Becoming Adult on the Move

Migration Journeys, Encounters and Life Transitions

Edited by
Elaine Chase · Nando Sigona · Dawn Chatty

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Editors

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Elaine Chase, Dawn Chatty, and Nando Sigona

Akram arrived aged 14 in the UK from Afghanistan as an unaccompanied child. How come he finds himself a decade later in a refugee camp in Indonesia, still searching for a place to lay down roots and begin to live his life? Dan left Eritrea in 2006 and arrived without family in the UK. Why has he spent more than ten years couch surfing and living in destitution before finally being granted leave to remain? Adnan arrived unaccompanied as a teenager from Albania. Why did he have to 'disappear' from statutory authorities in the UK and seek his future elsewhere in Europe? *Becoming Adult on the Move* seeks to answer these questions by situating

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the biographical trajectories and aspirations of young people like Akram, Dan and Adnan within broader national, regional and global debates, policies, practices and discourses on child and youth migration. In doing so it unsettles ideas about singular and disconnected child migration and resituates these often-perceived solitary migratory projects within their wider cultural, social, political, economic and historical frames.

Over the past decade or so there has been a growing appreciation of the specific dimensions of child and youth migration and mobilities in ways which go beyond seeing children and young people as constituent parts of family migration. This has brought with it an increased understanding of the impact of these movements not only on young people's lives and outcomes from their own perspectives (Veale & Donà, 2014) but also on the important roles that they play in shaping family migration dynamics, sustaining livelihood strategies, maintaining transnational ties and identities, as well as the significant contributions to care practices and collective wellbeing (Ni Laoire et al., 2012; Heidbrink, 2020; Chase & Allsopp, 2020; Lems et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2023).

Children and young people are now central to contemporary migration patterns and debates, with those under 18 years constituting an estimated 38%, equivalent to 8 million children and young people, of the global refugee population (IOM, 2020). So-called unaccompanied children accounted for more than 23,000 known individual applications for asylum in Europe in 2021 (Eurostat, 2022), constituting a 72% increase compared to the previous year but far lower than the more than 90,000 applications for asylum in Europe registered by unaccompanied minors at the height of the refugee 'crisis' in 2015. As noted elsewhere (Sigona et al., 2017; Chase & Allsopp, 2020), an unknown number of children and young people arrive in Europe without claiming asylum and so are not counted within these statistics.

The politically constructed figure of the unaccompanied child in Europe is frequently offered time-limited protections for the period of time that they remain a child. These are accorded in keeping with obligations stemming from governments being signatories to international conventions on the rights, protection, wellbeing and best interests of children—including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989); and the UNCRC General Comment No. 6 on the treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside of their country of origin (UNCRC, 2005). As a result, many young people spend their teenage lives in host countries during which time they have access, albeit in uneven

ways, to care, accommodation, healthcare, education and other services and support. Once young people 'age out' of childhood, typically at the chronological age of 18, unless they have secured refugee status in the host country—through proving a well-founded fear of persecution in accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol—they may face forced removal to their country of origin and/or be denied any further access to protections, statutory services and support. For those who are returned, our research has demonstrated how many find life in countries of origin unsustainable and unsafe, and so migrate again in search of safety and security in other places (Chase & Allsopp, 2020). Beyond what has been written about the sorts of drivers of child and youth migration typically articulated in individualised asylum applications, there has been limited focus on where the arrival of young people into the UK and Europe fits within the broader trajectories of young people's lives and the range of factors that may shape migratory decisions and journeys in countries of origin as well as in transit and destination countries.

Becoming Adult on the Move draws on data from a three-year ESRC-funded research project: *Becoming Adult: Conceptions of futures and well-being among migrant young people in the UK* (www.becomingadult.net). The study combined an analysis of key concepts in relation to child and youth movement—'migration'; becoming 'adult': 'wellbeing'[1]; and 'futures'—linked to specific countries of origin (Afghanistan, Albania, Eritrea and Vietnam). These were explored through three interrelated work packages: (i) an analysis of cultural understandings of these concepts through different cultural media in the selected countries of origin; (ii) longitudinal and retrospective biographical narrative interviews with 100 young people, predominantly from 3 of these countries of origin who have experienced very different migratory outcomes; and (iii) an analysis of the policies governing the lives of young people from these countries of origin as they make the transition to 'adulthood' combined with interviews with key stakeholders. A grant linked PhD studentship within the project-enabled comparative research and analysis to take place in Italy with a similar cohort of young people although from a more diverse set of countries of origin. Core findings from the study in relation to wellbeing

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[1] The specific issues of wellbeing in the context of migration and its fundamentally political dimensions are discussed in length in a forthcoming companion volume emerging from the research by Chase and Allsopp: *The Politics of Wellbeing in Transition* (Bristol University Press 2020).

outcomes can be found in the accompanying book, *Youth Migration and the Politics of Wellbeing* (Chase & Allsopp, 2020). The current volume engages with the multiple transitions of young people migrating alone, starting with the cultural repertoires about migration and adulthood to which they are sensitised in their countries of origin from a young age, through to their direct experiences of turning 18 in a different country. These combined insights are framed by an analysis of related policies which bureaucratically and institutionally shape these migratory experiences.

