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Lessons from Listening to the Voices of Unaccompanied Central American and Mexican Children

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Unaccompanied Central American and Mexican Children

by

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Abstract

Children make up half of the world's refugees, yet limited research documents the views of youth about their own migratory circumstances and recommendations. This dissertation contributes new knowledge of migrant youths' views by analyzing selected secondary data from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) interviews conducted with unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico in the custody of the U.S. federal government for entering the United States without the proper documents.

In light of prior research focused on unaccompanied children's protection issues outside of the home, the first section of this banded dissertation analyzes interviews with unaccompanied children who disclosed child maltreatment in the home or family setting. Examination of this dataset finds that females reported higher rates of maltreatment overall, a higher incidence of multiple abuse experiences, and nearly exclusively reported experiencing sexual abuse and domestic violence, as compared to their male counterparts. Girls were more likely to disclose maltreatment as a reason for migrating, while boys were more likely to disclose abuse as a form of suffering or harm, suggesting the need for varied methods of inquiring about maltreatment, as well as acknowledgement that maltreatment revelations depend upon the interviewer's skills and not merely upon whether abuse occurred.

The second section analyzes the responses of Central American and Mexican migrant children to one interview question regarding how to help youth like themselves, and identifies several implied "no-win" situations as potential reasons for the migration decisions of unaccompanied children. Furthermore, the children's responses highlight the interconnected nature of economics, security, and education as migratory factors. Children demonstrated use of political speech, primarily through negative references regarding their home country's

government, president, and the police, with particular emphasis on police corruption and

ineffectiveness. Their recommendations have implications for interdisciplinary and coordinated

international development responses to migratory causes, and for providing youth with

meaningful opportunities to contribute their views and suggestions.

The third section concludes by using reflection on the research experience to examine

various decision points before and during the research process. A "thesis→antithesis→synthesis"

formula is employed to aid future researchers in predicting and resolving the research tensions

discussed, and to protect the dignity of research participants, particularly when working with a

vulnerable and hard-to-access population.

Unaccompanied migrant children have many lessons to teach us about the gender and age-

based risks they face, their recommendations for helping themselves and others like them, and

research methods with young people. These lessons may not come in the manner, timeframe, or

sense of logic that adults expect they should, and children may indeed view the world differently

from adults. Even in this, children are trying to teach us something, if we are willing to listen.

Dedication & Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to the unaccompanied youth from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, who entrusted their stories to me and my exceptional UNHCR colleagues (Amelia Ahl, Elise Damas, and Aryah Somers Landsberger).

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Lessons from Listening to the Voices of

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This banded dissertation gleans new lessons from the voices of unaccompanied Central

American and Mexican children by examining three different perspectives on their migration:

- The perspective of unaccompanied children who experienced child maltreatment prior to

  migration;

- The perspective of unaccompanied children on how to help other youth like themselves;

- The perspective and reflections of this researcher after conducting and analyzing

  interviews with unaccompanied children.

These three perspectives together critique how we listen to and engage with unaccompanied

children based on gender, age, and researcher reflection. The first article considers the interview

responses of a specific subset of migrant children who have experienced child maltreatment.

Given the more typical research focus on migrant children's risks *outside* of the home or family

environment, this article examines maltreatment risks *inside* the home or family environment, an

issue that has received less attention in the literature on migrant children and from which girls

may face greater risk than boys. The second article analyzes children's recommendations for

helping other children like themselves, taking particular notice of lessons for decision-makers

from listening to children's own concerns. The third article focuses on this author's reflections as

a researcher, in order to maximize methodological lessons following research with a vulnerable

and hard to access population.

      Unaccompanied children, as a phenomena of migration, are nothing new. More than 125

years ago, on the last day of 1891, the first person to be processed through New York's Ellis

Island was 17-year-old Annie Moore, an unaccompanied minor from Ireland who arrived with

two younger brothers hoping to join their parents in New York City (The Statue of Liberty –

Ellis Island Foundation, n.d.). Since then, unaccompanied children have emerged as a notable

occurrence multiple times over the last century, including, but not limited to: the evacuations of

British and Finnish children during World War II; the sending of so-called "Pedro Pan" (Peter

Pan) children to Miami following the Cuban revolution; the Vietnam "babylift" and subsequent

resettlement of thousands of unaccompanied Vietnamese children to Australia, Canada, Europe,

and the US (Ressler, Boothby & Steinbock, 1988); and the long refugee camp confinement and

then US resettlement of the "Lost Boys of Sudan" (International Rescue Committee, 2014).

Similarly, the migration of Central American unaccompanied children to the US, as well

as other countries in the region, has ebbed and flowed since civil war and proxy war violence

devastated the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, from the 1960s to

the 1990s. Unaccompanied children arriving in the US from El Salvador, Guatemala and

Honduras (but notably not Nicaragua) had averaged around 7,000 to 8,000 annually since the

Homeland Security Act of 2002 transferred their care and custody from the enforcement-oriented

former Immigration and Naturalization Service, to the service-oriented Office of Refugee

Resettlement (ORR). The US arrival rate of Central American unaccompanied children began to

increase significantly after 2011, peaking with more than 57,000 unaccompanied children placed

into ORR care in 2014 (ORR, 2015). Representing a small portion of overall migration to the

US, this increase prompted the use of terms such as "flood" and "surge," elevating a sense of

fear and mistrust rather than a response emphasizing protection and care (Strom, 2017). US

government apprehensions of Central American unaccompanied children dropped after 2014, but

remained much higher than their pre-2011 averages (Kandel, 2017).

In response to the increased migration of a highly vulnerable population, the United

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) initiated a study examining the root causes

of this migration through interviews with over 400 unaccompanied children from El Salvador,

Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. At the time of the interviews in 2013, virtually all of the

children were being held in a range of US federal government custodial settings, due to their

entry without proper immigration documents. The interviews focused on children's reasons for

leaving home, and their experiences during migration. The resulting UNHCR report documented

that well over half of the interviewed children had claims to international protection from

organized armed criminal actors or violence in the home (UNHCR, 2014).

In order to maximize the lessons from this rich interview data with unaccompanied

children, this dissertation examines in greater detail the subset of UNHCR interviews with

unaccompanied children who revealed child maltreatment, as well as the recommendations of all

the interviewed children about how to help others like themselves, and then concludes with

researcher reflections on working with a vulnerable and difficult to access population. Together,

this work amplifies the views of young people deeply affected by migratory dynamics, yet often

overlooked as stakeholders in bringing about changed circumstances.

Conceptual Framework

This dissertation began with a conceptual framework grounded in a nested view of

systems theories that narrow from general systems and world systems theory, down to ecological

theory and family systems theory. Each of these systems theories provides an alternate

perspective into the varied dynamics that lead to migration: systems theory and world systems

theory allow consideration of macro level dynamics, such as hierarchical subsystems and

suprasystems, as well as governmental policies and global economic forces (Kondrat, 2008,

Chase-Dunn, 2007); ecological theory and family systems theory introduce the "goodness of fit" between people and their environments, as well as intra-familial dynamics and decision-making processes that influence migration decisions (Gitterman & Germain, 2008, Kerr, 2000).

This top-down perspective—while useful for conceptualizing broad migration dynamics—evolved into a synthesis with the more bottom-up perspective recognizing the unique and valuable contribution of youth voice, as both significant for youth identity development as active contributors (Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011), and also a potential corrective to adult assumptions about youth views and experience. The successor conceptual framework undergirding this work merges youth voice and critical theory by elevating children's voices while questioning the inherent power relations in the adult-child interaction. Using the Popper inspired notion of the "dialectic triad" incorporating the concepts of *thesis, antithesis and synthesis* (Popper, 1963, p. 2)*,* this conceptual framework blends the macro perspective of systems theory, with the micro perspective available through listening to youth voices, into a synthesis that uses critical theory and reflection to examine adult understandings of youth perspectives.

Several writers in the field of children's and young adult literature have developed the concept of "aetonormative theory" to describe the customary phenomena of interpreting the world through an adult lens (Seymour, 2015; Beauvais, 2012; Nikolajeva, 2009). Just as writers such as Gilligan (1982) used feminist theory to challenge assumptions that male-dominated interpretations of reality were the only way to view the world, aetonormative theory likewise challenges an adult-dominated worldview by calling into question whether adults truly understand the perspectives of children, or whether adults merely project adult views onto children. This theoretical question takes on grave implications in the practical context of

immigration adjudications—such as refugee and asylee determinations—since adult adjudicators determine whether unaccompanied children's experiences meet specific standards of persecution that might lead to legal protection. In such a context, how well do we understand children's perspectives?

Payne (2014) describes critical theory in social work as placing greater focus on the ways that societal structures cause social problems, rather than viewing social problems as the result of individual characteristics. If we take this general critical theory approach as it has evolved—that of questioning fundamental assumptions of hierarchies and inequalities, particularly with respect to economics, gender, and race—and apply it to the context of migrant children, questions arise regarding the societal structural flaws that lead children to leave their homes. Rather than assuming personal deficiencies that lead to child migration, what are the societal structural flaws that lead youth to view migration as necessary or preferable, compared to remaining at home? What lessons can the views of individual children reveal about these questions?

Gilligan (2014) writes that "Listening in a way that creates trust was essential to hearing a 'different' voice, meaning a voice that didn't make sense according to the prevailing categories of interpretation" (p. 91). The voices of children on which this dissertation is based represent a "different voice," by allowing children to speak for themselves where possible, and by revisiting these interviews, after the primary research was completed, in order to listen again in a way that might reveal different voices and new lessons that were not initially discerned or amplified.

Unaccompanied children represent a particularly vulnerable population at risk of harm and exploitation. In addition, they likewise represent a group of significant human potential who can contribute to both the US and to their homelands. Furthermore, our treatment of unaccompanied children reflects certain legal and moral duties to protect those who seek safety

at or within our borders. For the profession of social work, unaccompanied children present social justice issues regarding humane treatment and protection, along with concrete child welfare practice issues regarding the appropriate care and custody of children outside the care of a parent or guardian (National Association of Social Workers, 2014).

Summary of Banded Dissertation Products

This dissertation expands on that earlier UNHCR (2014) research with unaccompanied children by engaging in secondary analysis of particular subsets of that larger interview corpus. In combination, this banded dissertation considers, "What are the lessons from listening to the voices of unaccompanied Central American and Mexican children?"

The first article of this dissertation provides in-depth analysis of interviews in which unaccompanied children disclosed child maltreatment. This study explores gender differences regarding the type of maltreatment experienced, as well as the gender of abusers. In addition, the study examines when children disclosed maltreatment during the interview process, in order to extract lessons for professionals interviewing migrant children for adjudicatory proceedings.

The second article examines all 404 unaccompanied children's responses to a question about their recommendations for helping other children like themselves. Analysis of their responses identified the entwined migration motivators of economics, security, and education, that can also combine to create no-win situations leading children to migrate. Children's responses included political speech in the form of largely negative references to their home country's government, president, and particularly the police, suggesting the need to provide youth with meaningful ways to contribute their views and suggestions.

The final article concludes with reflections on decisions made before and during the research process. These reflections are distilled into lessons for future researchers in working

with a vulnerable and hard-to-access population. Together, these three separate analyses prompt consideration of how adults listen to the voices to vulnerable youth, particularly in relation to gender and age, and encourage the practice of researcher reflection to maximize learning from research with youth.

One teen noted memorably that adults "need to give us a voice." This dissertation aims to honor and amplify the voices of the unaccompanied children who disclosed maltreatment, shared recommendations, and willingly participated in research that might help other children like themselves.

Discussion

Analysis of unaccompanied children's references to maltreatment revealed significant gender differences, with 38% of girls revealing maltreatment compared to only 14% of boys. Girls were also more likely than boys to experience multiple abusers, and girls experienced sexual abuse and domestic violence nearly exclusively compared to boys in this sample. While rates of maltreatment revealed in this sample were similar across nationalities, the gender gap within nationalities varied more significantly, for example with 38% of Salvadoran girls disclosing abuse, compared to only 7% of Salvadoran boys. Such findings correlate to Salvadoran experts, who note that the majority of sexual violence occurs in the home, and that the highest number of rapes in 2011 were reported by 12 to 18 year old females (Gaborit et al., 2015). Experts from the region indicate that patriarchal norms are entrenched in society, leading to discrimination and abuse, gender-based violence, and femicide (Rivera, Ruelas, Cuello, Flores & Pinto, 2015; Paz y Paz, Solórzano & González, 2015; Gaborit, Duarte, Orellana & Brioso, 2015; Lorente & Morales, 2015).

Notable gender differences also appeared in the analysis of abusers, with males named as the abusers at more than twice the rate of females. This research also found a range of different interview questions that led to abuse revelations, and that less than half of the children who revealed abuse did so in response to specific questions about their reasons for migration. These gender-related findings have some broad parallels with US maltreatment data, in which older girls, ages 11 to 17, experience maltreatment at rates higher than males of the same age (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Although one US study found that men made up a little less than half of child abuse perpetrators (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2005), this study did not assess neglect (except when co-occurring with abuse) due to different cultural and economic contexts, which may account for at least some of the gender disparity among abusers in this study.

An examination of children's recommendations for helping youth like themselves revealed the interconnected nature of economic, security, and education issues. These entwined migratory factors appeared to create perceived "no-win" situations that may lead to migration. These findings support UNHCR's earlier analysis regarding children's reasons for leaving home (2014a), while adding nuanced recognition that knowledge of these interrelated factors should encourage migratory adjudicators to inquire about security-related issues when children mention coming to the US for economic or education reasons (for example, children who say they came to the US to continue their education should also be asked why they could not continue their education in their home country).

Furthermore, these children's comments revealed largely negative political speech, with the police singled out more than any other public figures. These children's comments about the police support Cruz's (2015) assertion that the police become the daily representation of any

regime, and more broadly these children's comments demonstrate the potential for youth to hold political views. Together, these children's comments demonstrate that children can hold political views, and provide recommendations regarding priority areas for improvement within their home countries.

The final area for examination and reflection focused on the research process itself. Interprofessional perspectives can benefit the research experience, and interviewing in pairs allows the researchers to draw on multiple strengths during the interview process in recognition that children may develop an affinity for, or engage better with, one researcher or another. Reflection on the research process revealed that unaccompanied children have things to teach researchers both verbally and visually, by documenting not only what was heard but also what was seen. Furthermore, when interviewing about painful subject matter, multiple interviews may enable some children to disclose by building rapport over time. This observation may appear to run counter to some professional recommendations to limit the number of interviews. Using the "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" principle, these ideas may be synthesized, rather than merely conflict. In keeping with the social work principle of "starting where the client is" (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney & Strom-Gottfried, 2013, p. 49), the provision of different ways of questioning may allow each child to respond in idiosyncratic ways, with some children responding readily in the first interview, while others may require a relationship of trust built over time.

Unaccompanied children have much to teach us, regarding their experiences of maltreatment, their recommendations for helping others like themselves, and methods of conducting research with a vulnerable population. These lessons come from being willing to listen and observe what children are trying to tell us. These lessons may not come in the manner,

timeframe, or sense of logic that adults expect they should. Even in this, children are trying to teach us something, if we are willing to listen.

Implications for Social Work Education

Unaccompanied migrant children raise numerous issues that should receive greater attention in professional education. The social work profession has deep historical roots in serving children in need of protection, and in serving the foreign-born, practice areas which are both pertinent to working with unaccompanied children. Furthermore, the U.S. federal government operates a type of shadow child welfare system for unaccompanied children apprehended by immigration enforcement agents, a system that operates largely outside of the purview of social work educators despite the profession's entrenched role with other forms of domestic child welfare. More intentional preparation of social work students to work in this system could raise the level of professionalism, and also encourage grappling with some of the ethical issues inherent in the federal government's potentially competing interests in both child protection and immigration enforcement.

Findings from this dissertation also point to the importance of teaching future social workers about specific gendered risks for unaccompanied children (as well as adults) from Central America and Mexico, with females potentially facing greater risks of abuse within the home environment, particularly in the form of sexual abuse of domestic violence. Given social workers' duty as mandated reporters, this dissertation also provides lessons about the need to give children multiple opportunities to disclose, and that children will disclose in their own time and manner. Recognition that references to life transitions—such as moving, living with a new caregiver, switching schools, etc.—warrant further inquiry, as they can sometimes be indicators

of maltreatment, may also be relevant to teaching future social workers about following up on interviewing cues.

Social work educators could also increase efforts to encourage students to master or maintain a second language, particularly Spanish. Prioritizing recruitment and retention of bilingual/bicultural social workers also emerges as an implicit need. At the macro level, this research underscores the importance of stimulating student interest in immigration policy, as well as U.S. foreign policy that impacts humanitarian aid and migratory patterns. Social welfare policy courses should incorporate immigration and international policy as relevant to populations both inside and outside the U.S. Overall, this research indicates the importance of elevating unaccompanied children, and migration generally, within the social work curriculum.

Implications for Future Research

On a conceptual level, the application of critical theory to assumptions about children, and to power relations between children and adults, has only briefly been introduced here and warrants further examination. Unlike other contexts for applying critical theory, the application to youth is guaranteed to change as young people age into adults. Nonetheless, adults frequently and erroneously assume to understand the perspectives of children. In what ways can the application of critical theory to relations between children and adults help researchers and professionals to better grasp perspectives that are destined to change over time? In what ways do children lose forms of knowledge or perspective as they age, just as they also gain a different type of knowing through maturation?

On a child protection level, this consideration of perspective by age could also be applied to children's views of child maltreatment. How do children themselves define abuse and neglect, and does this differ by age, gender, nationality, ethnic group, or economic status? In addition,

how do incidences of maltreatment relate to larger societal forces, particularly violence, poverty, and limited educational opportunity as experienced by many people in parts of Central America and Mexico? How do increases in societal violence relate to and impact levels of family violence?

Additional research with young people from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico who chose not to leave home could also provide insight regarding the factors that can provide safety or hope and thus encourage young people to remain. The contrasting lack of migration by Nicaraguan unaccompanied children warrants further examination, in order to consider macro and micro level differences that have resulted in such disparate migratory dynamics.

Finally, existing research with children could be re-examined for further utilization, so that secondary analysis of existing data can be maximized as an alternative, or complement, to new research with children as research subjects. Further incorporation of critical reflection into research with children should be explored, so that additional research lessons can be gleaned and methodological decisions in research with children can be assessed and shared with other researchers. Most importantly, further research into the most effective and humane adjudicatory methods with migrant children is warranted, in order to better understand what type of context and questioning methods lead children to tell their stories in ways that are pertinent and protective.

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Child Maltreatment and Child Migration:

What Unaccompanied Migrant Children from Central America and Mexico

Say about Abuse and Neglect and Its Implications for Post-Migration Practice

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Abstract

Research into the migration of unaccompanied children tends to focus on protection issues outside of the home, with less attention given to protection concerns inside the home. This article analyzed 85 interviews with unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico who were held in U.S. federal custody for entering the United States without the proper documents. This secondary data subset comes from a larger corpus of 404 interviews conducted in 2013 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees with unaccompanied children between the ages of 12 and 17. Elaborative coding was employed to examine types of abuse, relationship to abusers, and point of disclosure. Findings included notable gender differences in abuse experienced and reported abusers. Females reported higher rates of maltreatment overall, a higher incidence of multiple abuse experiences, and nearly exclusively reported experiencing sexual abuse and domestic violence, as compared to their male counterparts. Males in this sample reported physical abuse more than other types of maltreatment, though females experienced physical abuse at a higher proportional rate. Male abusers were reported at more than twice the rate of female abusers, perhaps due to a lack of data on neglect. Girls were more likely to disclose maltreatment as a reason for migrating, while boys were more likely to disclose abuse as a form of suffering or harm. Implications include the need for varied methods of inquiring about maltreatment, recognizing children's changed circumstances as reasons for further inquiry during protection interviews, and acknowledging that maltreatment revelations depend upon the interviewer's skills and not merely upon whether abuse occurred.

