

Unaccompanied migrant children and indebted relations: Weaponizing safeguarding

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Abstract

UK statutory guidance for practitioners suggests that indebtedness is an area where safeguarding red flags should be raised and action taken to minimize the risk of exploitation. Yet, our research shows that unaccompanied migrant children have complex indebted relationships, which can range from extractive to connective. Drawing on interviews with unaccompanied children, we show that these indebted relationships can include financial debt to smugglers, responsibilities to support transnational families, as well as social obligations to peers and others. Their accounts present a nuanced understanding of the taboo nature of indebted relationships, not to be shared with the practitioners in their lives. This is due, in part, to the potential threat of reporting to the Home Office, which might jeopardize their immigration status. In response to this weaponization of social care, we demonstrate how children turn to peer networks of support, creating their own alternative forms of social protection. In so doing, we complicate critiques of adultification, which traditionally highlight the ways that racially minoritized children may be treated as adults—to their detriment. In so doing, we show that because indebtedness is normatively linked to adulthood, unaccompanied children's hopes and fears may be rendered unsayable and therefore unsupportable in social care, all in the name of safeguarding.

KEYWORDS

adultification, childhood/youth, children's services/social care, indebtedness, migration, unaccompanied child migrants

1 | INTRODUCTION

There has been rising attention to the weaponization of statutory children's services in the UK (Dillon et al., 2021; Wroe, 2021). Weaponization, by which we refer to the exploitation of purported concerns about children's safeguarding to increase the use of surveillance and

control of marginalized communities (see also Wroe et al's introduction to SI, 2023), is most recently exemplified by the case of 'Child Q', where a young black girl was strip-searched after she was wrongly suspected of carrying cannabis and reported by school management to the police. In response, a rising chorus of voices has been rightly demanding change and an end to systemic racism, highlighting the ways that racially minoritized children are treated as more mature, resilient and culpable than white children by social workers, teachers and other care professionals. Many of these important critiques mobilize the notion of 'adultification' to make sense of the way that,

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regardless of their age, children of colour are often denied the protection that is meant to be afforded by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and its inclusion in national law and, as a result, are subjected to punitive treatment or restricted welfare support.

Adultification is often considered to have emerged as an analytic concept in the 2000s, largely focused on the United States and often in psychological and therapeutic literature. In a seminal paper on the topic, Burton (2007, p. 331) argues that 'adultified children precociously do the "heavy-lifting" in families (e.g., "parenting" one's parents or siblings) with the intent of meeting a specific family need.' Unlike contemporary British critiques of adultification, which point to the way the status of childhood is denied to (racially minoritized) children in legal and institutional contexts, in its original usage the emphasis is on children taking on 'adult roles' within families. While pointing out the distinctions in usages of 'adultification', we also note that there is slippage between the two, particularly as both tend to draw on hegemonic constructions of childhood as a time of innocence, dependence and romanticized ignorance, where children—in contrast to adults—are seen to be essentially and primarily vulnerable and in need of protection simply because of their youth. For example, Burton's (2007) analysis tends to present 'adult roles' as though these are natural facts rather than historically and socially contingent constructions of generational positions and relations, highlighting knowledge of financial issues as an example of adultification through 'precocious knowledge'. However, we appreciate her founding argument that what is at stake is not the violation of the 'roles, responsibilities, and behaviours' that all children everywhere and anytime should have, but adultification points to times when these appear to be "out of sync" with contemporary social and institutional notions of what children are expected to do' (Burton, 2007, p. 331).

In the UK, Davis and Marsh (2020) have drawn attention to the adultification of Black British young people in the context of social care and police treatment. However, existing literature focusing on migrant children has given little attention to the ways that the concept of adultification may, or may not, offer explanatory power in relation to their experiences and treatment (although see Hlass, 2020; Puig, 2002). This is surprising, not least because contemporary racism often relies on cultural rather than biological constructions of 'race' where the figure of the migrant is always already racialized as 'Other', alien and abject (De Genova, 2018; Silverstein, 2005).

