Unaccompanied young females and social workers: meaning-making in the practice space

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Abstract

This article considers the role and importance of the intersubjective practice space created between social workers and unaccompanied young females (UYFs) – girls and young women under 18 years of age, who arrive in a country not in the care of a parent or guardian, and claim asylum in their own right. The voices of UYFs are under-represented in the literature and there is very little research which considers social work with this marginalised group. Through a study of how UYFs and practitioners in England experienced and constructed each other during their everyday practice encounters, we discuss the potential of the practice space for creating mutual understandings and enabling positive changes. Analysis revealed that their subjective and affective experience of their encounters and of each other, both as individual humans and as representations of particular categories (asylum-seeker/looked-after child and professional helper/agent of the state), influenced how they engaged, communicated, co-constructed understandings of each other, and viewed the process and outcomes of the social work contact. We argue for the importance of practice encounter spaces, their distinctiveness from what is written in policy and law, and their potential as a site for creativity and change.

Keywords: asylum-seekers; children and adolescents; female unaccompanied minors; gender; migration; relationship-based practice

Introduction

Within the context of a 'global humanitarian refugee and migrant crisis' (Oxfam, 2019), there has recently been increasing recognition of the plight of 'unaccompanied minors' – those under the age of eighteen, not in the care of a parent or other guardian, and who claim asylum in their own right. Numbers are significant; in 2018, around 20,000 unaccompanied children arrived in Europe (Eurostat, 2019), and nearly 54,000 were identified at the US/Mexico border. National responses differ but social workers are commonly involved in providing information and guidance at reception points, and facilitating access to supporting services

(UNICEF, 2019). In the UK, for example, where the research discussed in this paper was conducted, unaccompanied minors become 'looked after' within the state care system, and legally entitled to be treated as '*children first, migrants second*' (Ang 2019 p 118). Social workers, therefore, have a key role to play in their care, support and protection.

A growing body of research has examined aspects of the social work response across regions such as Europe (Allsopp and Chase, 2017), South Asia and Africa (Nikku, 2013), and within countries such as Jordan (Suleiman and Hutchinson, 2018), Sweden (Eastmond and Ascher, 2011), Greece (Buchanan and Kallinikaki, 2018), and Mexico and the US (Bruzzzone and Gonzalez-Araiza, 2019). A key theme that emerges is the challenge practitioners face in working in an empowering manner as 'champions' for unaccompanied children (Drammeh, 2019) within processes such as age assessment, claiming asylum, the provision of care, and family reunification. There are examples of practitioners working to meet the needs of young migrants through reflective acts of care, advocacy and solidarity (Boyles *et al.*, 2019; Larkin 2015), but these sit alongside continuing examples of young people's exclusion (McLaughlin, 2018). So how do practitioners balance a human rights ethos, which should promote young people's agency and rights, when they are arguably contributing to a system of surveillance and control (Chase, 2010)? An enhanced understanding is needed of the affective and subjective relationships formed between unaccompanied minors and their social workers within such structures. This is particularly so in respect of practice with girls and young women whose voices are under-represented in the literature (Asaf, 2017) and who frequently form a minority of unaccompanied young people within host nations. In the UK, 319 of UK asylum applications in 2018 were from females compared to 2,544 from males (Home Office 2019). Practice knowledge has therefore largely developed around the experiences of unaccompanied young men. Gender may impact at all stages, for example Home Office figures show a trend toward fewer grant refusals for female unaccompanied asylum seekers, but a trend towards higher refusal rates for males (Home Office 2019).

This paper seeks to address this gap in understanding by considering some of the ways in which social workers and unaccompanied young females (UYFs) in England experienced and perceived the other in their practice encounters. Through analysis of narrative and creative interviews, we explore both how social

workers seemed to bestow identities on UYFs, placing them in hierarchies of belonging (Back *et al.*, 2012), and the ways in which UYFs worked relationally to resist or modify these identities. We identify the importance of practice spaces which enable UYFs to be seen through their own eyes, rather than through a fixed lens that they cannot influence but which may profoundly shape the support they receive.