The book captures the diverse trajectories of young people subject to immigration control after becoming 18 which are largely contingent on whether or not they were able to secure legal status. Those who secure indefinite leave to remain have often begun building, in many cases highly successful, lives for themselves in Europe and experience new forms of becoming and belonging. Yet they remain linked and tied in important ways to countries of origin, or to other significant points in their migratory journeys. These cultural and social links and ties are strong and continue to significantly influence their lives, for example, through transnational social obligations, practices of care, religion, custom, food, music, politics or marriage. For the many who fail to secure legal status as they reach the age of majority, the protracted uncertainty of their migratory journeys is very real and, as our research demonstrates, for some young people becomes global in nature and spans many years of insecurity and destitution. Lives on hold furrow profound scars on young people that reverberate in their lives even when their applications for leave to remain are eventually successful.[2]

METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATION

The project was rich in its use of different popular media to work with young people and allow them to narrate their histories and experiences in ways which both aligned with their interests and differentiated the telling of their experiences from the institutionalised processes they were routinely subjected to through asylum and immigration systems. Examples of these approaches and outputs including the use of art, photography, music,

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[2] Chase, E. and Sigona, N. (2016). Lost in the World: the young people shunted around a global asylum system. *The Conversation* is available at: http://theconversation.com/lost-in-the-world-the-young-people-shunted-around-a-global-asylum-system-55991

comedy, theatre and animation can be found on the project website (www.becomingadult.net) and methodological details of research engagement in the accompanying volume *Youth Migration and the Politics of Wellbeing* (Chase & Allsopp, 2020). Working in collaboration with an author, Habib Rezaie, one of the peer researchers on the project, published his own autobiography, *The Doorman of Urozgan* (Rezaie & Pevsner, 2020)

Through these different experimental media, we wanted to present the voices of young people in collective, polyphonic formats and ensure that they reached non-academic audiences. At the same time the longitudinal elements of the study have enabled us to capture continuous movements in real time while enabling young people to reflect on their pasts, presents and futures which tended to fade in and out of focus throughout their narratives. Where we have captured longitudinal data with young people at different points in time, the intention was not to test the veracity or consistency of their stories, but rather to relate the messiness of often-confusing, all-consuming and for some terrifying transitions. Making permissible omissions, contradictions and opportunities to make sense of these through their narratives, the research approach sits in stark contrast to how young people are channelled and churned through asylum bureaucracies where no effort is made to understand the multiple and complex psychological, cultural, linguistic or political reasons why it may not be possible to sustain a coherent narrative over time yet such inconsistencies, no matter how minor, are routinely the basis on which applications for asylum are judged non-credible (Robinson, 1999; Jubany, 2011; Abbas et al., 2021).

In this volume, we place important emphasis on a further research innovation, the use of different cultural and social media to situate young people in countries of origin and transit and to better understand where their life stories, however unique, fit within more collective patterns, understandings, aspirations and expectations of migration. At the same time, we explore how ideas and practices of migration are generated through their generational experiences in the sense of sharing a history at particular points in time (Manheim, 1927). The treatment of notions of 'migration', 'adulthood', 'wellbeing' and 'futures' as sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1969) within a range of cultural media in each country of origin has been particularly generative of important insights into collective dynamics, understandings and codes of practice in young people's migratory trajectories.

Imaginaries, Expectations and Realities

The various chapters in the volume reflect ideas related to the imaginaries of migration for young people; the expectations that are produced by those who migrate, those who stay behind and those who receive or 'host' in countries of destination; and the realities of the lived experiences of migration. The latter are determined by multi-level factors from macro political ideologies, discourses, practices and migration governance regimes to the enactment of meso-level institutional processes and procedures in relation to individual children and young people alongside other diverse micro-level interactions that they have with family, peers and beyond. Making sense of the world and one's own place in it is negotiated across these different scales and geographical and social locations.

