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Citizens of nowhere? Paradoxes of state parental responsibility for unaccompanied migrant children in the UK

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Abstract

Social workers are confronted with a contradictory task: that of acting as state parents for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, in an era of hostile migration policies and austerity. Mobilizing Young's (2006) concept of 'responsibility' we ask: how is state parental responsibility towards unaccompanied minors given meaning, and with what consequences, for both frontline workers and unaccompanied minors alike? Drawing on interviews with frontline workers and unaccompanied minors in the UK (n = 107), we delineate three modes through which responsibility operates: namely outcomes, capacity and morality. We argue that the underlying logic of responsibility shifts the blame from sociopolitical structures to migrant children themselves, with crucial consequences for questions of social justice.

Introduction

In the summer of 2015, about one million of migrants arrived to the European shores, seeking asylum (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). In the wake of what was quickly defined a ‘refugee crisis,’ a figure occupied centre stage: asylum seeking children who migrated without parents. These children have been described, by media and policy discourses, in ambivalent and contradictory terms (Lems et al., In Press). On the one side, they have been portrayed as innocent children: victims to be saved, whose fate calls for a moral responsibility of protection. On the other side, they have been represented as illegal migrants: their age often disbelieved, and their vulnerable position ultimately undermined by their migratory status.

In this article, we focus on the UK context, to reflect on the question of social responsibility for these young people – an issue of pressing international relevance for academic and policy debates. Specifically, our aim is to examine a fundamental tension in the state responsibility of protection for unaccompanied minors: while the state is responsible for acting as the best parent in virtue of their status as vulnerable subjects, it is also charged with policing the boundaries between citizens and non-citizens (Galli, 2017, Heidbrink, 2014). Previous research has highlighted how migrant children occupy a difficult territory (Bhabha, 2000, Chase, 2009, Kohli, 2005) but has not fully explored how this plays out on the ground in the relationships between unaccompanied minors and those who are tasked with implementing these contradictory policy aims. In this article, we shed new light on how social workers conceptualize their state parental responsibility towards unaccompanied minors and how, in turn, these different conceptualizations shape care practices and (de)legitimize entitlement. Drawing on in-depth interviews with frontline workers and ethnographic fieldwork with the unaccompanied young people in their care, this article makes a significant contribution to knowledge on child migration and the operation of the welfare state. In particular, it aims to

unpack the mechanisms through which state parental responsibility for unaccompanied minors is understood, implemented, and contested in this fraught territory - between benevolent policies for children, and hostile measures for migrants.

In analyzing these issues, we draw on the concept of 'remedial responsibility' to explain the different modes through which social workers act as state parents and codify entitlement to rights. Remedial responsibility is defined as the social responsibility towards the most vulnerable (Miller, 2008). It is assigned to groups of people by virtue of their professional role, to aid those who are considered in need of help or remedy. Codes of Ethics and Practice frame social workers' remedial responsibility within issues of justice, recognizing that 'respect for human rights and a commitment to promoting social justice are at the core of social work practice' (BASW, 2012: 1.1). In understanding social workers' actions, we utilize Young's theoretical formulation of responsibility as involving both personal and structural factors in the practice of aiding those in need (Young, 2006). Young foregrounds responsibility as 'a certain *way of looking* at the whole society, one that sees patterns in relations among other people and positions they occupy in relation to one another' (Young, 2006: 70). We argue that social workers' actions are guided within a model of responsibility that is largely framed within negative representations of unaccompanied minors as 'burden' and neoliberal discourses of self-governance. This model shifts blame from sociopolitical structures to young migrants themselves, with the consequences of restricting the care these young people receive and of removing social justice from the core of social work practice.

A wide interdisciplinary literature has examined the limitations and disparity of policies and practices for unaccompanied minors in different international contexts. Many scholars have specifically focused on the tensions of social workers' roles, between child welfare and migration control (Cemlyn and Nye, 2012, Dunkerley et al., 2005, Newbigging and Thomas,

2011, Wade et al., 2005, Ottosson et al., 2012, Bhabha and Schmidt, 2008). The majority of this literature critically points out how migration control trumps the duty of care for migrant children, often transforming social workers into immigration enforcement officers (Humphries, 2004, Giner, 2007). Restrictive migration policies produce what Masocha (2013) has called a ‘defensive social work discourse,’ or the account of ‘we do the best we can.’ This includes actions such as blaming and excusing, through which social workers justify their practices. Moreover, bureaucratic procedures can further limit entitlement (Giner, 2007). In particular, the consideration of migrant children’s best interest as ‘culture-blind and context-free primarily serves to justify increasing restriction of family reunion for child migrants, and thereby serves the state’s best interest at the cost of the individual child’ (Engebrigtsen, 2003: 193).