Seeking to address this unexplored area, in this paper, we consider adultification through a specific focus on unaccompanied migrant children's indebted relations. As we demonstrate below, indebted relations can include anything from financial debts to emotional and moral obligations. Although statutory guidance for practitioners suggests that indebtedness is an area where safeguarding red flags should be raised, unaccompanied children speak of a much more complex and ambivalent relationship to indebtedness. Their accounts present a nuanced understanding of the taboo nature of indebted relationships, not to be shared with the practitioners in their lives. This is due, in part, to the potential threat of social care practitioners reporting young people to the Home Office, which might jeopardize their immigration status. We understand this process as a form of

weaponization whereby social care plays a role in 'everyday bordering' (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018) in the lives of migrant young people. In response to this weaponization of social care, we demonstrate that children may turn to peer networks of support, creating their own alternative forms of social protection. In so doing, we complicate critiques of adultification within social care and draw out implications for social work practice.

2 | UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN IN THE UK'S 'HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT'

Unaccompanied children are those on the move without parents or guardians or who have been separated during migration. In 2021, 4382 unaccompanied children applied for asylum in the UK (Home Office, 2022). If young people are assessed as being under 18 years old and found to have no family in the UK, they are taken into the care of the local authority under section 20 of *The Children Act 1989*, with the same legal entitlements to care and support as any child in the jurisdiction. However, unaccompanied children in the UK are increasingly subjected to age disputes questioning their child status (Home Office, 2023). Accounts of the Home Office pressuring children to present as adults (Taylor, 2022) as well as the high numbers of age disputes overturned on appeal (Dennis, 2022) point towards age disputes as a form of punitive state violence and adultification.

Many unaccompanied children have undertaken lengthy and costly journeys to the UK, potentially incurring significant financial debt (Chase & Allsopp, 2020), not least because of the lack of safe, secure, and government-sanctioned routes of entry. Statutory guidance indicates that financial indebtedness is a potential indicator of trafficking and exploitation, where safeguarding red flags should be raised. This includes where a 'child has to pay off an exorbitant debt, e.g. for travel costs' (DfE and Home Office, 2011), where they have a 'perception of being bonded by debt' (Home Office, 2023) or where young people are in receipt of 'unexplained money, mobile phones, phone credit, items, clothes, money [and] worries about having debt' (Metropolitan Police, 2021). Guidance from both the Department for Education (2017) and the Home Office (2023) highlight the statutory duty on frontline practitioners under section 52 of the *Modern Slavery Act* (2015) to identify potentially trafficked children and refer them into the National Referral Mechanism, as soon as practicable.

Concerns to mitigate child exploitation can rapidly turn into a raft of safeguarding measures akin to surveillance (Wroe, 2021), weaponizing social care by closely linking it with law enforcement and punitive interventions. Although many of these measures may be well-meaning and concerned with protection and care, they can simultaneously be experienced by young people as forms of control (Aissatou et al., 2022). Guidance from the Metropolitan Police (2021) encourages social care practitioners to show 'professional curiosity' and to gather intelligence around potentially exploited children to share with their local Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub. Department for Education and Home Office (2011) guidance also suggests that

'foster carers/residential workers should be vigilant about anything unusual'.

Beyond concerns over exploitation, indebtedness is often viewed by practitioners as profoundly unchildlike, an onerous responsibility they should never be burdened with (Rosen et al., 2019). This echoes arguments about the dangers of 'adultification', which focus on protecting children from what is seen to be a premature saddling with responsibilities associated with social adulthood (Burton, 2007). As a result, unaccompanied children's engagement with money or financial activity may be viewed with suspicion. Such distrust is compounded by an overtly hostile immigration regime and 'culture of disbelief' towards migrants (Clayton et al., 2019; Rosen et al., 2019). This not only permeates the asylum and immigration process but the social care system. Many unaccompanied children have had their credibility regarding age, nationality and identity questioned at every stage of their journey within the UK (Aissatou et al., 2022), from their first encounter with statutory services to the ongoing care they should receive from local authorities (Dorling, 2013).

The politicized climate around migration and narratives of deservingness shaping welfare provision, particularly for cash-strapped local authorities, produces tensions for social workers. Although the professional body, the British Association of Social Workers (2021, p. 7), states that ethical principles of social work include a focus on 'promoting the rights of all people experiencing discrimination, structural inequality and marginalisation', in policy and practice, social workers are positioned in a gatekeeping role. They are required to assess whether children fit the criteria for support, which they are meant to ascertain through age assessments and ongoing forms of surveillance (Humphries, 2004). This weaponization of social care inevitably leads to a conflict of interest for social workers: between their duty of care to unaccompanied children and state imperatives for governing the care system. As we go on to elaborate, this contradictory and hostile climate curtails the possibilities for unaccompanied children to share experiences, perspectives and needs, including about indebtedness.

