View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by City Research Online

O'Toole Thommessen, S.A., Corcoran, P. & Todd, B. (2015). Experiences of Arriving to Sweden as an Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Minor from Afghanistan: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Psychology of Violence, 5(4), pp. 374-383. doi: 10.1037/a0038842

CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON
EST 1894

City Research Online

Original citation: O'Toole Thommessen, S.A., Corcoran, P. & Todd, B. (2015). Experiences of Arriving to Sweden as an Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Minor from Afghanistan: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Psychology of Violence, 5(4), pp. 374-383. doi: 10.1037/a0038842

Permanent City Research Online URL: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/8066/

Copyright & reuse

City University London has developed City Research Online so that its users may access the research outputs of City University London's staff. Copyright © and Moral Rights for this paper are retained by the individual author(s) and/ or other copyright holders. All material in City Research Online is checked for eligibility for copyright before being made available in the live archive. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to from other web pages.

Versions of research

The version in City Research Online may differ from the final published version. Users are advised to check the Permanent City Research Online URL above for the status of the paper.

Enquiries

If you have any enquiries about any aspect of City Research Online, or if you wish to make contact with the author(s) of this paper, please email the team at publications@city.ac.uk.

Experiences of Arriving to Sweden as an Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Minor from Afghanistan: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Sara Amalie O'Toole Thommesssen, Paula Corcoran, Brenda K. Todd

Department of Psychology, City University London

Abstract

Objective: The number of individuals seeking refuge and safety in European and Western host-societies has increased in recent years and there is no evidence to suggest that this trend will reverse in the foreseeable future. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and youth are particularly vulnerable to risk. The detrimental influence of political conflicts, war and forced migration on asylum-seeking individuals' mental health is well-documented; however, the stressors encountered after arrival to the host-country have been investigated less frequently. This study explored how a group of six male refugees from Afghanistan experienced arriving to the Swedish host-society as unaccompanied minors, and how they perceived the support available to them. **Methods:** Based on individual semi-structured interviews, an interpretative phenomenological analysis was carried out to explore the perceived risks and protective factors during the first months and years in the host-society. **Results:** The qualitative findings draw attention to the crucial importance of clarifying the complex asylum-seeking process, the protective influence of social support, the importance of educational guidance, and participant's strong desire to fit in and move forward with their lives. **Conclusion:** The resulting information can inform the practice of supporting asylum-seeking youths' adaptation in host-societies and in developing assessment measures and interventions for these groups. Specifically, the results indicate the protective role of social support and highlight the potential value of mentoring schemes.

Keywords: Unaccompanied minors, refugees, social support, risk and resilience, children and war.

The global report published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the summer of 2013 illustrated that the number of individuals seeking safety and refuge because of political and armed conflicts, persecution or other human rights violations in 2012 was the highest it has been since 1994. The UNHCR report recorded the highest ever number of asylum applications relating to separated children since such figures were incorporated in their reports in 2006. For the preceding five years, most asylum seekers fled from Afghanistan and the largest number of unaccompanied and separated children came from Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2013). As unaccompanied minors face greater risks than children and youth who are accompanied by parents, relatives or carers, there is a general consensus that this group is the most vulnerable of all individuals seeking safety in foreign countries (e.g. Goodman, 2004; Halvorsen, 2002; Mels, Derluyn, Broekaert, & Rosseel, 2010; Thommessen, Laghi, Cerrone, Baiocco, & Todd, 2013; Wernesjö, 2012). The dangers and risks involved in travelling without protection from adults are well-documented (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2007; Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick & Stein, 2012; Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, & Cunniff, 2008). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989), which came into force in September 1990 and was approved by all UN member states apart from Somalia and The United States, gives all children equal rights to have a childhood, to be treated fairly, to safety, protection, education and to be heard. This present study sheds light on the experiences of a group of unaccompanied minors who have not always been treated fairly, have not been offered protection and safety, or had educational opportunities and whose voices are rarely heard.

The adverse effects of political conflicts and human rights violations are well-documented and a wealth of research has explored the mental health risks in asylum-seeking unaccompanied children and youth (e.g. Bronstein, Montgomery, & Dobrowolski, 2012; Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, & Cunniff, 2008; Thommessen et al., 2013). In addition to the dangers associated with the pre-migration environment and the long journey to the asylum-country, research carried out in high-income countries has found that risk factors in host-societies can contribute to poor mental health in asylum-seeking and refugee groups (Carswell, Blackburn, & Barker, 2011; Fazel et al., 2012; Lie, 2002; Silove, Sinnerbrink, Field, Manicavasagar, & Steel, 1997; Sultan & O'Sullivan, 2001). Indeed, some evidence indicates that the post-migration environment can be more predictive of psychological morbidity than traumatizing events survived pre-migration (Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg, 1998) and that trauma symptoms can increase over time in the host-society (Lie, 2002). Although research based on diagnostic measures has contributed critically to knowledge about the physical and somatic consequences of potentially traumatizing experiences on individuals, the primary focus tends to be restricted to pre-selected symptoms and difficulties, thereby limiting our understanding of refugees' individual experiences.

Qualitative enquiries that have sought to investigate refugee and asylum-seeking individuals' personal experiences after their arrival to host-societies have thus far been scarce (Miller, Worthington, Muzurovic, Tipping, & Goldman, 2002; Wernesjö, 2012). Such studies, however, could potentially lead to vital knowledge for screening, interventions and for establishing how best to support these groups at early stages. The voices of refugee children, adolescents and young adults are, for the most part, absent from existing literature on refugee mental health. Few studies have previously enabled refugees - and children and youth in particular - to identify and voice the stressors they personally find most difficult to face (Goodman, 2004; Miller et al., 2002; Strijk, van Meijel, & Gamel, 2010) or what has been helpful in the receiving country (Wernesjö, 2012). Where qualitative methods have been used to explore the experience of refugee populations, however, they have led to important information.