However, other scholars have also emphasized how social workers can take a more engaged role and challenge the institutional constraints affecting their everyday practices. For instance, Kohli (2007) identifies three roles enacted by social workers: ‘humanitarian,’ providing everyday support; ‘witness’, offering a therapeutic space to listen to individuals’ stories; or ‘confederate’ recognizing the political context of asylum and taking an ethical stand. Other scholars have explored how social workers can play an advocacy role in challenging migration policies such as long-term detention for asylum seekers (Briskman and Cemlyn, 2005, Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001, Humphries, 2004). In these instances, the activist role of social workers is understood within a human rights approach, ‘keeping humanity, social justice and human rights at the forefront, combined with a willingness to challenge and not collude with dominant practices’ (Briskman and Cemlyn, 2005: 721).

While this literature provides important insights into social workers’ roles, it tends to frame their actions into generalized prototypes of roles, often polarizing practices of care and control, advocacy and compliance. We make a crucial intervention into this literature by investigating

frontline workers' practices within the analytical framework of responsibility, highlighting the underlying logics, contestations and contradictions at the core of these practices. The concept of responsibility allows us to reconnect individual actions to wider social structural contexts: that is, to understand the micro-level relationships between unaccompanied young migrants and social workers within discourses of responsibility and social justice, which are often absent from current debates in this area. By bringing together the perspectives of both frontline workers and the young people in their care, we also engage with the responses of young migrants to the different institutional modes of enacting remedial responsibility. This analytical lens allows us to unpack the complexities surrounding social workers' positions and practices.

To make these arguments the article proceeds in three sections. We start by reviewing the UK policy context in light of the ambiguous status of unaccompanied minors as both children and migrants, and during a time of austerity measures. We then outline the theoretical framing for examining the sociopolitical processes and discourses underlying the duty of care for these young people. Finally, drawing on new empirical data, we juxtapose the perspectives of service providers with the experiences of unaccompanied minors. We analyze how frontline workers and young people make sense of state parental responsibility, and how these understandings shape the possibilities (and failures) of different kinds of relationship of care. To conclude, we reflect on the implications of these understandings to issues of social justice as they relate to the realm of institutional care and care practices for young migrants.

The context: Unaccompanied minors and state parenting in the UK

The category of 'childhood' as a new object of social care policies emerged after the Second World War, with the notion of children as vulnerable subjects in need of protection and the creation of an international children's rights framework (Pupavac, 2001, Aries, 1962). However, the status of unaccompanied asylum seeking children as 'migrant others' radically

unsettles assumptions around childhood and protection (Bhabha, 2000). As noted by many scholars, unaccompanied minors have been socially constructed in a contradictory way: as both vulnerable children deserving protection according to international standards; and as risky migrant youth representing a threat to national security (Menjívar and Perreira, 2017, Kronick and Rousseau, 2015, Bryan and Denov, 2011).

This ambivalent attitude is evident in the policy pathways for these young people in the UK. In virtue of their status as minors, they are included within policies of care for looked after children; yet, in virtue of their status as asylum seekers, they have to go through a brutal asylum system primarily devised for adults (Crawley, 2010, Allsopp and Chase, 2017, Kohli, 2005). In order to be granted protection, children must fall under the juridical category of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC): being under 18; applying for asylum in their own right; having been separated from both parents and not being cared for by an adult. In absence of a parental figure, the state takes the parental responsibility and assumes the duty of care. Specifically, unaccompanied children are protected within welfare policies for looked after children under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. Later amended in 2014 and 2017, the Act places responsibility on local authorities, emphasizing outcomes, service integration and personalization to support children's needs. State parental responsibilities include 'acting in the best interests of looked after children, and promoting their health and wellbeing' (Department of Education, 2017: 1.a).