Keywords: unaccompanied children, child maltreatment, abuse, migration, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico

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Unaccompanied migrant children—those who are separated from parents or habitual

caregivers[1]—cross borders for numerous reasons including the push of war, violence,

deprivation, and hopelessness, as well as the pull of safety, family, work, and opportunity.

Among the push and pull factors motivating child migration, violence within the family or

household has received less attention as a small but serious dynamic in children's migration

decisions. Violence and poverty outside of the home are easier to observe and document, while

abuse and neglect inside the home can be shielded from public view and practitioner awareness.

Research into child maltreatment among children in the U.S. receives regular and regulated

attention (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.), but maltreatment as a migration motivator

among child migrants can be overshadowed by other broad societal problems, such as war and

poverty, that lead to larger numbers of "children on the move" (UNICEF, 2016).

This study seeks to answer the question, "What do unaccompanied Central American and

Mexican migrant children say about their experience of child maltreatment?" The article

describes unaccompanied migrant children's own comments about maltreatment in the family or

home prior to leaving their countries of origin. It further explores at which point during

interviews the children revealed the abuse, in order to consider the interview questions that

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[1] The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) distinguishes between an unaccompanied child, and a separated child, as follows: "'Unaccompanied children' (also called unaccompanied minors) are children, as defined in article 1 of the Convention [on the Rights of the Child], who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. 'Separated children' are children, as defined in article 1 of the Convention, who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members." (p. 6).

elicited revelations of maltreatment. This analysis spotlights an important protection issue that may be overlooked or minimized by both immigration adjudicators as well as children themselves. This article establishes migratory reception and adjudicatory implications for those who provide services and determine the immigration status of unaccompanied child migrants.

Definitions of child maltreatment vary by country, culture, and region. Since the interviews analyzed here occurred within the United States (US), and since each US state adopts its own child maltreatment statutes, this research applies uniform child maltreatment definitions used by U.S. public health workers in classifying children's revealed experiences of abuse and neglect (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon & Arias, 2008). Using secondary data from 404 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) interviews with Central American and Mexican unaccompanied migrant children, this article examines a subset of 85 interviews coded for maltreatment. The terms abuse and maltreatment are used here interchangeably, since few youth in this sample spoke about neglect. This analysis offers a unique opportunity to better understand the scope of the problem, including the demographics of children who reported maltreatment, the type of abuse and the reported abusers, and when children disclosed abuse during the interviews. The research that follows affords a more nuanced understanding of a largely unstudied problem, and it makes policy and practice recommendations to improve post-migration protective measures for children who experience pre-migration child maltreatment.

Literature Review

Central American children and adults have been migrating to the U.S. in significant numbers since the 1980s and thereafter (Musalo & Lee, 2017; Zong & Batalova, 2015). An increase in the migration of Central American unaccompanied children became evident in the fall of 2011, increasing annually until U.S. Border Patrol apprehensions of Central American

unaccompanied children spiked in 2014 to more than 68,000 children—more than four times the

number of unaccompanied children apprehended in 2011 (Meyer, Margesson, Seelke & Taft-

Morales, 2016). In 2015, apprehensions slowed to just under 40,000 unaccompanied children,

increasing again in 2016 at almost 60,000 (Kandel, 2017). Ensuing policy changes—such as

heightened immigration enforcement at the Mexico / Guatemala border, increased U.S. aid to

Mexico for migrant interdiction, expanded use of family detention for Central American migrant

mothers and children entering the U.S., and accelerated deportation cases against newer

arrivals—only briefly reduced the number of Central Americans reaching the U.S. (Musalo &

Lee, 2017; Appleby, Chiarello & Kerwin, 2016). As the number of Central Americans reaching

the U.S. declined temporarily, the number of Central Americans deported from Mexico

simultaneously increased (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Explanations for this dramatic growth in child arrivals focus on the documented rise in

Central American gang violence, particularly in El Salvador and Honduras (Rosenblum & Ball,

2016; UNHCR, 2014). The combination of continued economic strain, limited work and

educational opportunities, cynicism about public corruption voiced even by youth themselves,

and U.S. family ties, provides ample reasons for the poor and vulnerable to flee Central America

and flock to the U.S. for safety and opportunity (Schmidt, 2017a). Beyond these typical

explanations, some evidence suggests that the legacy of increased U.S. border enforcement over

the past three decades has had the counterintuitive effect of *increasing* migration to the U.S., by

unintentionally locking migrants in, such that previous patterns of circular migration by a largely

male population (with periods of return to the home country) have been replaced with many

permanently settling in the U.S. while close family members migrate to join them here (Massey,

2015).

Most literature on Central American child migrants focuses on the root causes of migration (Hiskey, Córdova, Orcés & Malone, 2016; UNHCR, 2014), and the rights violating nature of the U.S. response (Musalo & Lee, 2017; Center for Gender and Refugee Studies & KIND, 2014). A limited amount of literature has focused exclusively on migrant children's accounts of maltreatment in the home or family that may contribute to migration and protection needs.

Maltreatment Globally

Child maltreatment occurs across all cultures, with definitions of abuse and neglect varying by country, culture, and region. Despite this cultural variability in parenting practices, the World Health Organization (WHO) nonetheless notes broad cultural opposition to child abuse and "virtual unanimity" against severe discipline and sexual abuse of children (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi & Lozano, 2002, p. 59).

The most commonly recognized forms of child maltreatment include: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, and neglect (Leeb et al., 2008; Krug et al., 2002). More broadly, these forms of maltreatment may be further differentiated between acts of commission (e.g. an abusive deed) and acts of omission (e.g. a failure to act). Coope and Theobald, in their qualitative interviews with Guatemalan child welfare professionals, stakeholders, and children, note that participants emphasized the importance of avoiding the "criminalization of poverty," otherwise a majority of Guatemalan children might be considered neglected (2006, p. 532). Thus, maltreatment goes beyond merely being poor, and occurs across all income levels.

A study by McRee (2008) found that, among 40,000 U.S. youth who received services through federally funded homeless shelters, children from blended families including at least one

non-biologically related adult (such as an adoptive parent, stepparent, or cohabiting parent)

experienced a heightened risk of physical or sexual abuse. Similarly, refugee children separated

from their habitual caregivers are recognized as facing heightened risk of "neglect and abuse," as

well as military recruitment, child labor, detention, trafficking, discrimination, health problems,

and lack of emotional support (ARC Resource Pack—Module 6, 2009, p. 16-17). While child

maltreatment occurs in all family constellations, more distant relationships can have an increased

maltreatment risk.

Thus, despite differences in cultural practices and economic resources, broad agreement

on what constitutes child maltreatment is possible, along with a recognition of certain risk

factors, such as more distant relationships.

Maltreatment in Central America

Limited data exist about the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in Central America,

with the greatest focus on child sexual abuse. Definitional variations by country pose challenges

to comparative study. One nationally representative survey of women in El Salvador, Guatemala,

and Honduras, found that rates of child sexual abuse (before age 19) ranged from 6% in

Guatemala, to 9% in El Salvador, to 11% in Honduras (Speizer, Goodwin, Whittle, Clyde &

Rogers, 2008). Another study in León, Nicaragua (Olsson, et al., 2000) found that 20% of men,

and 26% of women reported sexual abuse before the age of 19.

Maltreatment and Migration

Bjørgo and Jensen (2015) report on the experiences of home country physical abuse for

34 unaccompanied refugee minors in Norway, one of the few studies that examines the

intersection of interpersonal violence and child migration. In contrast to the research detailed in

this article, Bjørgo and Jensen solely examined physical abuse, using a broader definition that

included abuse at the hands of school teachers, and interviewed youth who had lived in Norway for one to four years. In contrast, this current research examines all forms of child maltreatment within the home environment among recently arrived Mexican and Central American youth, 95% of whom had been in the U.S. for only a few hours up to a few months.

What Children Say about Maltreatment

Children who have experienced abuse and neglect may warrant protective measures, yet the traumatic and psychologically harmful nature of child maltreatment may lead children to reveal such experiences in ways that are contrary to their own interests. More plainly, the times when children ought to reveal that they have been abused or neglected are often the times that children are least inclined to do so.

Leander's study of 27 Swedish police interviews with documented child sexual abuse victims demonstrated children's reticence to talk about abuse (2010). Sexually abused children subjected to intercourse, and those children abused for more than six months (rather than on a single or a few occasions), were more likely to deny the abuse than other sexually abused children, suggesting that the more severe the abuse experience, the less willing children were to talk about it. Furthermore, the children reported two times as many new details during second and third interviews, and their likelihood of denying or avoiding talking about the abuse was reduced during the second and third interviews, indicating that children may need multiple interviews in order to more fully disclose the details of abuse experiences.

A study of war affected Ugandan parents and children found that while war and child maltreatment correlated with psychological problems for the adolescents, only child maltreatment correlated with psychological disorders for the parents (Olema, Catani, Ertl, Saile & Neuner, 2014). In the authors' words, "the impact of child maltreatment on psychological

disorders surpasses the damage of war trauma" (p. 35), signaling to these authors that intra-familial violence in war-affected regions may be an underestimated phenomenon. Another author makes parallels between the experience of child abuse and experiencing a hostage situation (Mudaly & Goddard, 2001). Hence, while migratory adjudications generally focus more on communal forms of violence (such as war, political persecution or community violence), perhaps greater attention should also be paid to the protection of migrant children who have experienced familial forms of maltreatment.

Cultural norms regarding the protection of one's family reputation may inhibit children from revealing experiences of abuse. Chan, Lam and Shae (2011) found that school age children in Hong Kong expressed reluctance to disclose hypothetical abuse situations because it might result in harm to a parent. Similarly, Fontes (2007) discusses the inhibiting effect on sexual abuse disclosure of culturally valued shame and honor in Latino families, while Berman notes that the children of domestically abused mothers experience feelings of "shame and embarrassment" regarding the violence in their homes (2000, p. 121). Furthermore, children may require the appropriate combination of opportunity, motive, and rapport in order to overcome the typical fear and discomfort in talking about a taboo and traumatic subject (Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt, & Tjersland, 2005).

This review of the relevant literature demonstrates a principal research emphasis on migrant children's protection needs outside of the home or family environment. While such a focus on external threats to children represents the more frequent childhood risks resulting in migration, it also overshadows the very real protection issues faced by a less visible population of children who have experienced abuse or neglect within the family or home. Furthermore, while extensive scholarly literature has examined how children discuss maltreatment in forensic

interviews with law enforcement (Katz & Barnetz, 2014; Schaeffer, Leventhal & Asnes, 2011; Leander, 2010; Evans, Roberts, Price & Stefek, 2010; Sayfan, Mitchell, Goodman, Eisen, Qin, 2008), very little academic literature has examined how migrant children discuss maltreatment in the context of the migration experience.

This article places its primary focus on migrant children from Central America and Mexico who discussed child maltreatment experiences as part of a research interview while in federal custody or supervision for immigration violations.   This research examines: the type of abuse described by the children; the demographics of the abused and the abusers; and at what point during the interview process the children revealed this information. This article asserts that migrant children may be reluctant to reveal experiences of maltreatment, and that they may not describe child maltreatment as an explicit migration motivator, even if the maltreatment warrants protective measures. The article concludes with implications for practice and migratory adjudications within a child protection framework.

Methods

The research examined here explored the question, "What do unaccompanied Central American and Mexican children say about child maltreatment?" This research is based on secondary data analysis of 85 qualitative interviews with unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, between the ages of 12 and 17. This author received permission from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Regional Office for Washington and the Caribbean, to analyze specific subsets of data as part of a program of research for a doctorate in social work.

The Original Research Study

This data set came from a larger dataset consisting of 404 interviews with male and female unaccompanied Central American and Mexican children between the ages of 12 and 17. The interviews were conducted by UNHCR in 2013, in order to study the root causes of migration to the United States by this population of children. This author was employed by UNHCR as a Senior Research Consultant, along with three other research interviewers, all of whom were female. Interviews with Central American children were conducted at U.S. government-funded residential facilities for migrant children who had been taken into federal custody for immigration violations, while potential relative caregivers in the U.S. were being located and assessed. Interviews occurred at facilities clustered in the following areas: Phoenix, AZ; Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Jose, CA; Chicago, IL; Brownsville, Harlingen, Houston, and San Antonio, TX. The majority of Mexican children were interviewed in U.S. Border Patrol detention facilities in the Rio Grande Valley area of South Texas, close to the border with Mexico.

Semi-structured interviews in Spanish, using both open-ended and closed-ended questions, were conducted in pairs, with one interviewer asking the interview questions while the other interviewer typed the child's responses into an iPad with a separate keyboard. Interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes; one team took notes in Spanish, and the other team took notes in English with simultaneous translation by a native Spanish speaker. The U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement granted UNHCR permission to conduct the interviews within its shelter programs, and the U.S. Customs and Border Protection approved the UNHCR interviews within the U.S. Border Patrol stations.

Children were randomly selected, after narrowing census lists down to those who were originally from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, between the ages of 12 and 17, and in residence for five days or more in order to acclimate. Facility staff could also exclude participants due to a child's mental health issues. Researchers used non-proportional quota sampling in order to reach 100 interviews from each nationality, while proportional quota sampling was used with respect to gender, in order to approximate the gender proportions of each nationality within ORR custody. Overall, 77% of the interviewed children were male, while 23% were female. Within nationalities, the gender distribution ranged from a low of 4% female among Mexican youth interviewed, to a high of 35% female among Salvadoran youth interviewed. The gender imbalance among Mexican unaccompanied children warrants further study beyond the mere recognition of it here.

Protection of Human Participants

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, Minnesota) reviewed and approved this secondary data analysis using an exempt review process. The IRB required that the data be de-identified by removing interview numbers, the names that the children asked to be called during the interview (only a first name was recorded), and the children's hometown.

Prior to beginning the original research, UNHCR employed two methods of review as a protection for human participants, and in an effort to mimic the IRB process of academic institutions. First, UNHCR shared its methodology and research instruments with 14 external professionals having expertise in working with migrant children; this resulted in modifications to the research plan and questionnaire. In addition, UNHCR shared its methodology and research instruments with the UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Services office, as well as the

UNHCR Child Protection office, both located in the organization's Geneva headquarters. Feedback was incorporated into the methodology and the interview questions.

Informed consent procedures occurred in both group and individual formats, as well as orally and in writing. Interviewers held "charlas" (chats, or small group discussions) with groups of 5-7 children, in order to provide an overview of the research project, describe the voluntariness of participation, and to give children an opportunity to ask questions. Children who wished to participate then met individually with the interviewing pair, in order to reiterate verbally and in writing the child's right to voluntarily participating, to stopping the interview or taking a break, to answering whichever questions the child wanted, and to speaking with a shelter counselor afterwards if desired. Children were also informed that their information would be kept confidential, except in situations where they revealed that someone was currently hurting them, that they wished to hurt someone else, or that they wished to hurt themselves, in which case the interviewers would be obligated to share the information in order to seek help and to protect the child or others.

Children were informed that the interview data would be used to write a report that could help other children like themselves. Furthermore, they were informed that the interview might make them sad by talking about their home country; on the other hand, it might also make them feel some relief by talking about their experiences with another person. Children were told that the interviews would have no impact on their immigration cases, nor on the family reunification process. Possible beneficiaries of the research might be other migrant children like themselves.

Data Analysis

The data set was received as an Excel spreadsheet consisting of 85 interviews. Each interview was a separate row of data, with each column representing responses to a separate

question. This subset of data consisted of interviews which had previously been coded for a reference to child abuse and neglect. Since this author was part of the original interview process, the original data analysis, and the prior report writing process, this secondary analysis employed "elaborative coding" by building on constructs from the prior research (Saldaña 2009, p. 168), and only using interviews previously coded for maltreatment. The analysis in this article elaborates on themes identified during the original data analysis for the report, *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection* (UNHCR, 2014).

The data were selectively coded by reading through each interview to seek out responses in which the children mentioned experiences of abuse or neglect. Standardized definitions of child abuse and neglect, with some modifications, were adopted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Child Maltreatment Surveillance: Uniform Definitions for Public Health and Recommended Data Elements, Version 1.0* (Leeb et al., 2008; hereafter referred to as the "CDC definitions"), a collaborative document developed, "to promote consistent terminology and data collection related to child maltreatment" (Leeb et al., 2008, p. iv). The categories described in the CDC definitions included: abuse categories of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse; along with neglect categories of failure to provide (physical neglect, emotional neglect, medical/dental neglect, educational neglect), and failure to supervise (inadequate supervision, exposure to violent environments). Codes used for this study included: physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, physical neglect, violent exposure, educational neglect, and abandonment (see Table 1). Physical neglect, educational neglect, and violent exposure, were only noted in combination with other maltreatment codes. Neglect was not considered in the original child maltreatment coding of the entire dataset, since many

children experienced poverty and deprivation. The category "abandonment" was added, despite

its absence from the CDC definitions, since children themselves mentioned abandonment either

by name or by circumstance (e.g. 17-year-old Salvadoran female, "My mother abandoned me

when she left my father when I was nine."). The categories "medical/dental neglect" and

"inadequate supervision" were not used in this study, due to their virtual absence in the

children's responses. This raises a separate area of potential research in looking at children's

views of the child maltreatment categories created by adults. Judging by the credentials listed by

the "Reviewers and Panel Members" names for the CDC definitions (Leeb et al., 2008, p. v), it

seems unlikely that any children or youth participated in the process.

Table 1

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4" align="center">Child Maltreatment Categories
From the CDC, <i>Child Maltreatment Surveillance: Uniform Definitions for Public Health and Recommended Data Elements, Version 1.0</i></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td align="center">CDC Terms</td><td align="center">Coding Terms Used in This Research</td><td align="center">Explanation of Differences</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Child Abuse (Acts of Commission)</td><td>Physical abuse</td><td>"Physical abuse"</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Sexual abuse</td><td>"Sexual abuse"</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Psychological abuse</td><td>"Psychological abuse"</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="8">Child Neglect (Acts of Omission)</td><td colspan="3">Failure to provide</td></tr>
<tr><td>• <i>Physical neglect</i></td><td>"Physical neglect"</td><td>Used only in combination with other categories, since it was not mentioned by the children in this dataset;</td></tr>
<tr><td>• <i>Emotional neglect</i></td><td>"Psychological abuse"</td><td>Combined with "psychological abuse" category, due to difficulty in distinguishing psychological abuse and emotional neglect based on the information available</td></tr>
<tr><td>• <i>Medical/dental neglect</i></td><td>Not used</td><td>Not mentioned explicitly by the children in this dataset</td></tr>
<tr><td>• <i>Educational neglect</i></td><td>"Educational neglect"</td><td>Used only in combination with other categories (e.g. physical abuse + educational neglect), since this category was not coded in the original data analysis</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Failure to supervise</td></tr>
<tr><td>• <i>Inadequate supervision</i></td><td>Not used</td><td>Not mentioned explicitly by the children in this dataset</td></tr>
<tr><td>• <i>Exposure to violent environments</i></td><td>"Violent exposure"</td><td>Used when children mentioned domestic violence between parents or caregivers; not used in relation to gang, cartel or community violence UNLESS the child had also experienced another category of child maltreatment</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="3">Added Categories</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td>"Abandonment"</td><td>Not explicitly included in CDC categories, but was mentioned by children; combines all aspects of "Failure to Provide"</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td>"Domestic Violence"</td><td>Used for girls who were "acompañado," or living with boyfriends, whom they often referred to as "marido" or husband, even if not legally married</td></tr>
</table>

Excel spreadsheet cells were highlighted in yellow when a child mentioned an experience of child abuse or neglect (e.g. a 14-year-old Mexican male who responded to question 16aa regarding how much schooling the child had completed, "I was in middle school until a few months ago. I left school because I didn't get along with my father's wife. She would get angry at me and scold me all the time because I am not her son. So I left my father's house and I haven't gone back to school. I left my father's house five months ago."). Cells which included data that might be relevant to the abuse, but that did not explicitly mention abuse, were highlighted in orange (e.g. this same 14-year-old Mexican male responded to question 15a regarding where else he has lived since he was born, "I lived with my father and step-mother until five months ago. But I had problems with my step-mother, so I decided to leave and go live with my cousin in another part of [the city].")