Miller and colleagues (2002) studied eighteen women and ten men from Bosnia who took part in a semi-structured interview focusing on individual exile-related stressors. The interview covered three topics; life prior to the war in Bosnia, the journey to exile, and life in the host-society, Chicago. The analysis led to seven main themes: Social Isolation and Loss of Community, The Loss of Life Projects, A Lack of Environmental Mastery, The Loss of Social Roles and Meaningful Activities, Lack of Sufficient Income, Lack of Adequate Housing and Basic Necessities and lastly, Health Problems not previously experienced in Bosnia. Using a narrative method the researchers were able to identify critical variables that had previously been overlooked when relying purely on deductive quantitative methods. Thus, changes in social roles, social integrity and social connectedness as well as forced abandonment of life projects, and personal goals and dreams were found to be prominent themes across individuals.

A further qualitative investigation explored the ways in which young unaccompanied male minors from Sudan dealt with the trauma they had survived, as well as their coping strategies (Goodman, 2004). Based on a case-centered, comparative approach, the narratives of fourteen male youths’ stories of their lives were analyzed, leading to four main themes: Collectivity and the Communal Self, Suppression and Distraction, Making Meaning (about their personal situation and suffering) and finally, Emerging from Hopelessness to Hope. Overall, the findings highlighted how the participants’ resilience was largely made possible through a sense of brotherhood and social connectedness within the group (Goodman, 2004). This resonates with previous results suggesting that the perception of social support contributes to well-being, and that lack of social support is associated with increased mental health difficulties (Berthold, 2000; Carswell, Blackburn, & Baker, 2011; Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg, 1998; Kovacev & Shute, 2004; Strijk et al., 2010).

A qualitative exploration of unaccompanied minors' needs and experiences in the UK was provided by Groark, Sclare and Raval (2011). Following an interpretative phenomenological analysis, four themes were developed; Loss, Negotiating a New Life, Experiences of Distress, and Process of Adjustment. The authors argue for a holistic approach to therapeutic intervention, in which the refugee individuals' personal stages of adjustment, as well as social and political circumstances are considered. Thus, initial coping strategies in the host-society may include avoidance, distraction and anxiety management until stability has been reached. During later stages individuals should be introduced to situations where trusting relationships can develop and should be provided with adequate access to education and health care systems (Groark et al., 2011).

The needs and experiences of unaccompanied minors in European host-societies remains an under-researched topic, despite the fact that numbers of asylum-seeking individuals are increasing (UNHCR, 2013). This present study had three main aims. Firstly (1) to explore the ways in which male unaccompanied youth from Afghanistan experienced arriving to the Swedish host-society, and (2) how they perceived the support available to them on arrival and which support systems the young people experienced as most helpful during the initial months in the asylum country. The final and more implicit objective (3) was to give voice to this group of young refugees. This study adds novel findings to the field by focusing on individual experiences in the host-society, and by enabling young refugees to express what they found most difficult and helpful during the initial stages. The main research question was: How do unaccompanied refugee minors experience arriving to the Swedish host-society and what do they find particularly helpful and challenging after their arrival?

Method

Sample

Initially, information about the purpose of the study was sent to the refugee center where participants were to be recruited, and a group meeting was arranged with potentially interested participants, the researcher and staff. The research was completely separate from the organization providing support to participants, and the researcher and staff emphasized that participation was voluntary and that whether or not the youth took part would not have any consequences for their relationship with staff. An interpreter was present during the meeting and participants were encouraged to ask questions and to voice any potential concerns. Because of the specific research question, the invited sample was homogeneous rather than based on maximum variation. Based on advice from the two ethics committees (identified below), participation was limited to individuals aged over 18 years. The inclusion criteria were therefore that each participant had arrived to Sweden as an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan, that they had received refugee status, and were eighteen years of age or older. Two individuals below the age of 18 years expressed an interest in taking part, but did not fit the inclusion criteria because of their age. As the specific center only housed young individuals from Afghanistan who had arrived as unaccompanied minors and who had been granted refugee status, it was not necessary to turn away any further participants. Thus, six 18-19 year-old refugee individuals from Afghanistan, who had arrived to Sweden as unaccompanied minors between the ages of 15-16 years, took part in the study and none of the individuals fulfilling the inclusion criteria chose not to take part. All participants were male. Prior to being interviewed, participants were asked to give written and verbal informed consent.

The participants had all had their asylum applications approved in Sweden, which minimized the risk that they might be reluctant to speak about their experiences because of pending cases. Therefore, all of the young participants had experienced waiting for the outcome of their application, and receiving a positive decision. Ethical approval was granted from the relevant Swedish ethical review board (EPN) and City University London before initiating the research. All names of participating individuals, as well as some names of places, have been changed in order to protect participants' identities. The pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

Data Collection

The interviews took place at the refugee center in a Swedish city where all six participants lived, as this was a familiar place for the young people. One male interpreter who spoke the two main languages of the group, Farsi and Dari, translated the interviews in person. To protect their identity further, the participants were offered the opportunity to carry out the interview using screen translation where the interpreter was not physically present; however, all of the participants chose to carry out the interview with the interpreter physically present in the room. The interviewer was female and spoke Danish and Swedish with the interpreter, who translated from Danish and Swedish into Dari or Farsi. The majority of the participants spoke very good Swedish, and in some cases chose to answer questions directly in Swedish rather than waiting for the interpreter. Each interview lasted between 30-50 minutes. Five out of six interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. One individual chose not to be audio-recorded, and the interviewer therefore wrote down this participant's replies by hand, with his informed consent.