The hegemonic context for practice encounters between social workers and unaccompanied young females

Constructions of individuals arriving in a country without a documented right to live and work could hardly have become more reductive and polarised in recent years, with characterisations including ‘charitable subjects’, ‘bogus’ claimants and even ‘vermin’ (Danewid, 2017). Highly charged political, social and moral debates abound (Pew Research Centre, 2018; Sigona, 2018) with public attitudes often influenced by rhetoric and stereotypes, and discourses of the ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ refugee widely discernible (Hynie, 2018). Those seeking asylum may be recognised as meriting support, but there are pervasive discourses about risks of terrorism, lack of integration and/or the negative impact on public services (Ipsos Mori, 2016).

Public sympathy is more readily garnered at the visible suffering of minors, particularly younger children who are frequently constructed as vulnerable and ‘blameless’. Yet the common trope of innocence as a prerequisite for ‘deserving’ status is deeply problematic (Slovic *et al.*, 2017). It disregards children’s *right to* asylum, and does not recognise the agency, determination and resilience they have demonstrated in their journey to the host country (McLaughlin, 2018). Sympathy does not necessarily translate into sustained shifts in public attitudes or more permissive social policies (Chenot, 2011). The UK ‘Dubs Scheme’, which sought to bring 3000 unaccompanied minors from the Calais camps, achieved less than one-tenth of its aspiration and the assessment process was found to be ‘unfair and unlawful’ by the UK Appeal Court (Safe Passage, 2018). An insidious counter-narrative persists that those who look more independent and competent are not children at all, but adults lying about their age (McLaughlin, 2018).

Intersectional understandings are essential as forced migration can be affected by factors such as class and ethnicity (Urbańska, 2016), religion (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh, 2010), disability (Crock *et al.*, 2012), and sexual identity (Fournier *et al.*, 2018). However, being, or being identified as, a young female is a variable with a potentially distinct impact (Palmary *et al.*, 2010; Sirriyeh, 2013). Gendered cultural expectations, lack of educational opportunities and lowered social status can place UYFs in a particular position of dependency, leaving them even more vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence (Forced Migration Research Network, 2017). Sexual exploitation is found all along the migration journey, including so-called 'transactional' or 'survival sex' to acquire safe passage (Freedman, 2016). Young females are the group mostly likely to be trafficked in host countries, for various forms of exploitation (Bokhari and Kelly, 2012; Miller-Perrin and Wurtele, 2017) and brokered marriages (Hume and Sidun, 2017). Women and girls may be stigmatised and marginalised by adults in positions of authority following sexual violence, exploitation and sex work; this can exclude them from accessing safe and dignified reception conditions, placing them at even greater risk (Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2018). Yet the literature provides little evidence that practitioners are considering how constructions of age and gender may influence their practice with UYFs.

Whilst the recognition of UYFs' gendered oppression and victimisation is important in developing female-centred services, it has a downside: girls and women may be pervasively constructed as "*passive, dependent, vulnerable victims in need of protection*" (Oswin 2001, p.348). The 'situated agency' they deploy to negotiate fear, risk and safety in migration is not always recognised (Palmary *et al.*, 2010). Such thin readings of their lives can diminish the development of UYFs' narratives of strength and, paradoxically, increase their risk of stigma, oppression and exploitation if they do not accept the categorisations of innocence, oppression or vulnerability imposed on them (Hume and Sidun, 2017). It may threaten their asylum claim, too, if professionals question their story because they do not look or act the part (McLaughlin, 2018).

Social workers' professional values and codes of ethics charge them to respect human rights and to promote social justice (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018), but it would be surprising if they

were entirely immune to this complex, problematic hegemony (Moore, 2013). Professionals are relatively rich in economic, symbolic, and cultural capital, even if they have their own histories of refugee-status or inequality; intersubjective power relations which reproduce social norms, discourses and positions are consequently likely to feature strongly in their interactions with unaccompanied minors (Houston, 2015). Social constructions are relational – we frame ourselves in the process of constructing others (Danewid, 2017) – so when social workers position unaccompanied youth primarily in terms of dependency and relative worthiness, this legitimises their own power-position as ‘helper’ or ‘gatekeeper’ (McLaughlin, 2018). How might this influence social workers’ meaning-making when seeking to make sense of the complex and varied experiences of unaccompanied minors? Might practitioners struggle to see, engage and communicate with UYFs on their own terms, when hostility towards asylum seekers is the pervasive field of every encounter and setting (Moore, 2013)?