A number of core themes emerge as central to these dynamics and are picked up across the chapters. First, the volume centres the range of cultural repertoires and representations of migration in countries of origin, transit and destination and their historic, political and social dimensions. Second, the various chapters engage in different ways with notions of gender, race, ethnicity and the bifurcation of young people into categories of 'good' and 'bad'/'deserving' and 'undeserving' migrant. A third theme relates to time and spatiality in young people's migratory trajectories, unsettling notions of the linearity and time-boundedness of movement.

Social, Political and Popular Media Shaping Migratory Projects

Starting with a collection of insights into how notions of migration, adulthood, wellbeing and futures are conceived of in different cultural scripts within countries of origin, the first four chapters in the volume illustrate how social, political and popular media emerge as central protagonists in migratory experiences. They become a means of transcending borders and take on multiple motivational, emotional, logistical and political roles.

In Afghanistan, YouTube videos, online newspapers, Afghan TV channels, radio and social media platforms such as Facebook and increasingly WhatsApp as well as poetry, rap and hip-hop all become means of sharing experiences and aspirations within the transnational space. As clearly depicted in the chapter by Abbasi and Monsutti, such media help connect the loner, the stranger, the wanderer—and enable reflections on the shared identity or 'ontological status' of *âwâragi* (the life of being a 'wanderer').

In Eritrea, while responsible adulthood is portrayed politically through the imagery and the discourse of the fighter, for young people this represents the fundamental denial of adulthood. Forced and indefinite conscription into the army equates to impeding them from moving forward with the normal benchmarks of adult life such as earning a living, marrying and starting a family. Migration is thus associated with the quest for adulthood and '*netsanet*' (the Tigrinya word for freedom) and for many young Eritreans is seen as the only way of simultaneously exercising autonomy, fulfilling responsibilities for collective care and support of family behind in Eritrea and, in some cases, pursuing political activism from their positions of exile. Against the cultural and political censorship within Eritrea, artists find their political voices outside of the country through the use of music, poetry, script writing and media representations which enable them to articulate in host countries why they have left Eritrea.

For young people from Albania, a long and complex history of migration across generations provides the backdrop to young people's contemporary migration. Factors known to instigate or determine migratory decisions and experiences are evident in a range of contemporary cultural media including poetry, blogs, YouTube videos, magazine articles and popular films selected because of their thematic treatment of youth migration from Albania. These factors mirror findings from empirical data in the *Becoming Adult* study as well as subsequent research (see the LOHST project), underscoring the importance of family ruptures, blood feuds, trafficking and crime as reasons why young people cannot find safety in Albania and so look to find such safety and security through seeking asylum in the UK and Italy.

In Vietnam, online and social media are increasingly important in shaping and forming views and decisions about migration, how to migrate successfully and when it is an appropriate time to return. Such media have been shown in other research to provide vital sources of support and information for Vietnamese migrants who may be working illegally in other contexts (Le Duc, 2016; Anh Hoang, 2016). The media illustrate how common depictions of young Vietnamese as 'child slaves' forced to work in cannabis farms may sit at odds with how young people themselves articulate through social media what they see as the potential value of such work for their own autonomy and agency. Often carrying the heavy expectations of family in Vietnam, the representations through these media illustrate the role of shame when migratory projects do not go to plan and the lengths that young people go to in order to 'save face' and honour

through the migratory decisions that they make. There are clear emerging connections, however, between treatment of young people subject to immigration control in the UK and their increased vulnerability to different forms of exploitation by criminal gangs (Beddoe, 2021)

In distinct ways, the contributions to the book illuminate the complex, dynamic and interacting political, social, economic, cultural as well as historical dimensions of young people's migration, forcing us out of disciplinary and policy silos and encouraging us to unsettle and problematise what we think we know and understand. As such the volume seeks to transcend individualised accounts of migration and consider the sorts of collective factors which continue to shape ideas about migration as young people seek to establish a place for themselves in the world. A core aim of this work is to re-situate the migration of children and young people into Europe within a global framework of analysis—illustrating how, in Bozzini and Tecle's words, 'the local becomes global'—what happens on the streets of Damascus, Kabul, Hanoi or Asmara or the provincial towns of Northern Albania, has its ramifications in any major city in Europe. It picks up the mantel of other scholarship in order to problematise the language and assignations associated with this group of young people, enable a better understanding of the diversity of their migration experiences and situate them within their broader social, political and historical contexts (Heidbrink, 2020). In essence, young people who arrive 'on their own'; 'unaccompanied' or 'separated'—which are typically terms ascribed to them—actually experience migration in ways which debunk these categorical labels. Whether they meet others in countries of origin, form new alliances and friendships along the way or develop new friendships as they navigate how best to journey through Calais, Libya or the Mediterranean Sea, most young people are anything but 'unaccompanied'. And whilst they may not have the physical support of parents or family as they move, they sustain relationships by phone, online and through global social networks in ways which are complex and important (Lems et al., 2020). At the same time, the bureaucratic treatment of the 'unaccompanied' or 'separated' child often severs and undermines these ties and obfuscates their connectivity and agency.