However, in a tightening immigration system and hostile environment, the duty of care for migrant young people has been increasingly framed within what Shamir (2005) terms a 'paradigm of suspicion.' That is, the portrayal of unaccompanied minors as 'bogus' refugees and threats to national security has allowed the legitimization of racism and discriminatory practices. Scholars have also highlighted unaccompanied minors' difficult transitions into

institutional adulthood: when they reach the age of majority, they are treated as responsible adults and significantly stop receiving care support (Allsopp et al., 2014, Sirriyeh and Raghallaigh, 2018). Former unaccompanied minors who have been refused asylum and have exhausted their appeal rights may enter into illegality, and are often subject to destitution and deportation (Schuster and Majidi, 2013, Gladwell and Elwyn, 2012). This drastic shift in social care support becomes even more significant as the majority of unaccompanied young people arrive in the UK at the age of 16 and 17, and are thus very close to institutional adulthood.

In recent years, the protection of unaccompanied minors has been further eroded by measures of austerity and privatization (Crawley, 2010, Hek et al., 2012, Humphris and Sigona, 2019). In migration governance, neoliberal logics have increasingly reduced budget deficits through spending cuts, limiting the allocation of resources assigned to migrant children. Between 2010 and 2020, local government core budgets have seen reductions of £16 billion - from £18.2bn to £2.2bn, as demand for services has increased (Local Government Association, 2017). These cuts have particularly affected specialist teams for unaccompanied young people, constraining the institutional funds to respond to their legal, social and psychological needs (Children's Society, 2015). Parallel to austerity, the process of privatization and outsourcing within social care arrangements has fragmented the delivery of services for unaccompanied children across a myriad areas of professional practice – social workers, housing providers, teachers, community organizers (Darling, 2016, Kritzman-Amir, 2011). This diffusion of state power has increased confusion around who is accountable for providing specific services, further dissipating responsibility.

Theoretical considerations

In this article, we understand the erosion of protection and services for unaccompanied asylum seeking children as a sociopolitical and historical phenomenon – one which profoundly shapes

practices and discourses of care. In the last decades, policy and media discourses which insinuate migrant young people as bogus refugees, as well as the neoliberal disintegration of the welfare state, have increasingly contributed to portray young migrants as undeserving of care (Yarris and Castañeda, 2015, Oorschot, 2000). In order to understand these logics of deservingness, we crucially need to examine their intertwined logics of responsibility: that is, how state agents are made accountable for protecting unaccompanied young people as members of a collectivity, or conversely for delegitimizing their entitlement to rights.

In her theorization of responsibility, Young (2006) frames responsibility as involving both personal and structural factors. She argues that not only the individual is the centre of ethical responsibility, but one's actions are also embedded within wider structures that can produce injustice and inequalities. She defines the obligation towards marginalized groups as 'responsibility for social justice:' a personal and collective sense of duty that engages with social structure as the core subject of justice. Given that the promotion of social justice is considered to be at the core of social work practice, Young's argument is of particular relevance here. Defining social structure as the core subject of justice, she argues that 'principles of justice should apply to background conditions rather than to individual transactions' (Young, 2006: 65, see also: Rawls, 1999).

Importantly, Young identifies the main cause of erosion of social protection as a shifted paradigm of responsibility. She notes that neoliberal societies have moved from a *social* to a *personal* kind of responsibility, often pinning the blame on the poor for their circumstances. This gesture has the consequence of deflecting attention away from the structural conditions that produce injustice, and to dilute social obligations towards vulnerable groups (see also: Rose, 1999, Rajak, 2011). While attentive to these socio-historical shifts, we aim here to examine how the (de)legitimization of entitlement for unaccompanied children happens on the

ground, and to explore how particular understandings of responsibility may contribute to reproducing unequal patterns and positionings of power in care practices.

In looking at different modes of responsibility, we also follow a non-essentialized view of the state, focusing on what Bourdieu (2012) has referred to as the ‘acts of the state,’ rather than an abstract idea of power. It is in these everyday micro-practices that different state agents negotiate what, and how, resources should be given (Starr and Collier, 1989, Dubois, 2014). Analyzing policies from a bottom-up approach, scholars have examined how ‘the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively *become* the public policies they carry out’ (Lipsky, 2010 (1980): xiii). The perceptions and experiences of service providers have increasingly become subjects of analysis, providing a window on the implementation of policies, as well as on the diffusion of state power (Graham, 2002, Eggebø, 2013, Dubois, 2016). It is in the encounter between frontline workers and unaccompanied young people – a space both intimate and institutional - that responsibility is given meaning, and our analysis is situated.