The picture is muddy, too, from the UYF’s perspective. Unaccompanied minors may have little or no conception of the social work role (Kohli, 2007), and can find themselves having to rapidly appraise social workers’ purpose, choosing whether and how to engage with them, at a time of great personal change and/or trauma as they enter a new country. The stage is thus set for a complex intersubjective encounter.

Methodology

This paper considers some of the data and findings from a ‘practice-near’ (Froggett and Briggs, 2012) qualitative study which sought to shed light on some of the dynamics which occur when UYFs and social workers meet in professional situations, such as border control processes, care placement finding, and keywork support (Drammeh, 2019). The study took a narrative, psychosocial and feminist lens (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012) to data collection and analysis. Data were gathered through unstructured, creative interviews with eight research participants – five social workers (female apart from Chris who was male) and three UYFs – within local authorities in the south of England over a twelve-month period between 2017 and 2018. Purposive sampling was initially used to recruit individuals with the relevant experiences and knowledge, and snowball sampling was used to recruit further participants (Bryman, 2012). Individuals were drawn from two groups. The first comprised girls and young women aged between 14 and 21 at the

time of interview, who had come to the UK as minors more than six months ago, and who had experienced social work involvement. Initial contacts were made through social workers, residential workers and carers, who gave UYFs a brief introduction to the project and provided the information sheet. The second group encompassed social workers who had direct practice experience with UYFs, either through conducting initial assessments at borders or supporting their subsequent placements. They were approached through local authority gatekeepers. All participants were interviewed at least once, with one young woman interviewed twice.

The data discussed in this paper were collected through individual 'creative interviews' (Mannay, 2016), where the researcher started with a single open question, rather than bringing a pre-existing set of questions, and then provided a space for the participant to engage in free drawing while they talked, should they so wish. The opening question for social workers was, *'Can you tell me about a young woman you have worked with?'*. UYFs were asked to describe the first time they met a social worker in the UK. The intention was that such an open space would facilitate interviewees to provide metaphor-rich, thick descriptions in their own voices about themes which were significant to them, rather than dialogue being driven by the interviewer (O'Kane, 2008). We were particularly concerned to offer the girls and young women as much control as possible to tell the story they wanted, as unaccompanied young people are often silenced by not only their experiences of forced migration, but of a hostile asylum-seeking process in the host country (Chase, 2010; Kohli, 2007). Visual methods have been found to work well with participants who do not share a language with the researcher, or where articulating experience may be difficult, perhaps as a result of trauma (Mannay, 2016; O'Kane, 2008). It was hoped, too, that the free drawing method might disrupt any rote or normative discourses by social workers which can prevent them from reflecting on the messy complexity of social work practice, such as attempts to present themselves as solely having the best intentions or 'doing the best we can' (Masocha, 2013).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, with repetitions, pauses, intonations and emotional expressions such as sighs and laughter noted in the text, in conjunction with any images drawn at the time, to help re-create the affectual climate of the interviews and surface unspoken material (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012).

In data excerpts, participants' emphasis is denoted by underlined words. Analysis of these multi-dimensional texts was guided by the feminist model of Voice-Centred Relational analysis which involves analysing the data through repeated readings, each with a particular focus: for plot and researcher's responses to the narrative; for the Voice of the 'I'; for relationships; and for cultural and social contexts (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). The participants' accompanying images were not viewed as holding any stable 'objective' meaning but rather as heuristic amplifiers of affect, inter-subjectivity and meaning-making. Consequently, they were read as positioned interpretations rather than as an external 'truth' (Wood and Kidman, 2013).