As the purpose of this study was to explore how the young individuals had experienced arriving to the Swedish host-society, and what was most helpful and challenging, questions focused on experiences in the host-society. Participants were invited to talk about their recollections of arriving to Sweden, including their first memories and impressions. Furthermore, questions were asked about the challenges they faced, and the support that had received. Participants were moreover given the opportunity to express any potential concerns they might have and what they felt young people in their situation needed first and foremost. The researcher emphasized that she did not have the political power to make these changes, but expressed that her intention was to present their views in written work, in the form of quotes and extracts. In order to minimize any potential pressure to express favorable views about the host-society which might otherwise have been felt, participants were informed that the researchers were not Swedish nationals and did not live in Sweden. Moreover, the confidentiality of the interviews was stressed, and participants were told that the organization from which they were recruited did not have access to their data.

Data Analysis

This study design was based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), a method that is particularly apt for research questions concerned with the exploration of lived human experiences and is suitable for studies that aim to shed light on topics that are under-researched, or that seek to give a voice to individuals who are not usually heard. The transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, following Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2009) guidelines. To avoid potential misrepresentations, the interpretations focused solely on content rather than temporal referents or repetition of words, as the interviews were translated twice: once from Dari to Danish by the interpreter during the interview and later from Danish into English for the purpose of analysis and write-up. For these reasons, it was decided that putting analytical weight on language details such as tenses used, could potentially lead to misrepresentations of the participating individuals.

The first stage of analysis was carried out by the first author and involved writing initial thoughts and notes on the transcripts, highlighting words, sentences or phrases that seemed to be important, as well as the researchers' spontaneous reactions and reflections. This was done for the first interview and some emerging themes were developed. Next, connections between the emerging themes that had been developed, based on the first transcript, were drawn. When turning to subsequent interviews, these were dealt with as the first, starting with preliminary notes, thoughts and associations before moving on to emerging themes and exploring the connections between emerging themes within each transcript. An independent reading of the transcripts was carried out by the second and third author, before all three authors met to discuss the themes. During this second stage of the analysis, some themes were found to fall under the same overall theme, thereby creating super-ordinate headings, whereas other themes were dismissed or re-conceptualized (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The second and third step of the analysis was therefore carried out by three authors together, and four main themes remained.

Findings

Overall, the participants told stories of themselves as boys who had been forced into independence at an early stage of their development. They had travelled without the protection of adults, and had learned to survive on the long journey from Afghanistan to Sweden, which took up to six months. Extracts exemplifying the four main identified themes will be presented: From Danger to Safety, Living in Limbo, Guidance and Social Support, and Striving to Fit in and Move Forward.

From Danger to Safety

Although the participants were not asked to speak about their pre-migration experiences, four out of six mentioned the hardship survived prior to coming to Sweden, in some cases as a way of comparing life in Sweden to what they had previously experienced. For these participants, it seemed they were telling the beginning of their story of fleeing their home country. The following quotes exemplify findings that correspond to the study’s first aim of exploring how the male unaccompanied youth from Afghanistan experienced arriving to the Swedish host-society.

One of the participants, Beltoon, gave a short and factual summary of his journey to Sweden:

> I was with my family in Iran for 6 -7 years, with my mum and my younger brother. I *can’t remember exactly how many years we were there for, but I think it was 6 or 7* years in Iran. From Iran I travelled alone to Greece and from Greece to Italy and from Italy to Sweden. I was hiding underneath a car.

Similarly, Daoud gave a brief description of his journey:

> (...) There were many countries along the way: First I went through Turkey and Greece and then I was in Italy and then France and finally Sweden. It was tough shit. *You don’t have any passport, no pa*pers, no nothing – it was difficult shit.

Isah elaborated and gave the following account of his journey:

> It was a long journey to come here, I travelled from Afghanistan to Iran and from there to Turkey and on to Greece and Italy and then through many other countries to get to Sweden. This journey took five months. My life was in danger, and then I *didn’t have any papers or passport, my life could easily have been destroyed. If you* want to experience what we have been through, if you want to understand my situation, you should try to live as an illegal immigrant in Greece and try to travel like I did. I was hiding underneath a truck, just next to the wheels, without food, without water for up to 40-50 hours in one go.

When asked about the first impressions and memories from Sweden, the participants spoke of their arrival to the host-country in positive terms, and four out of six respondents mentioned that they were met with kindness and friendliness, which led to an experienced sense of safety.

Adeeb remembered the initial time in Sweden as follows:

> The main difference was that I experienced friendliness here, contrary to my *situation in Iran where I didn’t have any papers and I was in constant fear that the*

> police would catch me. People from Afghanistan are not treated kindly in Iran. But in this country, I was met with kindness and friendliness and I got the temporary legal papers until I received the decision and my refugee status, and I felt safe while I was waiting for the outcome of my asylum application.

Isah's first memories were as follows:

> When I got a place in the refugee center, the thing I remember was that it was the first time in five months that I could relax. It had been a 5-month journey and I was exhausted and ill, I had been travelling under very difficult conditions, but when I got here it was the first time in five months that I could relax. It was also the first time I was met with friendliness. Before, everything had been chaos – just chaos – but now there were people listening to me.

Daoud recalled a similar experience:

> When I first came to this country I went to the police. They were friendly and helpful and they showed me the address where I had to go to apply for asylum: The Swedish Migration Board. At the Migration Board people were also friendly to me and I was treated nicely.

The extracts and stories that were provided by the participating individuals shed light on how the initial stage in the host-society was experienced by the individual. Officials and professional involved in the initial stages of arrival and the asylum process were thus described with words such as kindness and friendliness.

One of the examples Isah gave, towards the end of the interview, illustrates the stark contrast between how he was treated in Sweden in comparison other places during the long journey from Afghanistan:

> I was abused and beaten by gangs and by the police in (place). I have experienced enough in my life. One time I was beaten so badly by the police in (place) that I *couldn't walk. My friends had to carry me. We were three boys, all from Afghanistan, and one time I didn't make it. The other two boys got away but I didn't make it. The* three *police men used me as a personal punch bag and I couldn't walk when they had* finished.