Methodology

We draw on empirical research combining two sets of data: semi-structured interviews with frontline workers, and ethnographic fieldwork with young people. This work was part of a wider study on unaccompanied minors and transitions into institutional adulthood in England.¹

We specifically focused on four different locations which were representative of a wide

¹ Project Research Title “Becoming Adult: Conceptions of Futures and Wellbeing among Migrant Young People in the UK”, funded by ESRC, grant number ES/L009226/1. Further information about the project and methodology is available at www.becomingadult.net.

geographical spread and had high numbers of unaccompanied minors. Full ethical approval was obtained through the University of Oxford CUREC process for social science researchers.

Interviews with frontline workers were conducted between January and July 2016 (n = 50). Interviewees were sampled to cover different service providers, i.e. social workers, teachers, housing support workers, mental health support workers, NGO workers. Representatives from organisations providing services for unaccompanied children were contacted and asked for an interview; they were also asked to recommend others who provided similar services, focusing on education, housing, legal representation, mental health and youth groups.

Biographical interviews (n = 57) and ethnographic fieldwork were carried out with current and former unaccompanied children from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Albania, for a period of nineteen months (from May 2015 to December 2016). Young people were 17-25 years old and had a range of immigration statuses including: asylum seeker, refused asylum seeker, having discretionary leave to remain. Participant observation took place in formal and informal meetings and gatherings, in young people's homes, public places and NGOs. Biographical interviews focused on migratory experiences, everyday lives, perceptions of wellbeing and futures, access to services and interactions with institutions.

Data from fieldwork with youth and frontline workers were anonymized during the transcription process and were thematically coded to identify cultural categories, assumptions and issues raised by respondents (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). The two sets of data were then cross-analysed by three members of the research team, in order to find synergies and dissonances between policy practices and youth's lived experiences.

In what follows, we predominantly draw on the narratives of social workers (who have the primary state parental responsibility) and other frontline workers. We contrast their voices with

the experiences of young people, to examine how state parental responsibility is given meaning across a different spectrum of professional practice. We highlight three institutional modes in which remedial responsibility is enacted and understood, which often overlap and are not mutually exclusive: (i) *outcome responsibility* which focuses on quantifiable results and risks in relation to unaccompanied minors' futures; (ii) *capacity responsibility* which looks at how the duty of care is diffused across different subjects and is justified by financial costs; (iii) *moral responsibility* which emphasizes the social connection with the young person, and where social workers take on personal responsibility for the young people in their care. Across the 50 frontline workers interviewed, 64% interpreted responsibility in terms of outcome and capacity, justifying restrictive practices;² 36% framed responsibility in terms of morality, inclining towards more inclusive actions and an affective connection with young people.

Outcome responsibility: Unaccompanied minors as a 'bad' investment

'As if this were my own child' is the ambiguous policy guideline given to local government actors to orient their practices of care (Children in Care Council, 2015). In listening to the accounts of frontline workers, we found that the majority interpreted this state parental responsibility as seeking to bring about the improvement of what they term the *outcomes* for a young person's future. Ellen,³ a social worker, understood her responsibility as follows, 'You know you have made a difference if you can really see your role in the outcomes for a looked after child (...) What I want is for them to become a successful adult.' Successful outcomes were typically referred to as the conditions that neoliberal policies associate with 'good' citizens: pursuing education and being a hard-working student; securing legal status and a job; becoming financially independent and mastering budgeting skills. Ellen went on to list these

² 62.5% of these individuals had negative narratives about unaccompanied minors as 'burden' and 'undeserving', while 37.5% expressed more nuanced and mixed opinions, however inclining towards restrictive procedures.

³ Names and identifying details of frontline workers and unaccompanied young people have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

benchmarks to review a young person's progress,

You go through a list of things: you look at their current placement, how their health is progressing, their education, and any issues in relation to their identity including their immigration status and how that is being progressed. You look at their legal status, you look at the finances and make sure that those are in order. So, anything that a caring parent would really be discussing with their child.

However, while social workers often described feeling 'proud' when a young person in their care does well, the blame was often shifted to individuals in case of negative outcomes. Susan, for instance, detailed the example of a young boy from Albania who was, she said, 'a frustrating case because we all want to help but he is not helping himself.' She explained that he had 'his own personal problems' and continued,

You know, committing crime, offending, not in education, high on cannabis, on the verge of some form of mental health... but he hasn't been assessed so you can't really say he has got mental health problems. But yes, depression.

