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Active survival in the lives of unaccompanied minors: coping strategies, resilience, and the relevance of religion

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ABSTRACT

Asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors contend with numerous challenges as they adjust to living in a new country. Although increasing attention has been paid to their capacity for resilience, little research has been done on the exact manner in which they cope. This paper describes some of the insights gleaned from a qualitative study undertaken with unaccompanied minors living in Ireland. Six different coping strategies are identified, namely: (1) Maintaining continuity in a changed context, (2) Adjusting by learning and changing, (3) Adopting a positive outlook, (4) Suppressing emotions and seeking distraction, (5) Acting independently, and (6) Distrusting. These are described in turn. Particular attention is paid to the potential role of religion in relation to the participants' coping strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, researchers have begun to pay increasing attention to the circumstances of unaccompanied minors or separated children: children and young people under the age of 18 who are 'outside of their country of origin and separated from both parents, or their previous legal/customary primary caregiver' (Separated Children in Europe Programme 2004, p. 2).[1] Research findings, practice knowledge and conventional wisdom all indicate that these young people face multiple challenges in their lives. They face difficulties related to their pre-departure experiences, their flight from home and their lives in exile Unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors have often experienced armed conflict, death of loved ones and oppressive circumstances. Some are seeking asylum because of a fear of persecution, whilst others are escaping from conditions of poverty and lack of opportunity (Ayotte 2000; Thomas *et al.* 2004; Hopkins & Hill 2006; Chase *et al.* 2008). En route, while many children are well looked after and view those who accompany them as "benefactors" (Ayotte

2000, p. 83), others experience ill-treatment, abuse and exploitation during their journey (Ayotte 2000; Lustig *et al.* 2004). Upon arrival in a new country, unaccompanied minors usually have to cope with the loss of loved ones, the loss of culture and the associated threat to their sense of identity (German 2004). They are faced with adjusting to new circumstances, often involving an entirely different cultural context, whilst also dealing with the uncertainty surrounding their futures, the stresses associated with the asylum process (Sourander 1998; Rea 2001), and, in many jurisdictions, the difficulties of negotiating the care system (Kohli & Mather 2003; Chase *et al.* 2008).[2]

Given the plethora of challenges and the tendency of researchers to concentrate on the difficulties that these young people encounter, unaccompanied minors are frequently depicted as vulnerable individuals, who are emotionally distressed and 'at-risk' (e.g. Sourander 1998; Rea 2001; Bean *et al.* 2007; Hodes *et al.* 2008). Yet, whilst it is clear that unaccompanied minors face a range of stressful circumstances that constitute a risk to well being, not all of them necessarily experience

adverse outcomes. Indeed, Rutter (2003) suggests that although some refugee children remain psychologically vulnerable and a few manifest 'disturbed' behaviour, most seem to cope with the multiple stresses they experience. Increasingly, attention is being paid to the diverse manner in which children respond to the challenges of forced migration, and to the fact that many emerge as "active survivors" rather than as "passive victims" (Rousseau & Drapeau 2003, p. 78). For example, social workers who were interviewed by Kohli (2006a) said that they found unaccompanied minors to be "interesting and elastic in their capacities to survive and do well at times of great vicissitude" (p. 7). In essence, the resilience of these young people is beginning to be acknowledged, at least to some extent, although German (2004) contends that studies investigating the resilience of refugees are not yet given the same attention as research that looks at their vulnerability and its manifestations. While definitions vary, according to Masten & Powell (2003), resilience refers to "patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity" (p. 4). A person can be resilient or they can show resilience to a particular risk [1] (Ungar 2004). Various authors have commented on the resilience of forced migrants, including unaccompanied minors (e.g. Muecke 1992; Ahearn 2000; Kohli & Mather 2003; Kohli 2006a; Chase *et al.* 2008). While some studies focus specifically on the resilience of the participants (e.g. Rousseau *et al.* 1998), in others, evidence of resilience is hidden within discourses of vulnerability. For example, within descriptions of loneliness, lack of integration and fear of deportation, narratives of survival and determination can be found (e.g. Robins & Rylands 2004; Wallin & Ahlström 2005).