Compared to previous experiences during the journey to Sweden, the friendliness and kindness that the participants had been met with, was clearly worth emphasizing when recalling their first memories and impressions. The kindness participants had come across in Sweden did not seem extraordinary to the researchers, yet participants expressed how they had come from danger to a place that felt safe.

Living in Limbo

Although all of the individuals who took part in the study had received their refugee status when the interview took place, the anxiety and concern they had experienced during the initial months in Sweden, whilst waiting for the outcome of their asylum application, was a prominent theme across all six interviews. This illustrates the dilemma of having reached the first goal and having sacrificed so much along the way, only to be met by another set of challenges in the host-society. These findings relate to the first two objectives of the study: Firstly, exploring how male unaccompanied youth from Afghanistan experienced arriving to the Swedish host-society and, secondly, investigating how they perceived the support available to them on arrival, as well as which support systems the young people experienced as most helpful during the initial months in the asylum country. Daoud recalled the initial months in Sweden in the following way:

> The most difficult thing for me was the loneliness – being so lonely was very difficult for me. And waiting for the asylum decision was really difficult. The nine months I waited were hard because of the uncertainty. After a short pause, he added: Having the outcome of my asylum application was just one small problem solved, thinking about the future and all the thoughts were still there. For me it was important to start thinking about education, to keep myself busy and to try to improve my chances of *having a future. When you're a child, you don't have a lot of problems or things to* worry about, but after you grow up a little bit, even after the decision (referring to his asylum application) was made, there were still lots of problems to be solved and lots of difficulties. Things like thinking about having your own family and children, and being able to provide food for them.

With a sense of longing to return to his relatively carefree childhood, Daoud made comparisons between the past and the present, and expressed his concerns about the immediate and long term future. Isah also mentioned the distress he experienced whilst waiting for the asylum application, and the concerns that followed:

> During those first nine months (waiting for the asylum decision) I was under a lot of pressure. I cried a lot because of my family. They (Taliban) said they were going to burn down our house because of our religion. During the first months I had two main problems, or one double problem. The first thing was thinking about Afghanistan and my family and worrying about them, and the second thing was the uncertainty of what was going to happen to me, worrying that I would be deported and that I would land in the hands of the enemy.

And he later summarized:

> The two most important things young asylum-seeking individuals need are, first of all, for asylum applications to be dealt with quicker and secondly, to have some kind *of psychological support and help. I couldn't focus, I couldn't concentrate. You can* try to imagine how the young people, *who don't have papers and who don't have* status, feel.

The extracts above reveal the isolation, loneliness and fears experienced by the young individuals during the asylum process. Despite having found temporary safety in the Swedish host-society, their initial memories were influenced by the uncertainty of not knowing what was going to happen in the future, worrying about the outcome of their asylum applications and their families left behind. In addition to their own personal distress, many of the participants spoke of family members who were still in Afghanistan or neighboring countries, and that they worried about their family's safety and well-being. This demonstrates the burden of not knowing if family members were still alive or not, in a sense experiencing both a very real loss of what was familiar to them in the past - their families, home, friends, school - as well as an ambiguous loss of their families. Beltoon voiced his concern about his family in the following extract:

> The most difficult thing was waiting for the outcome of my asylum application, and worrying about that – and about whether or not I could go to school here. And also thinking about my family – my mother and my younger brother, they are still in Iran, and I was worrying about whether or not I could bring them here.

Similarly, the participants spoke compassionately about other individuals from Afghanistan who had been through the same journey and similar suffering, only to be sent back to the hands of the enemy, as one of the participants expressed it. Beltoon said:

> What I think is really problematic and very difficult and negative is that so many young people go through so much to make it this far, they use all their resources and money to come to this country, they sacrifice so much, and then they are just deported or denied asylum here. Many young people are deported. I know people who have been sent home.

Similarly, Fahim also voiced his concern for others who had been less fortunate than himself:

> The people who are still waiting for the outcome of their asylum application are living in limbo. They can attend school but they are not in a position to really learn *anything because they don't know what is going to happen or if they will have to* leave the country.

Guidance and Social Support

All of the participants had travelled long distances without support or protection of parents or adults and one participant explained how he had been on his own from the age of ten. Having left families and friends behind, and having lost family members, five out of six participants emphasized the importance of social support and positive encouragement from staff, their 'good man*'* (mentor provided by the Swedish state, known in Sweden as '*god man',* although this role can also be filled by women) and friendships with other youth who had experienced similar difficulties. This theme sheds light on the second objective of this study by exploring what participants experienced as supportive and helpful during the initial months and years in the host-society, and provides examples of the protective factor of social support.

The mentoring scheme had clearly played an important part in Adeeb's experience of arriving to Sweden, and he spoke warmly of his good man, an elderly woman with whom he was still in contact, despite no longer being a minor:

> There was an Iranian woman who was appointed to be my good man, and in addition to the fact that we spoke the same language, she also helped me with more personal

> advice and helped me with things that had to do with life in Sweden, more than what would be expected of her, more than the norm. That was the friendliness and kindness or humanity she provided. She helped me with all kinds of things – more things than she would have been expected to do as her role as my good man.

And later during the interview, he explained why the support and encouragement meant so much, as the mentor seemed to have taken the role of a supportive carer, who was willing to provide personal advice and guidance, rather than helping with administrative issues only:

> The most important thing is the support from immediate people around the young person. For instance, encouraging the young people to go to school and to take part in education - not just to turn up every day so that you get your allowance – but to get the advice and guidance needed to actually learn for the sake of learning – to become something and make something of yourself. I think the most important thing is to be surrounded by friends and people who can guide you and encourage you to develop.