Susan described the boy's difficulties, including his poor mental health, as 'his own personal problems' and emphasized his lack of self-responsibility. Her narrative sustains a model of personal responsibility and blame: young people who succeed as good and self-sufficient citizens are morally deserving of rights, while the others who fail are personally irresponsible and 'faulty' (Rajak, 2011, Anderson, 2013).

This discourse is tightly linked not only with neoliberal imaginations of who is a good citizen (Harvey, 2007), but also with particular social assumptions about the role that young people should play in society. In welfare policies, children are imagined as 'social investments:' citizens in becoming who one day will contribute, with their hard work, to the economy (Lister,

2003). Given the crucial role of the child in society, as important is the role of parents. Contemporary models of parenting view parents as risk-managers, responsible for protecting children in virtue of both their vulnerability and their future social contribution (Lee et al., 2014). Parents have the duty to protect children from the risks of negative effects for their development, and are ultimately responsible of securing positive outcomes for the child and the whole society.

However, the ambiguous status of unaccompanied minors as liable to deportation and therefore ‘non-citizens-in-becoming’ often subverts discourses about risk and responsibility. Many frontline workers, instead of looking at these young people as social investments and future contributors of society, tended to anticipate the negative outcome of their deportation, thus seeing the provision of support as a ‘bad’ investment. Let’s take the example of Stephen, a local authority manager responsible for unaccompanied minors with failed asylum claims. He explained,

You have spent three years of money on a case, it has sat in the property doing bugger all and you have stopped accommodation and you have spent forty thousand pounds on it and you haven’t rationalized the aspect of return from a statutory perspective. So it will be interesting to look out for how much that aspect about the limitation on local authority support is spelled out. Because of the limitation on local authority support, we can’t do everything for you and that must be in the pathway plan.

Stephen refers here to the limitations on statutory support provided by the Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, which excludes certain groups of migrants from support and assistance. He believes that unaccompanied children should be made aware early on that their care will abruptly cease if they fail their asylum claim and that this should be, as he said, ‘rationalized’ by the local government. By referring to the young person as a ‘case’ and

inferring that 'it' is both a waste of time and money, he clearly reproduces neoliberal narratives around cost efficiency. He weighs remedial responsibility in relation to the costs of 'these cases,' as well as the risk of deportation. When the likelihood of forced return is considered to be very high, especially for certain nationalities, this reasoning inevitably decreases frontline workers' sense of responsibility. The young people risk being reframed as not worth investing in.

Importantly, as state parents, social workers are not only managing outcomes but also mitigating risks. Anticipating the possibility of illegality and deportation, many social workers consider preparing children for this risk as an integral part of their state parenting responsibility. Sharon, for instance, reflected on how she saw her duty of care to include 'challenging' young people to discuss deportation as a 'natural part' of their pathway plan,

I think we should consider the return as a natural part of your pathway planning from day one. (...) to be honest your job as a kind of parent is to actually be quite challenging on this and say to the child: well you might not want to talk about return but have you considered the risks of exploitation, if you stay without any status here? Have you explored the problems that you might encounter if you go for many years without any form of status?

The image of risk as intimately linked to deportability and illegality ultimately confines the remedial responsibility for unaccompanied minors to an undefined elsewhere and constructs these young people as 'citizens of nowhere.' The investment for their futures, as well as the duty to protect their safety and wellbeing, is shifted to the young people themselves because they are not perceived to be members of the nation state.

These discourses of outcomes and risk coalesce to profoundly mark the lives of many young people. They exacerbate their already uncertain condition by placing emphasis on outcomes and results that they are prevented from achieving without a form of legal status (such as having no right to education or work). For example, a few months after his asylum claim had been refused, Edward, an 18-year old boy from Albania, recounted how he felt completely abandoned by institutions and felt unable to plan for his future. Trapped within the fear of deportation and the impossibility of imagining a viable life, he described being denied the ‘opportunity to be a good citizen, to have the right as everybody has,’ and continued,

I am forbidden everything that makes me a healthy person and a citizen-to-be so that I can complete myself here. There are two parts of myself: my body is here but my mind and my idea hasn’t come yet because if I make plans, and if things go wrong, then my plans will be destroyed.

The focus on outcomes that defines many bureaucratic relationships means that young people’s state of legal uncertainty is marked by a dominant discourse which perceives them as failing, or even anticipates their failure, because they are not achieving the outcomes of ‘good’ citizenship (Walters et al., 2010). This discourse deprives many young people of the possibility of becoming citizens or, as Edward put it, of becoming a ‘healthy person and a citizen-to-be.’