Overall, while Ahearn suggests that "most refugees are able to manage well enough in the aftermath of their experience" (p. 236), others provide evidence that child refugees display symptoms of stress at a physical, behavioural, emotional and cognitive level (e.g. Sourander 1998; Rea 2001; Thomas & Lau 2003). The varied research findings suggest that creating a dichotomy whereby refugee children are seen as either 'vulnerable' *or* 'resilient' is over-simplistic. Instead, for many, *both* vulnerability and resilience may be evident. Given that coping refers to efforts to manage demands that are appraised as taxing (Lazarus & Folkman 1984, p. 141), symptoms of stress and coping strategies inevitably exist side by side. It is acknowledged here that the young people in this study may have experienced traumas and may suffer emotionally and behaviourally as a result.

However, the focus of the study was on their coping strategies as they adjust to life in a new country. Although, as we have already seen, some attention is now being paid to the resilience of unaccompanied minors, there has been very little exploration of *how* these young people cope (exceptions include Goodman (2004) and Chase *et al.* (2008)). If we are to view resilience as referring to "competence when under stress" (Ungar 2008, p. 220), how do unaccompanied minors demonstrate this competence? What coping strategies do they adopt? This paper is based on research that seeks to go some way towards addressing this issue. In addition, within discussions of coping, the significance of religious faith is highlighted. All but 1 of the 32 participants emphasized the importance of religion in their lives. Religion and religious beliefs often seemed to facilitate them in the various coping strategies that they used. While the paper's focus is based on research with unaccompanied minors in a specific national context (Ireland)[3], we argue that its implications may be more general in that it points to coping strategies that may be significant for various immigrant and forced migrant populations living in other receiving societies.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was adopted in the research. From the outset, we expected that in fieldwork interactions with the young people a certain type of "relational context" (Miller 2004, p. 224) might exist – one primarily based on distrust. Given that refugees are frequently depicted as distrusting those around them (Daniel & Knudsen 1995; Robinson 2002), it was expected that the unaccompanied minors might not trust the researcher undertaking the fieldwork (author 1), perhaps especially given that she had previously worked as a social worker with unaccompanied minors. We were concerned that the participants might not feel able to be open about their situations or might not tell the truth. Therefore, it was decided to utilize methods that would enable rapport to be built with the young people. A decision was made to engage in participant observation in 'Valley Lodge', a hostel in which unaccompanied minors live, and to seek to undertake in-depth qualitative interviews with young residents there. These methods were also in keeping with our desire not to describe the experiences of unaccompanied minors in a narrow or stereotypical manner. Instead, we sought to study them as distinctive individuals and to reflect the range of their different perceptions.

Table 1 Gender, age and religion of interview participants

Gender		Age (years)						Religion	
M	F	14	15	16	17	18	19	Christian	Muslim
14	18	3	5	6	8	6	3	23	9

Table 2 Regions of origin of interview participants*

Region of origin	Number
Eastern Africa	14
Western Africa	13
Middle Africa	2
Southern Africa	1
Western Asia	1
Eastern Europe	1

*In the interest of protecting the anonymity of the participants, in general, the regions of origin of the participants are named rather than the specific countries of origin. The regions used are those identified by the United Nations scheme of geographic regions.

In addition, we expected that the participants might consider this research to be sensitive or risky because of the researcher's intention to delve into experiences that might be perceived as "deeply personal" (Lee & Renzetti 1993, p. 6). Therefore, particular attention was paid to ensuring that participation in the research did not cause harm, that consent to take part was both informed and voluntary and that the identities of the young people were protected. In addition, a decision was made not to ask the young people *why* they had come to Ireland, as it was felt that this was a potentially stressful question that they constantly faced within the asylum process.

In relation to the consent process, gaining access to Valley Lodge and obtaining consent for the participation of its residents in the research was a complex and time-consuming process. Informed consent was sought from the responsible authority (the Health Service Executive) and from staff at Valley Lodge. The informed consent of the young people was then sought, both in relation to participant observation and, subsequently, interviews.

The current paper is primarily based on the interview phase of the study. In total, 18 females and 14 males were interviewed.[4] They came from 13 different countries and ranged in age from 14 to 19 years (see Tables 1 and 2). They had been in Ireland for varying lengths of time. Consequently, they were also at different stages of the asylum process. Overall, a very diverse group of participants was interviewed.