Fahim also emphasized the importance of having guidance and mentorship as a means of support:

> It is important to have one person to talk to, and to have someone to guide you. It is important that someone tells you how important is to get an education, because there is nothing to do, they (asylum-seeking youth) are just waiting, there is no job to do, so young people are doing nothing and wasting their time. But if someone can talk to the young people in their own language, and tell them that they must have an education, *because that's the only way to move forward*, to do something with their *life. That's what I think is really important: Someone to show them the way, and* provide support and guidance – like a mentor.

Beltoon similarly emphasized the importance of support from staff at the center and his mentor. In his case, he stressed the need to be introduced to the new society, and to engage in meaningful activities.

> It was the staff and my good man who were helpful to me. Everyone who arrives to this country on their own, who is younger than 18 years of age, is provided with a good man, like a guardian. They help with practical and administrative issues and things. After coming to this country, the most important thing is the asylum process and being granted status. Then if that happens, it is important to have something to do, like school or work. And what is also important is being introduced to this society, so for instance, learning how to deal with practical things.

Later, whilst talking about the importance of having social support, as a universal human need, Beltoon added:

> It is always good to speak to someone now and then. Just like you (referring to the interviewer) need to speak to someone when you have a problem, I too need to speak to someone when I have a problem. It is good to have someone to speak to.

Advice and the support of caring adults seemed especially important to these young men who had been unable to access protection and care from their family during difficult situations. One of the participants, however, expressed that he did not feel supported, or that he did not feel others would be able to help or understand his situation.

> Isah: There is no one who can help you – *you have to help yourself. If you don't get a* reply from your asylum application, who do you think can help you? No-one. You have to be able to take care of yourself. I know that not everyone is able to find the strength to survive. You can either choose to help yourself to survive – or you can kill *yourself. Those are the two options. When you've come this far, and when you've* survived so much, that means you are very strong and that you have been very strong.

In summary, the extracts shed light on participants' desire for guidance and support, as well as a sense of longing for people who would be able to listen to and understand what they had been through. Despite the young participants' strength and resilience, they also expressed a need for adult protection and support, even though the degree to which they seemed willing or able to accept help from others varied.

Striving to fit in and move forward

Having survived hardship in Afghanistan and during the journey to Sweden, the participants expressed a longing to fit into the new society, and their aim to take advantage of the educational opportunities and to become someone. In the extracts below, three of the participants speak about the importance of adapting to the host-society, to fit in and to learn about the rules and norms in the asylum country:

> Adeeb: It is important that we – or I – or we as refugees accept society as it is and not the other way around. We have to adapt and make sure we fit into society here; people in my situation have to do that. We have to accept this society, not the other way *around. It is important that we accept society's norms and rules in order to be* able to interact in this country.
>
> Daoud: Other *people can't do anything to help you, like if you're lonely; it's your* own responsibility to get out of the center. *You shouldn't just sit and do nothing. You have to get out and to keep busy. You have to help yourself. It's important not just to* sit at h*ome and do nothing. It's important to go out and meet people and to keep* active. If you want to learn, you have to go out and meet people. If you just sit at home, nothing will happen. I do spend time with other people here at the center, but you have to have some kind of contact with the outside world as well, not just the others living here.

Fahim emphasized the importance of education as a way of adapting to the new society:

> I want to attend school and get an education and then get a job, just like anyone else. I am in high school now. I would like to work on a construction site.

Although Fahim is aware that he has been through much more than his peers in Sweden, he longs to be like 'anyone else', and education and work are vital components in that process. In the extracts below, participants talk more specifically about education.

> Adeeb explains: While I was in Iran, I had to pay money to go to school – that was if I was lucky enough to be accepted into a school at all, because not all schools will allow refugees from Afghanistan – but if so, we had to pay money. Here in Sweden everyone said to me: *"You can go to school for free".* When I lived in Iran, it was very difficult to go to school or to learn and develop at all, because of the circumstances and the situation - how refugees from Afghanistan are treated there, and also because of the financi*al aspects, it wasn't free. But while I was living there,* I read a book about a diplomat and this book inspired me. I*t's my dream to become a* diplomat.
>
> Beltoon: I hope to study and get a job and to have a home and a car. I also hope to be able to see my family. I tried to get them here, when I got my refugee status, but it was not possible. Now I hope it might be possible for them to visit sometime in the future, if they can get their visa.

And he added:

> My younger brother is disabled – he was born that way – so it is very difficult for them. My mother is a (her profession) *but they are 'living black' and that is very difficult. They have absolutely no rights at all. I can't help them financially now that I'm at school.*

Beltoon's mother and brother are living under difficult circumstances, without legal papers or rights, which he refers to as 'living black'. These extracts focus on using the many possible ways to move forward and reveal a strong desire not to waste the opportunities provided in the asylum country. The participants also demonstrate an awareness that other young people in the same situation have not been able to reach their destination, exemplified through stories of friends and brothers who died along the way, and of other Afghan boys who experienced similar journeys and difficulties only to be refused asylum or deported from Sweden, as well as extracts about families who were still living under very difficult circumstances.

Discussion

Only a limited number of studies have previously provided refugee youth who entered a Western host-society as unaccompanied minors with the opportunity to voice their opinions, and as far as we are aware, no research to date has explored the personal experience of arriving to an asylum country and the initial support provided through a qualitative method. The main aims of the present study were to give young unaccompanied refugee minors a voice in order to (1) to explore their experience of arriving to Sweden, and (2) what they had perceived as supportive and challenging at the time. Based on an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, four main themes were developed: From Danger to Safety, Living in Limbo, Guidance and Social Support, and Striving to Fit in and Move Forward.

