* 35(3): 225-250.

Wade, Jim, Ala Sirriyeh, Ravi Kohli and John Simmonds. 2012. *Fostering Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Young People: Creating a Family Life across a 'World of Difference'.* London: BAAF

Walby, Sylvia. 2012. 'Sen and the Measurement of Justice and Capabilities: A Problem in Theory and Practice.' *Theory, Culture & Society* 29(1): 99-118.

Wolff, Jonathan and Avner de-Shalit. 2007 *Disadvantage.* Oxford, Oxford University Press

Wright, Katie. 2012. *International Migration, Development and Human Wellbeing.* Rethinking International Development Series. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan

Wright Mills, C. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination.* Oxford: OUP

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2006. Belonging and the politics of belonging, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40:3, 197-214

Yuval-Davis, Nira, Georgie Wemyss and Kathryn Cassidy. 2017. Everyday Bordering, Belonging and the Re-orientation of British Immigration Legislation. *Sociology,* 52 (2): 228-244

Zimmermann, Bénédicte**.** 2006. 'Pragmatism and the Capability Approach: Challenges in Social Theory and Empirical Research.' *European Journal of Social Theory,* 9 (4): 467-484.

---

[i] www.becomingadult.net
[ii] All names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect young people's anonymity