Promoting the Resilience of Unaccompanied Children: Lessons from research

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Introduction

- Context
- Vulnerability and Resilience of Unaccompanied Children (UAC)
  - Coping strategies
  - Trust
- Experiences of Residential Care
- Entering Adulthood
- Practice Implications
Unaccompanied children (UAC): Under 18, Outside country of origin, Separated from primary caregiver

In 2015, 96,465 unaccompanied children applied for asylum in the EU MS (23% of all asylum applicants under the age of 18)

Irish context:
- First arrived in 1996, increase in numbers followed by decrease
- Circa. 100 have arrived per year in recent years
- Increase likely within next few years due to Relocation programmes
- In recent times, more public interest re UAC – e.g. Success of #NotOnOurWatch campaign to bring children in from Calais

The Vulnerability of UAC

- Pre-migration experiences: A mix of the ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’
  - Poverty, conflict, lack of opportunity, discrimination, harmful cultural practices, persecution
    - “It is very painful for me to talk about life. It gives me bad thought” (‘Junior’ cited in Hopkins & Hill, 2008)
- Family relationships, friendships, schooling, every-day life.
  - “She would read me stories, she would, we would play games, cards ... Eh, we would cook, you know” (young person cited in Ní Raghallaigh, 2007)
- Migration and Transit experiences
  - Witness death and violence en route; at risk of exploitation; fear of authorities
  - Detention, beatings, forced separation from siblings (Mougne, 2010)
  - Protracted periods in temporary camps in unsafe and unsuitable conditions; boredom and depression (European Union Committee, 2016)
The Vulnerability of UAC - 2

Post-migration experiences
- Initial relief, joy, perhaps even excitement
- Gap between expectations of exile and the reality
- Encountering multiple changes and challenges:
  - Dealing with numerous losses – many ambiguous (Boss, 1999)
  - Range of emotions related to family left behind: loneliness, worry, guilt; overwhelmed by perceived responsibility to achieve refugee status and provide for those at home
  - Hostility; Racism;
  - Communication and language problems; Adjusting to a new and different culture
  - Dealing with the challenges of the asylum process / care system
  - Normative challenges of adolescence.

- Alongside new opportunities; time spent with friends; education; extra curricular activities etc

- Arising from identification of the challenges, inevitably there has been a focus on the vulnerability of this cohort – At risk of the development of psychopathology; evidence of PTSD; Depression; Anxiety.

Increasing recognition of the resilience of refugees and asylum seekers

Resilience: Masten (2001) describes resilience as referring to “a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development” (p. 228)

Michael Ungar (2013) on resilience:

“Findings from a series of qualitative (Theron, Cameron, Lau, Didkowsky, Ungar, & Liebenberg, 2011; Ungar et al., 2007) and quantitative (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011) studies support a view that resilience is both the innate capacity of young people and the quality of their family systems to find ways of coping following exposure to acute and chronic stressors, as well as the capacity of their schools, communities, service providers, and government legislators to provide resources in ways that are meaningful to those who are impacted by maltreatment (Ungar, 2008; Ungar et al., 2007, 2008, emphasis added)”
What facilitates resilience amongst refugee youth?

  - Social Support (including from friends and from professionals)
  - Acculturation Strategies
  - Religion / meaning making
  - Education
  - Avoidance
  - Hope / Optimism

Relevant literature on resilience / coping among UAMs:
Goodman, 2004; Groark, Sclare & Raval, 2011; Maegusuku-Hewett et al., 2007; Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010; Ní Raghallaigh, 2011; Øppedal & Idsoe, 2015; Rousseau et al. 1998; Smyth et al. 2015; Sutton et al., 2006; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2014

- Need to recognise that vulnerability and resilience exist side by side rather than being mutually exclusive.
While refugee children are at risk of harm and of adverse outcomes, they and those around them can ward against this by enhancing their resilience and capacities to cope.

“The importance of children’s agency needs to be appreciated, as should the wider ecological contexts and social relationships in which they are engaged, so that welfare policy and practice does not assume that refugee children are a homogenous mass of passive victims of adverse circumstances.” (Maegusuku-Hewett et al., 2007: 319)
Coping Strategies among UAC in Ireland

- Coping strategies:
  - Maintaining continuity
  - Adjusting by learning and changing
  - Adopting a positive outlook
  - Suppressing emotions and seeking distraction
  - Viewing themselves as self reliant
  - Distrusting
  - Relying on Religion

(See: Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010)
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

Young Person,
in Ní Raghallaigh, (2013)
You can talk about stuff about Nigeria and stuff … she has like more experience than I do, you know, in things about Nigeria …, I can learn stuff off her yeah and …we speak the same language.

Young Person, in Ní Raghallaigh, (2013)
To me I cannot say I prefer Irish or African. If they’re being nice to me, I stay with them.