3 | MIGRATION AND INDEBTEDNESS

As Datta (2022, np) explains, 'Debt is a feature of many migration stories; it precedes and is re-made through migration.' Many decisions to migrate are fuelled by debt in the country of origin. Migrants often accumulate debt along the journey to pay their way, and they may continue to accumulate debt in receiving countries, borrowing money for their own survival and as a way of ensuring they can make remittances.

This suggests that indebted relations are complex and morally laden. Indeed, language around 'who owes what to whom have played a central role in shaping our basic vocabulary of right and wrong' (Graeber, 2011, p. 8). Debt is often loaded with negative associations, particularly as within many religions as it is closely aligned with both sin and guilt (Graeber, 2011; Ingham, 2000). However, debt is a far more nuanced concept animated by 'articulations of hope, regret and

love' (Kirwan et al., 2019, p. 139) that are often the cause of indebtedness in the first place.

Although indebtedness features centrally in the existing literature on migration, this focuses almost entirely on adults. Combined with normative perceptions of childhood as a care-free time, unshackled from responsibilities (James & Prout, 1990)—'economically useless but emotionally priceless' in Zelizer's (1985) provocative framing—this has largely obscured the ways in which children may incur, manage, understand and navigate indebted relations, or it is viewed as a problematic form of adultification (Burton, 2007). Where migrant children do feature in scholarship, indebtedness has often been an offshoot rather than the focus, and financial debt has tended to be separated from other forms of debt such as emotional obligations. This point notwithstanding, the limited existing research offers important insights into the ways that the complexities of debt play out in the lives of (unaccompanied) child migrants.

As with research about adult migrants, financial repayments and remittances may be seen as both a practice of care and response to social and financial indebtedness (Datta, 2022; Datta & Aznar, 2019). For example, Heidbrink (2020, p. 41), writing about Guatemalan child migrants, notes that debt repayment is a way of 'intimately bind[ing]' children to their family, a way to maintain transnational relations and a sense of community belonging despite geographical distance. Children's mobility, even when unaccompanied, is often viewed as part of a shared project and investment in the whole family's future and best interests (Chase & Allsopp, 2020). As a result, migrant children may feel that they should have a right to support their families, whether by repaying debts to migration brokers or through repaying a social debt to their family through remittances. This may be motivated by strongly felt moral, religious, familial or intergenerational obligations. Doing so can also be about maintaining dignity (Jijon, 2020; Liebel & Invernizzi, 2019) and feelings of self-worth and value (Heidbrink, 2020). As Datta et al. (2007) describe in their research with adult migrants, repaying familial debt and sending remittances can also be an important coping strategy, particularly for those experiencing feelings akin to survivor's guilt, thinking of those left behind.

Indebtedness does not just result in the repayment of past debts but can contribute to a desire to 'pay forward', for example working towards bringing family to a new country. This can increase unaccompanied children's sense of well-being, 'sustaining feelings of security and continuity despite multiple upheavals and changes' (Chase & Allsopp, 2020, p. 33). Pointing to unaccompanied children's support of their peers, Johansen and Studsrod (2019, p. 8) suggest that as it is not always possible to directly reciprocate the care family have provided, debt repayment is generalized, 'going round in a circle'.

Although repaying debt and fulfilling familial obligations can cement intergenerational relations via a morally and emotionally valued practice, Glockner (2023) describes how familial debt can also translate into exploitation for children, who feel responsabilized by familial obligations. Likewise, Chase and Allsopp (2020) unpack the 'acute dissonance' that some young people feel with competing pressures: a sense of obligation and desire to support their family which

may come into conflict with their individual aspirations. Debt, whether financial or emotional, can become a significant pressure and burden on young people's lives, particularly for those who have been unable to secure status and find better paid employment, leaving them with a sense of guilt at failing to meet their family's needs, often a primary reason for their migration (Chase & Allsopp, 2020).

In short, there is a conflict between the complex and fine-grained presentation of migrants' indebted relations in existent research and the way in which debt is treated in social care policy. There, it is largely problematized simply because children are involved, only allowing it to be viewed in terms of exploitation. Yet, with limited research focusing specifically on unaccompanied children's experiences of and perspectives on debt, it is unclear how these tensions are experienced, understood and navigated by unaccompanied children themselves, nor what the implications are for social work practice. Our paper addresses this lacuna, drawing on data generated as part of the Children Caring on the Move (CCoM) research project.