Analysis of the interviews involved a process of open, axial and selective coding of the transcribed data (Strauss & Corbin 1998). These codes were attached to lengthy paragraphs and dialogues rather than to specific words or phrases (Miles & Huberman 1994). This ensured that the voices of the participants were privileged and that their cultural contexts were always considered, an important point given the significance of context in people's resilience (Ungar 2008). This process allowed diverse narratives and coping strategies to be identified. These strategies will now be discussed.[5]

DEALING WITH CHANGES AND CHALLENGES: MULTIPLE STRATEGIES

Reflecting the existing literature, the narratives of the participants suggested that the young people were faced with multiple changes and challenges in their lives in Ireland. They faced a life without family and childhood friends, and they lacked close relationships. They were negotiating a very different culture – one which, from their perspective, lacked a sense of community. The young people also talked about having to deal with the many challenges of the asylum process, including stressful procedures and the ongoing fear of deportation. Overall, it was evident that the participants had to deal with past traumas, present difficulties and future uncertainties. The question to be asked then, is, how did the young people cope? Through the interactions with the young people during fieldwork and through careful analysis of the interview data, different coping strategies emerged. In addition, it became evident that religion played a central role in their coping efforts.

Maintaining continuity in a changed context

To begin with, the young people appeared to engage in a strategy of 'maintaining continuity in a changed context'. They were embracing opportunities for continuity between the past and the present and planning to maintain continuity into the future. Continuity has been identified as an important aspect of identity (Erikson 1968; Hartar 1990). Having some sense of sameness between the past and the present facilitates

the formation of a continuous sense of self, thus suggesting the importance of this coping strategy. One girl talked about being able to '*live a Nigerian life*' in Ireland:

> Ireland now, maybe the Irish people may not accept it but it's mixed culture now. And there is different cultures here. There is African shop. If I want my Nigerian food I can get it. And if I want to go to Nigerian church I could go. But assuming all these things are not there and it's purely Ireland, you know it would be more difficult because you really miss home. Because that life is not there. But the way it is now, I'm in Ireland but if I want to live a Nigerian life, you could still get it.

Continuity was also available through religious faith. Reflecting the work of Handlin (1973) in relation immigrants in the USA, religion served as a bridge between the old and new 'worlds' of the unaccompanied minors, in terms of their relationships with God[6] and in terms of their religious practice. From the participants' descriptions of their childhoods, it appeared that religion and faith in God had usually been dominant features of their lives in their countries of origin. When they moved away from these countries, they were able to carry religious faith and its associated rituals with them. Amidst multiple other changes in their lives, faith was something that remained relatively unchanged. One girl, who spoke about attending a Nigerian-led church in Ireland, was asked about the importance of her religious faith. She immediately responded by tracing the thread of religion back to her family origins, thus suggesting the continuity that was associated with it:

> I grow up in a Christian family anyway. And we are used to going to church every Sunday. And waking up every morning and doing prayers at home. So, when you are not doing that, when you are not going to church, it will even feel strange not to go to church on a Sunday. You will feel like, Sunday is meant for church. Like . . . I don't know about all this all this cities back at home but where I grow up with, Sundays, shops doesn't open. Yeah. It's only meant for like, you go to church.

Phinney & Rosenthal (1992, p. 145) have emphasized the importance of minority youth incorporating a positively valued ethnic identity into their sense of self. In this study, culture and ethnicity appeared to be important aspects of the young people's identities. When the participants held on to elements of their culture – including religious faith – their sense of threat posed by change seemed to be lessened, as was their sense of loss. People from their own cultures were particularly important in terms of facilitating this. Contact with them provided opportunities for continuity of culture and conversation. Often, the young people were able to speak their native language and watch films and eat food from home in the company of others from a similar background. In addition, these people provided an opportunity to talk about the past and about familiar people and places that they had known at home. In this way, the young people's culture became an explicit part of their daily lives in Ireland, rather than a hidden part of their private selves.