Ethical clearance was given by the University of Sussex and through the Research Governance processes of the local authorities involved. Confidentiality and anonymity are particular issues for girls and women who have been trafficked or who are fleeing persecution and for whom identification may pose a risk (Pearce, 2011). So, not only are all participants and local authorities anonymised in this paper, but very limited information is provided about locations and individual characteristics, histories, circumstances, ethnicity, and so on, to reduce any likelihood of unintended recognition of either social workers or UYFs. Recording of interviews may be uncomfortable for young people who may already feel under surveillance (Chase, 2010), so particular care was taken to ensure they gave fully informed consent for the audio recording. It was made clear that the research would not impact on any outstanding asylum claims nor the services they were receiving from the local authority. Interpreters were made available to all the UYFs, for both the consent process and the interviews, funded by their local authority. All the UYFs had a key professional involved with them who could offer support following the interview, if needed.

Limitations

The number of participants is small, particularly in the case of the UYFs. Whilst this allowed for a richer analysis of the data, and the voices of the participants to be foregrounded through thick description, a larger sample might have meant differing perspectives emerged. No claims for representativeness can be made. However, we contend that the depth analysis and theorisation, with reference to contingent research with social workers and young unaccompanied people separately, mean that a degree of analytic

generalization (Yin, 2012) to wider social work practice with UYF is merited. The UYFs interviewed were approached through trusted adults, so it is likely that the data captured participants with relatively positive relationships with professionals. UYFs without any trusting connections or on the boundary of going missing, were perhaps less likely to be engaged. The research was conducted with UYFs who were speaking English as a second language, and one interview involved an interpreter, so there is an increased chance of miscommunication of certain words or phrases. Some cultural cues or communications may also have been missed. The practitioners who took part had worked in specialist services at some stage in their career. The data therefore did not capture practitioners who may be less committed to the social work role with unaccompanied young people or who may question whether social work has a role at all.

Findings: Meaning Making in the Practice Space

All participants in this study characterised face-to-face practice encounters as the key sphere where their understandings of each other emerged and which shaped the role that the practitioners played in UYF's lives. The UYFs had sought asylum in the UK for differing reasons, but they all brought individual aspirations, fears and hopes for their present and future lives:

I want a better life, to be safe, to protect myself, so that's why I choose to live in the UK...Education I found is very important because a lot of women or young lady in my country, they're not allowed to complete their education...I wear a hijab or not so it is my choice. In my country I do not have that freedom... Here I be like, if I'm 15 or 16 I'm underage ... no one can force me to marry...I can have a better future, if I have a bad past experience...I have a voice. (Grace, UYF)

The UYFs initially had little concept of social work as it is practised in England, but they recognised that social workers held a power they wanted to access - not only to find safety and have their everyday needs met but to achieve their goals. Practice encounters were framed by UYFs as their main opportunity to influence the social worker's actions and perspectives, and they wanted practitioners to keep pace with their changing aspirations as they adjusted to life in the UK. For social workers the practice encounter was both a chance to engage and an opportunity to gather the information they needed to provide an appropriate intervention.

Yet engaging and mobilising each other in this way was not straightforward. The social workers' understanding of unaccompanied minors had developed largely through work with young men, so there

was a sense of novelty and unknowingness about UYFs, and a conception of them as more vulnerable to forms of exploitation on difficult migration journeys:

They're quite a rarity especially when I worked in [other county] and we picked them up from [a motorway service station], so it was only those that were robust enough to deal with the back of a lorry journey, which rules out a huge amount of girls, probably for the parental concerns as much as their own but, you know, they were just rare. (Alice, Practitioner)

The richest descriptions of UYFs came from practitioners who had worked with an UYF over a period of time, spending time with her in different spaces. Most of the practice encounters considered in this research took place in the young women's living spaces, often framed by notions of the 'social work' visit – a statutory requirement to 'see' young people in their 'placements'. In the early encounters, practitioners could feel pressure to gather information quickly, to inform their assessment and guide their actions. Task-centred processes often dominated here, particularly after arrival when support services were being set up. Although practical support was appreciated, this was insufficient for the young women and they wanted practitioners to also engage with their emotional trajectories. Telling the stories of their past could be part of a process of moving forward for UYFs, a staging post in the process of change, but it was emotionally painful and they feared not being believed when sufficient trust had not been established:

It's very hard, it's really hard, like when just come and you don't know anyone and that time. Do I have to tell them or no? It's really hard because of I trust. (Salam, UYF)

The multiple meanings attached to practice encounters could create tensions for practitioners, who were moving between wanting to utilise the protective power within their social work role and resisting the more authoritarian elements this could involve. One practitioner described vacillating between feeling '*the most important thing is to keep that young person safe and for them to feel safe... before we attack them with loads of things... give their finger prints or their DNA or their photos taken, their age assessments done*' and at the next recognising, '*hang on a minute, you're employed by this, this is your job*'. Yet there were examples of encounters that had 'held' young women even in such situations. It was here that embodied communication was shown to be potentially significant, as in Grace's account of meeting practitioners at the port:

They just make me to calm down and they talk to me and they touch my hand and they start make me to feel comfortable and not cry and 'I'm here, alright' they try to say to me 'you're all right here' and they try by different way. I didn't understand English, they can't talk my language but still they try to

make me to feel better and they make, like they talk to me and they say they are listening. 'You all right here, no one can do anything to you and we will be with you' and they try. They try until the interpreter come and then they explain to me that I'm all right here... they be with me all that time. They very nice. They bring for me free chocolate and they, I'm not well and I'm cold. They try to call doctors and they ask me if I need doctor or anything. They bring for me clothes and they try to find out where I'm going to stay. (Grace, UYF)

Relationships could be created in the practice space which were both sustaining and transformative for the UYFs. Grace described her social worker as providing a stable period of support and care which enabled her to develop, visualising this as a 'sheltering tree' (see Image 1):

She is bigger tree because she always look after me... She protect me, so always I know I'm safe with my social worker... She help me to grow in the right way so one day I can be like a big tree... She know Grace one day she wanna be a doctor. She know my plan. (Grace, UYF)

Image 1: Grace's tree

Salam spoke of her relationship with her social worker in highly emotive terms, drawing her experience as a series of hearts which mended and grew larger over time:

First time when I came my heart was broke, broke heart in half... With my social worker I feel like, I just draw half-way, they gave me hope... In my life trusting is hard to me, so the way how they trust me, the way how they treat me, they make me like to have a big heart, because they give me value... Now I have a big heart and I have hope... I have aim... For my social workers... this is just for them. (Salam, UYF)

However, practice encounters, or the lack of them, could also be a source of frustration and miscommunication. Mia described the inaction and disengagement of one social worker, Monifa, as a lack of care:

She don't follow your story... she come late... she's not organised... she not very – heartfelt... she don't hearing my problem. (Mia, UYF)

Mia contrasted this strongly with her previous social worker, Rosa, by whom she felt believed, helped and understood. Practitioners were never interchangeable for young women, although the extent to which this was recognised within the organisations was questioned:

My manager early on she goes, 'Alice, social workers should be like cogs in wheel, you should be able to put one in and pull one out'...I thought, no, they are relations.... they are human relations and you can't actually just suddenly slip someone else in. (Alice, Practitioner)

Feeling believed, trusted and understood as unique individuals required consistent engagement over time, but the relational boundaries remained fluid and contested. Rather than occupying static positions, belief and trust emerged as shifting embodied responses which could be felt, and then resisted and/or adopted, in the moment. Where UYFs had experienced abuse by males, trusting male professionals could be difficult and this needed to be considered by agencies when allocating a social worker. For some practitioners, the highly contested discourses about migration created additional difficulties in feeling trust and belief. Social worker Susan was troubled with feelings of doubt about one UYF's story of crossing the Mediterranean. Her drawing (see Image 2) contained a large question mark:

Is she who she says she is?... Is she? I think about those images that I've seen on the news with the overcrowded boats... I'm going to be absolutely honest, there's a small part of me that's kind of put a question mark there... I was expecting a lot more almost traumatised, shell-shocked young people... I wasn't expecting them to be as assertive. (Susan, Practitioner)

Image 2: Susan's Drawing

Alice spoke similarly of feeling troubled that one UYF did not behave as expected and might be '*playing the system*':