4 | METHODOLOGY

CCoM ran from 2019 to 2022 and explored unaccompanied children's experiences of care, and caring for others, as they navigate the complexities of the immigration-welfare nexus in England. As part of the project, both authors worked in partnership with a team of Young (peer) Researchers to design creative research methods, collect and analyse data, and disseminate research findings. Leon undertook an additional project as part of CCoM to explore unaccompanied children's understanding and experiences of debt and the implications this has for interactions with the professionals in their lives.

Our paper draws on the range of data generated with unaccompanied young people from across the CCoM project. Most interviews were 1–3 h, and 69 interviews were conducted with 33 participants. A further five interviews specifically focused on debt. Mindful of not replicating Home Office-style interviews, which can be invasive and triggering (Back & Sinha, 2018), we used methods designed to ensure that participants felt they were in control of what they shared. These included object-based interviews where participants were asked to bring an object that represents care; photo elicitation focused on a 'day in the life' of the participant; and walking interviews to see places of (un)caring. Debt-focused interviews were based on a short, animated vignette about an unaccompanied child who sends money to his family but has not shared this with professionals, as well as his feelings of indebtedness to a professional who had supported him. The vignette method was selected to relieve pressure on participants to talk about their own situation (Kandemir & Budd, 2018). Vignette interviews explored what participants thought the character was feeling, what advice they would give, whether they knew people in similar situations and what recommendations they would make to professionals to better support young people in similar situations. Apart from the vignette-based interviews, most of the interviews were co-facilitated by a Young Researcher and a university-based researcher.

All CCoM participants had arrived unaccompanied in England, the majority before their 18th birthday. Anonymization, not simply pseudonymization, is crucial to our presentation of the material. Some participants have pending asylum applications with the Home Office and so it is vital they are not identifiable, which might jeopardize their application. Many spoke about things they had not shared with the professionals in their lives, and we do not want this to lead to any repercussions for participants. With this in mind, we have not included any data that might expose individual participants, including age, city/region of residence and country of origin.

We now turn to the CCoM data to explore the ways that unaccompanied children think about and experience debt.

5 | THE AMBIVALENCE OF INDEBTED RELATIONS

Ferid (vignette interview) fled persecution in his country, arriving in the UK before his 18th birthday. He spent several years in limbo waiting for the Home Office to grant him refugee status. He confided that his family had accumulated a substantial debt to have him smuggled to a safe country. He was clear that he was not held in debt bondage by the smugglers or told to work. Instead, he knew his family had borrowed a substantial amount to pay for his travel to safety, and, subsequently, he felt a huge responsibility to pay off their debts. He had ended up working for cash in hand, finding work in fast food shops, construction sites and carwashes and even taking out loans so he could send money home to his family to help incrementally pay off the debt. Ferid said he knew others like him: *'Everyone has a debt. They just don't tell you about it'*.

Ferid's story illustrates the complexities of unaccompanied children's indebted relations and the ambivalent feelings these can produce. In many ways, Ferid's independent migration is emblematic of migration as a joint family project for the collective best interests of the family (Chase & Allsopp, 2020; Giuliani et al., 2022), in this case, to ensure the safety and security of one of their own. Ferid was not directly indebted to the smugglers who enabled him to get to the UK; however, he assumed this debt as a member of his transnational family. Although no one was compelling him to pay off the family's financial debt, he felt a sense of emotional obligation to do so, demonstrating the deep entanglement of the moral and financial aspects of debt.

Other participants described remittance payments as a social obligation and repayment of an emotional, rather than financial, debt, heightened by intimate knowledge of the difficult conditions facing family members. For example, Daniel (vignette interview) had left his family in his early teens and had spent several years migrating to the UK, where he had arrived shortly after his 18th birthday. He talked about the close bond he maintained with his family and the indebted loyalty he felt towards them. For Daniel, this was a generational obligation:

'You have a responsibility because they raised you up [...] we're growing up, and we're coming to other countries

... and we need to now look after the community, look after the families. [...] I have a responsibility to give back ... because this is my mum and the family, and they look after you [...] and you need to look after them back.'

Indeed, debt was not simply understood by participants as an interpersonal relationship. Many spoke about a generalized sense of indebtedness towards family, peers and wider communities, often as reciprocity for care they themselves had received.