After this first review of the data, the author commenced a second round of coding to classify the type of abuse, the reported abuser, the number of the interview question(s) in which the child revealed the abuse. Since some children disclosed multiple abusers, this section had up to four abusers coded (e.g. the same 14-year-old Mexican male mentioned above also spoke of his father's abuse in response to question 34 about whether anyone had made him suffer, "My mother died in a car accident when I was two. My father has been with his wife for seven years, and she has always mistreated me. She beats me and tells me I am not her son. My father also beat me and told me that he didn't know why he had brought me into this world if he didn't even want me.")

During a third review of the data, this author examined these children's responses to five questions regarding migration reasons and protection concerns. Responses were counted and classified by gender, in order to consider when children disclosed maltreatment.

Findings

Demographics of the Dataset

The dataset to be examined for this study contained 85 interviews that had previously been coded as containing references to child maltreatment (abuse or neglect). After reviewing the content of all 85 interviews, eight cases were excluded from this analysis due to a narrower reliance on solely the written interview record (without using researcher knowledge beyond the written record), leaving 77 interviews for analysis.

Although girls represented 22.5% of the overall interview population, they represented 45% (35 females) of the children who had reported child maltreatment, compared to males who comprised 77.5% of the overall sample but only 55% (42 males) of the children who mentioned child maltreatment. Guatemalan children (22%) and Honduran children (21%) had the highest rates of reported maltreatment, followed by Salvadorans with 18% of children mentioning some form of child maltreatment. Mexican children had the lowest rate of abuse and neglect, with 15% mentioning it during their interviews. Given the low number of Mexican females in this sample (only 4), and the higher rate of child maltreatment among females, it is possible that the overall rate of reported abuse among Mexican children skewed lower, in part, due to the underrepresentation of females in this sample. Two out of the four Mexican girls interviewed mentioned maltreatment experiences. Since Mexican children are more commonly and rapidly returned to their home country, compared to their Central American counterparts, it is also possible that the few Mexican children who were interviewed in an ORR-funded shelter, rather than returned to Mexico within 72 hours, were more likely to have experienced some type of protection concern such as child maltreatment.

Guatemalan females had the highest rate of child maltreatment at 43% (9 females who mentioned abuse out of 21 Guatemalan females interviewed), compared with 38% of Salvadoran females (14 out of 37), and 34% of Honduran females (10 out of 29) who revealed abuse. Salvadoran youth revealed the largest maltreatment gender gap, with only 7% of Salvadoran males (5 out of 67) discussing maltreatment in the home, compared to 16% of Guatemalan males and 16% of Honduran males revealing similar information. Such data indicates a much higher rate of female maltreatment within the home for all three Central American nationalities (not including Mexican females due to the small sample size).

While the entire original dataset was nearly evenly split between urban and rural backgrounds (UNHCR, 2014, p. 62), among this data subset—of children who mentioned child maltreatment—a higher percentage were urban, with 58% urban and 42% rural. In addition, while females were more likely to have come from urban areas in the complete dataset (54% of females were urban compared to 47% of males), males and females make up more even percentages of the urban and rural populations among those who mentioned maltreatment: 60% of females and 56% of maltreated males were urban, while 40% of females and 44% of males were rural. These gender breakdowns suggest that, among this population, those who came from urban settings have a higher likelihood of maltreatment, and that this holds true across both genders.

Among this data subset, there were quite similar responses to the question, "Did you grow up in the same place you were born," with a little less than half saying "yes" (N=38), and little more than half responding "no" (N=40). This could suggest that children who move around are not necessarily more likely to experience child maltreatment than children who live in one place their entire lives.

Reported Abuse and Abusers

Within the 77 interviews analyzed, 40% (31 children) spoke of at least two incidences of maltreatment. Seven children spoke of at least three experiences of maltreatment (each abuse experience perpetrated by a different adult), six of whom were female.

Abuse (acts of commission) was mentioned far more than neglect (acts of omission) at a rate of more than 4:1, thus the term "abuse" is used in this article to cover all forms of maltreatment discussed. The most frequently cited type of abuse was physical abuse, with 53 instances mentioned (see Table 2). Psychological abuse by a family member was mentioned 40 times. Sexual abuse was disclosed 18 times—all but once by females, while abandonment by a parent or primary caregiver was mentioned 15 times. Eight girls also described situations of domestic violence, in which a live-in boyfriend became abusive. By contrast, exposure to domestic violence between parents was mentioned by three boys, who discussed the violence of a father towards their mothers.

Table 2

Abuse type	Total by Gender		El Salvador		Guatemala		Honduras		Mexico		TOTAL*
TYPES OF ABUSE MENTIONED BY CHILDREN											
					Nationality and Gender						
Child's Gender	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	
Physical Abuse	18 / 53	35	11	5	3	10	3	6	1	14	53
Sexual Abuse**	17 / 18	1	8	0	3	0	6	1	0	0	18
Psychological Abuse	21 / 40	19	9	3	6	4	3	7	3	5	40
Physical Neglect	1 / 2	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
Educational Neglect	2 / 2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Violent Exposure	0 / 3	3	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	3
Abandonment	7 / 15	8	2	1	2	3	3	3	0	1	15
Domestic Violence	8 / 8	0	2	0	2	0	3	0	1	0	8
TOTAL	74	67	32	9	19	18	18	19	5	21	141

* Totals equal more than the total number of children's interviews analyzed, since children reported some abusers as inflicting more than one type of abuse (e.g. a 17-year-old Salvadoran girl who said that her mother beat her and also did not believe that her stepfather tried to rape her on multiple occasions; this was coded as physical abuse and psychological abuse by the mother, and sexual abuse by the stepfather).
**This number does not include five additional rapes mentioned by girls that did not occur within the home/family environment.

The 77 children spoke of maltreatment by at least 121 individuals, consisting of 81 men and 38 women, and two abusers whose gender was not stated (e.g. "I was abused by someone in my family.") Parents were the most frequent abusers, with about two times as many fathers named as mothers (see Table 3). Children reported 32 biological fathers and 9 stepfathers as the source of some form of maltreatment. A 16-year-old Salvadoran girl told the UNHCR interviewers: "My father beat me for my whole life. Even before I was born, he would hit my

mother when she was pregnant with me. He drank when he was drunk, and when he was sober.

Anytime he got angry with me, he would hit me or beat me with a belt."

Mothers were reported as abusive at about half the rate of fathers, with 17 biological

mothers and 4 stepmothers mentioned as abusive. For example, a 15-year-old Honduran boy

reported: "No one paid attention to me. My mother told me that I was worthless and she didn't

understand why I had been born. I started thinking bad things. I cut myself, I cut words into my

arms. I tried to cut my vein, but then I started thinking about my sisters, and I didn't do it. I

decided to live my life for them." An additional three children referred to abuse by "parents"

indicating that both mother and father were abusive, including a 16-year-old girl who lived with

an adoptive family in Guatemala: "They would hit me, my adoptive family, and they did not treat

me well…They just sent me to work, and they would take away the money by force. They would

hit me for this reason."

The next most common category of reported abusers were live-in boyfriends, whose

abuse was mentioned by nine girls (and no boys), including this 16-year-old from Honduras:

"My boyfriend would yell at me. He was fine when we first got together. After four months, we

decided to move in together. I got pregnant immediately. Then he changed. He started screaming

at me and treating me badly."

Additional maltreatment was attributed to grandmothers (9), such as this 12-year-old boy

from Honduras: "My grandmother also mistreated me. She was mean to me. She told me to leave

the house, but where was I supposed to go? The only place I could come was here [the U.S.]. She

forced me and my siblings to work…She was angry because I didn't stay with her at first when

my mother left [for the U.S.]…She told me I had no voice in the house. It hurt my heart when

she said that." In addition, six uncles, five brothers, three aunts, two grandfathers, and a group of cousins, were also reported by the children as abusive.

Table 3

WHO THE CHILDREN REPORTED AS BEING ABUSIVE
WITHIN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

GENDER		RELATIONSHIPS	# OF ABUSERS
	Both	"Parents," "Grandparents," adoptive parents	5 men + 5 women = 10
	Male	Father (32 bio-fathers + 9 stepfathers)	41
		Boyfriend, common law husband, "marido"	9
		Uncle	6
		Brother	5
		Grandfather	2
		Cousins	1
		Other relationship, or identity unclear (e.g. employer or employer's son for girls providing live-in domestic help; father of a substitute caregiver; neighbor; "relatives"; live-in friend; smugglers; unknown rapist)	12
		TOTAL MEN =	76 + 5 = 81
	Female	Mother (14 bio-mothers + 6 stepmothers + 1 foster mother)	21
		Grandmother	9
		Aunt	3
		TOTAL WOMEN = 33 + 5 =	38
	Unclear	Gender unclear or grouped ("relatives," "they," "I was abused by someone in my family")	2
		TOTAL:	**81 + 38 + 2 = 121**

When Children First Disclosed Abuse

The interview included five questions related to children's reasons for migration. The first question was intended to elicit children's explicit reasons for migration and included the questions: (1) Why did you want to leave your country?; (2) Were there any other reasons? This second question was asked until children had no additional reasons to add.

These questions were followed by three additional questions regarding suffering, harm, and danger: (3) Has anyone ever made you suffer at some point in your country?; (4) Has anyone ever caused you harm at some point in your country?; (5) Have you ever been in danger at some

point in your country? This set of questions was intended to draw out potential protection

concerns that children may not associate with migration, or that children may need more

encouragement to discuss. For example, children might state that their reason for migrating was

to join a relative in the U.S., while also having experiences of violence, oppression, or

persecution that led the child, or the child's family, to make plans for the child to join the relative

in the U.S. By analyzing responses to these individual questions, it was possible to examine

which children spoke about their abuse as a reason for leaving their country, and which children

spoke about their abuse as a form of suffering, harm, or danger.

Twenty-two children *first* disclosed having experienced abuse in response to the question,

"Why did you want to leave your country?", and another 13 disclosed in response to the follow-

up question, "Were there any other reasons?" In addition, 14 children first revealed abuse in

response to the question, "Has anyone made you suffer at some point in your country?", and an

additional 10 children first revealed abuse in response to the inquiry, "Has anyone caused you

harm at some point in your country?" Only one child first disclosed abuse in response to the

question, "Have you ever been in danger at some point in your country?" (see Table 4a). Overall,

girls were more likely than boys to disclose abuse in response to the first two questions, as well

as to the later question regarding danger. The highest rates of disclosure were in response to the

question about suffering, and why children left their countries of origin.

Thirty-three children (21 female, 12 male) spoke of two or more abusers, often revealing

one experience in response to one type of question, and additional abusers in response to other

questions. While this sample consists of 77 children who disclosed some type of abuse,

altogether they discussed 141 instances of maltreatment, indicative of both multiple experiences

of abuse and differing ways of discussing it with an interviewer.

Beyond these maltreatment references mentioned above, an additional 17 children revealed their initial reference to abuse in response to some question *other than* the five questions discussed above, suggesting that children will not all respond to the same questions in the same way, and that different types of questions may be necessary for some children to feel comfortable discussing maltreatment. For example, a 17-year-old Honduran girl responded to a question early in the interview, regarding other places she had lived since birth, by saying: "When I was less than two I lived with my mother, and my stepfather was abusive and my mom left me with my grandfather. After that, my mother left and she never came back until I was about fourteen years old. Finally, when I was fifteen, she called me, but she did not come to visit me or anything." Later in the interview she reveals that she had been raped four times walking home from work, and that her mother stayed with an abusive partner. This interview was coded for abuse by stepfather, and abandonment by mother. In theory, there might also be abandonment by biological father, but abandonment coding was limited to instances that children themselves identified a caregiver as abandoning them.

Girls demonstrated more willingness to disclose abuse to the earliest question about reasons for leaving home. Boys demonstrated a higher likelihood of disclosing abuse as a form of suffering or harm, perhaps indicating that for some youth abuse is viewed as something to be endured more so than a reason to flee. These questions are also a compelling reminder of the importance of giving children multiple opportunities to reveal abuse, and varied questions that consider abuse from multiple perspectives.

Table 4

**Number of <u>CHILDREN</u> who <u>FIRST</u> Disclosed Some Form of Maltreatment
In Response To These Questions ***

Question posed to child	"Why did you want to leave your country?"		"Were there any other reasons?"		"Has anyone made you suffer at some point in your country?"		"Has anyone harmed you at some point in your country?"		"Have you ever been in danger at some point in your country?"		Other question	
Gender	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**
	12	10	9	4	3	11	2	8	1	0	8	9
TOTAL	22		13		14		10		1		17	

* This chart counts individual children, not incidents of abuse, so the number of total incidents of abuse is larger than the number of children counted here. In addition, this chart counts their first disclosure, though children may have referenced an incident in response to later questions as well.

Considering these children's responses in this way also reinforces that some children's stories of maltreatment may initially be missed in interviews, whether due to the type of questions asked, the dynamics of the interview, or the child's reticence to discuss painful topics. Within children's reasons for leaving home, 22 children who revealed abuse in response a direct question about "Why did you want to leave your country?" while 13 children waited for the additional prompt, "Were there any other reasons?" before discussing abuse, and another 42 first mentioned abuse in response to a different type of question.

Discussion

This research examined what migrant children say about maltreatment within the home or family environment, with a particular focus on: the type of abuse and abusers reported; when children disclosed abuse; and where children ranked abuse among their reasons for leaving home.

Gender and Maltreatment

The most striking findings relate to gender with respect to several measures. First, gender was relevant to the *reported experience of maltreatment overall*, with girls reporting maltreatment at a much higher rate than boys. In this study population, 38% of girls (35 out of 91) revealed maltreatment compared to only 14% of boys (42 out of 313). Children from all four countries revealed broadly similar rates of abuse, ranging from a low of 15% of Mexican children (15 out of 102), to a high of 22% of Guatemalan children (22 out of 100). In addition, 21% of Honduran children (and 21 out of 98) and 18% of Salvadoran children (19 out of 104) reported abuse. It should be noted that Mexican youth had the lowest representation of girls among interview participants (only 4 females out of 102 Mexican youth interviewed), which may account for their lower rate of reported abuse. Girls were also more likely to experience multiple abusers, with 21 females and 12 males discussing maltreatment experiences with two or more abusers. Although U.S. maltreatment data is based on a study population from a different national cultural context, federally-compiled U.S. maltreatment data also demonstrates that older girls—ages 11 to 17—experience maltreatment at a higher rate than their male peers, however this trend is reversed among boys below the age of five, who experience maltreatment at a higher rate than girls (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

Second, the *gender gap by nationality* was notable in the reported experience of maltreatment, with Salvadoran girls having the largest gap compared to their male peers, with only 7% of Salvadoran boys mentioning abuse or neglect within the home, compared to 38% of female Salvadorans interviewed. Guatemalan and Honduran girls experienced more than twice the rate of abuse compared to their male peers, with 43% of Guatemalan girls disclosing

maltreatment, along with 34% of Honduran girls. The sample of Mexican girls was too small to

be reliable, though two of the four Mexican girls interviewed also mentioned abuse.

Third, gender had bearing on the *type* of abuse reported. Females experienced sexual

abuse (17 reports) and domestic violence (8 reports) nearly exclusively, with only one additional

male reporting sexual abuse by a peer with whom he was living temporarily. It is possible that

this comparably low reporting rate by males indicates the stigma for young men in disclosing

sexual abuse, many of whom do not disclose until adulthood (Easton, 2013). Females reported

psychological abuse at a slightly higher rate (21 reports of psychological abuse by females,

compared to 19 reports by males). Abandonment was mentioned by a similar number males and

females (7 females and 8 males), but due to the smaller proportion of females interviewed, this

represents a higher rate of reported abandonment by girls. Although male reports of physical

abuse were greater (35 male reports compared to 18 female reports), this still represents a higher

proportional rate of physical abuse for females in this sample (20% of females overall reported

experiencing physical abuse, compared to 11% of males).

U.S. maltreatment data from 2014 indicate that 75% of reported child maltreatment cases

were for neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016), demonstrating the

important distinction between reports made by adults and reports made by children themselves.

In this study, physical neglect was only noted in two cases in which some other type of abuse

was identified first. Neglect is the most subjective type of maltreatment and implies a

comparison with the care provided to other children in the community. Lavi and Katz (2016)

found, in their analysis of forensic interviews with children who had experienced neglect, that all

of the children had difficulty identifying the reported neglect. Thus, children may not be able to

identify neglect themselves, or they may identify neglect as a form of psychological

maltreatment, such as a lack of support, as noted by this 17-year-old Honduran male: "I never

had the support of my parents." Leaving out neglect, the next highest U.S. form of maltreatment

in 2016 was physical abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016), which is

consistent with the findings in this study. This was followed in the U.S. data by sexual abuse and

then psychological maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

However, the data from this study of Central American youth finds a higher incidence of

psychological abuse than of sexual abuse. This may be partly attributed to the single interview

conducted and that some children require a greater level of comfort and rapport in order to reveal

sexual abuse.

Fourth, gender also proved to be significant in relation to *abusers*, with males named as

abusers at more than twice the rate of females. Eighty-two men were named as abusers (of both

boys and girls), compared to 38 women. Biological fathers and stepfathers made up a little less

than half of the men named as abusers (41 fathers out of 81 men overall), while biological

mothers and stepmothers made up a little more than half of the female abusers, at 21 of the 38

named female abusers. Fewer types of females were abusers (mothers, grandmothers, aunts)

compared to males (fathers, grandfathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, boyfriends). U.S. federal

data on perpetrators, identified by 18 state-level child protective service systems, found that men

comprised slightly less than half of child abuse perpetrators, while a little more than half (51%)

of male perpetrators were fathers (U.S.. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). The

findings from this study reveal a higher percentage of male abusers when compared to U.S. data,

but a similar rate of abuse by fathers. The absence of neglect reports in this dataset may

underestimate the overall number of female perpetrators, since women are more often in a

caregiving role and therefore have a higher likelihood of neglect.

Thus, gender appears associated in this study with both the abused and the abuser, with females in this population more likely to experience abuse, and males more likely to be the abuser. It is unclear how much this population represents the experiences of their broader national populations. It is possible that maltreated children are more likely to migrate. However, as discussed in more detail below, not all maltreated children associate their maltreatment with their reasons for leaving home.

These gendered aspects of child maltreatment have implications for those who work with child migrants. Professionals providing social services or legal services to migrant children should inquire about child maltreatment experiences, recognizing that children may reveal abuse in varied ways and at varied times. Adjudicators should recognize that children revealing maltreatment later than expected, or in follow up interviews rather than original interviews, or after developing a greater degree of comfort and rapport with particular adults, may be indicative of the child's sense of appropriate timing rather than indicative of fabrication.

When Children Disclosed

Children spoke of maltreatment experiences in response to different types of inquiries, underscoring that a variety of questions may be necessary to encourage children to reveal maltreatment. This research demonstrates that it is not unusual for children to disclose abuse in their own unique ways and in response to different prompts. For example, a 14-year-old Guatemalan girl said that she left her home because, "I wanted to, like I said, come see this country, work. I wanted to help my mom. Work pays better in the United States." After a few additional inquiries, she answered the question of whether she had ever been in danger by saying, "My father drank a lot and used drugs. He threatened to kill me." This interview provides

a poignant example that while she had experienced potentially life threatening danger from her own father, she did not include this initially among her reasons for migrating.