From Danger to Safety The findings that relate to the asylum process are connected to the first objective of the present study, by providing examples of how this group of unaccompanied minors experienced arriving to the Swedish host-society. Research from other European countries has demonstrated that post-migration stressors negatively affect mental health difficulties in refugee and asylum-seeking populations (e.g. Carswell, Blackburn, & Barker, 2011; Fazel et al., 2012; Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg, 1998; Lie, 2002; Silove, Sinnerbrink, Field, Manicavasagar, & Steel, 1997) and if support systems which facilitate openness, friendliness and support are offered in the host-societies, this is likely to have a positive effect on further adaptation. Providing opportunities for asylum-seeking youth to voice their concerns, views, fears and opinions seems to be an important task for researchers and professionals in the future.

Living in Limbo Adaptation in asylum countries is often a long and gradual process (Fazel et al., 2012) and is impeded further by the complex and lengthy asylum procedures. Indeed, the asylum process was one of the main causes of worry and distress expressed by the young participants, including the uncertainty and loneliness of that period, which had been the most challenging and difficult experience in Sweden. This is likely to be particularly pertinent to unaccompanied children and youth without parental protection, who have less experience with dealing with distress because of their young age. Previous research has found a number of adverse factors associated with the uncertainty of waiting for an asylum application, such as fear of being sent back, loneliness, isolation, discrimination, anxiety, loss of culture and loss of social support (e.g. Carswell et al., 2011; Silove et al., 1997). Providing social support during the asylum-seeking process and clarification of processes are therefore critical tasks for the professionals involved. Although the extracts illustrated that the good man system had been a positive experience for most of the participants, this was not always the case. It is possible that the feeling of living in limbo and the uncertainty of the asylum-process hindered some participants’ ability to develop a personal relationship in Sweden, in case everything would suddenly be taken away from them if they were deported.

The participants in the present study did not know the details of their family members' whereabouts, safety or whether or not they are still alive. Such ambiguous loss is characterized by a lack of clarity, as there is no opportunity to perform mourning rituals which would otherwise be an important part of grieving and coming to terms with the loss (Boss, 2004). The experience of ambiguous loss and later reunification with family members was explored by Luster, Qin, Bates, Johnson and Rana (2008), who interviewed ten boys who were brought to the USA as unaccompanied minors after several years of living in Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya (The Lost Boys of Sudan). The authors argue that the boys' hope of one day being able to see their families again may have provided them with encouragement and strength (Luster et al., 2008).

In this present study, the participants' concern for family members and friends left behind highlights the importance of social connectedness, and how the lack of contact with family members, and lack of knowledge about their well-being, was a cause of worry. Although participants had reached a country where they found safety and had received refugee status, they did not experience stability, and problems and difficulties persisted. Acknowledging the concern and anxiety for family members left behind, and seeking ways of establishing contact where possible, may help alleviate this distress. Thus, rather than simply focusing on the unaccompanied child or youth, their broader social connections need consideration. These findings therefore shed light on the first two objectives of the study.

Guidance and Social Support Although the participants in this present study had been hardened and had learned to be resilient, as one of the participants put it, as a consequence of their experiences in their home country, the journey to Sweden and their experiences in the host-society, they did express a need for adult support, advice and encouragement in the host-society. At the same time, there was an emphasis on personal responsibilities and reliance on oneself across the interviews, and there seemed to be a difference between the participants' willingness and ability to accept support. These findings highlights how participants' anxiety and concerns were inter-connected to their families and the lives they have left behind, which in turn affected their need for social support.

One of the main contributing factors to facilitating adaption and well-being in the asylum country has previously been found to be the development of close, meaningful social relationships. Evidence suggests that the perception of social support contributes to well-being in refugee youth and similarly, that the lack of social support is associated with increased mental health difficulties (Berthold, 2000; Carswell et al., 2011; Strijk, et al., 2010). In the UK, Hodes and colleagues (2008) found unaccompanied asylum-seeking youth who received less support through their living arrangements, such as independent accommodation, to show increased symptoms compared to unaccompanied asylum-seeking adolescents with higher levels of support, such as living with a foster family. In Australia, Kovacev and Shute (2004) found a positive relationship between perceived social support from friends and family and adjustment to the host-country in a group of adolescent refugees from the former republic of Yugoslavia. Similarly, Gorst-Unsworth and Goldenberg (1998) found poor social support in the host-country, England, to be a stronger predictor of depressive morbidity than the trauma experienced. Lie (2002) carried out a longitudinal study in Norway, in which a group of refugees were followed for a period of three years. Alarmingly, trauma symptoms increased over time in the host-society, and unemployment and lack of social contact were found to be especially important factors influencing stress in the host-country. Similarly, qualitative and mixed-methods research has illustrated the importance of social relationships and social connectedness for asylum-seeking and refugee individuals (e.g. Goodman, 2004; Mels, Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008; Miller et al., 2002; Strijk, et al., 2010, Wallin & Ahlström, 2005)..

Striving to Fit in and Move Forward Across the interviews, participants focused on the importance of learning about the receiving society, making an effort to adapt, and on moving forward through education, which are themes that relate to the first two objectives of this study. A common theme was therefore a sense of personal responsibility within the asylum country. As a result of the independence and coping abilities required to make the journey from Afghanistan to Sweden on their own, the participants were used to managing difficulties and hardship, and this strategy persisted in the asylum country.

Having come from a very different culture, with a past that was far from the norm in Sweden, education was an important component of integration, moving on and finding stability and normalization. This focus on education and the future was similarly found in a qualitative study exploring the needs and strengths of unaccompanied minors carried out by Hopkins and Hill (2010) in Scotland. These authors interviewed a group of unaccompanied refugee youth as well as their service providers about the needs and strengths of unaccompanied refugee minors. The participating youth expressed the importance of practical, legal and social support, as well as education and a desire to learn (Hopkins & Hill, 2010). Participants in the present study expressed a willingness to take full responsibility for their own lives, rather than waiting for opportunities to be handed to them.