Adjusting by learning and changing

However, seeking continuity was not the only way in which the young people coped with the discontinuity in their lives. They also engaged in a strategy of 'adjusting by learning and changing'. Whilst most of the young people wished to retain elements of their home cultures, they also wished to adapt to their new environment. Through interaction with friends and with professionals, the young people learnt about practical and cultural aspects of Ireland. One participant talked about how his sense of dress changed. Whilst he sought to incorporate his own individual taste into his dress style, he also wanted to ensure that he was dressing '*like a European guy*'. He observed how his friend was dressing:

> And the friend I used to be with, I was watching the way he's dressing. . . . But the way he's dressing, I keep it in my way. [. . .]I'm putting my own style, so . . . that's how. So . . . I'm in Europe now . . . I gotta be like a European guy, so, see people dressing good. I gotta dress good or something.

For others, changing their religious practice represented a way of adapting to the Irish way of life. For example, Muslim young people spoke about trying to pray five times a day. They wished to observe this requirement but were unable to pray at the designated times. Therefore, they opted to pray at alternative times and 'added' prayer times together. In their efforts to adjust to life in Ireland, participants also spoke about learning practical things from their peers, such as how to get from place to place. Others described learning about aspects of Western youth culture: having boyfriends or girlfriends, what English Premiership soccer teams to support, what music to listen to, etc. For others, the emphasis was placed on learning English or improving their English. One participant commented that he was friendly with Irish young people in order "*to know much things and to really get how to speak English*". Hence, through everyday experiences and through conversations with both peers and professionals, the participants in the study began to adjust to Irish life. Learning new behaviours

and making changes in their existing behaviours represented a way of coping with the difficulties and differences in their new life.

Overall then, from these first two strategies, it seemed that, like the participants in Miller *et al.*'s (2008) study, the young people "selectively [embraced] aspects of both cultures" (p. 41) rather than rejecting one in favour of the other. Thus, it can tentatively be suggested that these participants were adopting an "integration acculturation strategy" (Berry 1997) and a "bicultural identity" (Phinney *et al.* 2001). They wished to maintain their heritage culture and retain a strong ethnic identity whilst simultaneously identifying with their new society and seeking interaction with Irish culture. Often, religious faith facilitated their efforts. Whilst this research did not set out to evaluate the effectiveness of the various survival strategies, research by Berry *et al.* (2006) has suggested that those who adopt an integration acculturation strategy, including having a bicultural identity, tend to fare best in terms of psychological and sociocultural adaptation.

Adopting a positive outlook

A third coping strategy was that of 'adopting a positive outlook'. Many of the young people seemed to cope by focusing on the positive aspects of their situations. They frequently expressed appreciation for the good things in their lives and hope for the future. Such expressions were often situated within a comparative framework, with their circumstances in Ireland being compared to what they perceived to be less favourable circumstances in their countries of origin. In essence, they made meaning out of their current difficulties by placing them in the context of past problems and future opportunities. As was the case with the Sudanese unaccompanied youth interviewed by Goodman (2004) in the USA, hopefulness arose from hopelessness. The young people frequently talked about *creating* a better future for themselves, through study, prayer or lifestyle choices (such as the avoidance of alcohol). Their sense of hope facilitated them to cope with their difficult present life circumstances. One boy said:

> But I'm trying to keep my head up . . . You know, because I know things one day are gonna get better. You know I mean, so . . . [. . .] I'm hopeful. It won't be this way every day. It won't.

The influence of religious faith was again present in the words of another participant. She talked about how God helped her in the past and would continue to help her into the future:

> Because I believe he's the one that sent the man to help me. I believe he's the one that brought me to this, eh, country, you understand? I believe he's the one that's still protecting me up till now. I believe with him everything is possible.

Thus, for this girl, hope was possible through God. Goodman (2004) has pointed to the importance of hope for people who have suffered from trauma and loss. By hoping and believing that their new lives would provide high quality education, good career prospects and positive childhood experiences for their children, the young people in this study seemed better able to cope with their many difficulties. Appreciating what they had and having hope for the future served as powerful sources of positivity.

Suppressing emotions and seeking distraction

A fourth strategy involved the young people 'suppressing emotions and seeking distraction'. Elsewhere, reference has been made to the silence that often surrounds refugees' past lives (Papadopoulos 2002; Kohli 2006b). The narratives of the participants suggested that, in their daily lives, they often wished to remain silent about their past and present circumstances and that they wished to suppress difficult thoughts and emotions. Some of this silence may have stemmed from different cultural norms of self-disclosure and emotional expression. However, to a large extent, it seemed that for these young people, remembering past events, thinking about the present and worrying about the future were considered upsetting experiences that should be avoided. Goodman (2004) has stated that this pattern of coping "though adaptive in traumatic situations, can be problematic in the long run" (p. 1192). Similarly, Beiser & Wickrama (2004) suggest that suppressing and disconnecting the past may be effective short-term strategies, but that maintaining these strategies forever may be impossible. Yet, despite these concerns, it was evident from the interviews with the young people that, for them, suppression represented a concrete and useful way of dealing with their current circumstances. One girl talked about the future and about the fact that, if she had children, she would not talk to her daughters about her country of origin.