Importantly, this paradigm of responsibility focuses on personal and individualized outcomes rather than structural factors for both social workers and unaccompanied minors alike. Social workers are placed in a work environment where targets, results, and mitigating risks are the primary aims of their work. This context provides the institutional mode of outcome responsibility, where unaccompanied minors are envisaged in terms of their quantifiable results and how much of a risk they pose (to themselves, others, or society). Their uncertain legal

situation serves to heighten this ambivalent approach, where young people become ultimately responsible for their own outcomes in an environment where it is impossible to achieve them.

Capacity responsibility: Dispersal and financial costs of care

The privatization of the welfare landscape combined with contemporary austerity measures further contributes to the erosion of remedial responsibility for unaccompanied minors, sustaining a discourse on the duty of care in terms of *capacity*. In our study, we found that service providers often assigned and measured remedial responsibility according to ‘capacity criteria.’ First, they identified who was capable of supplying the remedy; and second, they calculated its financial cost. In what follows, we describe how this capacity criteria is interpreted and enacted in a context of scarcity of resources, and when state parenting responsibilities are dispersed across many subjects.

While social workers are considered as primarily responsible for unaccompanied children, in practice parenting duties are also assigned to housing providers, NGO workers and teachers. Some NGO workers, particularly those that provide housing support, described how social workers often asked them to take on more obligations due to the fact that they were overworked such as signing a consent form for an after-school club. NGO workers then have to decide, on a case by case basis, what they can and can’t do. That is, they have to explicitly decide the limits of their responsibility. Many explained that such decisions often made them feel as though they were not giving children the ‘best care’ possible or not acting as the ‘best parent.’

Moreover, the difficulties around sharing responsibility for care often come to a head when different professionals have conflicting understandings of what their responsibility exactly entails, and when this tension is exacerbated by lack of resources. The discrepancy between these diverse understandings makes people confused about who is responsible for what. For

instance, it is sometimes unclear who should take a child to see their solicitor or whether the child can attend on her/his own. This confusion ultimately dissipates responsibility, shifting the job to someone else, and creates gaps of care that are intensified by austerity. A disagreement between a social worker and an NGO about applying for a driving licence is a case in point. Peter, a support worker, recounted,

One of the boys had applied for his provisional driving licence and my colleague had helped him do the forms. But the social worker was furious and stopped it. She didn't want him to learn to drive. It doesn't make any sense, does it? What parent doesn't want their kid to learn to drive?

For Peter, the purpose of the driving licence was to have an identity document that was official and made the child feel safer. He also drew on an idea that is enshrined in the duty of care for social workers 'to act as the best parent.' Instead, the social worker, Peter claimed, focused on whether young people could afford driving lessons and gauged her duty of care in terms of financial capacity. Ultimately, therefore, what remedial responsibility means (for instance, whether young people are entitled to driving classes) is often determined by discourses around the scarcity of resources and economic rationale.

Social workers, on their part, often described the difficulties of responding to young people's needs by referring to wider financial constraints and the increasing pressure of what they termed their 'caseload.' Some described their parenting role as being 'more matter of fact' or more 'emotionally distant' than the roles of foster parents and NGOs. This discourse of young people as 'caseload' not only relates to the bureaucratic procedure of considering unaccompanied minors as 'clients.' Importantly, it also refers to negative representations of young migrants in terms of crisis, as a burden to the system capacity (Vacchiano and Jiménez, 2012). Because of social workers' emotional distance, many young people recounted that social

workers often resembled immigration authorities rather than parents. Alba, a young girl from Albania, commented, ‘When I meet my social worker, it looks like I’m getting interviewed. It reminds me of immigration authorities. I just don’t feel comfortable. It should be more friendly, social workers should be more friendly. I know that they have many cases they have to deal with but...’ Yonas, a boy from Eritrea, said, ‘There’s bad people and there’s good people but as far as I’ve seen social workers treat you more as a thing, as a number, rather than a human being.’

By observing that social workers are overworked and considered them as just one among too many others, young people often tried to make sense of the limited care offered by social workers by seeing themselves as a ‘case’ and a ‘burden.’ Discourses around system capacity were so deeply infused into bureaucratic practices that not only social workers often conceived remedial responsibility in terms of their financial responsibility to the Children’s Departments, but that the young people under their care began to see themselves in terms of burden, and appropriated these discourses in order to make sense of their relationships with social workers (and ultimately the state).