The point here is that unaccompanied children—like adult migrants—have a wide variety of intersecting relations of indebtedness, both moral and financial, far broader than the understanding of debt in social care policy and guidance. Consequently, participants also had complex, and ambivalent, feelings about indebtedness. On the one hand, participants' accounts suggest that repaying financial debts or fulfilling social obligations may strengthen unaccompanied children's connections with their family and communities and be seen as a form of care and act to be proud of, as evident in Ferid's story (see also Chase & Allsopp, 2020; Heidbrink, 2020).

Further, being able to repay financial debts and social obligations, even in a generalized way, was highly valued by participants as a way of promoting a sense of belonging and counteracting the dehumanizing aspects of immigration and social care systems. For example, Hawre (walking interview) described the kindness and generosity he had received from a nurse when he arrived in the UK after a harrowing journey on the back of a lorry:

'I think she knew we were refugees. I will never forget her ... She went to the vending machine and bought us some food. I will never forget how nice she was to us. Now, I always buy a meal for new people when they arrive. When my [former] support worker calls me to help a new young person, I always tell her to buy the young person a meal if I can't get there. I tell her I will pay her back, and I do. She didn't want to accept the money at first, but I made her. The nurse was so nice to us, so I want to do like that for others.'

On the other hand, and often simultaneously, participants spoke about indebted relations as being draining and extractive, particularly in contexts of hostility and punitive state practices or exploitative criminal activity. Participants' negative feelings around indebted relations were often linked to the relentless stress of debt repayment. According to Ferid (vignette interview): *'Emotionally you feel like you are pressured in your mind that you cannot do anything else ...'* Although some spoke of explicit pressure by smugglers, for the most part, this pressure was self-imposed, often because debt repayment felt like a valuable practice rooted in social norms around being a 'good person'. Leila (vignette interview) explained:

'They feel they have to [send money home] because, "If I don't, maybe my parents or my family every month they are just waiting for that, 'Ping, go and get that money'".'

So, it's like they have expectation and when you come and you say, "I don't have", it's like you are disappointing them. And as a good person or a good child you don't want to disappoint your parents.'

The all-consuming pressure of debt described by participants suggests that although repayment can build social ties, it also disconnects people. For example, Isham (vignette interview) described friends who had struggled to find work to repay their significant debts and had turned to alcohol and drugs to numb the pain and guilt they were feeling. He explained several had blocked their families' phone numbers, as they could not face speaking to them.

Rules curtailing asylum seekers' right to work were viewed as a central, if not primary, cause of any stresses related to debt. Azwer (vignette interview) explained:

'To be honest, [financial debt] is not that really hard, but the thing is making it hard like when you are working without status, and you have no right to work. In that time, it's really, really hard. Like you are scared of being caught and you are scared if anyone found out and tell Home Office that you are working and all of that, and still you're doing that risk because you have a lot of pressure on your shoulders.'

According to participants, not having the right to work due to their immigration status meant unaccompanied children had to resort to working cash in hand in potentially exploitative conditions, frequently below minimum wage, or engaging in criminal activities to be able to send money to help their families. Others spoke about different strategies for repaying financial debts and how depleting these were. Ferid (vignette interview) described cutting down on food and walking 2 h a day to get to college so he could save every penny to clear his family's debt. Others spoke about going into further debt or using student loans and grants towards paying off debts.

Paradoxically then, unaccompanied children's indebted relations can simultaneously connect and disconnect, produce pride and depletion and generate a sense of belonging and dehumanization. In making this argument, we do not seek to justify extractive debt relations or deny that power and inequality lie at the heart of many debtor-debtee relations, whether financial or emotional (Polletta & Tufail, 2014). Instead, our point is that without recognizing the complexities of indebted relations, even with the best of intentions, social care professionals may wind up silencing or punishing unaccompanied children for their indebted relations, a point we move on to discuss.

6 | INDEBTEDNESS AS TABOO

Given the complex, consuming and potentially exploitative nature of indebted relations, it would not be unreasonable to anticipate that unaccompanied children would discuss these issues with those who

are, by law, meant to care for them, such as social workers and personal advisors. Yet, participants described the opposite.

When participants were asked directly about whether it was important to discuss their indebted relationships with a professional, they consistently replied with an emphatic 'no'. Leila (vignette interview) replied *'I wish they knew nothing ... They can't even maybe support me properly, how would they manage to support my debt as well?'* Azwer (vignette interview) also reiterated that it was not a good idea to disclose:

'Definitely no. I don't believe social workers. Like who they make themselves really, really nice to you, trust me, it's not believable to you say anything to them because they're going to sell you out in one minute.'