> I not think I . . . talk for my, for my daughters about [. . .] my country. Because is . . . difficult for me, you know? [. . . .] Every time you thinking this, you talking about this, I feeling like, crazy, you know? I no like talking about this.

For many of the participants, distraction served as a means by which they could suppress difficult thoughts. Other studies have also pointed to the use of

this strategy (e.g. MacMullin & Loughry 2000; Chase *et al.* 2008). Trying to be always in the company of others and trying to keep busy by focusing on schooling or other activities helped the young people to suppress their emotions. Distraction left less time to feel lonely, to be anxious about outcomes of the asylum process or to worry about other difficulties that the young people were experiencing in relation to their past or present lives. One boy, who attended an African-led church at weekends, felt that attendance at the church helped him to stop thinking about other things. This activity aided the suppression of his thoughts and again highlights the central role played by religious faith in many of the young people's coping efforts:

> Like, ehm, you go there and you forget about the . . . , you forget about, what can I say? [. . .] you just feel in the church. You don't think about anything else.

Acting independently

Linked to the young people's tendency to remain silent and to engage in suppression and distraction, [author 1's] conversations with the participants continuously showed that they were individuals who acted independently and who perceived themselves to be quite self-reliant. Such independence and self-reliance seemed to empower them to cope more adequately with their circumstances. Although relationships with peers and with professionals were important to them, the participants never came across as *dependent* on these relationships. They tried to deal with their own difficulties:

> You are no longer Mammy's boy or Daddy's boy, you know how you grow up, you take care of yourself, you have to learn to live without your parents, you know. Eh, taking your own responsibilities . . . I'm deal-with-your-own-problems guy. I deal with my own problems.

This tendency to view themselves as independent represented another coping strategy, one which has been identified by other researchers in relation to homeless young people (e.g. Lindsay *et al.* 2000; Kidd 2003). Like the homeless young people, the narratives of the participants in our study suggested that they were proud of being able to act independently and saw it in a positive light. Kidd (2003) has drawn attention to the fact that the emphasis on independence might hinder young people's ability to learn from others and might also be limiting because of it being an emotion-focused coping strategy.[7] Nonetheless, it seemed that by adopting an independent self-perception, the participants in this study felt an increased sense of control over their circumstances, thus helping them cope with their situation.

Yet, the strategy of not depending on other people and dealing with one's own problems went hand-in-hand with a belief in God and a tendency to turn to God for help and support. Most of the young people had a very strong personal relationship with God and felt that this relationship helped them to deal with the many difficulties that they faced. Reflecting the findings of other research in relation to refugees and immigrants, (e.g. McMichael 2002; Thompson & Gurney 2003), frequent reference was made to asking God for help and receiving help from God. For example, one young person stated:

> I just pray for God to help me, you know? [. . .] Help me to . . . see the right man. [. . .] That will like, love me. Get married. Settle down. Have a nice job. Just to get my status[8]. You understand? Get my status. Have a nice job. Live a nice life with my family [. . .] I would pray for my aunt. . . . My brother. For God to help him. I want to see him.

Having become separated from family and from childhood friends, the young people were usually faced with developing entirely new social networks. Faced with this challenge, the young people frequently chose not to seek support from those around them. Instead, they often engaged in self-reliance or turned to God when they felt they needed help. Thus, again, religious faith facilitated their coping.

Distrusting

Related to the tendency to see oneself as independent, was the tendency of the participants not to trust those around them. In fact, distrust emerged as another significant coping strategy. The extent to which people trust can vary depending on numerous factors, including culture and country of origin (Realo *et al.* 2008). Yet trust is widely viewed as a key component of relationships. Indeed, Mitchell (1990) asserts that "no major or enduring relationship can exist happily or comfortably without trust" (p. 849). However, Eisenbruch (1991) has identified the inability to trust others as a feature of the refugee's cultural bereavement. Other authors have also made reference to the difficulties that asylum seekers and refugees have in trusting (e.g. Delaney 2006; Hynes 2009).