Thirty-five children first revealed maltreatment in response to questions about their reasons for migration, while 25 disclosed this in response to questions about their experiences of suffering, harm or danger. An additional 17 children first discussed maltreatment elsewhere during the interview, often in response to a question prompting children to describe or explain a *change in their circumstances* (e.g. in response to questions about with whom they lived, where they lived, the amount of schooling they had completed, etc.). These findings have larger interviewing implications by demonstrating the importance for interviewers to identify transitions and changes in children's circumstances (e.g. moving, changing caregivers, changing schools, going to work, etc.) as having the potential to prompt stories of maltreatment or other protection issues. When children mention such changes in circumstances, interviewers should be alert to the fact that such narrative details may warrant further inquiry, particularly when considering protection issues (e.g. "What caused you to move from living with your parents to living with your grandparents?" or "Why did your schooling stop after sixth grade?" or "What led to you working at the age of eight?").

These findings have particular relevance to immigration adjudicators—whether immigration judges, asylum officers, or other immigration officials—as a reminder that children may not reveal maltreatment experiences in the manner that adults deem the most convenient, appropriate, timely, or logical. Indeed, children may conceal or reveal maltreatment information in ways that are contrary to their own interests, such as withholding maltreatment information in interviews when it would support a claim for protection or sharing maltreatment details at a point when it seems to contradict earlier versions of a child's story. Such situations should not

automatically be viewed with suspicion or as undermining a child's credibility. In reality, a child's reticence to discuss such topics may merely confirm how painful, shameful, or difficult the subject is for the child to communicate. It may take more time for some children to willingly speak of such experiences, or to recognize maltreatment as outside the norms of caregiving behavior.

Children in this sample disclosed abuse in varied ways—sometimes directly, sometimes tangentially, and sometimes after multiple opportunities. Undoubtedly, some children chose not to reveal their experiences of maltreatment (e.g., the boy who said only that his father kept a metal rod in the corner of the house, in case he ever needed it, but the boy would not say what his father did with the rod; or two children from the same household, interviewed separately, in which one child revealed a near-death experience at the hands of a relative, while the other child from the same household displayed very flat affect and spoke only of coming to join a relative in the U.S., but said nothing about dynamics in the household they had left behind). Children may require multiple prompts, or multiple entry questions, or multiple meetings in order to reveal abuse experiences.

These interviews demonstrate that children reveal abuse in both predictable and unpredictable ways. Some speak of it directly, in ways that may be expected by adults, while others appear more comfortable approaching the topic from a tangential subject. Only 29% of the children who disclosed abuse did so in response to the direct question, "Why did you want to leave your country?" (representing only 5% of the total sample of 404 unaccompanied children) suggesting that children may not directly connect maltreatment with migration motivation. For children who are reluctant to discuss the topic, or who are uncertain about how the topic will be received, an indirect reference may seem like a safer way to test the waters. Children may be

gauging whether the interviewer will pick up on the cues, or respond in a harsh, indifferent, or supportive manner. In this way, some children may be subtly observing their questioner, at the same time that they are being observed themselves. Interviewers of migrant children, including migration advocates and immigration adjudicators, should keep in mind that children's revelations of maltreatment are not solely dependent upon a child's experience of maltreatment, but also upon the interviewer's ability to invite or encourage children to discuss such difficult topics. Put another way, the child may be assessing the interviewer while the interviewer is assessing the child.

Strengths and Limitations

This article examined a little-researched phenomenon: child maltreatment among unaccompanied migrant children. This research is strengthened by the unique dataset available through the cooperation of UNHCR. For understandable reasons, unaccompanied children are difficult to access for research purposes. By using secondary analysis to study an existing dataset, this research builds on prior work, limits additional interviews with a group of vulnerable children, and maximizes the research knowledge from prior interviews with this hard to reach population (Schmidt, 2017b).

Limitations of this research include its reliance on previous coding for abuse and neglect, from which this subset of interviews was selected. Though access to the entire dataset was not available, this researcher participated in the original interview and data analysis process. Maltreatment details in these interviews are generally limited, and in some cases unclear, since this topic was not the primary focus of the original research. Furthermore, children's participation and responses were voluntary, and in some cases children did not wish to provide further details. Nonetheless, the abuse and neglect incidents recounted by this group of children

provide a textured portrayal of the maltreatment experiences of migrant Central American and Mexican youth.

Conclusion

Professionals working with unaccompanied children from Central America and Mexico should be alert to gendered risks that are different for girls and boys. This article found that Central American girls demonstrated a higher risk than boys of maltreatment within the home or family environment, and that their abusers have a higher likelihood of being male. Girls in this sample also experienced a far higher rate of sexual abuse and domestic violence than boys. Boys experienced physical abuse more than any other form of maltreatment, nonetheless, like psychological abuse and abandonment these were all experienced by girls at a higher rate than boys since girls only made of 23% of the overall sample. This study did not examine children's reports of risks *outside* the home (e.g. gangs, cartels, crime, corruption, community violence, etc.), which have been discussed in greater detail in the UNHCR reports *Children on the Run* (2014), and *Women on the Run* (2015). While Central American and Mexican girls and boys face a variety of risks both inside and outside the home, this research suggests that girls may face more risks inside the home than boys.

Furthermore, girls in the population studied were more likely than boys to associate their maltreatment experiences with their reasons for migrating, while boys were more likely to consider maltreatment as a form of suffering or harm, perhaps suggesting that it is viewed as something to be endured. While 29% of unaccompanied children in this study disclosed maltreatment in response to a direct question regarding children's reasons for leaving home, plus another 17% in response to further probing regarding this same question, nearly one-third of children (32%) revealed abuse in response to questions about experiences of suffering, harm, or

danger, and an additional 22% of children revealed abuse elsewhere in the interview in response

to questions not intended to elicit such information. This may indicate a reticence to discuss

maltreatment experiences and the need for a variety of questions, or multiple meetings, to allow

children to reveal maltreatment in their own way. It may also signal that not all children, boys in

particular, associate maltreatment experiences in the home with migration motivation.

Furthermore, recognizing transition experiences within a child's narrative may also help

interviewers to identify possible indicators of maltreatment (such as a change in school, home,

caregiver, etc.). On the whole, providing children with multiple avenues through which to tell

their stories, combined with sensitivity to children's cues, may be an interviewer's greatest assets

in helping children to feel comfortable enough to discuss difficult subjects such as maltreatment.

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"They need to give us a voice":[2]

Lessons from Listening to Unaccompanied Central American and Mexican Children on Helping Children Like Themselves

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Executive Summary

Children make up half of the world's refugees, yet limited research documents the views of youth about migratory causes and recommendations. While there is wide recognition of migrant children's right to free expression, few opportunities exist to productively exercise that right and provide input about their views. This article analyzes the responses of Central American and Mexican migrant children to one interview question regarding how to help youth like themselves, and identifies several implied "no-win" situations as potential reasons for the migration decisions of unaccompanied children. Furthermore, the children's responses highlight the interconnected nature of economics, security, and education as migratory factors. Examination of children's political speech revealed primarily negative references regarding their home country's government, the president, and the police. The police were singled out more than any other public figures, with particular emphasis on police corruption and ineffectiveness. Additional analysis focused on children's comments regarding migration needs and family.

Recommendations for future action include:

- Recognizing entwined motivations and no-win situations that may lead children to leave their countries of origin.

- Promoting integrated approaches to home country economic, security, and education concerns for Central American and Mexican youth.

- Acknowledging migrant children's political interests and concerns.

- Providing youth with meaningful opportunities to contribute their views and suggestions.

- Incorporating migrant children's input and concerns into spending plans for US aid appropriated for Central America.

- Emphasizing youth leadership development in efforts to address child migration.

Introduction

In 2015, children[4] comprised 51% of the globe's 21.3 million people seeking refuge in another country (United Nations General Assembly 2016; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2016a). Using a broader definition, UNICEF estimates that 65 million children are "on the move" due to global hostilities, poverty, climate events, or the pull of opportunities abroad (2016). Yet limited research documents the views of youth regarding migratory causes and recommendations (Global Refugee Youth Consultations 2016). This omission of youth perspectives ignores young people's rights to have a say in matters affecting them. Furthermore, it risks misunderstanding and misrepresenting what young people think about their circumstances, and it overlooks young people as potential resources and leaders in seeking solutions to the problems that affect them and, by extension, their communities. This article considers the central research question, "*What can we learn from the observations and recommendations of Central American and Mexican unaccompanied migrant children themselves?*" by analyzing the responses of Central American and Mexican migrant children to a question regarding how to help youth like themselves, and then concludes with policy and programming recommendations.

The United States witnessed unprecedented levels of Central American unaccompanied child migration in 2014 (ORR 2015; USBP 2015), short-term decreases in 2015 (Rosenblum & Ball 2016), followed by a return to increased Central American apprehensions at the Southern US Border that continue well above historical averages (USBP 2016; Burnett 2016). El Salvador and Honduras, with Guatemala close behind, trade positions at or near the top of lists of the

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[4] The terms children and youth are used here interchangeably to refer to individuals under age 18, although in practice the term "youth" is more nebulous. The United Nations Secretariat defines "youth" as young people between the ages of 15 and 24, however this is not universally observed across UN offices (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.; UNHCR, 2013).

world's most violent countries or the nations containing the most homicidal cities (The

Economist 2016; Watts 2015; Instituto Igarapé n.d.). Persistent gang violence in this region,

along with the push of economic strain and the pull of US opportunity (Donato & Sisk 2015;

Rosenblum 2015; UNHCR 2014a), seem to ensure that these migration patterns will continue for

some time. This relentless violence, combined with high levels of criminal impunity, lead to

mistrust of law enforcement to address security issues (Open Society Justice Initiative 2016;

Eguizábal, Ingram, Curtis, Korthuis, Olson & Phillips 2015).

Adding to existing literature reporting the reasons Central American and Mexican

children leave home (UNHCR 2014a & 2014b), this article examines previously unreported

children's responses regarding how to help child migrants like themselves. In analyzing the

children's own statements, this article also elevates the voices of youth as an important

component in responding to migration crises globally, concluding that youth views can add

nuance to understanding migration motivators and that in order to adequately respond to child

migration and ultimately prevent—or at least reduce—the need to migrate, national and

international policy makers must understand and integrate youth perspectives into the

development of effective solutions.

To that end, this article engages in secondary analysis of interview data with 404

unaccompanied Central American and Mexican teens, previously reported on in the publication,

Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the

Need for International Protection (2014a). This earlier report focused largely on data regarding

children's reasons for leaving their countries of origin, finding that at least 58% of the children

interviewed were potentially in need of international protection from organized armed criminal

actors or violence in the home (UNHCR 2014a). Hickey-Moody (2016), discussing the Dewey-

informed concept of "little public spheres" (p. 58), asks "What if young people could be included in the public realm? What would they say and how would they say it?" (p. 62). These 404 unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, provide valuable insight into their assessment of the problems that lead to youth migration and potential responses. In an era of global migration crises, their views deserve our attention.

Literature Review

A review of the relevant literature indicates both a recognition of migrant children's right to free expression, along with an acknowledgement of the limited practical opportunities to productively exercise that right and provide input about their views.

Youth Voice

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrines the right of children to express their views on matters affecting them, while Article 13 ensures their right to free expression (United Nations General Assembly 1989). Together these Articles establish the right of children to participate in circumstances in which they have an interest, while Article 3 clarifies that "the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration" (United Nations General Assembly 1989) in all actions that concern children. Thus, children have the right to give their opinion and to have their best interests prioritized in decisions concerning them.

Yet a systematic review by UNHCR of its youth engagement activities concluded that youth remain invisible within UNHCR structures and beyond (UNHCR 2013), while the organization continues its commitment to full age, gender, and diversity inclusion (UNHCR 2011). In a recent effort to mitigate this inattention to the particular needs and input of youth, UNHCR and the Women's Refugee Commission coordinated a series of 56 Global Refugee Youth Consultations in 22 countries, culminating in a final global consultation at UNHCR

headquarters in June 2016 (Gaynor 2016; Global Refugee Youth Consultations 2016). Such

efforts represent nascent steps towards incorporating the views of refugee youth into migration

policymaking.

A very limited academic literature focuses on the voices of Central American children

themselves, using narrative research with small sample sizes (Berman 2000; Bjørgo & Jensen

2015), anecdotal accounts (Georgopoulos 2005; Nazario 2014; Somers 2010), or grey literature

reports (UNHCR 2014a, 2014b; Rosenblum 2015). Anastario and co-authors contribute to such

literature through secondary analysis of governmental interviews with deported youth in El

Salvador, who indicated family reunification, economics, and insecurity as their primary reasons

for migrating in 2013 and 2014 (Anastario, Barrick, Gibbs, Pitts, Werth & Lattimore 2015). A

separate study in El Salvador, that gathered data directly from active and at-risk gang-involved

youth themselves, found that a low orientation towards the future, low levels of empathy,

combined with educational problems and peer relations with other delinquent or gang-involved

youth, presented significant risk factors for youth violence and misconduct (Olate, Salas-Wright

& Vaughn 2012). While small in scope, these studies suggest multifactorial explanations for both

youth who migrate, and for youth who become involved in the gangs that can cause other youth

to migrate. Oversimplified descriptions misstate the inherent complexities for both young people

who leave, and for young people who contribute to the dynamics causing others to leave.

Children and migration

Children's reasons for migration have been tied to their parents' migration patterns,

suggesting generational or cyclical trends (Donato & Sisk 2015), while also demonstrating

children's own agency within migration decisions (Khashu 2010; Somers 2010). Children's

approaches to migration differ from adult expectations, as they undertake less preparation and

undervalue migration risks (Khashu 2010), thus reminding policymakers that relying solely upon adult logic and priorities to understand youth behavior potentially overlooks the ways that maturity, age, experience, education, and access to resources, lead adults to understand things differently than young people.

US policy decisions may also influence children's migration. For example, a broad-based analysis of Mexican migration suggests that politically-motivated militarization of the US-Mexico border inadvertently locked migrant laborers within the US, so that family members had to migrate to the US to be reunited, thus initiating a "shift from sojourning to settlement" (Massey 2015, 286). Musalo and Lee (2017) convincingly argue that US policy has focused too much on an enforcement-based response to assumed pull factors while ignoring the significant protection-oriented push factors. This article's analysis of the children's responses suggests that clear theoretical distinctions between push and pull factors may be difficult to recognize in reality due to the intertwined nature of migration dynamics. Simplistic explanations risk underestimating the multilayered migratory reasoning that leads children to leave their countries of origin. Understanding children's own views adds necessary nuance to these complex dynamics.

Methods

Research Design

This article analyzes previously unpublished data based on responses to one interview question from a larger 2014 UNHCR study examining the root causes of unaccompanied child migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. UNHCR secured US government cooperation to conduct 404 qualitative interviews with youth ages 12 to 17 held in US federal custody. Central American children were primarily interviewed in shelter care

programs overseen by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the US Department of

Health and Human Services (HHS), and Mexican children were primarily interviewed in

detention holding areas of US Border Patrol stations near the Texas-Mexico border. This dataset

uniquely captures the perspectives of children for whom migration decisions and transit

experiences were still quite recent. In 2014, UNHCR published the report, *Children on the Run:*

Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International

Protection, focusing on children's reasons for migration.

Original Methodology

Potential participants were randomly selected from those children meeting the designated

nationality and age population characteristics. The gender breakdown averaged 77 percent male

and 23 percent female (intentionally mirroring the gender composition of unaccompanied

children in ORR custody), with nationality variations ranging from a low of 4% female among

Mexican youth interviewed, to a high of 35% female among Salvadoran youth interviewed.[5]

To mimic the institutional review board process existing within academic institutions,

UNHCR shared its research methodology and instruments with 14 external child migration

experts and subsequently integrated their recommendations. In addition, UNHCR's headquarters

level offices for Child Protection, and for Policy Development and Evaluation Services,

reviewed and commented on the research methodology and materials.

Potential participants received informed consent explanations in small groups and then

individually, including the children's rights to: participate voluntarily, terminate the interview,

decline to answer questions, speak with an on-site clinician following the interview, and expect

confidential treatment of their responses. Interviewers also explained the limits of confidentiality

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[5] The extreme gender imbalance among Mexican children present in the Border Patrol stations and federally-funded shelters warrants further exploration but is beyond the scope of this article.

in the event that a child reported that someone was harming him or her, that the child wanted to harm himself or herself, or that the child wanted to harm another person. Further, children were informed of the potential risks of and benefits from participation. Interviews were semi-structured, using a mix of closed ended and open-ended questions in a standard format. Interviewers were able to ask clarifying questions, or to modify the order of questions based upon how children wanted to tell their story.

Secondary Analysis

UNHCR granted this author access to several subsets of the *Children on the Run* interview data in order to consider the research question, "What can we learn from the observations and recommendations of Central American and Mexican unaccompanied migrant children for helping children like themselves?" Children's responses to the following question were analyzed: "¿Tienes ideas de cómo podemos mejor ayudar a otros jóvenes que salieron de sus países?" [Do you have ideas about how we can better help other youth who leave their countries?]. In some interviews, this question also included the variant, "What would have to be different for you to have stayed?" to help children consider what would have helped them, in order to also think about what would help others. Responses include a combination of particular and general observations and recommendations.

UNHCR requested and was granted permission to review this article's findings prior to publication, solely in order to ensure the data was used ethically and in a manner consistent with the consent forms signed by the children. For the analysis in this article, conducted independently of the UNHCR report, the Institutional Review Board of the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN) reviewed and approved the research plan.

Data was provided as an Excel spreadsheet and included 404 children's biographical data (gender, age, nationality) and responses to the question described above (access to the interviews in their entirety was not provided). Grounded theory data analysis involved an initial round of "elaborative coding" based on theoretical constructs familiar from the prior research (Saldaña 2009, 168), followed by axial coding to identify subthemes, and inter-related pattern coding focused on economics, security, and education, as well as politics, migration needs and family references (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña 2014). A random selection of coded data was reviewed by a colleague for inter-rater reliability, resulting in coding agreement and confidence in coded themes.

Findings

Children's responses to this one question incorporated a mix of their own needs and generalizations about the needs of others. An initial review for themes revealed recurring references to: economics; security; politics; education; migration needs; and family; along with several idiosyncratic comments. These responses were categorized and counted by gender and nationality for comparison purposes (see Table 1). Comments regarding the interaction of economics, security, and education (or more specifically work, gangs, and school) were extracted as pattern codes and analyzed separately.

Table 1

Primary Themes from Children's Responses To the Question, "Do you have ideas about how we can better help other youth that leave their countries?"

	Primary Themes*					
	Economics (Work / Poverty)	Security (Gangs / Cartels)	Politics (Government / Police / Corruption) **	Education (School / Scholarships)	Migration Needs (In transit / In US)	Family
Total References	**166**	**125**	**114**	**83**	**82**	**39**
By Country:						
• **El Salvador**	37	52	31	19	19	11
• **Guatemala**	51	18	21	27	22	6
• **Honduras**	46	37	26	21	20	17
• **Mexico**	32	18	36	16	21	5
By Gender (percentages as a portion of the total male or female population)						
• **Female (n=91)**	35 (38%)	31 (34%)	22 (24%)	16 (18%)	16 (18%)	14(15%)
• **Male (n=313)**	131 (42%)	94 (30%)	92 (29%)	67 (21%)	66 (21%)	25 (8 %)

*Children may have had responses in more than one category.
**Political comments are further broken down in Table 2.

In the abstract, the three elements of economics, security, and education, may be conceived of as different spheres of experience, but the interview results reveal that in the reality of these children's daily lives, they are inextricably linked. This is not uncommon. As Bhabha observes, "While human-rights instruments and discourse emphasize the importance of educational goals…most migrant adolescents aspire to employment opportunities as a precondition not a sequel to postprimary education…These two issues are often intertwined in the life of adolescent migrants" (2014, 247-248).