Summarizing, the individuals who took part in this study had all been granted refugee status, which minimized their concern over the potential influences of their words on their pending cases. Their voices and experiences were judged to be particularly valuable, as they had arrived in the host-country as minors relatively recently, yet, had also had some time to reflect on their situation. Therefore, it was assumed that their experiences were not so recent that talking about them would be too distressing and that their view would be more comprehensive as they had experienced some degree of settlement in the new society. This present study sheds light on an under-researched area, the individual experiences of arriving to the host-society, and uses a qualitative methodology which has enabled the participants to express what it feels like to live in limbo, to be far away from family members and to settle in a new society. This provides a useful addition to findings from quantitative data focusing primarily on symptoms and neglecting the underlying causes.

Limitations

As this group of participants had all received their refugee status, the data does not include information about the experiences of youth who have been refused asylum, or how the available support was perceived by the individuals who received a negative outcome based on their applications. The fate of the children and youth who have been sent back to Afghanistan, and continue to be sent back, is uncertain and their views as yet unpublished. Moreover, the current findings offer an interpretation of interviews with a group of six young Afghan male refugees living in Sweden. Findings may well have differed if another researcher had carried out the interviews, or if the context had differed. Inevitably, the participants chose to reveal some experiences and views whilst withholding others and the analysis included the themes judged to be the most prominent by these three authors, and consequently, the full data set could not be presented. Nevertheless, the experiences of this group of youth resemble the refugee experiences and difficulties faced by unaccompanied children and youth from other countries, and are not necessarily restricted to Afghan boys whose journey ended in Sweden. This is evident through the similarities between these present findings and those of previous findings (e.g. Berthold, 2000; Carswell et al., 2011; Goodman, 2004; Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg, 1998; Kovacev & Shute, 2004; Lie, 2002; Luster et al., 2008; Miler et al., 2002; Strijk et al., 2010). Although the details of circumstances and personal backgrounds will naturally differ, broad similarities are seen to apply to asylum-seeking youth regardless of the host-society. Thus, experiences of loneliness and anxiety whilst awaiting the asylum outcome and a need for social support and guidance are amongst the commonalities.

Research Implications

In recent years, debates in high-income European host-societies have become increasingly hostile and aggressive, (Esses & Medianu, 2013; Greenslade, 2005) and public debates in European societies are primarily dominated by third party accounts. Individuals affected by forced migration, traumatic experiences and discrimination are rarely provided with an opportunity to respond to these negative and often aggressive and stereotypical statements.

Qualitative methodologies enable stories to be told directly from the people who have had the experiences, an attribute which has previously been lacking in this particular field. The present study highlights one of the main differences between quantitative and qualitative research by presenting findings that would not typically be accessed through quantitative measures. Future research focusing on asylum-seeking individuals' and refugees' lived experiences could contribute to improved practices with regards to the asylum-process and the support needed to facilitate positive adjustment and integration. When seeking to support asylum-seeking and refugee youth in European host-societies, interventions may benefit from considering the individuals' broader context, including the social support left behind. Qualitative enquiries in particular could contribute to further knowledge seeking to help unaccompanied minors integrate their past with their present situation. The current findings highlight the need for further research into the need for formal support that seeks to help minors reconnect or maintain connections with their family back home.

Clinical and Policy Implications

The four main themes identified in this study led to knowledge which could inform both theory and practice when seeking to facilitate adaptation in European host-societies, or when developing assessment measures and intervention programs for asylum-seeking and refugee youth. In particular, the findings draw attention to the crucial importance of social support as a protective factor, which corresponds to previous qualitative (e.g. Goodman, 2004; Luster et al., 2008; Miler et al., 2002), quantitative (e.g. Berthold, 2000; Carswell et al., 2011; Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg, 1998; Lie, 2002; Kovacev & Shute, 2004) and mixed-methods (Strijk et al., 2010) studies.

Based on the present findings, mentoring programs would seem an effective way of assisting adaptation and adjustment in the host-society. Specifically, programs for training and monitoring of mentors would benefit from the application of qualitative research evidence. Furthermore, based on extracts from participants in this study, it may be particularly helpful for newly arrived asylum-seeking individuals to be offered support from a mentor who understands the individuals' culture or speaks the same language. It is important to emphasize, however, that some refugees may worry more about contact with a person from their own culture or country because of concerns regarding confidentiality, stigmatization or for political reasons (Hodes, 2002). It may therefore be necessary to discuss cultural preferences with the asylum-seeking individual and to make a case by case decision. In combination with educational advice and support, which would incorporate two of the main findings from this study, asylum-seeking and refugee youth could potentially benefit hugely from research-informed support programs.

The current study highlights the need for prompt and fair asylum-application processing, which has previously been advocated by researchers (e.g. Fazel et al., 2012; Silove & Ekblad, 2002), as this period of uncertainty whilst waiting for the decision was found to lead to increased distress and worry, and to have adverse consequences for mental health.