I guess I wondered whether she was setting up a scene for my benefit... What would I want her to be, in order to look like a 'worthy asylum seeker'? If I take what the Daily Mail would consider the worst case scenario, that this is a rich girl... she's told me she's rich... who's come over here to study and maybe her [parent isn't missing]. (Alice, Practitioner)

Both practitioners were influenced by wider social constructions of refugee children, and found the agency and assertiveness they encountered at odds with the vulnerability and passivity they expected. Both, however, were able to reflect on this, working to open out their ways of thinking and feeling:

I've been on a really sort of moral journey with this whole thing as well... Why am I expecting something different because they're a refugee? (Susan, Practitioner)

The intersecting identities of UYF and practitioner were also a factor in these encounters, and there was evidence of a gendered dimension to the development of trust:

she's been probably the only one that's actually told me about their journey and their story to get here. I've haven't had that conversation with the rest of the young men. I haven't got that relationship (Susan, female practitioner)

'I'm a woman and she a woman, she can understand me more.. I think so' (Grace, UYF)

'if women have experienced..violence at the hands of men then I might just represent another male so therefore instantaneously she might be kind of guarded or nervous (Chris, male practitioner)

Similarly, a shared experience of migration could be a point of connection with some UYFs but a barrier with other young people:

I think for me it was easier ... to kind of become connected to me because of the fact I speak with an accent so they immediately know that I'm not English...that I'm not from this country ...some of the young persons I worked with were from [countries of origin]...so it was very difficult..for them to feel safe and OK talking to me...because of the country that I come from" (Eva, practitioner)

All the participants acknowledged the temporary nature of the social work relationship, but the UYFs wanted relationship endings to be linked to their individual needs, rather than calendar age. The current legal/policy framework makes this difficult to achieve, and the precarity that comes with turning 18 as an unaccompanied young person adds further complexity. Salam and Grace saw their refugee status as essential in their ability to forge new lives in the UK; it formed the roots of Grace's growing tree in her drawing. Yet refugee status did not simply equate to feelings of security. Salam was planning to apply for UK citizenship but was frustrated and unsettled by opaque systems, precarious housing and limited finances. Looking ahead she could not identify any adult who could offer the practical and emotional support she received from her social worker at the time of interview, support she knew would end when she was 21.

The data were saturated with the feelings provoked and involved in this relational direct work. Yet all of the practitioners struggled to identify consistent spaces where the complex thoughts and feelings of both themselves and the UYFs, and the implications for their work, could be safely explored. Overall there was a disjointed picture of peer support, supervision and individual reflection, and no evidence of robust connections with practitioners working in other authorities or internationally. Chris spoke of how practitioners needed consistent containing spaces if they were to adequately support UYFs:

They feel like they're in water and everything's really confusing... I am on the dry land and I see it as having a rope... I can help someone on dry land, even if I'm having to share what pain or experience they have... It is a balance between learning how to be on dry land but not detaching yourself emotionally - so there's no connection... if I'm in the water with them, I'm no good, we'll both go down. (Chris, Practitioner)

Discussion: Practice Encounters as Relational Affective Spaces

Massey (1994; 2005) describes the lived world as a multiplicity of intersecting social, relational micro-spaces, which connect across a series of contested boundaries. Each person's lived experience is unique because they follow individual trajectories through these spaces, and because they occupy different positions within the gender-power relations which construct each space. Social work practice could be

understood as an explicit attempt to create, prevent or support change (Adams *et al.*, 2005), conducted through a series of micro-interventions in UYFs' trajectories. Practice encounters form where the trajectories of UYFs and practitioners meet, each forming a unique social and relational space. Wetherell (2012) argues that we come to understand each other, within such situated spaces, through forms of joint '*affective-discursive practices*', located in '*actual bodies... negotiating, making decisions, evaluating, communicating, inferring and relating*' (p.159). Our data suggests that the interplay of relational power-relations and affective practices were shaping the (mis)understandings that emerged between UYFs and their social workers in the practice encounter.