Nearly all the participants spoke about how distrustful they were of social care practitioners. For some, this distrust was linked to the fleeting nature of the relationship:

'Everyone that comes in your life is temporary. No one is actually permanent [...] you go through social workers, but you know that that's for three months or six months, find it's not someone like permanent that can share these things with them'. (Ferid, vignette interview)

More so, however, participants spoke about constantly weighing up levels of risk associated with any disclosure of indebtedness. As Leila (vignette interview) articulated, it might be less risky keeping things to yourself and dealing with them alone, than jeopardizing your whole future in case the professional was not trustworthy:

'You wouldn't risk the life where maybe you lost a lot; you don't want to risk a whole thing. I would risk the hassle that the people who [I owe] keep calling me, [rather] than risk the whole ... a waste of time me travelling, a waste of years being here maybe waiting for a decision ... I wouldn't risk that.'

Others echoed Leila's point that the risks of disclosing to a frontline worker can have implications for immigration cases:

'There's so many people, they can't tell social services that, "I have contact with my family." ... The social services, they're going to, straight up, they're going to tell the Home Office that you've got contact with them [...] Some people really, like, are scared. They can't tell, because once you've shared these stories, you play with your life in the UK. Because they might share your story everywhere.' (Isham, vignette interview)

This sense that *'once you share, you play with your life'* illustrates the constant weighing up of risk unaccompanied children must

undertake when considering whether to trust practitioners. A particular fear they articulated was that social workers would tell the Home Office about their contact with their family or their financial debt. Their worry was that this could jeopardize their whole immigration application, which may rely on claims of being a vulnerable child unable to find their family or support themselves. For participants, the reporting of intimate confidences told to someone who was meant to care was a clear example of the weaponization of social care in the hostile immigration regime.

Participants' concerns about the impact of disclosing debt did not only relate to their immigration status but to social care itself. They described instances of unaccompanied children trying to talk to social workers about indebtedness and how this worsened the care they were receiving. Isham (vignette interview) recounted that his friend's social worker noticed that he was not spending his weekly allowance and that he had saved money in a bank account, which he was planning to send home. The local authority viewed this so suspiciously that he was placed in another city away from his social network. The local authority may have intervened to minimize the risk of exploitation. However, according to Isham, his friend experienced this as a form of control and suspicion, resulting in the local authority stopping his financial support and not allowing him to return to his network until his bank account was empty.

Even with trusted practitioners, unaccompanied children may be reluctant to disclose indebtedness. Ferid (vignette interview) explained that doing so might de-rail support, diverting attention to safeguarding trepidations about indebtedness instead of helping children to secure immigration status:

'They feel like if they talk to their lawyer about this or to someone, they are diverted from what's important at them right now. And important is to help them to get rights and help them to [...] get all the papers or help them to get an interview or anything'

Other participants struggled to see the benefit of sharing their experiences of indebtedness, as they felt there was nothing frontline workers could do to resolve the difficult or dangerous aspects of debt repayment:

'For a start, no one can help them. If you tell to social worker, "I have [to pay back] £20k," well, they will say, "It's not my problem". You know? "I cannot help you with that." Because they can't, they say, "My job is to make sure you have a place to sleep but my job is not to give you money". No one will do that. You have to work yourself that.' (Ferid, vignette interview)

Participants also worried that disclosing could affect how people saw them. Ferid's experience with professionals in the UK had led him to be wary of how people perceived him. Following a

complaint he had made to his social worker's manager, he was told, 'If you don't like it, go back to your country' (care object interview). Ferid later explained that all the time he was working in chicken shops and car washes, he had also volunteered for a children's rights organization. Yet he had chosen not to tell anyone about his ongoing struggles juggling poorly paid cash in hand jobs. He was worried they might think that he was trying to take 'advantage of [the] system they will feel like I'm just trying to take money from them, and they will just ignore me and stop helping' (vignette interview). Ferid's comments are indicative of the othering of migrants, who are often racialized as undeserving.

Given such grave concerns, it is hardly surprising that unaccompanied children rarely disclose indebted relations with frontline practitioners. These fears are compounded when indebtedness is met with distrust and even punitive treatment by practitioners, responses which, we suggest, reflect racialized narratives of deservingness (Shilliam, 2018) as well as infantilizing interpretations of debt as 'unchildlike', and unaccompanied children as adultified and thereby worthy of suspicion. Indeed, participants demonstrated an acute awareness not only of the risks of disclosing but the taboo nature of indebtedness. In a context where social care is weaponized, and indebtedness is viewed as a problematic form of adultification, unaccompanied children's debts are rendered unsayable, regardless of whether they are experienced as a source of value and pride or as a struggle and site of exploitation.