Conclusion

Overall, our findings offer a perspective on young refugees' lived experiences which have not previously been presented, namely the individual experience of arriving and adjusting to a European host-society, as well as the challenges, difficulties and support systems perceived to be most helpful. Finally, our findings draw attention to the need for researchers and other professionals to listen to the voices of refugee and asylum-seeking children, youth and young adults as part of the effort to facilitate adaption and improve conditions, experiences and well-being for one of the most vulnerable groups in Western societies today. As the third objective, implicit throughout this paper, was to give voice to a group of individuals whose voices are rarely heard, the final conclusion will be presented through the voice of one of the participants:

> When we say something, people should believe us. When we try to explain, people should listen to us and believe our word. *They shouldn't be suspicious of us all the* time, they should believe us. And really listen to us, just listen to us. *It's been a very long journey to come here and we've experienced many things:* People dying during the journey here, people drowning on the way from Greece. I wish people would listen to us and to *what we've experienced, and that they'd believe us. What we've* been through during the journey from Turkey and all the way here, it was a long way. We have experienced many things and we have learned many things: Many languages and many cultures. *We've been hardened. We've learned* to be strong and *we've become resilient.*

References

Berthold, S.M. (2000). War traumas and community violence: Psychological, behavioral, and academic outcomes among Khmer refugee adolescents, Journal of Multicultural Social Work, 8, 15-46.

Boss, P. (2004). Ambiguous loss research, theory, and practice: Reflections after 9/11. Journal of Marriage and Family, 66, 551-566.

Bronstein, I., Montgomery, P. & Dobrowolski, S. (2012). PTSD in asylum-seeking male adolescents from Afghanistan, Journal of Traumatic Stress, 25, 551-557.

Carswell, K., Blackburn, P. & Barker, C. (2011). The relationship between trauma, post-migration problems and the psychological well-being of refugees and asylum seekers. International Journal of Social Psychiatry, 57, 107-119.

Derluyn, I. & Broekaert, E. (2007). Different perspectives on emotional and behavioral problems in unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents. Ethnicity & Health, 12, 141-162.

Esses, V.M. & Medianu, S. (2013). Uncertainty, threat, and the role of the media in promoting the dehumanization of immigrants and refugees. Journal of Social Issues, 69, 518-536.

Fazel, M., Reed, R.V., Panter-Brick, C. & Stein, A. (2012). Mental health of displaced and refugee children resettled in high-income countries: risk and protective factors, The Lancet, 379, 266-282.

Goodman, J. H. (2004). Coping with trauma and hardship among unaccompanied refugee youth from Sudan, Qualitative Health Research, 14, 1117-1196.

Gorst-Unsworth, C. & Goldenberg, E. (1998). Psychological sequelae of torture and organised violence suffered by refugees from Iraq. British Journal of Psychiatry, 172, 90-94.

Greenslade, R. (2005). Seeking Scapegoats: The coverage of asylum in the UK press. Asylum and Migration Working Paper 5. London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

Groark, C., Sclare, I. & Raval, H. (2011). Understanding the experiences and emotional needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking adolescents in the UK. Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 16, 421-442.

Halvorsen, K. (2002). Separated children seeking asylum: The most vulnerable of all. Forced Migration Review, 12, 34-36.

Hodes, M. (2002). Implications for psychiatric services of chronic civilian strife: Young refugees in the UK. Advances in Psychiatric Treatment, 8, 366-376.

Hodes, M., Jagdev, D., Chandra, N. & Cunniff, A. (2008). Risk and resilience for psychological distress amongst unaccompanied asylum seeking adolescents, Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 49, 723-732.

Hopkins, P. & Hill, M. (2010). The needs and strengths of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people in Scotland, Child and Family Social Work, 15, 399-408.

Kovacev, L. & Shute, R. (2004). Acculturation and social support in relation to psychosocial adjustment of adolescent refugees resettled in Australia, International Journal of Behavioural Development, 28, 259-267.

Lie, B. (2002). A 3-year follow-up study of psychosocial functioning and general symptoms in settled refugees. Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica, 106, 415-425.

Luster, T., Qin, D.B., Bates, L., Johnson D.J., and Rana, M. (2008). The Lost Boys of Sudan: Ambiguous loss, search for family, and reestablishing relationships with family members, Family Relations, 57, 444-456.

Mels, C., Derluyn, I., Broekaert, E. (2008). Social support in unaccompanied asylum-seeking boys: A case study, Child: Care, Health and Development, 34, 757-762.

Mels, C., Derluyn, I., Broekaert, E., & Rosseel, Y. (2010). The psychological impact of forced displacement and related risk factors on Eastern Congolese adolescents affected by war. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 51, 1096–1104.

Miller K.E., Worthington G.J., Muzurovic J., Tipping S. & Goldman, A. (2002). Bosnian refugees and the stressors of exile: A narrative study, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 72, 341-354.

Silove, D. & Ekblad, S. (2002). How well do refugees adapt after resettlement in Western countries? Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica, 106, 401-402.

Silove, D., Sinnerbrink, I., Field, A., Manicavasagar, V. & Steel, Z. (1997). Anxiety, depression and PTSD in asylum-seekers: Associations with pre-migration trauma and post-migration stressors, British Journal of Psychiatry, 170, 351-357.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2009). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Theory, Method and Research, Sage: London.

Strijk, P.J.M., van Meijel, B. & Gamel, C.J. (2010). Health and social needs of traumatized refugees and asylum seekers: An exploratory study, Perspectives in Psychiatric Care, 47, 48-55.

Sultan, A. & Sullivan, K. (2001). Psychological disturbances in asylum seekers held in long term detention: a participant-observer account. The Medicinal Journal of Australia, 175, 193-596.

Thommessen, S., Laghi, F., Cerrone, C., Baiocco, R. & Todd, B. K. (2013). Internalizing and externalizing symptoms among unaccompanied refugee and Italian adolescents, Children and Youth Services Review, 35, 7-10.

UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3, available at: http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b38f0.html [accessed 19 December 2013]

UNHCR (2013). Global Trends 2012, Displacement: The New 21st Century Challenge. Geneva: UNHCR.

Wallin, A. & Ahlström, G. (2005). Unaccompanied young adult refugees in Sweden, experiences of their life situation and well-being: A qualitative follow-up study. Ethnicity and Health, 10,129-144.

Wernesjö, U. (2012). Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children: Whose perspective? Childhood, 19, 495-507.