The observations of migrant children analyzed in this article add a third issue—security—as a serious danger that appears to be intertwined with education and employment motives underlying migration choices for the Central American and Mexican migrant youth participating in this study. These three domains of education, security, and economics, were frequently mentioned together, revealing their interrelated nature. The following responses demonstrate instances in which children mentioned all three domains in the same response. For example:

- *"They need better education. There aren't jobs that pay enough for someone to go to school.[6] Children don't go to school, instead they get involved with gangs and start robbing."* (17-year-old Honduran male)

- *"There you study, but there are no jobs. Because they can't get jobs, they think it's better to go to the street or the girls just start having children."* (17-year-old Salvadoran male)

- *"I don't know, if there were more police presence or more resources to create centers to help children to not get involved in gangs. Some kids say they don't want to study any more, or they don't want to work, they only work to earn money to buy cocaine or marijuana. Many young people, 17 years old, leave school so they can join the gangs. I think there should be some kind of center where they can go and get classes and have an option to not be involved in the gang."* (17-year-old Salvadoran female)

- *"There are people who don't have money to enroll their children in school. And when children don't go to school they end up in the cartels."* (17-year-old Mexican male)

- *"Many young people would study if they had the opportunity to, but to do that their parents need to work. Many young people can't keep studying because their parents don't have work. The gangs—sometimes people that don't like to work or can't find work, most of them destroy their families and get used to being on the street."* (17-year-old Guatemalan male)

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[6] Students may have to pay for a combination of tuition, textbooks, uniforms, community contributions, and/or other fees, as well as transportation (Bentaouett, 2006).

To grasp the warp and weft of these three intertwining elements, they were treated as pattern codes and mapped as separate visual displays arranged by nationality. Images of the Salvadoran and Guatemalan displays are included below to represent the most significant contrast in these visual displays.

Pattern coding revealed that children frequently mentioned economics, security, and education issues in relation to one another. For the children from El Salvador, the relational comments focused more on the connections between economics and security, and education and security (see Figure 1). Guatemalan children placed greater emphasis on the relationship between education and economics (see Figure 2). The comments from Honduran and Mexican children were more evenly distributed among all three domains

Figure 1: El Salvador

Visual Display Mapping Salvadoran Children's Comments Connecting Economics, Security, and Education
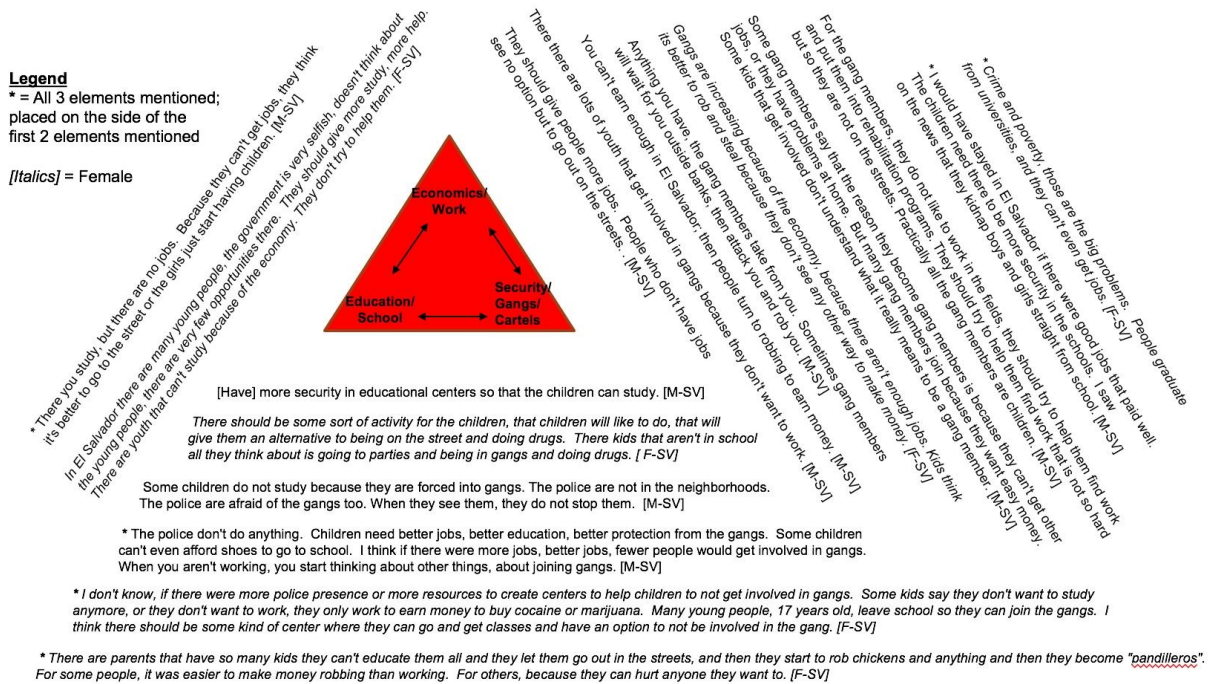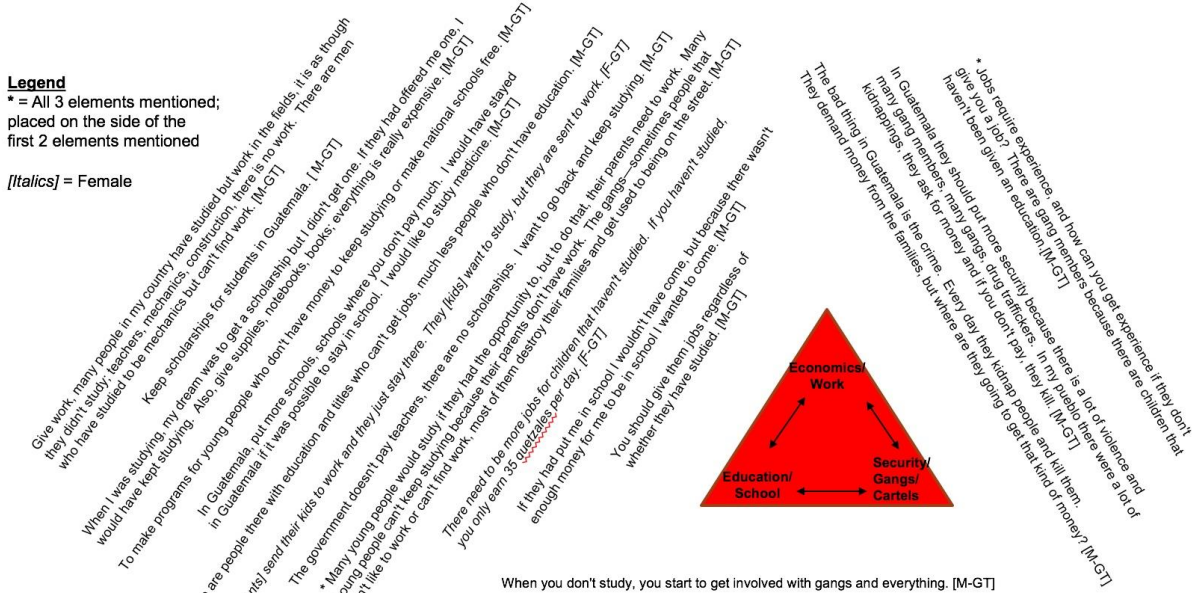

Legend
* = All 3 elements mentioned; placed on the side of the first 2 elements mentioned

[Italics] = Female

Figure 2: Guatemala

Visual Display Mapping Guatemalan Children's Comments Connecting Economics, Security, and Education

Legend
* = All 3 elements mentioned; placed on the side of the first 2 elements mentioned

[Italics] = Female

When you don't study, you start to get involved with gangs and everything. [M-GT]

Implicit "no-win" situations

When all of the children's comments were considered as a composite, several implicit no-win situations became evident, particularly related to economics, security, and education. Whether employed or unemployed, school enrolled or unenrolled, young people face risks from gangs and crime. Similarly, education necessitates employment, yet employment requires education. How does a young person get ahead in this rigged situation?

The children's comments below illustrate the no-win relationship between economics and security.

Economics ←→ Security

On the one hand, not working increases children's risks of joining or being forcibly recruited into a gang (due to idle or unsupervised time). On the other hand, working or having resources increases the risk of being targeted by a gang for theft or extortion.

o Examples:

- *"Gangs are increasing because of the economy, because there aren't enough jobs. Kids think it's better to rob and steal because they don't see any other way to make money."* (17-year-old Salvadoran female)

- *"Anything you have, the gang members take from you. Sometimes gang members will wait for you outside banks, then attack you and rob you."* (16-year-old Salvadoran male)

Security ←→ Education

Another, no-win situation surfaced in the relationship between security and education. Not attending school increases the risk of children being recruited into a gang (due to idle or unsupervised time). However, attending school increases the risk of being targeted by a gang (for harassment or recruitment by gang-connected individuals within, near, or on the way to school). These children's quotes further illustrate this predicament.

o Examples:

- *"Children in Honduras don't have the education they need. Sometimes they end up in gangs because they don't study."* (14-year-old Honduran male)

- *"There you have to pay a lot just to be enrolled in school. Some kids go to school and they get kidnapped. Just because they want to study and get ahead in life, they get kidnapped and they get ransomed. There is so much insecurity in Honduras."* (17-year-old Honduran male)

Education ⟷ Economics

Finally, there is a correlation in their responses between education and economics. On the one hand, well-paid work is necessary in order to pay for education (e.g., school fees, uniforms, supplies), while an education is necessary in order to obtain well-paid work. Indeed, even some youth with an education are not able to find meaningful work, because of a lack of jobs in the overall economy. These quotes reveal a sense of frustration.

- o Examples:
    - ▪ *"They need better education. There aren't jobs that pay enough for someone to go to school. Children don't go to school, instead they get involved with gangs and start robbing."* (17-year-old Honduran male)
    - • *"Jobs require experience, and how can you get experience if they don't give you a job? There are gang members because there are children that haven't been given an education."* (16-year-old Guatemalan male)
    - ▪ *"I tried to get a job after I graduated, but there are no jobs. You also have to continue your education and get specialized. You can't do that if you don't have money."* (17-year-old Honduran female)

These implied "no-win" scenarios reveal an underlying calculation that may be made by children and/or their families when making migration decisions. Because of the no-win analyses, children, and their families, may conclude that migration is the only choice the child has to get ahead, or, in many cases, merely to survive. Instead of decisions based on a child's best interests, this may lead to decisions based on the least worst options.

This migratory calculus is evident, for example, in response to a separate interview question by a 17-year-old Honduran male: "*My grandmother wanted me to leave. She told me: 'If you don't join, the gang will shoot you. If you do join, the rival gang will shoot you—or the cops will shoot you. But if you leave, no one will shoot you*.'" (UNHCR 2014a, 10). In this Honduran young man's retelling—as in the "no-win" scenarios described above—migration was the only alternative to avoid being killed.

Recognizing the existence of "no-win" situations from which child migrants flee supports the observations of Musalo and Lee (2017) that adopting solely a "pull" factor assessment (e.g. that US factors draw migrants) to explain recent increases in Central American migration is misguided. From a global policy perspective, recognizing such no-win scenarios raises questions about how both to respond humanely in the short-term to those who lack viable options to migration, and to also work over the longer-term toward creating safe and appealing alternatives to migration and promoting self-determination by giving youth reasons to stay in their home countries.

Political speech

Children's responses regarding public officials was coded as "political speech",[7] because of the references to those with public power. Given the differing contexts for children from four different countries, the recurring words "government," "police," "corrupt/ion," and "president" (along with their variants) were counted and analyzed as a common means of examining these children's references to those in positions of public power. Among these terms, references to *"government"* occurred most frequently overall (68 children), particularly from Mexican youth

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[7] This author limited coding of political speech to children's references to public officials, sometimes referred to as "state actors." The definition used in this article is narrower than that used by many legal scholars, which may also include references to both state actors and non-state actors as forms of political speech.

(25), followed by Guatemalan youth (15) and then Salvadoran and Honduran youth (14 references each). References to government were then coded for *pessimistic* comments, in which 41 children noted that the government cannot, will not, or does not help (including this 12-year-old boy: "*In Mexico, they don't help us, the government is corrupt*"). Comments indicating some belief in the government's potential to act in a positive way to help or protect children were coded as *possibility*, including statements of what the government could, should or needs to do (e.g. "*The [Guatemalan] government needs to control the extortions, robberies, and murders.*")

A total of 38 children mentioned the *police*, with the most references from Salvadoran and Honduran children (15 and 13 respectively), followed by six references to police by Mexican children, and four by Guatemalan children. Police *corruption* was mentioned by 21 children, most often Hondurans, including this 15-year-old male: "*They should have a law against corruption. There [in Honduras], a gang member goes to jail and is released the next day because the police are corrupt.*"

Sixteen children emphasized police *ineffectiveness*, including a 17-year-old Salvadoran female who noted: "*They kill there in broad daylight and the police do nothing.*" In addition, eight children noted the need for *more or better* police, including this 17-year-old Honduran male: "*If there were more police [in Honduras] everything would be calmer.*" A 17-year-old Salvadoran male was among six youth who commented on the *gangs being in control*—"*There are cities [in El Salvador] where the police are too afraid to go in because the gangs are the ones in control*" —while three children described situations of police *harming the innocent*, such as this 15-year-old Mexican male: "*The [Mexican] police will stop you and steal your money and beat you.*".

Honduran and Mexican children mentioned "*corruption*" more than other children, with nine and eight references, respectively, compared to four references by Salvadoran children and two by Guatemalan children. In addition to police references, the term corruption was used in relation to the government or country in general 11 times.

Mexican youth referred to the *"president"* six times, while the other three nationalities each made four uses of the term "president." The primary theme related to presidents was their *ineffectiveness*, including this comment by a 15-year-old Honduran male: "*The President always says he will end the crime, but it's always the same—he does nothing.*" Another five children stated that the president needs to *change or to be different*, with this appraisal from a 16-year-old Guatemalan male: "*We need a good president in Guatemala; the presidents there only help the rich.*"

The political speech analyzed in response to this one question came more from males—18 were female (18%) and 79 male, compared to 23% female for the entire sample—with an average age of 16.13, higher than the entire sample's overall average age of 15.83.

Table 2

Children's Use of Specific Political Terms in Response to the Question, "Do you have ideas about how we can better help other youth that leave their countries?"

Political Speech:
References to Politicians and the Public Sector **
(Percentages refer only to this subset of responses)

THEMES	"Government"*	"Police"	Word "Corrupt" Used in Relation to…	"President"
Total Mentions	**68**	**38**	**23**	**18**
Sub-Themes	• *Pessimism*: (41) – "The [Salvadoran] government is very selfish, it doesn't think about the young people." – "The government in Guatemala can't do anything, they don't help people." – "The [Honduran] authorities are involved with the gangs. They don't protect the community, they protect the maras." – "In Mexico, they don't help us, the government is corrupt." • *Possibility*: (19) – "The [Salvadoran] government can help, they can send officers to provide security to the houses and the neighborhoods." – "The [Guatemalan] government needs to control the extortions, robberies, and murders." " – The [Honduran] government could help with school, for those who do not have the money." – "The [Mexican] government can help people to have food." • *Other*: "I am not sure if the government can help" (4); reference to US government (3), unclear response (1)	• *Corrupt:* (21) – "The [Salvadoran] police are corrupt and they tell the gangs before there is a raid." – "[In Honduras] the police sell themselves. They're corrupt. A criminal ends up in jail, and a few days later he is out because he buys off the police." – "In Mexico, you see a police officer, and he isn't a police officer, he is a hit man." • *Ineffective:* (16) – "If you call the [Guatemalan] police, they don't come until two days later." – "[In Honduras] a gang member goes to jail and is released the next day" • *More/better PO needed*: (8) – "If there were more police [in Honduras] everything would be calmer." • *Gangs in control:* (6) – "There are cities [in El Salvador] where the police are too afraid to go in because the gangs are the ones in control." • *Harm the innocent*: (3) – "The [Mexican] police will stop you and steal your money and beat you." • *Other:* (4)	• Police (13) • Government/ country in general (11) • Other (2)	• *Ineffective:* "The president always says he will end the crime, but it's always the same—he does nothing." Or should do more (9) • *Change needed:* (5) "I think we need to change the president. The presidents steal money and the people suffer." • Other (4)
El Salvador	14 (20.5%)	15 (39%)	4 (17%)	4 (22%)
Guatemala	15 (22%)	4 (11%)	2 (9%)	4 (22%)
Honduras	14 (20%)	13 (34%)	9 (39%)	4 (22%)
Mexico	25 (37%)	6 (16%)	8 (35%)	6 (33%)

* Government coding includes 49 explicit references to the term "government" as well as 16 other references to government, such as "the mayor", "politicians", "authorities", or government authorities implicitly referred to as "El Salvador", "Guatemala", "Honduras", or "Mexico." Other implicit references to the US government were counted within the category of "migration needs" in Table 3 (e.g., "In the US, give them papers and work.")
**Some children made multiple comments that fell under more than one subcategory.

Migration needs

The 82 individual children whose ideas for helping other youth addressed migration needs largely focused on access to US territory and access to immigration benefits, as well as better treatment and protection. Within this overall group, 30 children made generalized requests to *let migrants enter* the US; a 17-year-old Guatemalan female represented this response by saying, "*Let them in, don't deport them*." By contrast, five children demonstrated some migration *ambivalence*, such as this 17-year-old Honduran male: "*It would be better to have work there and not have to come here*."

Another 30 referenced a desire to *expand migration benefits* or protections, including this 16-year-old Guatemalan male: "*Give work permission [in the US] so young people can work and help their families*." Fourteen children noted a need for *better treatment* towards migrants, particularly towards children, as noted by this 17-year-old male from Mexico: "*In the US, I wish they could help more children with refuge*."

Finally, eleven children identified a need for more *protection or help in transit*, with some emphasizing the security needs en route, such as a 13-year-old Salvadoran female who commented: "*They need more protection from the gangs in El Salvador and from the Zetas on the journey. They kidnapped two people in Mexico and had them hostage for 14 days*." Others emphasized the need for help with basic needs such as goods and clothing, in addition to asking that officials not apprehend them, as this 17-year-old Honduran male pled: "*Tell the trains to go slowly…tell immigration to not grab them so that they can pass. Give them food, clothing—some people don't even have clothing*."

Table 3

Children's Statements Regarding Migration Needs in Response to the Question, "Do you have ideas about how we can better help other youth that leave their countries?"

Summary of Children's Statements Regarding Migration Needs **

	Let Migrants Enter	Expand Migration Benefits	Better Treatment	Protection/ Help in Transit	Migration Ambivalence
Total Responses	30	30	14	11	5
Examples	Including: • "Let them in to look for a better future" • "Let us pass" • "Let us stay and only deport those who create disorder" • "Give us the opportunity to study and work" • "Take down the walls…at the border"	Including: • Give "papers" • Give "permiso" • "Give us legal work like any other person" • "Approve the immigration reform" • "They can also bring us to help [the US], we can do this."	Including: • "You can protect children by making sure immigration doesn't treat us badly…they treat us like animals" • "Make more programs like this one [ORR shelter]" • "Not to keep people here so long [in ORR shelter]" • "Help us because we are minors, don't mistreat us" • "That all kids have the same rights as the kids here, without discrimination, corruption" • "Not put them in [immigration] jail"	Protection: • "Children need protection against the cartels" • "Get rid of the thieves on the route" Help: • "Tell the trains to go slowly…tell immigration to not grab them so that they can pass. Give them food, clothing some people don't even have clothing"	Including: • "Better to… not have to come here" • "The journey is hard" • "Explain… difficulties they can face on the journey"

**Some children made multiple comments that fell under more than one subcategory.

Family references

Children's recommendations regarding relatives included 39 references to family or family members, with recurring themes of family reunification, helping family, and maltreatment in the home. Seventeen children made comments about the need for *family reunification* generally, such as the request of this 13-year-old Honduran female: "*Help them so they can be with their families. That is the most important.*" Some children referred to their desire to be reunited with a specific individual, primarily parents, such as this 13-year-old Honduran female: "*I would like to stay here with my mom [in the US].*")

In contrast to the 17 children who mentioned the need for family reunion, eleven spoke of *problems in the home*, such as the need for parental support or the need to be protected from abuse or neglect. A few children spoke of their own experiences of maltreatment in response to

this particular question, such as this 16-year-old Honduran female: "*I would stay [in Honduras] if my grandmother would accept me with my baby and if she will take care of me...*" More often they spoke in generalized terms, only hinting at their own possible abuse or neglect, such as this 14-year-old Mexican male: "*Children in Mexico, children like me, need help. They need parents who support them. I have seen other families where they have a mother and a father and the children are supported. Every time I see that I feel sad because there are children that don't have that.*"

Eleven children talked about the desire to *help family members* remaining in the home country, with responses like this 17-year-old Salvadoran female: "*Give us the ability to work and to help our families.*" Some children, like this 15-year-old male from Honduras, expressed concerns about their families' economic well-being and safety: "*I would have stayed if I had been able to make money and invest it so that I could help my family. I don't know how to protect them. There are lots of gangs.*" Others were motivated by helping a specific family member in a specific way, such as the 14-year-old Guatemalan female who stated: "*I would have stayed if I had had a better paying job that would really let me help my little sisters.*" These children's responses demonstrate the varied roles that family relationships play in migration decisions: family can be a pull factor drawing youth to the US for reunification purposes; family can be a push factor in order to economically maintain the same family that one leaves behind; family, or lack thereof, can be a push factor giving children a reason to leave, such as the 13-year-old Honduran girl who stated, "*Help the kids that are on the street, that do not have family and they look for a better life.*" For young people, the developmental need to love and be loved may outweigh any legal repercussions of migration.