Moral responsibility: Between parents and state agents

At the opposite end of the spectrum, some social workers reacted to the limits of their institutional position by assuming a moral responsibility and identifying with their role as motherly figures. In this section we illustrate this particular mode of responsibility through the example of Sarah, a social worker, and of two girls under her care. While her case was representative of larger trends in our research, we focus here on her particular modality of practice. Through the singularity of her example, our aim is to show the complexities of care practices as both personal and institutional spaces, and to analyze more in-depth how they converge and diverge from the experiences of unaccompanied minors.

Sarah defined herself as an ‘overbearing mother’ and spoke with affection about the young people under her care. She described them as ‘her children’ and believed that looking after them was her life’s project. In practice this meant that she was available on weekends for them, and took them to a restaurants on their birthday. Sarah, however, was able to establish this kind of relationship with the young people she worked with partially because she did not face the same financial constraints as other social workers practising in large metropolitan local governments, but rather worked in a rural borough that cared for a relatively small number of unaccompanied minors. She was acutely aware that the support received by ‘her children’ was far beyond the capacity of many other local authorities, ‘I really care about the young people. And I fight for them. I want good experiences, a good service for them, good legal support. I go with them to all of their legal interviews.’

Sarah understood her parental responsibility towards young people in affective terms, ‘I love my job, when I feel really down I go to see the girls and boys and it restores me. I get too attached. I’ve had my first graduation, he’s like my son.’ Though Sarah was concerned about ‘outcomes,’ she tended to not approach this issue through the notion of risk or illegality but through a different temporality of care where her responsibility was extended beyond her professional duty. She explained,

With me it’s about getting really good outcomes and staying in touch and being there for them. I keep in touch with them post 21, I’ll be with them until I retire. They still ring me when their 25 or 26. It’s lovely. They all call me mum. I adore them all! I know it seems a bit unprofessional but if you get outcomes... I know people that treat it as a 9-5 job, but I don’t.

Throughout our conversations, Sarah oscillated between an affective register, such as ‘he’s like my son,’ and bureaucratic justifications for her work exemplifying the challenges and

contradictions of the role of a state parent. For instance she stated, ‘A lot of my work was rated outstanding work for care leavers. It depends on how much you care. The council is very interested in state parenting and I’ve always been well supported.’ Ultimately, she recognized that she often went beyond her state-mandated role, ‘I get in trouble for it, I make myself available at any time of day or night.’ She also recounted how she advocated for young people to have better services in housing and education, or for young people not to be deported, ‘No deportations, we fight for them. It is a worry, but I feel reassured because we have good solicitors.’ The language she often used, as ‘fighting for them,’ evoked her deep personal engagement, as well as the difficulties that are likely to be involved in the act of resisting the institutional constraints of her position.

However, her role was also inevitably embedded in a web of wider power relationships, as shown by the perspectives of Mariam and Ella, two 18-year-old girls from Eritrea under her care. Sarah had placed them together in a building where they each have their own flat. One evening, sitting with the two in Mariam’s living room, we talked about their experiences with Sarah. With a sense of warmth and affection in their words, they recounted how she was always ready to reply to their text messages or to answer their calls when there was a problem, often outside of her working hours, in the evenings or during weekends. Yet, as Mariam reminded us of an unresolved heating problem they had in their flats, the ambivalences in their relationship began to emerge. A few months before, the radiator has stopped working properly in the two flats; yet the girls have alerted Sarah only recently because they did not want to ‘complain too much.’ The girls have found a temporary solution by tying a flip flop to the radiator and by covering themselves with extra blankets. As she sunk into the sofa with her zebra-striped blanket and sighed about the cold temperature, Ella started to discuss her other needs. How much, for instance, she wanted to move to London or Birmingham to be able to go to the women’s mosque. When she asked Sarah whether she could be moved, she neither

said yes or no. She simply postponed the issue to an indefinite tomorrow and she didn't act. Ella was left, she said, with the impression that Sarah preferred her to stay where she was – in the same building and in the same city with her friend – because, as she put it, it was 'easier for her to manage us.' Ella exclaimed in an agitated voice, 'But we have different lives and different needs and she thinks that our needs are all the same!'

