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Journal Item

How to cite:

Crafter, Sarah (2019). [Book Review] Unaccompanied young Migrants: Identity, care and justice. Children & Society (Early Access).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1111/chso.12355>

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Book Review for Children & Society

Unaccompanied young Migrants: Identity, care and justice

By Sue Clayton, Anna Gupta and Katie Willis (Eds.)

Bristol, Policy Press, 2019

ISBN: 978-1447331889, £21.99

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Unaccompanied young migrants: Identity, care and justice

Unaccompanied young migrants: Identity, care and justice breaks new ground by offering a comprehensive picture of a problematic legislative and policy framework surrounding the lives of unaccompanied minors, both in the UK and internationally. Importantly though, the book does this whilst ensuring that the stories and experiences of unaccompanied minors do not get lost. This edited book carefully unpicks the complexities reflected in the contradictions in legislation and policy whilst being mindful of shifting contexts. Two things become manifestly evident very early-on when reading this book. The first, is that the contributors clearly care deeply about the perilous uncertainty that plagues the lives of unaccompanied minors, both before their arrival into their new country and long after it. The second, is that the legislation, policy and border treatments of unaccompanied minors are like sticking plasters, placed one on top of another. For every form of protection in place there is an amendment to policy or practice which seeks to undermine it. On the surface, systems of protection are in place but in reality, there has been systematic failure to deliver that.

This is not an easy book to read and nor should it be. One of the strengths of the book is that it addresses a wide range of themes and issues that transcend individual chapters. Equally though, it would be possible (though arguably a less rich experience) to dip into specific chapters. One key thread throughout the book is the role that Nation States play in shaping the wider socio-legal, legislative and policy landscape. Rather than protecting children, nation states engage in hostile practices that make the settlement of unaccompanied minors excessively challenging. Moreover, a number of authors in this book discuss the dilemmas of hostile immigrant practices when personal and professional roles operate at a disjuncture between practice, policy, legislation and human rights.

Unaccompanied Young Migrants traces the threads of uncertainty and precarity that foreshadow the lives of unaccompanied migrants and those involved in their care. Subject to the categories and labels placed upon them by others as either 'deserving' or 'underserving', young unaccompanied migrants are constrained in their goals for the future, dependent on asylum decisions that are out of their hands and subject to the vagaries of a complex migration regime. The richness of the book is aided by having a set of interdisciplinary authors from law, social work, media, sociology, psychology and geography who come from academic, professional practice and the media. The authors claim they hoped this book would provide a more nuanced and sympathetic understanding of the experiences of unaccompanied migrant youth and I do believe they have achieved this aim.

The first section of the book takes a look at the wider debates around migration regimes, legal frameworks and care systems, consistently juxtaposing protections that are theoretically available to young migrants against the significant gaps in the reality of practices on the ground. For example, Clayton and Willis use the context of the Calais Refugee Camp to explore the contradictions evident in immigration regimes, border controls and territorialisation. The legal system and the legislative context take centre stage in the discussions about conflicts (York and Warren) and Care (Gupta) of unaccompanied minors. Section 2 tightens the focus by narrating the experiences of young people; charting identities, resistances, misplaced guilt, friendship, loss, anger, aspiration, belonging and more. Perhaps some of these narrative descriptions could have been critically unpacked a little more, and in a book purely for academics and by academics that would have been expected. But that is not the driving force of this book and that is why it would be of interest to many people working across different disciplines and professional sectors. Age is an inevitable theme discussed by a range of authors but so is the importance of space, place and belonging (see chapters by Clayton and Drammeh). More rarely though, this book makes a dedicated effort to examine durable solutions for those turning 18 years old in the chapter by Williams, not least, emphasising how little organisations and agencies engage seriously in addressing this hinterland. The authors of this book are careful though, not to engage in the pitfalls of assuming the answers lie in, for example, hopeful interventions of resilience or simplistic solutions for the young people's future. Section 3 moves beyond a focus on the UK to explore the experiences of unaccompanied migrant youth in other contexts, namely across the US-Mexican border (Bruzzone & González-Araisz), the Nordic countries (Lidén) and Australia (Robinson & Gifford). These chapters demonstrate that there are contextual differences in law, legal frameworks and legislation but all reflect on the life of precarity for unaccompanied minors.

Collectively, the chapters of this book work well together, shifting the lens of focus between the macro and micro in a way that ensures the reader understands how they speak to each other. Simultaneously, the reader never loses sight of the young people, perhaps because each chapter author conveys a deep sense of care and consideration given to how the young migrants are framed and their place within the culture of legislation. I would highly recommend this book.