Table 4

Children's References to Family in Response to the Question, "Do you have ideas about how we can better help other youth that leave their countries?"

Summary of Children's References to Family

Total Family References: 39	Family Reunion (in US or Home Country)	Problems in the Home	Desire to Help Family in Home Country
TOTALS	17	11	11
	Sub-themes	**Sub-themes**	**Sub-themes**
	• *Family reunion:* "I want all of my family to be together so we are not separated. This is what I hope for." • *Reunion with a specific relative:* "I would like to stay here with my mom [in US]." "I would not have stayed for anything because my father isn't there."	• *Need for supportive caregivers*: "The majority of children's parents don't care about them." • *Protection from abuse:* "I would have stayed if my [abusive] uncle didn't come to where I was living anymore." • *Neglect:* "Help parents and families especially when the parents don't take care of the families, for example if they drink alcohol."	• *Economics, security:* "I would have stayed if I had been able to make money and invest it so that I could help my family. I don't know how to protect them. There are lots of gangs." • *Relieve parents:* "I think that my mind would have changed if I had had money to help my mom, dad, and my family so that my father wouldn't have to work so hard just to feed the family." • *Help siblings:* "I would have stayed if I had had a better paying job that would really let me help my little sisters"

Discussion

This secondary analysis of Central American and Mexican migrant children's interview responses documents the interconnected nature of economics, security, and education as migratory factors. In addition, certain "no-win" situations were implicit in the children's responses, suggesting no-win situations as potential reasons for the migration decisions of unaccompanied children and their families. Examination of children's political speech revealed that 97 children spoke in primarily negative terms of the government, the president, the police, or corruption, revealing much greater pessimism than optimism regarding the potential for those in power to improve circumstances. The police were singled out more than any other public figures, with comments saying that the police were corrupt and ineffective, the country needed more or better police, the gangs were in control (rather than the police), and, in a few instances, the police harm the innocent.

Children's comments regarding migration indicate that these child migrants request and recommend more access to the US and to legal migration, while a few disclose some migration ambivalence; some children recommend better treatment of migrant children, and greater protection and concrete help for children and other migrants in transit. Finally, children's family references recognize their desires to be reunited with family, to be supported and protected in the home, and to help family members remaining in their home country.

These findings provide further support for UNHCR's earlier analysis of this same sample of children regarding their reasons for leaving home, which included "family or opportunity," "violence in society," "abuse in the home," "deprivation," and other idiosyncratic reasons (UNHCR 2014a, 7). To that previous research, this article adds nuance to our understanding of children's perspectives regarding the inter-related nature of economic, security, and education issues, suggesting that these issues cannot be considered in isolation and that migrant children may have entwined motivations for migrating that defy simple categorization. Furthermore, this article contributes a more in-depth examination of data from one question, and begins to lay the groundwork for a theory of child migration based on "no-win" situations, suggesting that children and their families may choose migration when faced with dangerous or deficient options.

The practical implications of these findings include their application by refugee and asylum adjudicators in corroborating the conditions of violence, corruption, and deprivation (both economic and educational) experienced by young people in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. Recognition of the interrelated nature of economics, security, and education for young people from these countries should encourage adjudicators to consider and inquire about related security issues when children mention economic or educational issues in

isolation. For example, if child asylum seekers articulate educational reasons for coming to the United States, adjudicators (as well as legal service providers) should probe behind the reasons why children could not continue their education in the home country. Similarly, children interviewed for refugee or asylum status who indicate economic motivations for migration should be queried further regarding any specific reasons that the child or family could not economically support themselves.

These children's expressed concerns regarding police and government corruption are buttressed by other reports that identify corruption in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico as on-going problems contributing to a lack of citizen security and undermining public confidence in the political system (UNHCR 2016b & 2016c; US Department of State 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Olson & Zaino 2015, 42). Cruz specifically connects police performance with overall political perceptions: "The police play a fundamental role in any political regime. Whether an authoritarian regime or a liberal democracy, police actions are intertwined with regime performance as they showcase the state's response to day-to-day issues" (Cruz 2015, 252). One journalist quotes a Honduran police chief recognizing that up to 20 percent of his own police force is "dirty", while community leaders living in the same area increase this estimate of corrupt law enforcement officers to half of the local force (Nazario 2016). Apart from educators, police may be the government actors with whom youth most interact; hence, police treatment of young people has direct relevance to refugee and asylum claims.

Analyzing children's political speech in response to this one question confirms the potential for youth to hold political views, whether burgeoning, sophisticated, or somewhere in-between. Adults at times presume political disinterest among young people, yet these children made comments suggesting political concern, and at times cynicism, regarding the corruption

and perceived ineffectiveness of those in positions of power. The question posed to these children was not specifically political in nature, yet 97 children (24 percent of the total number interviewed) used terms indicating political speech (individual children may have used more than one of the terms counted in Table 2). Given this research, refugee and asylum adjudicators should recognize the ability of youth to hold political views, whether nascent or mature.

Serido and colleagues (2011) make a connection between youth voice and identity development, suggesting that giving youth "opportunities to put their voices into action" (p. 56) can nurture the sense that they matter. The children's comments analyzed for this article indicate that they have relevant views about what would improve their circumstances and their societies. More explicit examination of Central American and Mexican migrant youths' sense of power within their home communities may reveal ways in which countries and communities of origin can empower youth by giving them a voice regarding their own futures. As stated by the 17-year-old Salvadoran girl cited in this article's title, "*Sometimes adults view children as lesser and they think we can't become anything or don't have an opinion. They don't ask for our view on things. They need to give us a voice*."

Taken together, these children's comments signal the need for holistic responses at national and international levels, in order to mitigate the "no-win" scenarios that appear to contribute to the migration of children. Such a holistic approach to addressing migration events fits with the ecological perspective in social work, which emphasizes the interdependence between people and their environments and the resulting reciprocal exchanges in which persons impact their environment at the same time that they are impacted by it (Gitterman & Germain 2008). As public and private actors work together to change the dynamics leading to migration, they must collaborate and recognize how their efforts impact the work of others and are impacted

in return. In more concrete terms, efforts to create well-paying work must also consider educational requirements, internship and job training opportunities, and how such approaches can compete with, and be undermined by, the seduction and threats of gangs and cartels. Efforts to improve educational opportunities for young people must also practically consider the economic requirements for children and their families to afford school attendance, along with the ways that schools can simultaneously mitigate the lure of criminal activity, while unintentionally facilitating recruitment and harassment by gang-connected peers and adults. Efforts to address security issues, particularly in relation to gangs and cartels, must also address the economic, educational, and political environment that has made illicit activity attractive, unavoidable, or involuntary.

As international aid to this region increases, programmatic approaches should be coordinated and interconnected. Equally important, youth should be involved in the planning and implementation of these interventions, if there is to be hope of success. The Global Refugee Youth Consultations led by UNHCR and the Women's Refugee Commission (and described in the introduction) demonstrate one possible model for such youth engagement, particularly if these gatherings can be translated into concrete action. Programs that implement the principles of positive youth development, and youth community organizing or mobilization, provide a grassroots approach to harnessing young people's ideas around issues of importance to them in a manner that is sustainable and develops youth leadership capacity (Washington Office on Latin America 2008).

A segment of these children's interview responses reveals a palpable frustration and pessimism, even resignation, about the corruption, selfishness, and maltreatment they identify in the adults with responsibility for their protection (police, politicians, and sometimes caregivers).

This sample of child participants represents a specific segment of the population—those who decided to leave their countries of origin. To the extent that they represent the views of at least some of their peers who have not or cannot leave, they signal a concerning sense of mistrust, particularly towards those in power. Christens and Dolan (2011) argue that youth community organizing can benefit the development of youth leadership and capacity, can improve community development, and can strengthen interactions between youth and adults. Such positive outcomes depend upon listening to youth views, developing youth leadership in order to effect change, and sharing power with youth in authentic ways through intergenerational collaboration (Christens and Dolan, 2011).

In December 2015, President Barack Obama signed into law The Consolidated Appropriations Act designating up to $750 million in aid and economic development funds for Central America. The Act requires that certain pre-conditions be met regarding border security, corruption, and human rights, before 75 percent of the funds are released (Meyer 2016; White House 2016; Beltrán 2015). The results of the research described in this article provide some broad suggestions for how youth themselves might allocate these funds, particularly in addressing economic, security, and educational issues. Concrete recommendations include prioritizing well-paying jobs, increasing protection from gangs and cartels, and supporting high-quality accessible education. Hanson identifies a "lack of coordination" (2016, 12) as a regional handicap in promoting collaboration between government entities working on different aspects of youth opportunity programming in the Northern Triangle of Central America. These children identify the need for their nations to address issues of economics, security, and education in a coordinated manner that recognizes the intersecting nature of these domains. The record level of US government funding committed in 2016 presents an opportunity to intentionally nurture and

develop future ethical leaders who can help to create conditions in which the next generation will be able to remain and contribute to their homeland.

Recommendations

In summary, concrete policy recommendations emerging from this research include the following:

1. **Recognizing entwined motivations and no-win situations that may lead children to leave their countries of origin.** Refugee and asylum adjudicators should recognize that migration motivators are interconnected, and that economic or educational motives do not preclude related security concerns. Furthermore, in-country policymakers and service providers should identify and seek solutions to perceived no-win situations.

2. **Promoting integrated approaches to home country economic, security, and education concerns for Central American and Mexican youth.** Refugee and asylum adjudicators should probe children's economic and educational reasons for leaving home to explore the possibility of interrelated security reasons leading to migration. For example, if a child mentions a desire to work or attend school in the U.S., adjudicators should also inquire about circumstances impeding these options in the child's home country.

3. **Acknowledging migrant children's political interests and concerns.** Refugee and asylum adjudicators should recognize the ability of children to hold political views, even if these views are nascent or immature from an adult's perspective.

4. **Providing youth with meaningful opportunities to contribute their views and suggestions.** Adults working with migrant youth, in the U.S., in transit, and in

home countries, should proactively seek out means for youth to contribute their views and suggestions, as a means of empowering youth, and of better understanding youth perspectives that may differ from adults' views.

5. **<u>Incorporating migrant children's input and concerns into spending plans for US aid appropriated for Central America.</u>** US and international aid to Central America and Mexico should seek out practical collaborative ways to address the root causes of migration across economic, security, and educational spheres of practice. For example, law enforcement efforts focused on reducing gang and cartel violence should incorporate positive youth development approaches through skill-building and rehabilitative programming, such as partnering with education and training programs for at-risk youth.

6. **<u>Emphasizing youth leadership development in efforts to address child migration.</u>** International and domestic programmatic efforts to stem child migration should include youth leadership development, to nurture future ethical leaders who can create conditions in which the next generation will be able to remain and contribute to their families and homelands.

Future Research

As an interviewer and researcher on the original study, this author is familiar with the full breadth of the children's responses. However, this article, which represents exclusively the author's own opinions, analyzes responses to only one question out of the entirety of each child's interview. Readers interested in a fuller picture of these children's interview responses should refer to the earlier findings of the UNHCR *Children on the Run* report (2014a).

The participants in this study represent only those children who left their countries of origin. Additional research could analyze the views of children who remain in their countries of origin to examine how their views differ from those who left. UNHCR found that 36% of the children in its study had one or both parents in the US (UNHCR 2014a, 63). A complementary study could focus on those children with relatives in the US who nonetheless chose to remain in their home countries. What factors in their lives counter the push and pull of migration? What efforts or circumstances are successful in giving children the security, or opportunity, needed to remain rooted in their home communities?

Future research could more specifically engage unaccompanied children in their perceived roles in relation to politics, political speech, public policy most relevant to youth, how migration impacts family relationships, and youth views on power (e.g. how age, gender, and diversity impact their perceived ability to create change in their lives and communities).

Ultimately, the analysis in this article provides a platform for the voices of these youths to be heard by those with the power to act and create positive changes in Central America and Mexico. These youth are asking for a say in their future. Who is listening?

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Reflections on Polarities in Qualitative Research with

Unaccompanied Children from Central America and Mexico:

Documenting Research Lessons with A Vulnerable and Hard to Access Population

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Abstract

Using reflection on the research experience, this article explores various polarities evident during interviews with 404 unaccompanied Central American and Mexican children regarding their reasons for migration. The polarities demonstrate decision points before research implementation, such as: open-ended versus closed-ended questions; mandated reporting versus confidentiality; documenting words versus observations. Furthermore, polarities became evident during the research process: are interviews therapeutic or troubling; is disclosure a process or a singular event; is children's thinking similar to or different from adults; does migration represent hope or fear? These polarities are examined in light of the "thesis→antithesis→synthesis" formula, to aid future researchers in predicting and resolving these inherent tensions and protecting the dignity of research participants.

Keywords: research reflection, unaccompanied children, research with children, research polarities, research tensions, migration reasons, Central American children, Mexican children, UNHCR

Reflections on Polarities in Qualitative Research with

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Documenting Research Lessons with A Vulnerable and Hard to Access Population

Important though sometimes overlooked decisions are made during the research

process—decisions that may have bearing on the outcome of a study but may not be considered

again after they have been made. This article asserts that reflecting on these decisions and related

deductions following completion of the research process results in important lessons that can aid

other scholars as they consider their research plan. Documenting these lessons is a particularly

important exercise when working with vulnerable populations to whom research access is

limited, in this case unaccompanied migrant children from Central America and Mexico held in

federal government custody after entering the United States without formal permission. Research

with teenagers in detained settings is understandably delicate, given power imbalances, risk of

harm, concerns about coercion, and the need for appropriate protections. Given these challenges

when conducting research with children (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.),

opportunities to learn from research with this population should be documented and shared.

As a specific type of reflection, Dorner suggests conducting an "ethics post-practice"

examination (2015, p. 362) to ensure that data usage involving children conforms to original study

intentions. In this article, I broaden that recommendation to suggest that post-practice reflection

on the research experience supports ethics broadly, from research methods to implementation to

interpretation. This idea is further supported by Mortari, who notes regarding ethics, "it is

necessary for the researcher to practice reflection on the whole inquiry work." (2015, p. 2).

Within the Social Work profession, the practice of reflection is consistent with the

evaluation stage of the "planned change process," (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2009, p. 8), which

consists of engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation at various practice levels

(Council on Social Work Education, 2015). These steps are considered baseline "competencies"

required of accredited social work education programs. Interestingly, there is no stated

exhortation to incorporate evaluation into the social work research process. Nonetheless, this

article will apply this last stage of evaluation to engage in a reflective evaluation of various

decisions from the research process.

Furthermore, this article will examine these decisions from the perspective of the

"dialectic triad" (Popper, 1963, p. 2), composed of the concepts *thesis, antithesis and synthesis*.

This article will focus on the decision-making polarities from the research experience, in order to

consider areas of thesis and antithesis, in order to ultimately seek synthesis. With this

examination method, I expect to identify useful lessons from the research process in order that

other scholars can build on these experiences as colleagues in knowledge promotion.

Various areas of scientific study have examined the role of polarities in relation to their

field (Dervin, 2010). Johnson notes that, "The objective of polarity management perspective is to

get the best of both opposites while avoiding the limits of each" (Johnson, 1996, p. xviii, as cited

in Benet, 2013, p. 27-28). In this article, I use research reflection to examine the polarities I

experienced during a research project involving interviews conducted with 404 unaccompanied

migrant children originally from Central America and Mexico, while they were held in the

custody of the U.S. government.

My explicit recognition of these polarities, or tensions, emerged after the research project

was completed. These tensions signify the pull of different research interests and dynamics,

rather than conflicts per se. Tomkinson (2015) discusses various ethical issues that arose during

her research fieldwork, and she notes that reducing situations to their binary elements can

become artificial or simplistic. Nonetheless, identifying such tensions, or polarities as I have

called them here, can help researchers to recognize and reflect upon subtextual interests, implicit

and explicit decisions, and underlying assumptions before, during, and after research, in order to

integrate the handling of such tensions in an intentional way, leading to a synthesis that results in

new knowledge. This article may intersect with emerging movements towards "meta-research"

by examining through reflection my own research practices, with particular relevance to the

"methods" branch of meta-research (Ioannidis, Fanelli, Dunne & Goodman, 2015) through

consideration of methodological decisions made before and during the research process. These

methodological decisions are examined from a philosophical perspective in order to seek useful

research lessons for future application.

Conceptual Framework: Reflection

A subset of qualitative research articles engages in reflection on the process of research,

focusing primarily on the knowledge gained from the research experience rather than from the

research data (Dorner, 2015; Easterling & Johnson, 2015; Sonn, Grossman & Utomo, 2013;

Munro, Holly, Rainbird & Leisten, 2004). Such scholarly writing helps to advance more of the

"how and why" of research, beyond the "what and when" that may receive greater emphasis in

more traditional research literature. Ultimately both types of literature are necessary in order to

think critically about research decisions and to reflectively examine the research process.

Mortari (2015) calls reflection, "a critical cognitive practice in the research field" (p. 1).

Savaya and Gardner (2012) employ critical reflection in order to examine the discrepancies

between practitioners' "theories-in-use and espoused theories" (p. 146). In the context of the

research study reflected on in this article, my reflection parallels the research project in question,

during which we asked unaccompanied migrant children from Central America and Mexico to

reflect on their own recent experience of migrating to the U.S. and the reasons that led them to leave home. We told the children that their stories would be used to help other children like them, thus my reflection here is also a means of honoring that commitment by extending the possibility that these reflections might help other researchers also working with children in migration or other difficult circumstances.

In this article, I am combining this practice of reflection with the concept of the "dialectic triad" from philosophy (Popper, 1963), in order to look back on various polarities and their resolution or interpretation. I am focusing on these polarities because they mark points in which decisions were made, and in which the research process could have proceeded differently. Would the same decisions be made now, in retrospect? By focusing on polarities, I note the caution of Anderson-Nathe, Gringeri and Wahab (2013) against reinforcing dualistic thinking and binary categories, and instead I aim to examine how these polarities were resolved or interpreted.

Literature Review

To provide context for the youth interviews on which this research focused, literature reviewed included material regarding unaccompanied children, the treatment of unaccompanied children in the U.S., the rise of Central American unaccompanied children coming to the U.S., and considerations in interviewing children. This literature base demonstrates the particularities and history of this population, along with commonalities in relation to interviewing children in general.