Gender, Race and the 'Good' Migrant

The contributions to the book also reveal some of the important gendered dynamics of migration, illustrating the different and at times contesting aspirations, experiences and outcomes which shape identities of young men and women on the move. The liberatory aspects of migration for Afghan young women, for example, emerge through the chapter by Abbasi and Monsutti. They discuss how social media in contexts of migration create spaces of both connection with like-minded people and opportunities to be and perform 'other', particularly important for young women migrating unaccompanied by family. Often ostracised as lone and single in countries of transit and destination by Afghan communities and diaspora, young women find space through these media to suggest other ways of living their lives, questioning patriarchy and offering new opportunities to other Afghan young women who are part of the diaspora in countries such as Iran. As such migration opens up different social mobilities and expressions of self and social media provide the channels to capture and transmit other possible identities to others. For young men, on the other hand, social media generates pressures to fulfil and globally transmit the trope of the successful migrant, whether or not the reality conjured through such media is authentic. The chapter on attitudes and practices of marriage among young Afghans in the diaspora by Ouzra Karimi, an early career UK-based scholar from Afghanistan, adds unique and new empirical insights into a major dimension of adulthood related to forging intimacies and marriage outside of Afghanistan. It suggests very distinct outlooks on marriage for young men and women within the Afghan diaspora and highlights the importance of further exploration of these vitally important yet under-researched dimensions of the transition to adulthood within migratory contexts.[3]

The more detailed migratory trajectories of Akram, Dan and Adnan capture the day-to-day realities for young men, reflecting the predominantly male cohort in the *Becoming Adult* study and by large the profile of unaccompanied children seeking asylum reaching the EU and UK. Nonetheless, they provide important illustrations of how particular masculinities are valued and aspired to across diverse migratory spaces,

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[3] The chapter was written after the completion of the *Becoming Adult* study and draws on Ouzra Karimi's MA dissertation at the University of Birmingham under the supervision of Nando Sigona.

how these can sometimes be conflicting and confusing and how young men seek to navigate these spaces within their multiple identities as sons, fathers, husbands, lovers, siblings and friends.

From the insights provided by the chapter by Barber and Nguyen, young people's migratory experiences are represented through cultural media as being gendered in multiple and complex ways. Cultural media present distinct vulnerabilities for young migrant women related to sexual violence and abuse. While single motherhood assumes particular qualities and expectations for young women, seemingly narrowing their future prospects of eventual return to Vietnam, parenthood for men and women may become a strategy through which to legitimise legal status. At the same time, young men and women are channelled through diverse pathways within the labour market, subject to different forms of exploitation as well as arguably presented with different opportunities. The chapter on Albania by Allsopp, Lala and Mai suggests similarly important gendered dynamics shaping migratory decisions and experiences of young men and women and how particular gendered migratory identities are both historicised and embedded in contemporary portrayals of youth migration from Albania.

Young people from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Albania experienced fundamentally different pathways through the asylum and immigration system in the UK and, in turn, these different pathways determined distinct wellbeing outcomes and possibilities. Albanian young people are most likely to be refused a right to remain in the UK; while a large proportion of young people from Afghanistan in the *Becoming Adult* study were either returned to Afghanistan or disengaged from statutory services to avoid deportation. Young people from Eritrea were most likely to have their claims to asylum accepted and, in most cases, secured indefinite leave to remain.

Of the thirty young people from Afghanistan included in the study, eight young people had been deported to Afghanistan (and of these seven had re-migrated); the remaining young person remains at the time of writing in Afghanistan, travelling the country in search of work and still dependent for survival on networks of support in the UK. Three other young people from Afghanistan had 'disappeared' (from social services, police and immigration control) in order to avoid forced removal; three were appeal rights exhausted and two were waiting for the outcome of their asylum appeal; five were waiting for an outcome of their application for further leave to remain; twelve had indefinite leave to remain (two of

whom had previously been refused) and one person had UK citizenship (Chase & Sigona, 2017).