The divergence between Sarah and Ella's perspectives, the affection yet the ambivalence in their relationship, illustrates the inherent contradictions of taking on a parenting role within a restrictive institutional context. While Sarah defined her role as a mother who went beyond her institutional duty, the young girls still felt as though they were sometimes 'managed' and treated as 'all the same.' Despite her effort to create relationships that are not primarily guided by state-mandated forms of kinship, and perhaps especially because she shies away from her institutional role, young people still perceive her to be ambiguously acting within this framework and causing forms of injustice. Sarah inevitably remained trapped in the role of an impossible parent - in the inevitable contradictions between a parenting relationship, and uniformed forms of state care.

Discussion

As Young reminds us, our sense of responsibility 'derives from belonging together with others in a system of interdependent process of cooperation and competition through which we seek benefits and aim to realize projects' (Young, 2006: 720). Through the different spectrum of care practices analyzed in this article, state parental responsibility towards unaccompanied minors emerges within discourses of scarcity and competition, rather than cooperation, which largely delegitimize the claims of young people. In this context, social workers tend to evaluate whether the financial costs outweigh the benefits, and to disperse the capacity to provide care among many subjects such as NGOs and housing providers.

These logics of cost-effectiveness, coupled with exclusionary discourses of non-citizenship, profoundly shape the state parenting concerns on protecting young people and mitigating risks. In the case of unaccompanied minors, risks are not considered in relation to the child's wellbeing and assumed vulnerability, but instead as the risks that the young person may pose to society in terms of financial burden and illegal status. And because for these young people the chances of deportation are often high, the responsibility of protection is often deemed as a 'bad' investment for institutions.

Considering unaccompanied migrants as deportable non-citizens, social workers often feel responsible for the consequences of their actions only in case of successful outcomes (i.e. pursuing education, securing legal status and financial independence). In other words, a connection is often established only if young people are capable of conforming to the standards of neoliberal 'good' citizenship and self-sufficiency. But when they do not succeed in attaining these outcomes - usually as a result of the structural and legal constraints imposed on them - the blame is put on young people themselves for being faulty and irresponsible. Importantly, this personal paradigm of remedial responsibility not only denies a moral and social connection with the young person, but also deflects attention from the wider structural factors that may have contributed to produce these negative outcomes for young people's futures. Isolated from wider social structures, remedial responsibility is redefined to the individualized decisions of social workers in the context of intense financial constraints, and personal responsibility is ultimately placed onto young people themselves.

The shift from social to personal responsibility is also evident in social workers who are not operating under such strict financial targets. Sarah, for example, expands her role, defining herself even as 'overbearing mother,' and countering too little with too much. In this case, a sense of personal moral responsibility seems to be the guiding framework for the relationship

with the young person. She actively avoids mentioning her state mandated role in institutional terms, and seeks to create an affective bond with young people. She could be framed as an ‘advocate’ who takes a human rights approach to fight for the young people under her care. However, as the quotes from Miriam and Ella show, even when social workers try to not collaborate with systems of power, they are inextricably bound up within them. The complexities surrounding Sarah’s ambiguous positioning between a parental figure and a social work practitioner add further nuances to the ‘confederate’ or ‘advocate’ role that is often heralded as the best model for engaging with marginalized groups (e.g. Kohli and Mitchell, 2007). Her role reproduces care practices based on an individualized ethics of personal dispositions and feelings. She recounted, for instance, that she personally fights for young people, she considers them as ‘her children,’ and she is available for them during weekends. However, Sarah remains a lone voice within her own institution, and she does not frame her actions within a collective and political ethics of solidarity that can grapple with underlying structures of power and wider structural constraints (Muehlebach, 2012). Relationships based on this individualized and contingent form of advocacy risk deflecting attention away from the structural conditions that produce injustice, and can unintentionally reproduce dominant narratives and symbolic violence. Young people with even the most caring social workers such as Sarah may still feel they are unable to make claims for their rights, but rather have to engage in individualized and uniformed relationships of gratitude.

To be sure, these three different interpretations of state parental responsibility highlight the inherent contradictions of practicing a duty of care within restrictive migration policies and neoliberal discourses of austerity and self-blame. A paradigm of personal responsibility, combined with the exclusionary framing of unaccompanied minors as citizens of nowhere, contribute to isolate the duty of care for these children from questions of structural inequalities and social justice. It is from analysing the position of a difficult case such as the care of

unaccompanied minors that the contradictions and intractable positions of social workers and young people are revealed, and from where we might begin to rethink institutional relationships within broader questions of social justice.

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