Unaccompanied Children

The United Nations defines an unaccompanied child as someone who has not yet reached the age of majority (typically 18), and who is "separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so" (UNHCR, 1997). According

to one text, "Unaccompanied children have existed in virtually every past war, famine, refugee

situation, and natural disaster" (Ressler, Boothby & Steinbock, 1988, p. 3). These same authors

document significant numbers of unaccompanied children in successive wars and disasters going

back to the Armenian massacre of 1915. Documentation and attention to the needs of

unaccompanied children has increased since the release of this seminal historical text by Ressler,

Boothby and Steinbock (1988), including the development of specialized identification and care

procedures (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children &

Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), n.d.; U.S. Department of Homeland Security,

2015; TVPRA, 2008; Interagency, 2004; UNHCR, 1997), as well as policies and training for

certain government officials charged with their care and decision making (ORR, 2015a; USCIS,

2009; EOIR, 2015; EOIR, 2007).

The absence of parental protection creates a heightened vulnerability to trafficking

(UNHCR, 2014a, 2014b), military conscription (United Nations General Assembly, 1997),

exploitation, abuse (ORR, 2015c; UNHCR, 1997), "child labor, kidnap and ransom by

smugglers, forcible recruitment by criminals or armed factions, homelessness, teen pregnancy,

physical deprivation, and violence and trauma" (Schmidt et al., 2015, p. 9). Unaccompanied

children receive special attention by authorities because of their many risks; at the same time this

special government attention deserves its own attention to guard against government abuses by

omission or commission.

Unaccompanied Children in the United States

Unaccompanied children have come to the U.S. in sanctioned ways (with refugee or

parolee status), and unsanctioned ways (as undocumented immigrants crossing a U.S. border, or

entering through an official U.S. port of entry or airport). The American public, as well as policy

makers, seem by turns fascinated, sympathetic, and alarmed by the presence of unaccompanied

children, typically more welcoming when the children have the rare good fortune of having been

invited to enter the country. Significant documented flows of unaccompanied children to the U.S.

within the last century include the "Pedro Pan" migration of unaccompanied Cuban children to

the U.S. from 1960-1962 coordinated by the Catholic church (de Haymes, 2004; Ressler,

Boothby & Steinbock, 1988), the Vietnamese babylift in 1975 (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2004) and

subsequent resettlement of unaccompanied refugee children from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia

during the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s (Ressler, Boothby & Steinbock, 1988). Though barely

documented in the literature, I had personal experience with several hundred unaccompanied

children from Cuba and Haiti, who were resettled in the U.S. after being held in temporary

refugee camps in U.S. military bases in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Panama City, Panama from

1994 to 1996. These Cuban youth had a swift route to lawful permanent residence, while

establishing permanency in the U.S. for the Haitian youth required multiple advocacy

interventions. By contrast, a wide variety of journalists, authors, and artists have documented the

exodus and resettlement experiences of the so-called "Lost Boys" and girls of Sudan (60

Minutes, 2013; Eggers, 2006; Quinn & Walker, 2006; Mylan & Shenk, 2003), many of whom

spent nearly a decade in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya before a large group was resettled

to the U.S. as refugees in the early 2000s.

Unaccompanied children entering the U.S. with refugee status are eligible for specialized

foster care programs and support services coordinated by two national networks of child welfare

service providers (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, and Migration and Refugee

Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops). Unaccompanied children who enter the

U.S. without prior legal invitation, and who are apprehended upon entry, are handled differently

from their refugee-status-holding peers. With the creation of the Department of Homeland

Security of 2002, oversight for this latter population of unaccompanied children was transferred

from the former Immigration and Naturalization Service to the Office of Refugee Resettlement

within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Thus, two systems of reception exist,

and the type of reception and care provided depends upon whether the child was invited by the

government to enter or showed up unannounced. Regardless, their needs as children are the

same.

Central American Unaccompanied Children

While unaccompanied children entering the U.S. through the refugee resettlement

program have come from varied national backgrounds (e.g. Afghanistan, Burma, Somalia,

Sudan), reflecting a range of global conflicts and U.S. political interests, unaccompanied children

entering the U.S. without immigration status have remained remarkably consistent over the past

25 years. In 1990, as a recent college graduate, I worked briefly as a paralegal assisting

unaccompanied children held in a federally-funded facility in South Texas. The primary

nationalities at that time were Guatemalans, Hondurans and Salvadorans. More than 25 years

later, these top three nationalities of Central American unaccompanied children entering the U.S.

remain the same, only larger. Following creation of the US Department of Homeland Security in

2003 through 2011, unaccompanied children served by the Office of Refugee Resettlement

averaged 7,000 – 8,000 annually (ORR, 2015b). This rose to more than 57,000 unaccompanied

children served by ORR in 2014, a drop to 33,000 in 2015, then more than 59,000 in 2016 (ORR,

2015d).

Multiple factors contribute to this child migration. Gang violence in these "Northern-

Triangle" countries continues to flourish, with young people a particular target for recruitment

(Gagne, 2016; Donato & Sisk, 2015; Rosenblum, 2015; UNHCR, 2014a; UNHCR, 2014b). Entrenched corruption reduces confidence in public institutions and hinders reform (Cruz, 2015). Economic insecurity combined with perceived US opportunity entice young people to seek a better life in the US. Relatives in the US give fearful or hopeful youth a migration trajectory. In combination, these entwined factors contribute to a sense of "no-win" situations that can lead to migration (Schmidt, 2017).

Interviewing Children

Interviewing children and youth requires skill and sensitivity. Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin and Horowitz (2007) note that children's reliability in interviews is less a matter of their memory, and more a matter of "the interviewer's ability to elicit information and the child's willingness and ability to express it" (p. 1202). This suggests that perceived limitations in children's interviews may in fact result from an adult interviewer's limitations in eliciting information from youth. In summarizing existing research, these same authors clarify that open-ended questions elicit more accurate information than "focused recognition prompts" (p. 1202). Children's non-verbal cues during interviews are also worthy of note, as Katz, Hershkowitz, Malloy, Lamb, Atabaki and Spindler (2012) found that alleged child abuse victims who did not disclose during investigative interviews demonstrated more disengagement behaviors than those children who did disclose during interviews. Thus, interviewing children requires, among other things, attention to the interviewer's own engagement skills with children, a willingness to allow children to express themselves through open-ended questions, and attention to the significance of non-verbal cues, with each of these skills relevant to my own research experience with unaccompanied migrant children.

Research Design

In 2013, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Regional Office for Washington and the Caribbean, received funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to study the root causes of migration among unaccompanied children from Central America and Mexico (UNHCR, 2014a), resulting in 404 qualitative interviews with unaccompanied children in the U.S. from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. I was one of four researchers hired to conduct Spanish-language interviews with children placed in federally-funded children's shelters and custody facilities, assisted by community-based service providers, or held in Border Patrol detention centers near the U.S.-Mexico border. These interviews were the basis for the UNHCR report, *Children on the Run* (2014a), focusing on the reasons children discussed for leaving home. The following sections describe the participants, human subjects protections, site and participant selection, consent procedures, and research instruments. Information on the data analysis can be found in the report, *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection* (2014a).

Participants

UNHCR received the cooperation of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in order to interview unaccompanied children initially apprehended at or near the southern border of the U.S. Central American and other non-Mexican children who were transferred to the custody of ORR within 72 hours of apprehension (TVPRA, 2008). These children were interviewed in ORR-contracted

facilities that included, "foster care, group homes, shelter, staff secure, secure, and residential treatment centers" (ORR, 2015c, para. 2).

Due to governmental agreements regarding unaccompanied children from contiguous countries (i.e. Mexico and Canada; Congressional Research Service, 2015), over 97% of Mexican unaccompanied children apprehended at the southern U.S. border remain in Border Patrol detention facilities until they are handed over to Mexican government officials and returned to Mexico. Less than 3% of Mexican children are ultimately transferred to ORR care to pursue asylum or trafficking claims (ORR, 2015d; Congressional Research Service, 2015). The majority of Mexican unaccompanied children interviewed for this project were in either the McAllen or Weslaco Border Patrol stations near the Texas-Mexico border.

Human Subjects Protection

To emulate the institutional review board process of an academic institution, UNHCR solicited feedback from fourteen professionals from around the U.S. (primarily attorneys and social workers), with expertise in serving immigrant children in federal custody and in immigration proceedings, on the research methodology and questionnaire. The UNHCR Washington office also submitted its methodology and interview instrument for review by both the UNHCR Child Protection unit, and the UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES), located in the organization's Geneva headquarters, and furthermore shared the methodology and interview questions with the Office of Refugee Resettlement to ensure their agreement with the proposed methodology. The interview questionnaire was piloted and revised following four interviews at a shelter for unaccompanied children in the Washington, D.C. region.

Site and Participant Selection

To maximize travel resources, interviews were clustered in communities with multiple

ORR-funded children's facilities, including: Phoenix, AZ; Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San

Jose, CA; Chicago, IL; Brownsville, Harlingen, Houston, and San Antonio, TX. For participant

selection, interviewers applied random numbers (from Random.org) to facility census lists of

residents fitting the parameters of nationality, age, and length of stay. Non-proportional quota

sampling was employed with respect to nationality by aiming for a quota of 100 children from

each of the four nationalities studied. The use of random selection within certain parameters

guarded against the external selection or referral of particular children for interviews (e.g. shelter

staff referring or not referring specific children for interviews based on certain aspects of the

children's stories or personalities), and ensured a cross-section of children's experiences in the

interviews. Within the selected nationality quotas, we employed proportional quota sampling

with respect to gender, by aiming for gender representation within each quota that mirrored the

gender distribution present within the entire population of unaccompanied children in ORR

custody (e.g., Salvadoran girls in ORR custody were proportionally higher than Guatemalan

girls, so we interviewed more Salvadoran girls than Guatemalan girls). Since certain programs or

facilities specialized in serving one gender or the other, a UNHCR staff person in Washington,

D.C., monitored the overall gender and nationality balance and advised each team on a weekly or

daily basis regarding the progress toward the nationality quota and the gender distribution.

The two primary interview contexts were quite different: the majority of children in ORR

custody were held for about 34 days (2015 data; ORR, 2015b) in child-oriented shelters that

contained elements of both a boarding school and a juvenile detention facility (e.g. institutional

education, meals and recreation, within a locked facility containing video and staff surveillance).

By contrast, the majority of children in Border Patrol detention facilities had just been apprehended by immigration agents within the last 24 hours and were held in locked group detention cells, without private toilets or natural light, typically returned to Mexico within the 48 hour period required by law (TVPRA, 2008).

Consent Procedures

We interviewed five to seven children per day within selected ORR facilities. The children were brought to a private meeting room for a group *charla* (chat, or introduction) in Spanish, presenting: UNHCR; my partner and myself as interviewers; the research project; and the interview topics. In addition, children were told that participation was voluntary, with no impact on their immigration or family reunification situation, and that their information would remain confidential, unless they told interviewers that someone was harming them, that they wanted to harm themselves, or that they wanted to harm someone else. Children were also told of their rights to ask questions, to stop the interview, or to not answer a question, and that the interviews would be used for research to help protect other children like themselves. Interviewers explained that talking about experiences from home might make some children feel sad, and that talking with someone else about home and family might also make some children feel better or relieved. Children in ORR programs were told of their ability to speak with counseling staff following the interview, if desired. In addition, consent procedures were reviewed individually with children who chose to participate. A few children declined to be interviewed; stated reasons included such things as not wanting to miss another activity going on simultaneously at the shelter, or a youth in the Border Patrol detention facility who had been up all night and preferred to sleep.

Group *charlas* were not possible in the Border Patrol stations, due to the lack of a private group meeting area. Instead, each interview team was provided with a small private investigation room in which to conduct interviews, and consent procedures were conducted individually. All consent forms for this research project were retained by UNHCR.

Interviews were conducted by two teams of interview pairs, with one interviewer posing questions and the other interviewer typing up the children's responses on an iPad. My interview partner, a native Spanish speaker, recorded responses in English through simultaneous translation, while the other team recorded responses in Spanish and translated the responses into English after all of the interviews were completed. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours, with most lasting 60-75 minutes. Interviews with youth who had experienced multiple attempts to enter the U.S., or with prolonged journeys through Mexico, lasted longer. We each wore a visible UNHCR pin to indicate that we were not part of the shelter or Border Patrol staff.

Instruments

The interviews consisted of 73 question groups, some of which contained follow up questions. Each interview had a maximum of 53 closed-ended questions, 66 open-ended questions, and 13 questions for the interviewer, for a total of 132 potential responses per interview. The questions were grouped into five main sections: biographical information; family information; questions regarding migration plans; the trip itself; and closing questions about the child's current circumstances and thoughts about helping other children like themselves. Each team used a set of United Nations paper maps of the four countries of origin to help youth recollect or demonstrate the route traveled from home country to the U.S. While some youth were unfamiliar with using maps, others seemed to find it a helpful way to remember place names, to identify home regions, and to be able to describe the lengthy journey they had

undertaken. As an interviewer, I found the maps to be a helpful visual tool for sequencing a child's migration experience. The maps also provided a means of externalizing the topic of conversation: we could focus on the map, rather than solely on the child.

In addition to maps, we set out "fidget toys" (e.g. stress balls, manipulatives) for youth to play with while talking, as well as paper and markers for drawing, to help children feel comfortable, relieve stress, and channel kinetic energy. Where permitted, we offered youth snacks and drinks during interviews. In the shelters, these were consistent with food available to the general population. In the Border Patrol facilities where food is very limited, we made available Gatorade, apples and snacks.

Reflections on Polarities

Subsequent analysis of the interview data focused on the identification of themes and the quantification of qualitative data, particularly related to children's reasons for migration. Yet many other research lessons were evident. I will discuss below several significant lessons that were not captured in the data, but are relevant for those doing research with children generally, or unaccompanied minors in particular. These are described as polarities of decision-making.

Polarities are nothing new in social work, which has grappled since the profession's beginnings with the question of whether to focus on persons or their environments, ultimately synthesizing these into the person-in-environment perspective as a unifying concept in social work (Constable & Cocozzelli, 1989). In the sections that follow, I describe the polarities I experienced and a potential synthesis. These are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Thesis	Antithesis	Synthesis
Closed-ended questions	Open-ended questions	Mixed Methods research
Documenting what was heard	Documenting what was seen	Intentionally planning to document multi-sensory data
Mandated confidentiality	Mandated reporting	Confidentiality within protective limits
Interviewing singly	Interviewing in pairs	Interviewing in pairs, with sensitivity and flexibility to have one or the other person take the lead role
One interview	Multiple interviews	Meeting once or twice before interviewing to build rapport
Asking once	Asking multiple times	Probing further by inviting the child to expand on the original question

Closed-Ended Questions or Open-Ended Questions

One of the most significant decisions to be made concerned the type of questions to pose to the children we interviewed, specifically whether to use open-ended or closed-ended questions. Perhaps naively, we included 66 open-ended questions in our interview questionnaire. While 53 closed-ended questions were included as well, the large amount of open-ended questions resulted in a large amount of data to be coded during the analysis phase. This debate between whether to collect easily quantifiable data, or more labor-intensive qualitative data, has emerged regularly in social science research. In this study, more attention was given to asking questions that provided information we wanted to know, while less initial consideration was given to how we would analyze all of the information we gathered. At times during the coding process, I wished that we had used fewer open-ended questions due to the amount of work it required. However, in retrospect, our study was richer and more nuanced due to the complexity of information available through open-ended questions, and for the ability to hear children's voices through their own responses rather than through a pre-selected list of response options.

From this experience, I was left wondering about the comparative benefits of closed-ended data as compared to open-ended data. Closed-ended data provided uniform responses that could be more easily quantified and analyzed statistically, but I was not convinced that closed-ended questions could produce the more unique data that emerged from open-ended questions that allowed children the freedom to respond in their own words, and with categories of responses that would likely go beyond what we might have speculated. The closed-ended questions seemed to be a convenience for us as researchers, while the open-ended questions were an invitation to freedom of thought and language for the children as interview subjects. As noted earlier, our questionnaire incorporated more open-ended questions than closed-ended, and the questions at the heart of our research (regarding the root causes of child migration) were open-ended. Perhaps unusual in this study was the size of our research sample (over 400 interviews), which intensified this tension due to the large amount of data to be coded and analyzed.

The larger debate between the use of qualitative or quantitative data predates this article, and will continue long after it [cite]. I became convinced through hearing children tell their stories that children's own words are more powerful and expressive than my paraphrase or selective reduction of those words, and that researchers should recognize this balance of what is gained and what is lost in the type of questions we pose. Mixed methods research represents perhaps the best synthesis of these polarities by potentially capitalizing on the best of both qualitative and quantitative research and allowing the voices of research subjects to animate the work (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). As Haight and Bidwell (2016) note, "Mixed methods researchers reject the false dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research. Instead they recognize that methods chosen for a particular study may fall anywhere along the methodological continuum" (p. 7). Mixed methods is an evolving research approach that

demonstrates great potential to achieve a synthesis of these research polarities through

intentional integration of methods that best answer research questions. In my experience with

unaccompanied migrant children, this was achieved through a mix of closed- and open-ended

questions, and the quantitizing of qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Documenting What We Heard or What We Saw

Our data collection focused on documenting children's spoken responses to our

questions, in this way focusing on oral and aural transmission of information. The majority of

youth that I spoke with seemed to enjoy, and even appreciate, the opportunity to talk about their

own experiences, and to have the attention of an interested adult who had time to listen. The

children who did not enjoy talking are the memorable exceptions (e.g. a boy who was adamant

that he did not want to talk about Honduras, even though he noted several times that he did want

to participate in the interview). In retrospect, we gave greater weight to what we heard over what

we saw, and yet what we saw was a privilege to which few researchers have access. These

reflections describe some aspects of what we saw and their relevance to the research experience.

I will focus on photos, drawings, family trees, and observations such as body language.

Photos. Shortly after we began the project, my partner and I asked if we could

photograph one hand of each child (if the child was in agreement) as a way to humanize those we

interviewed (see Figure 1). My partner would take the photo and then show it to the child, to get

the child's approval of the outcome, or retake it if the child was dissatisfied with it. We avoided

photographing hands with distinctive marks on them (e.g. scars or the occasional tattoo). These

photos became a representation of each child's individuality, and at the same time our common

humanity. The photos were a reminder to me during the analysis stage of the project that every

story represented an individual child, and that our research was not merely data but a small window into their often difficult past and more hopeful future.

Drawing. We used drawing in various ways as part of our interviews. Some children naturally picked up the pen and paper while we talked. One girl drew flowers and portraits the entire time we spoke, a form of artistic expression that complemented her verbal communication. We frequently asked children to draw some aspect of their story, such as a word we had not heard before (e.g. a farming implement; a particular vegetable). In some cases, the child's drawing helped us to understand the story better, such as the Guatemalan boy who drew his family's farm sliding down the hillside after an earthquake (see Drawing 1). In other cases, the child's drawing illuminated a particularly difficult part of the child's story, such as the place where gang members hung out and tried to recruit young people on their way to school, or what neighborhoods were the turf of which gangs within the child's home community. The drawings were a way of entering the children's world, by seeing a small part of their story through each child's eyes. The drawings helped to make the children's stories more real to me as an interviewer, and to better understand the children's lived experience.

Family trees. I also used drawing to create family trees with children whose family structure was complicated. A majority of children came from single parent or blended families. On average, only 34% of all the children we interviewed were raised by both parents, ranging from a low of 29% of Hondurans raised by both parents to a high of 45% for Guatemalans (UNHCR, 2014a). Some of these children were raised by single parents because one parent was already in the U.S.: 28% overall had one parent in the U.S., with a low of 19% for Mexicans and a high of 42% for Hondurans (UNHCR, 2014a). Many of the children's households of origin included extended family members and friends, for example an average of 41% of children had a

non-sibling child who also lived in the home (e.g. a cousin or friend; UNHCR, 2014a).

Geography presented a further complication, as we attempted to understand the overlay of family

relationships with family location. Father and an adult sibling might already be in the U.S., while

mother, grandmother, and a younger sibling remain in home country living with mother's sister,

her two children, a cousin by marriage and a neighbor child whose parents had gone to the U.S.

How to understand and capture that?