That said, participants were not simply silent about indebtedness. A few mentioned that they had decided to take the risk and confide in practitioners; however, this was the exception rather than the norm. In such cases, it was because the person had gone above and beyond their professional role, either staying in touch after they had changed roles or supporting unaccompanied children in their spare time. Azwer (vignette interview) had confided in his support worker about his financial obligations, explaining that he trusted her because 'she did way more than that she should do'.

Where participants spoke more freely about indebtedness, it was often with people who had personal experiences of migration. As Azwer went on to explain:

'Like if the person or that person's family, they used to be in that situation... Yeah, like, for example, I was in one place. There were two, three people that their parents before, they used to be like that. That's why they, you know, when they grow up, the parent told them like how they became here. Like one of the support workers, she was understand me really well and she know what I meant. Like I just said as well, so comfortable, like without scared or anything like that'

For many unaccompanied children, however, the risk of disclosure was simply not worth it, evidencing a substantive mismatch with the emphasis in policy and practice guidance calling on frontline workers to be particularly attentive to debt for reasons of safeguarding.

7 | ALTERNATIVE SUPPORT AND PROTECTION NETWORKS

Although CCoM participants rarely disclosed their indebted relations with practitioners, they did speak about the relief of sharing with someone they trusted. Many explained they turned to peer networks:

'They really feel worried, you know, they've got issues, they need someone who[...] they trust to talk to them[...] I think they need to care for each other, because in some situations, they can't even find someone who can help them, or speak to them, you know, even they've got some problems, they can't tell even the people who care about them, like staff members, but they can tell each other, they can care about each other. I think someone who is in your situation, he understands your problems much better than the other people who have never been in the situation.' (Rashad, care object interview)

Like Rashad, all participants commented on the importance of being connected with people who had been through similar experiences and could understand their situation enough to offer non-judgemental support around indebtedness, often far better than any practitioner:

'I'm very lucky because we understand each other. And when I feel hungry, I say to my friend, "I'm hungry" so they make some food, like bread and soup, they give to me and we eat together. And when I say, "Oh my God, I finished my money, can you please let me to borrow some money from you?" they give "how do they want?" I say, "£10". "Okay, okay, I give it you, but next week you give back to me". So I say, "Okay". Sometimes I joking them, "Do you have £1,000? Can you give me?" They say, "What? I don't have this money to give for you". So we're just smiling like that... Some story very small, but a lot of meaning.' (Chien, care object interview)

Other participants spoke keenly about the importance of practical and financial support within peer networks:

'In the beginning I was struggling to, that money was not enough at all. Like so many time I borrow money from my friends, and they help me. Otherwise, I was going like staying without food, without money for two, three days' (Azwer, vignette interview)

In many cases, this support helped unaccompanied young people to navigate indebted relations. For example, Isham (vignette interview) had made a friend when he first arrived in the UK who had taken him

under his wing, offering to lend him money and helped him find work. Recently, Isham had sold his car to help this friend who was in debt.

'Because he is like my brother, I can give him how much I have, like, whenever he asked me for money or for help, I would give him. ... Just returning. It's helping friends, it's just pleasure, you get more excited, "Oh, I helped this guy," so don't wait for helping you back, you just help, that's it. And one day they're going to help you back, trust me, one day they're going to help you back when you need it And he keep telling me, "Oh, thank you so much, if you wasn't there, no-one could help me" ... I said, "I didn't do nothing to you, my money is your money. So I didn't waste my money." He said, "No, I'm going to give you it back, and you know that, I don't want to get your money and put it in my pocket, nah, I'm going to come back and work really hard to give you it back." I said, "Okay, no problem if you give me it back, I'll buy a new car.'

These accounts illustrate how unaccompanied young people help each other with debt, in what we characterize as an alternative social protection system. This resonates with research about the role of informal sharing economies for adult migrants, which goes beyond emotional support to include informal money lending schemes (Datta, 2022; Oso & Martínez-Buján, 2022; Pincock et al., 2020).