Young Person, in Ní Raghallaigh, (2013)
Distrust among UAC in Ireland

- Only trusting certain people and only trusting to a certain extent
- Reasons for distrust:
  - Past experiences
  - Being accustomed to distrust
  - Being distrusted by others
  - Inability to tell the truth
  - Not knowing people well (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013)
- In addition: Being asked to trust numerous professionals, many of whom are state employees
- Remember: Their distrust serves a purpose, an important way of coping
They don’t trust me, they don’t believe me... So, I can’t believe them... So, I don’t trust them...

Cited in
Ní Raghallaigh, 2013
This doctor, I not trust him, I’m not safe. (Respondent 8)

I didn’t say to anything about my problem, I didn’t tell it to anybody, you know, because I don’t trust anybody. (Respondent 9)

Quoted in Majumder et al. (2015) article re UAC’s perceptions re mental health services in the UK
Residential Care
Experiences of Residential Care
The literature

Dearth of research relating to unaccompanied children in residential care.

- Chase, Knight & Statham (2008) in the UK – young people valued time in residential care; importance of quality of relationships between staff and young people highlighted, esp regarding settling in.

- Wade, Mitchell and Baylis (2005): short term residential care acts as a bridge to facilitate adjustment; comfort and solidarity provided by other young people but ‘this needs to be set against a recognition of the heterogeneity within this population and the potential for tensions to arise’.

- Wade, Sirriyeh, Kohli and Simmonds (2012) emphasise how problems can arise when UAMs are placed in non-specialist provision, causing confusion for existing non-UAM residents.

- Söderqvist et al (2014) (Sweden) highlighted the challenges for residential staff in creating an ‘ordinary home’ for UAMs given their surveillance role and the use of legal mandates that were not designed with this population in mind.
UAC’s Experiences of Residential Care in Ireland

- Study of UAC in foster care – included some initial questions about residential care. Participants: 21 young people, 32 stakeholders, 16 carers

- Strong evidence that residential care for these young people was serving its purpose of ‘providing a safe, nurturing environment’ (Byrne & McHugh, 2005).

- Important to note that residential care for UAC is not being used as a last resort, as is often the case for other children – generally used for initial reception, period of assessment of need and planning for longer term care.

- In general – young people had very fond memories of their time in residential care; stakeholders very positive about services provided.
Positive Experiences of Residential Care

Young people mentioned:
- Being in the company of other UAC
- Living in Dublin
- Going on outings
- Staff who were welcoming and supportive

Stakeholders mentioned:
- Assistance with initial adjustment: ‘remembering the simple things that are so important’
- More medium term adjustment to new environment; negotiating cultural differences
- Sensitivity to cultural differences among residential care staff
- Importance of young people meeting other UAC
- Protection for children at risk of trafficking
Experiences of Residential Care in Ireland
Positive aspects

The good thing about the residential house was ... everybody was like together. I got to know... people from different countries and we become friends and we were having dinner, everything like together.. So, I really enjoyed it like, you know, as a child when you leave your family, you come to a different country, you feel like so lonely, but when I went to the residential house it was like all the kids there together so you don’t feel as much as... when you’re by your own, alone like.

(Cited in Ní Raghallaigh, 2013)
Experiences of Residential Care in Ireland
Positive aspects

The first months... It was very difficult but... They helped me in Grove Lodge to come over, to go over it, like to forget things, to be myself, to learn more things about myself, to grow like. It was very good, they really helped me in Grove Lodge... They helped me to move out of the pains... ...everything that was worrying me there.

(Cited in Ní Raghallaigh, 2013)
Experiences of Residential Care in Ireland
Challenging Aspects

- Many of the challenges in keeping with the experiences of other young people in residential settings.
  
  Young people mentioned:
  - Rules of the residential unit
  - Unnatural environment: Monitoring of their activities; staff recording what happens
  - Being cared for by a team of people who worked on a shift basis
  - Challenging living with people of different cultural backgrounds
  - Difficult when friends move on to new care arrangements

Stakeholders (including foster carers) mentioned:
- Lack of familiarity with ‘professional’ relationships
- An alien type of care arrangement – coming from countries where there was no residential care.
- Stigma associated with living in residential care
- Risk of institutionalisation
- Lack of flexibility due to rules and regulations.
- Challenges moving into foster care

(Cited in Ní Raghallaigh, 2013)
Experiences of Residential Care - Challenges

It’s not a normal place to be at like if you get me… You’re not really living in a stable place.. Like, its great, like to live there but… people come in and go and staff changes everyday so it’s kind of like ‘wooo’, you know, and for other young people that might be too much, if you get me…at first it was like ‘Ahh my God’ today you’re seeing this person and the next its another person and… it’s just always new people coming in and it’s just like ‘Ahh’… people should be sent to families but then I like residential units as well, so I don’t know.