Prior to the start of this research project, I had unsuccessfully searched for a family tree

to use during our interviews. Once our interviews started, I improvised with a method of my own

creation (see Figure 2). Based on my perception of how children discussed their relationships, I

drew a circle in the middle of the paper, representing the child as the center of the child's own

world; a line radiated left and right, dividing the paper in half to represent the child's home

country below the line, and the U.S. above the line—a border, of sorts. I then drew a spoke

below that border line for each important person the child talked about, writing their name, age,

and relationship to the child. All household members in the home country were included. Family

members in the U.S. were drawn on spokes above the line. Thus, I prioritized relationships in the

home country by proximity (living together), and prioritized relationships in the U.S. by familial

connection. This judgment represents another type of polarity of family connections: proximity

v. relationship. The focus on familial relationships in the U.S. mirrors government priorities for

children in federal custody, based in part on the results of past litigation (Flores Stipulated

Settlement Agreement, 1997). However it is important for researchers to recognize our own

cultural, programmatic, or geographic interpretation of concepts such as family. Under U.S.

immigration laws, definitions of family are grounded in blood ties or legal proceedings (e.g.

marriage or adoption). Researchers should be reflective and intentional about the basis for

defining concepts such as family and how these match or differ from the definitions and assumptions of our research subjects. For many of the children we interviewed, friends were treated like family members.

Body language and observations. During the analysis phase of the project, I realized that the words we documented did not capture the children's full story, which included their body language as well. In future research with children, I would include a space for recording general observations from each interview, both for quantifying certain things (such as tears, flushed face, sweaty palms, and other signs of stress and distress). In addition, specific observations regarding body language may enrich the data, in a way that words cannot convey alone, for example: the child who used a long rubber toy to demonstrate how his older brother tried to strangle him; the pregnant girl who seemed to carry the weight of the world on her shoulders, such that she had to put her head down on the desk when we asked about her pregnancy; the only child we interviewed who wore glasses, and another one with braces; the boy who talked about gang activity in his hometown while banging our sand-filled stress ball against the side of the table, until the ball ruptured and spewed sand all over his clothes, providing much needed laughter.

Each of these visual components (photos, drawings, family trees, body language and observations) complemented and enriched the verbal data that we documented. A synthesis of these sight and sound components might begin during the planning phase by recognizing these different dimensions of the research experience, and being intentional about how and why they will be recorded.

Mandated Confidentiality or Mandated Reporting

Our interviewing team included two immigration attorneys, a UNHCR employee, and myself, a social worker. UNHCR's fundamental mandate is the protection of refugees (UNHCR, n.d.). As a social worker, I too have a protection mandate regarding children, exercised in my duty as a mandated reporter of child maltreatment. This responsibility can override confidentiality expectations. Attorneys, by contrast, have an equally compelling professional mandate to maintain client confidentiality except in the most extreme circumstances. How could these differing professional responsibilities be synthesized? Adding an additional layer of complication, we were conducting interviews in five states, each state with different mandated reporting expectations. This inter-professional collaboration strengthened the research methodology, by incorporating both legal and social work perspectives. However, different professional requirements regarding confidentiality and mandated reporting presented issues that needed to be addressed directly for a consistent approach across both interview teams.

Ultimately, we adopted a uniform approach that was appropriate under all the states' laws, advising children during our introductory explanation that their interviews would be confidential except if they told us someone was hurting them, they wanted to hurt themselves, or they planned to hurt someone else. In those circumstances, we would be obligated to tell someone who could help in order to protect themselves or the other person. Otherwise, the content of our interviews would be confidential and used in an anonymous way in our report. In practice, I felt compelled to break confidentiality in one case where a child spoke of trying to harm himself very recently. Although the child said that he had spoken with a staff person about this, I wanted to confirm that the staff were indeed aware, which they were.

This approach represents a means of benefitting from a broadened professional perspective, while adopting a uniform approach to protection issues. This synthesis of protection and confidentiality responsibilities provided a way forward for interprofessional collaboration. However, this topic warrants further examination. How might professional responsibilities conflict with research approaches and what are the appropriate resolutions? Could we have justified having different approaches given our different professional expectations? The synthesis of these professional responsibilities seems best attained by returning to our core goals: protection and confidentiality. Understanding the historical reasons for each profession's emphasis helps to approach these interprofessional discussions with respect.

Interviewing Singly or in Pairs

UNHCR decided to use two people to conduct the interviews, a decision made before I was hired as part of the research team. There had been some discussion about whether two interviewers would make children feel pressured, or outnumbered. Reflecting upon my experience conducting interviews in pairs, I think this provided a protection for the child, the interviewers, and the research process. For the child, this provided a measure of protection from the possibility of abuse, particularly given that interviews were sometimes conducted in closed classrooms, as a space providing privacy. For interviewers, this partnership provided a measure of protection from allegations of abuse by children in which it might be one person's word against another's. More demonstrably helpful, this partnering allowed for two professional perspectives on the interview content. Given the emotionally heavy content of some interviews, our partnership also allowed us to process what he heard, providing a shared release following difficult stories. Given the risk of secondary trauma from interviewing so many children who had

experienced violence and deprivation, partnering for interviews was professionally valuable and personally healthful.

I also noticed that certain youth connected more with one of us or the other. My younger partner connected with youth who were more street-smart, who used slang, and who enjoyed talking about music or pop culture. As a middle-aged social worker and mother, I connected more with youth who saw in me a parental figure. Together we were able to draw on the strengths in these differences by having one or the other of us take a more active role in a particular interview when it seemed that the child was responding more, or making more eye contact, with one of us in particular. The synthesis I note—between having one interviewer or more than one—is to use pairs while having one interviewer take the lead during the interview so that the child does not feel interrogated, but also maintaining the flexibility to switch roles when warranted by attending to the child's cues.

Interviewing One Time or Multiple Times

I observed that some children shared their difficult experiences with us readily, while others seemed like it would take a relationship of trust built up over time. One boy at a Border Patrol station was tearfully sharing his experience of paternal abandonment, and his need to get to his mother in the U.S., before we completed the informed consent process. The typical interview averaged around 60-75 minutes in the shelters, and about 30-45 minutes in the Border Patrol detention facilities. However, a few shelter interviews lasted longer, in cases where a youth wanted to talk and to tell his or her story in great detail. One girl spent months working in Mexico in order to continue funding her journey north. She seemed to remember every conversation she had had during her migration journey. In a few instances, it seemed like we merely had to find the right yarn to pull, and a complete story would unravel before us. Some

children had quite vivid memories of their journey to the U.S., which was typically their first real experience of travel; we merely had to guide the release of the story with our questions as guideposts. A few boys had made several attempts to enter the U.S., hence their interviews were longer as they recounted their Sisyphean experiences of progressing north, only to be deported by one government or another.

In perhaps the most extreme example, we randomly selected siblings as part of our interview group. One spoke of maltreatment by an older brother. The other, by contrast, spoke of migrating for family reunification and said nothing of family tensions, while exhibiting the flat affect sometimes present in a child who has experienced abuse. Two credible youths from the same home, and yet their stories were markedly different. Do we expect children to tell us everything the first time? What if they do not? The lesson for those adjudicating children's cases is that some youth trust easily, while others require time and effort. Professionals requiring children to discuss painful experiences must expect, and be ready to accommodate, both scenarios without assuming that the child lacks credibility.

An alternate model could involve meeting children once or twice informally, before conducting a formal interview. This might allow children to become comfortable with someone before discussing topics of a personal nature. There is not one right way for a child to respond. Adults must be willing to allow children to respond in their own time and process. Disclosure can occur as either a process or a singular event, or something in between. In this research project, we only met children once; interviewing them a second time was not possible. Given the range of children's painful disclosures within the interview—from sharing immediately to sharing near the end of the interview, to sharing no painful information despite other non-verbal cues suggesting that we had not captured the child's whole story—it is possible, perhaps likely,

that some children would share more during subsequent meetings after the development of greater rapport.

Asking A Question Only One Time or Asking Multiple Times

Just as it may take a child multiple conversations to discuss painful situations, it might take multiple questions to get at the full answer to a question such as, 'why did you leave your home?' In my experience, children's reasons for coming to the U.S. are often complex and layered (Schmidt, 2017). In some interviews with children there was one reason—most likely to be with a parent, or to escape some type of danger. However, more often it was an accumulation of motivations combined with the right amalgam of circumstances to make migration possible. In our quantification of children's reasons, we found that 70% of children stated more than one reason for coming to the U.S., while 30% stated only one reason, most commonly family and opportunity, or community violence (UNHCR, 2014a).

Many children said that they came "para seguir adelante" (to get ahead), a vague enough reply that provided a response without providing much of an answer. At times this vague response seemed like a test of us as interviewers, as if the child was asking us, "Do you really want to know, or are you just asking the question?"

During the development phase of the interview questions, we received a very helpful suggestion from immigration attorneys with the South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation Project (ProBAR), which regularly serves immigrant children. They recommended responding to each migration reason with the further probe, "Were there any other reasons?" until the children had nothing more to say. This suggestion proved astute, since many children's responses were akin to peeling an onion: more general reasons mentioned initially and more specific and difficult reasons shared after that, or after additional questioning. In the response from a twelve-

year-old Honduran boy, he initially spoke of joining his mother, then of his mother's ability to

pay his migration journey, then of his own wishes, then the death of his father, and finally his

grandmother's abuse and potential abandonment. In response to a prompt, he adds that he wants

to study, work, and learn a skill. In response to a subsequent question about whether anyone had

made him suffer, he spoke further about his grandmother's abuse and rejection, and his

emotional reaction. This boy's migration motives appear layered, with various reasons building

on top of prior reasons.

It would be easy to reduce this boy's motivations to simply family reunification, yet his

stated reasoning is more complex. It involves both reasons to leave his home country and reasons

to remain in his home country. The ultimate decision to leave Honduras appears to have been a

confluence of multiple factors: 1) mother's presence in the U.S.; 2) mother's ability to finance

the child's transit; 3) child's wishes; 4) father's death; 5) grandmother's maltreatment; and 6)

grandmother's threat of abandonment. Remove any one of these factors, and the child might not

have come.

Some unaccompanied migrant children, like the one described here, appeared to have one

essential motivating goal composed of multiple motivating factors that determine the timing of

reaching the goal. In effect, they have multiple reasons for coming that combine and interact

until finally tipping the scale towards migration. For many parents, and their children, the goal is

to be reunited someday, somehow. This aspirational goal of reunification in reality requires

multiple additional factors in order to come to fruition. These additional factors reflect the reality

that the migration of children, accompanied or unaccompanied, often requires multiple actors,

including the child's own volition (Somers, 2010), the child's circumstances, the parents'

circumstances, the circumstances of substitute caregivers, the family's financial resources, access

to the mechanics of transit, among other things. Over time, the essential motivating goal may remain an end in itself (e.g. family reunification), or it may become the means to some other end (e.g. safety, opportunity, stability). Thus, the goal remains, but it takes on a different meaning because all of the people involved in making that goal happen have changed over time. A child may initially mention the easiest of the multiple reasons for coming, or may mention the essential motivating goal (such as family reunion), however this may not be what ultimately caused the child to leave home. The synthesis of asking a child a question once or asking multiple times might be to probe further, as we did by asking "Were there any other reasons?" by inviting a child to expand further in relation to the original question.

It is also worth recognizing that a child's multiple reasons for migration do not negate one another. That is, the fact that the child has wanted to reunify with his mother for some time does not mean that this motive is more valid or primary than the abuse by his grandmother. This serves as a reminder for U.S. adjudicators of children's asylum claims, or other protective measures, that a child's desire to reunify with a parent or other relative in the U.S. should not be viewed as cancelling out other stated reasons that may warrant legal protection.

Discussion

Implications for Research and Practice

The reflections discussed here have implications for the decisions to be made in designing and implementing research with children as the subjects. While focused on research, these reflections correlate to the seven polarities discussed in this article that may also have relevance for practice settings in which unaccompanied children are interviewed. First, researchers should consider which type of data achieves the research goals and captures what children have to say. What closed-ended data offer in convenience, open-ended data may

counterbalance in richness and detail. Mixed methods research approaches may provide an effective means of capitalizing on both generalizability of quantitative data with the specificity of qualitative data.

Second, researchers should consider engaging the breadth of sensory observations available in deciding what type of data to document. Words are often the most obvious, but other visual data, such as body language and drawings, may provide a fuller picture of the experience to be documented.

Third, interprofessional perspectives can provide complementary understandings of the data, both during and after the research gathering period. Working across professional fields also introduces different professional responsibilities and ethical understandings. Clarification and resolution of these differing duties should occur at the outset of a project, to avoid misunderstandings or a lack of uniform methodological approach.

Fourth, partnering for interviews can provide protections for the child and the researchers, and may be done in a way that is comfortable for children while allowing interviewers to draw upon one another's strengths.

Fifth, when interviewing children about painful events, researchers should remember that initial interviews will likely solicit responses from those children who are more forthcoming about painful events, while multiple interviews, or multiple meetings, may allow more reticent children to build rapport before sharing their experiences.

Sixth, likewise, some children will share their history the first time they are asked about it, while other children may require additional probing, repetition, or the use of different ways of questioning in order to be willing to share difficult information. Each of these observations has relevance for research with children, as well as applicability to practice settings with youth.

Directions for Future Research

This article has focused on reflections regarding the research experience with children. I have considered polarities of thesis and antithesis, in pursuit of synthesis. With that in mind, research that more explicitly compares these polarities in relation to children might further this analysis. For example, researchers might benefit from examining the similarities and differences in the results from using closed-ended and open-ended questions with children. Such an examination may inform both researchers and practitioners in creating questionnaires and conducting interviews. Researchers could also benefit from examining the results between different sensory data outcomes with children, such as documenting what is heard versus what is seen. Such an examination could expand researchers' and practitioners' perspectives on potential information to be gathered with children. For researchers working across professional lines, important guidance could be created for proactively navigating different professional responsibilities that may present potential ethical conflicts, so that interprofessional practice is considered and used competently. Finally, research into a variety of single versus multiple scenarios could be considered: one *interviewer* versus two (or more); one *interview* versus two (or more); posing a question once versus multiple times. Examining these questions would further our knowledge regarding how children respond in an interview setting. Undertaking any of the studies suggested here should weigh the usefulness of such research, with respect to children's interests, against the potential harm to children in retelling painful experiences. Opportunities to further explore existing data and research methodologies, as I have done here, should be utilized in order to minimize the re-interviewing of children.

Conclusion

These lessons from research go beyond the analysis of data, and include a reflective analysis of certain methodological research decisions. Documenting these reflections in the research literature can help to further research methods, particularly with vulnerable and difficult to access populations. Reflecting on research experiences is also in keeping with the NASW Code of Ethics, which reminds social workers to, "…contribute to the knowledge base of social work and share with colleagues their knowledge related to practice, research, and ethics. Social workers should seek to contribute to the profession's literature…" (2008, §5.01(d)).

In this article, I have reflected on my experience conducting research interviews with unaccompanied Central American and Mexican children in U.S. government custody, and considered particular methodological decisions that reflect polarities of thought. Discussion of each of these decisions may help future researchers, as well as practitioners, to make informed decisions in approaches to research as well as services with this vulnerable and difficult to access population.

My research experience with unaccompanied migrant children convinced me of the value and importance of listening to children themselves, including what children can tell us both verbally and visually. Interprofessional approaches to conducting research with children can bring varied and complementary perspectives to working with children, while also requiring special attention to differing professional responsibilities. Specific interviewing methods can impact how much children tell us. While my observations here are relevant to research, the use of effective methods is of greatest import in adjudicatory immigration proceedings that can potentially shape or even save a child's life. Asylum and other immigration proceedings must realistically account for contextual and methodological approaches that improve or limit a child's

openness to talking, such as a child's ability to trust and relate to persons charged with interviewing children. Recognizing the particularity of each child's history, and trying to understand a situation from each child's individual perspective, can help to bridge the age gap between minor age subject and adult interviewer. Ultimately, we must be willing to recognize that children have important things to tell us, show us, and teach us, if we have the patience and perseverance to listen and learn.

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Figure 1

Photographs of Unaccompanied Children's Hands
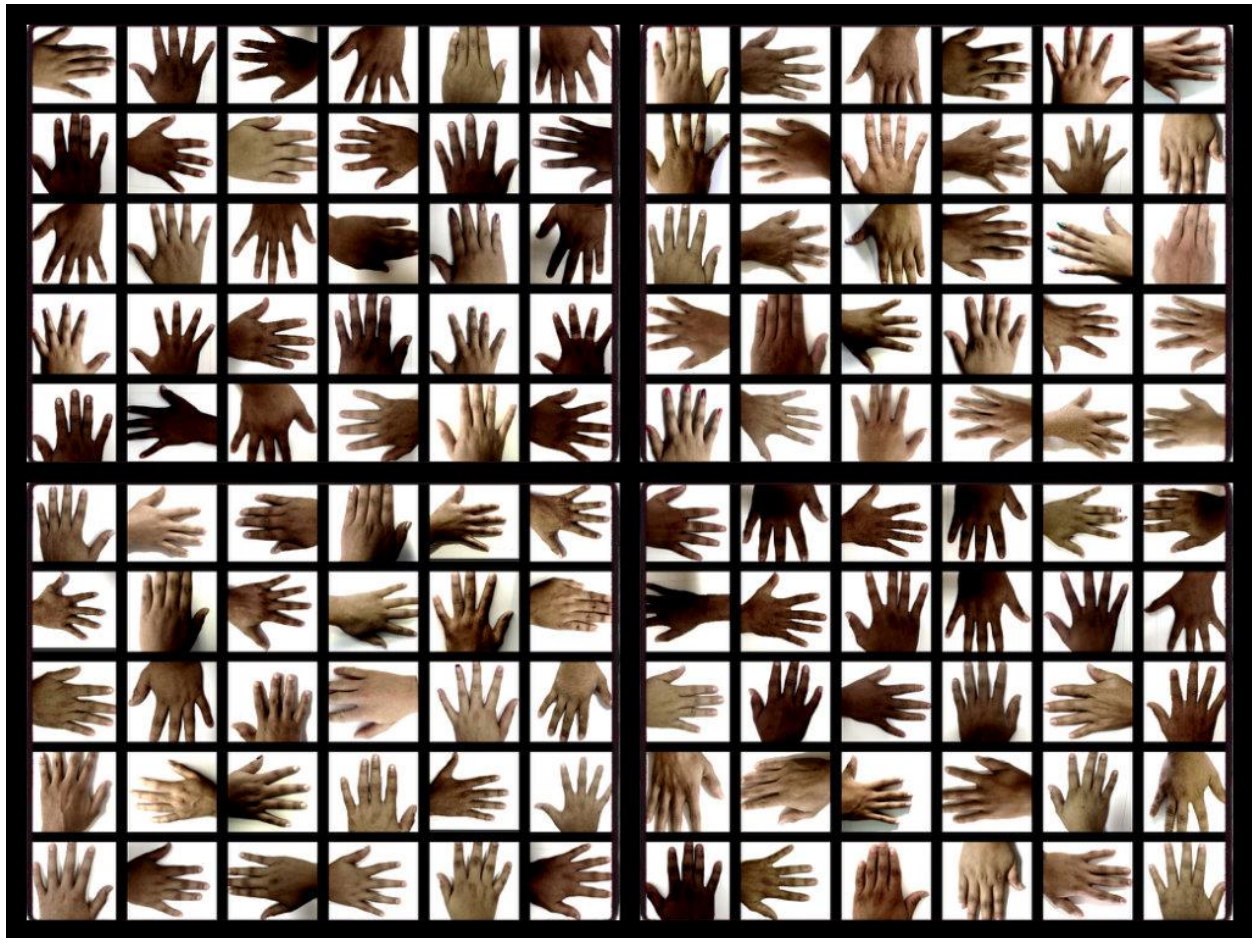
Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2014).

Figure 2

Improvised Family Tree for Cross-Border Relationships