The importance of this alternative support network is partly explained by unaccompanied children's mistrust of a weaponized safeguarding system, but also by a powerful sense of obligation to support each other. This reflects the generalized sense of indebtedness expressed by many participants and their desire to 'repay it forward', supporting other young people as a way of honouring the debt they feel to those who helped them. Salim (walking interview) explained how unaccompanied children's networks offer support and protection, and are ways to empower each other to confront the hostility they might experience:

'You take 1000 people's experiences, and you share with those that have just arrived, and it really helps, because you now have power [...] Because you don't know your rights, you don't know how to change your social worker, you don't know how to deal with difficulties, you don't know how to deal with when you get caught by police when you're not doing nothing wrong [...]. And once people know about this, always they say, "Oh, now I'm powerful, because I know my rights".'

Alternative networks of support, protection and care are being forged between unaccompanied children as both a repayment of generalized indebtedness to others and a way of managing extractive indebted relationships. It highlights that these networks are both valued and possible, despite the fact they are forged by children, as well

as their importance in the face of often violent and punitive social care systems, which simultaneously infantilize and adultify.

8 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have drawn attention to the ways that unaccompanied children in the UK understand and navigate indebted relations. We have pointed to the complexities of debt repayment showing that it can provide a sense of pride, value and transnational connection and that it can be tiring, burdensome and extractive—often at the same time. Despite these complexities, we have shown that unaccompanied children generally choose not to disclose indebted relations to frontline practitioners, including those with statutory obligations to care for them. We suggest this silence is, at least in part, a consequence of the weaponization of children's services in a hostile immigration environment and a consequence of the taboo nature of children's engagement with financial responsibilities contained in hegemonic ideas of childhood. Instead, unaccompanied children may form alternative networks of protection with each other, providing emotional, practical and financial support for navigating the complexities of indebted relations. Institutions that are intended to provide care and protection may fail to do so, as unaccompanied children shoulder the burden and pride of debt repayment on their own. Further, although the Modern Slavery Act (2015) and guidance for practitioners have increased frontline workers' awareness of the risks of exploitation because of debt, the complexities of emotional, social and financial aspects of indebted relations are obscured. Nowhere is this more apparent than in relation to peer networks, which are often viewed with suspicion, mistrust and sites for grooming due to financial indebtedness (Crafter et al., 2021). This one-sided view of unaccompanied children's networks not only means that their relationships may become the site of punitive interventions. It also squanders the potentials of these networks for fostering belonging and solidarity.

We make two points in conclusion. The first is conceptual and relates to the notion of 'adultification'. Age disputes, where unaccompanied children are denied status as children, are an example of the way that racially minoritized children are adultified in legal and institutional contexts. In this instance, critiques of adultification rightly point to the detrimental impact of denying children the status of childhood and therefore the rights and entitlements this affords. At the same time, critiques of adultification that normatively link certain practices, such as indebtedness, to adulthood can have the opposite effect. As we have shown in this article, safeguarding trepidations around childhood indebtedness infantilizes and renders unaccompanied children's hopes and fears unsayable and therefore unsupportable, all in the name of safeguarding. Our point then is about the importance of simultaneously challenging the denial of rights based on processes of adultification and resisting the imposition of hegemonic ideas of childhood through critiques of adultification. Not only does the latter reproduce an exclusionary and Eurocentric childhood (Balagopalan, 2018; Rosen & Crafter, 2018), but it means unaccompanied children have to navigate conflicting transnational and

intergenerational expectations, putting them under pressure to 'do the right thing' when there often is no singular 'right thing' possible.

Our second point relates to the implications of these research findings for social work practice. An over-emphasis on indebtedness as a red flag for exploitation is a misreading of the complexities of indebted relations. It misses the conditions that produce extractive indebtedness including dispossession and its causes, the lack of safe migration routes, denial of the right to work, lack of control of finances and long waits for secure immigration status. It curtails reflection on, and support for, the positive features of debt repayment and social obligation articulated by unaccompanied children. In part then, this highlights the importance of reframing views of peer and transnational networks and considering how these can be positively recognized, enabled and encouraged. It also underscores the importance of learning from unaccompanied children's reflections on the weaponization of social care, where practitioners seem to collude with a hostile immigration system. This message from young people is a call to action to social care staff to reassess their understanding of the values and practices of social work.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS APPROVAL

This article includes data from the Children Caring on the Move (CCOM) project, which was approved in 2019 by both the Open University Ethics Committee and the UCL IOE Committee (Z6364106 2019 10 16 - REC: 1266).

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