Practitioners' ways of understanding fundamentally shaped their decisions, plans and actions in this study, but the UYFs were not passive recipients of social work intervention. Instead they were working actively to engage practitioners, to influence workers' appreciation of them as agentic individuals, to get their emotional needs met, and to achieve their aspirational goals. Having spent their early lives in spaces where being young and female was constructed in particular ways, the UYFs in this study were now occupying spaces where their bodies could be seen differently and where their notions of what was possible as a young woman were shifting. A UYF does not present herself as a *fait accompli* to a practitioner who then begins to 'understand' her. Instead, through a series of much more situated and relational encounters, at borders, in communities and living spaces, (mis)understandings and (mis)constructions are continually being formed and re-formed. Although both sets of participants in this study had aspirations, and ideas about where their own trajectories could lead, the spatial power-dynamics, and the affective understandings which emerged, could facilitate or undermine this.

Understanding within these spaces was sometimes framed as information, a biographical account or collection of 'facts' which could be written down and passed on to others – a model favoured in neoliberal models of knowledge (Froggett, 2002). When biographical information about a UYF was absent, some practitioners found this anxiety-provoking and could fall back onto fixed notions of the 'refugee child' or the unknowable 'other' (Ahmed, 2000). Being 'understood' could also be an embodied experience, a felt connection or a sense of being believed. When these sensed understandings were absent, encounters were

more likely to be described in terms of miscommunication, mistrust and frustration. For the UYFs, making oneself *knowable* involved a difficult process of judging what to say, when and to whom. Social workers could become keepers of their stories, the shared holders of past events – but feelings of shame and fear were sometimes involved and the UYFs wanted control over what information was shared. Although UYFs might have developed trust in individual practitioners, this had not extended to the organisations they represented.

Rather than practice encounters being the site where policy and procedure are simply acted out, the data shows them to be interpretations within unique events, '*a locus of the generation of new trajectories and new configurations*' (Massey, 2005, p.141). They can therefore be spaces of creativity and change, as well as relational spaces which exclude or silence. The UYFs in this study feared being viewed through fixed lenses that they could not influence and which might affect their support and care. They rejected rigid gendered and racialised notions of the 'refugee girl' as unhelpful to professionals understanding their individual experiences. In the current political and social context, where constructions of migrants are polarised and fraught with notions of worthiness, vulnerability and mistrust, it is crucial that practitioners unpick the emergent understandings that develop in their work with UYFs, and that the organisational and professional systems support and enable them to do this. Creating and supporting spaces where affective responses can be explored may help to undermine cultures where disbelief is a dominant discourse and support practitioners to identify and manage their doubt and anxiety, better enabling them to engage with UYFs in ways that acknowledge their agency and complex identities. Without such an engaged connection, there is a danger that categorical thinking may dominate the ways UYFs are constructed. These constructions can include or exclude UYFs from legal entitlements, and the rights aligned with these (e.g. Department for Education, 2017; UN General Assembly, 1989) and so they merit close attention.

Conclusion

This research adds to our knowledge about social work practice with a diverse group of young people who are under-represented in the literature. It raises questions, not just about how UYFs are understood, and who they are trying to be seen as, but about *who it is possible for them to become* in the micro-spaces of

the practice encounter (Larkin 2015). The UYFs in this study made a particular link between consistent physical presence, engagement and a felt understanding, and they described a sense of *not being known* if their social worker was physically or emotionally absent. Having continuity of relationship was therefore vitally important for the UYFs, even when the relationship was problematic, because ruptures could disrupt this process of development for them: when their social worker changed, the experience of the encounters changed. This relational need troubles the bureau-professional organisational discourse (Lymbery, 2012) of practitioners as interchangeable ‘cogs’ in a machine. Instead more attention needs to be paid to the highly inter-subjective nature of the practice encounter space, and its significance in social work with UYFs.

The UYFs all identified gendered power-relations as a significant factor in their experiences as young migrants and as recipients of social work services. By asking questions about the relational dynamics at play, and considering how gendered power-relations may be working in and around the practice encounter, practitioners may be more able to shift fixed constructions and develop more holistic understandings. Connecting with practitioners across organisational and national boundaries could offer additional lenses, with which to strengthen and inform local practice. This may also allow more identification and challenge of exclusionary discourses within the border and local authority spaces, better supporting the aspirational processes of change that these unaccompanied girls and young women are engaged in.

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