(Cited in Ní Raghallaigh, 2013)
Experiences of Residential Care Challenges

I think the residential units could sometimes really institutionalise somebody. It can be very structured. ... It needs to be, it needs to function for six children, but it can be very structured and some can adapt to it but, you know, while they’re adapting, they’re just sort of falling into this pattern of this real westernised type of care where we do everything for you and, you know, some of their own innate coping mechanisms .. get a little bit less.

(Cited in Ní Raghallaigh, 2013)
Experiences of Residential Care - Challenges

I was happy to finally find a family but I was also sad to leave, to leave the people I’d been living with…. I really got to know them and I liked them. So, it was a happy and a sad moment.

(Cited in Ní Raghallaigh, 2013)
Entering Adulthood
Entering Adulthood

- For UAC in the Irish context the transition to adulthood is particularly challenging.
- Aged out UAC are accommodated in direct provision, unless their claim for protection has been recognised or they are ‘exceptionally vulnerable’
- Young people face numerous challenges in DP
- Mc Mahon report suggests that foster carers should prepare UAC for direct provision by building their resilience—a somewhat bizarre recommendation (Ní Raghallaigh & Thornton, 2017)
- However, even within the context of direct provision, resilience remains evident:

  Even though I’ve gone through a lot and felt like a prisoner (in direct provision), I’m free now. I have more friends here now than I did in my country and I can call Ireland my home

Assisa Sow, former UAC quoted in Irish Times article by Sorcha Pollack:

http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/i-felt-like-a-prisoner-in-direct-provision-but-i-m-
Practice Implications
Challenges for Practitioners

- All of the general challenges associated with working with children in care.
- Hostile narratives regarding ‘bogus’ or otherwise ‘undeserving’ UAC
- Danger of focusing on the ‘asylum seeker’ and the ‘extraordinary’ rather than the ‘young person’ and the ‘ordinary’
- Silence, secrecy and mistrust (See Kohli 2006b; Ní Raghallaigh 2013b; )
- May be difficult to build trusting relationships
- Cultural differences: e.g. Communication styles; norms; values; beliefs; perceptions about the clients’ problems; emotional expression
- You may be viewed as an ‘expert’ and this may hinder your ability to encourage client self-determination
- Challenges helping young people to settle in residential care when they are due to move to foster care
- Asylum process; turning 18; threat of deportation
Building Relationships

- Need professionals who:
  - Are emotionally self aware
  - Provide practical assistance
  - Provide emotional support when sought
  - Don’t try to replace birth families
  - Advocate for the young people
  - Are culturally competent
  - Allow silence
  - Can respond to the co-existence of vulnerability and resilience
  - Can respond to young people who want to be ‘attached’ or ‘detached’ (Biehal, 2009, drawing on Downes, 1988)
Cultural Competence

- Cultural competence: “the ability to maximise sensitivity and minimise insensitivity in the service of culturally diverse clients” (O’Hagan, 2001)

- Two key components:
  - **Cultural sensitivity**: refers to attitudes and values that involve openness, flexibility, receptiveness and an appreciation of the different worldviews held by individuals; Also self awareness, especially being aware of one’s own biases and stereotypical views about cultures (Lee and Greene, 2004)
  
  - **Cultural knowledge**: the knowledge or information element of working cross-culturally. E.g. Knowledge about the cultural group’s experiences, religions, values, communication styles, help-seeking behaviours, ways of thinking etc. (Lee & Greene, 2004)
Reflective Practice

- Recognize the place of informed self-awareness –
- Exercise professional curiosity and ask the question ‘why?’ in relation to one’s practice.
- See each encounter as unique and unpredictable and requiring negotiation through the professional relationship.
- Pay attention to the processes operating in practice as well as to its content
- Recognize impact of work on oneself
- Utilise relationship-based, reflective support and supervision
  - (Ruch, 2005)
To Conclude

- Numerous challenges facing UAC, relating to the past, the present, and the future.
- There is a temptation to simply label them as ‘vulnerable’.
- Research indicates that alongside vulnerability exists resilience, agency, and a capacity to cope in numerous different ways.
- The full range of care options needs to be considered for UAC – residential care may be best for some; foster care for others; supported lodgings also.
- The use of direct provision as ‘aftercare’ needs to end.
- Social Care practitioners have a key role to play in helping adjustment, facilitating resilience, and advocating.
- Researchers have an important role to play in continuing to examine the experiences of UAC and of those that work with them.
Go Raibh Maith Agaibh!

Questions?

Workshop tomorrow will provide an opportunity to discuss this presentation in more detail and to discuss some case examples, drawing on the knowledge and experience of attendees.


References

References


References


Refugee Children in Wales: Coping and Adaptation in the Face of Adversity

Authors Hewett