Similarly, in this current study, whilst there were some exceptions, the participants often talked about only trusting certain people or about only trusting people to a certain extent. The young people attributed their distrust to past experiences, being accustomed to distrust, being distrusted by others, feeling

unable to tell the truth, and not knowing people well. It seemed that their past experiences interacted with their current difficulties and future uncertainties and created a situation where trusting others became a challenge. When one young person was asked why he found it difficult to trust, he stated:

> Every reason you can think of . . . [. . .] you know what, I just found it hard to trust a human being. . . . I trusted Mary[9] and I trusted my friends, but, I grew up with them, so, I thought I could grow up and talk to them. So, when I'm here, like there's people I don't know, I don't feel like talking to them or trusting them or anything like this because . . . It's just . . . I don't know why, I just don't . . . trust . . .

Threaded through explanations such as this one was the idea that distrust was 'functional', as has been suggested elsewhere by Kohli (2006b, p. 712). Yet, whilst trusting people was seen to be difficult, the participants talked about their trust in one particular being: God. In the absence of other close relationships, God was reported as particularly important to them. They spoke enthusiastically about trusting and loving God and about relying on him for guidance and support. One young person stated:

> The only, only, only friend [laughs] I trusted all the time, that's God. [. . .] I don't have any more friends, I trusted more than God, I don't think so. You know because, always God knows more than everybody. And God's gonna help you all the time. [. . .]God always gonna help

Thus, coping was again facilitated by a belief in God. Distrusting others was perhaps easier in the knowledge that at least God could be trusted.

Overall, 'distrusting' appeared to represent another coping strategy. Distrust helped the participants to deal with the challenges and changes with which they were faced, especially by increasing their sense of self-reliance and by minimizing the risk of being hurt or betrayed. Distrusting was often something that the participants decided to do, as a means of protecting themselves. While it must be acknowledged that inter-personal difficulties may arise because of this lack of trust (Mitchell 1990; Anderson 2001), the participants seemed to find that distrust was functional in their immediate circumstances.

DRAWING THE COPING STRATEGIES TOGETHER

Figure 1 shows the range of different coping strategies that were found to be used by the group participating in this study. These strategies are abbreviated as adaptation, positivity, suppression, independence, continuity and distrust. Each of these has been dis-
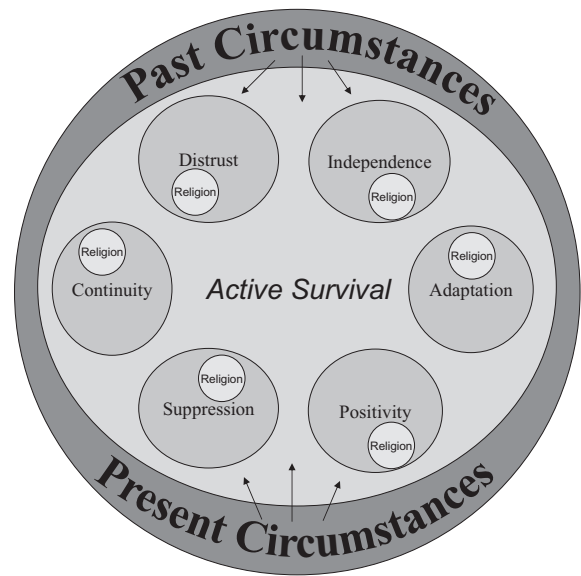

Figure 1 Coping strategies, contexts, and the importance of religious faith.

cussed previously, and overall, they form part of the active survival of the group of young people who participated in this study. While this study has not sought to explore the connections between these different strategies, exploration of the strategies showed one clearly common element between all of them. This element was religious faith.

By examining the coping strategies of the participants in depth, it became evident that for all but one of the young people religious faith was an important part of their lives, and significantly, it played a role in their coping efforts. Practising their religion and having a strong belief in God facilitated the young people in their use of the different strategies. Thus, in Fig. 1, smaller 'religion' circles have been placed inside each coping strategy. This suggests that although the coping strategies were frequently used *independently* of religious faith, often, the young people's religious beliefs and practices formed a part of the different strategies. For instance, as regards the first coping strategy, in dealing with the challenges of living in a very different cultural context, religion provided continuity for the young people – continuity in terms of their relationships with God and their religious practice. However, it also served as a way in which the young people could use the strategy of adapting by learning and changing. For instance, whilst they held on to their beliefs, their religious practice and ideas about faith sometimes changed in order to accommodate their new environment. In

addition, faith facilitated the use of the third coping strategy – adoption of a positive attitude – as many of the participants expressed hope in a future influenced by God. Religion provided the participants with a means of distraction and of companionship, hence facilitating the process of suppression, the fourth strategy. Religious beliefs also helped the young people to act independently: faith allowed them to feel independent and self-reliant, as their confidence in God's help meant that they did not feel the need to rely on other people for help. Linked with this, and related to the final strategy of distrusting, the participants' trust in God minimized their need to trust those around them.

Thus, in the overall context of having grown up in religious societies, of facing multiple challenges arising from their past and present circumstances, and of lacking close relationships with those around them, religion served as both a 'relatively available' and a 'relatively compelling' coping resource (Pargament 1997). It was 'relatively available' as it had been a central part of their lives in their countries of origin and constituted an important part of their worldview. In addition, few other alternatives were available. It was 'relatively compelling' as a coping resource in that the young people's strong faith meant that they saw religious coping as a worthwhile way of dealing with their circumstances, a way that made sense and felt right to them (Pargament 1997). As a result, and because of the multiple purposes that it served, religious coping was used frequently by the young people in dealing with the difficulties and vicissitudes of their lives. For most of them, religion held a central purpose in their lives and was strongly connected with the other ways in which they coped.

The narratives of the participants suggested that the coping strategies that they used were purposefully chosen as they believed them to be the most compelling options available in their circumstances. As such, the participants were active in their efforts to survive. The young people had a clear rationale for coping in the way that they did. The choice of which strategy or strategies to use was influenced by the past and present social and contextual circumstances of each individual, thus highlighting that coping and resilience are context-dependent, as has been suggested by Ungar (2008), amongst others. This is illustrated in Fig. 1 by the arrows going from the outer circumstances circle into the inner active survival circle, thus suggesting the connections between the past, the present and the various coping strategies. Firstly, for example, in choosing to maintain continuity whilst

also adjusting by learning and changing, the participants were clearly influenced by the cultures and societies in which they had grown up and by their new situations. Secondly, when young people compared past circumstances in their countries of origin with future opportunities in Ireland, they adopted a positive outlook, thus again suggesting the influence of the past on their decision-making. Thirdly, difficult past and present experiences resulted in the young people choosing to distract themselves and to engage in suppression of thoughts and emotions. Fourthly, a sense of independence often emerged because of the fact that those who were available in the past were no longer available in the young people's new circumstances. Fifthly, a strategy of distrusting was often adopted because of past experiences of being let down by those who had been trusted. Hence, influenced by the past and present, the young people chose between different coping strategies. In doing so, they showed that they were actively engaged in surviving the challenging circumstances that they faced, both as asylum seekers and as adolescents. In addition, their narratives shed light on the importance of the contexts in which resilience is found.

Whilst Fig. 1 goes some way towards illuminating what may often be happening for unaccompanied minors, it is not being proposed as a completed explanatory framework. It is a preliminary offering, which seems to depict the coping strategies that were evident in *this* study. It suggests the *possible* centrality of religious faith in the coping efforts of other unaccompanied minors and asylum seeking young people. However, it is recognized that the situations of these young people are complex and dynamic. Hence, their circumstances should not be described in a static or simplistic way. Within all of the insights that emerged in this study, diversity of opinion and of experience was evident. Consequently, the complexities and nuances of the lives of these young people need to be taken into consideration and attention needs to be paid to difference, to individuality and to changes that occur over time. Further follow-up research is needed so as to see whether these coping strategies continue to be used and whether religion continues to be of relevance to these young people's lives and to the lives of other young people who follow in their footsteps.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This research suggests that whilst unaccompanied minors face multiple changes and challenges in their lives, the participants in this study purposefully used

various coping strategies in their efforts to deal with their circumstances. The narratives of the young people give credence to the view that, frequently, unaccompanied minors are "agentive purposeful actors" (Frydenberg 1999, p. 23), who cope in a variety of individual ways depending on what they perceive as most appropriate to their circumstances. In addition, it is evident that religious faith plays an important role in their efforts to cope. Although further research is needed into the long-term effects of the various coping strategies, including the role of religious faith, the findings are in keeping with a perspective that focuses on people's strengths. Overall, whilst the vulnerability of this population cannot be ignored, more attention needs to be paid to the young people's resilience and to their "adaptive strengths" (Goodman 2004, p. 1178). A strengths-based perspective (Saleebey 2002) needs to be continuously utilized not only in practice but also in research. Doing so will serve to acknowledge the multiple capacities and resources of unaccompanied minors, Hopefully, it may also encourage a form of professional practice respectful of these attributes and committed to empowering these young people.

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NOTES

1 In relation to the term 'unaccompanied minor', increasing attention has been paid to the fact that not all children who are separated from their parents or customary caregivers are 'unaccompanied' per se. For instance, some children may be living with extended family members, but may face similar risks to those encountered by unaccompanied refugee children. As a result, the use of the more inclusive term 'separated children' has been encouraged (e.g. UNHCR 2004), However, as the study being discussed in this paper did not include children who were living with extended family members, the more specific term 'unaccompanied minor' will be used throughout. For the purpose of this paper, 'Ireland' is used to refer to the 'Republic of Ireland'.

2 The term 'unaccompanied minor' covers a myriad of children and young people in different circumstances. While some arrive in countries of resettlement via UNHCR resettlement programmes following years of living in refugee camps, others come independently, with the help of an agent, and seek asylum. The participants in this current study were children who went through or were going through Ireland's asylum process. Their narratives did not suggest that they had spent time in refugee camps. Much of the research on unaccompanied minors is focused on children who previously lived in refugee camps (e.g. Goodman 2004; Lustig *et al.* 2004). Whilst the circumstances of such children and young people are quite different, the findings from this literature are still of relevance to the situation of the participants in this study.

3 In the Irish context, records show that the first unaccompanied asylum-seeking minor arrived in 1996 and that the numbers increased rapidly from then until 2001. The numbers applying for asylum – whether adults or children – have decreased considerably in more recent years, with 390 applications being made by unaccompanied minors between 2004 and 2006 (data from the Office of the Refugee Application Commissioner), the time at which the fieldwork took place. In Ireland, the majority of unaccompanied minors live in the Dublin region and are the responsibility of a statutory Health Service Executive (HSE) social work team. Whilst a very small proportion of unaccompanied minors live in residential homes or with foster families, most of the young people live in hostel accommodation with little supervision, a situation that has received much criticism in recent years (Christie 2002; Corbett 2008). See Mooten (2006) for further details regarding the situation of separated children/unaccompanied minors living in Ireland.

4 Initially, it had been expected that the interviewees would be recruited amongst the young people living in Valley Lodge. However, only eight of the young people there were interested in taking part. Therefore, young people living in other hostels in Dublin as well as young people living outside of Dublin were approached and invited to participate. Overall, 24 of the interviewees were not Valley Lodge residents.

5 When quoting from the interviews, we decided, as far as possible, not to change the grammar or syntax that was used by the young people. Although this means that the reader might sometimes find the quotations difficult to understand, we felt that this approach would allow us to more adequately represent the young people who had been interviewed. In addition, it leaves our insights open to greater scrutiny and gives readers the opportunity to decipher for themselves what the young people are saying.

6 We recognize that the different respondents may not necessarily subscribe to the same sense of God. They may have different beliefs about who God is. When we talk about God in this paper, we are referring to the participants' relationship with God. We are using the term God as this is what the young people used.

7 By engaging in problem-focused coping, a person attempts to change the troubled person–environment relationship by acting either on the environment or on oneself. By engaging in emotion-focused coping, a person seeks to change either the way the stressful environment is attended to or the relational meaning of what is happening (Lazarus 1993). Problem-focused coping is often expected to be more beneficial than coping that is emotion-focused, although Thoits (1995) argues that there is no clear evidence to support this perception.

8 The young person is referring to refugee status when she talks about "my status".

9 'Mary was a family friend in this boy's country of origin. Following the murder of his parents, she had helped him to leave the country.

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