A number of young people had spent up to ten years of their lives on migratory pathways, seeking out secure legal status and a place to call 'home'. This had important impacts on their health and wellbeing and meant that futures are frequently put on hold indefinitely. These ongoing migratory journeys involved return to Afghanistan or purposeful disengagement from statutory services in order to avoid the risk of deportation (fear of which was a highly salient in their narratives). Where it took place, enforced return to Afghanistan was usually followed by re-migration, either back to Europe or elsewhere. These protracted uncertainties in young people's lives are captured by Bashir and Noor. They had initially travelled to the UK aged 15 and 16 respectively in the late 2000s and, after being removed to Afghanistan a few years later, travelled back to Europe. Bashir was in Eastern Europe at the time of the interview, and Noor, instead, had been removed once again to Afghanistan.

> The second time was more difficult, how many borders? You count them … from Afghanistan to Pakistan, from Pakistan to Iran; from Iran to Turkey; from Turkey to Greece; Greece to Macedonia; from Macedonia to Serbia; from Serbia to Hungary; from Hungary to Czechoslovakia; from there to Austria; from Austria coming here (Italy), more than like 8, 9, countries. (Bashir, 23, currently in country in Eastern Europe)
>
> I have really, really done journeys you know, a hard time. … It's a bad situation. I have become old inside in my heart you know. (Noor, aged 24, currently in Afghanistan)

Albanians constitute one of the largest groups of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK but are also one of the least likely to be granted refugee status. Of the 18 young people taking part in the study, in line with national figures, the majority had been refused leave to remain beyond the age of 18 or were waiting for the outcome of an appeals process. Only four young people in the study had been granted indefinite leave to remain (usually after an extended appeals process with highly expert legal advice). Aware that people from Albania constitute one of the largest groups of deportees from the UK, young Albanians in the study appeared to avoid removal through disengaging from statutory services as they turned 18 and when their applications were refused or frequently moving to other places of residence (Sigona et al., 2017).

This point of transition was typically a time of high levels of stress and anxiety, Ida, a young woman from Albania captures the dilemmas experienced by many young Albanians in a similar position.

> For me, one of the hardest parts of life is deciding whether to walk away or to try harder. Dealing with the Home Office and all the problems is very stressful for young people who come to the UK. It is so hard when people cannot understand you. But it is even harder when you cannot understand yourself anymore because of the hard life and problems you have to face. These problems affect your mind, your life, your goals, and you don't know what to do. (Ida, from Albania)

Applications for asylum in the UK by Eritreans are typically, although not exclusively, met with recognition of the need for protection by the UK government and currently Eritrea is not a designated 'safe' country and as a result forced return of Eritrean nationals is unlikely. As noted above, at the time of our research, forced return to Afghanistan was common and in the majority of situations resulted in re-migration on the part of young people (Chase & Allsopp, 2020). Since the collapse of the pro-Western Afghan government and the return to power of the Taliban in August 2022, forced returns to Afghanistan have been suspended (Home Office, 2021), however, the conditions of reception in the UK have worsened in line with the prescripts of the Nationality and Borders Act (Home Office, 2022) championed by the former Home Secretary Priti Patel.

The migration trajectories of young people from Albania are complex and decision-makers within asylum systems are less persuaded by experiences of 'blood feuds', family violence and trafficking in asylum applications. As we go to press, the UK Home Office receives an increasing number of applications for asylum from young people from Albania (Home Office, 2022), yet refuses to recognise the specific forms of persecution faced by young people (MiCLu, 2021). In the first two quarters of 2022, 46% of applications for protection from Albanians under the age of 18 were refused at initial decision compared to 10% of child asylum applications as a whole. At the same time, concerns about trafficking of Albanian children and young people for labour and sexual exploitation have increased year on year, with similarly common concerns raised in relation to young people from Vietnam. While research has highlighted how such exploitation can sometimes be oversimplified in immigration and anti-modern slavery debates (O'Connell Davidson 2015), National Crime

Agency statistics suggest that Albanians are the most commonly represented national group in the monitoring of criminal and labour exploitation forms of modern slavery recorded through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).

Emerging research also indicates that young people often find themselves caught between systems of 'protection' in relation to asylum and trafficking which are unconnected and at times opposing. As a result, they may find themselves waiting for the outcome of a referral to the National Referral Mechanism founded on evidence of trafficking which results in a halting of their asylum applications, while a positive recognition within the NRM is no guarantee of being granted protection through the asylum-seeking system (MiCLU, 2021). The siloed approaches to these statutory systems and processes for young people migrating alone, particularly as they make the transition to institutional adulthood at 18 years, means that it is common for them to fall through the often-significant gaps in these distinct protection mechanisms.

The chapter by Tamsin Barber and Hai Nguyen points to some of the important cultural and social norms which may be defining whether and how Vietnamese young people move and the sorts of outcomes they are most likely to experience in their quests for seeking asylum in the UK. The chapters illustrate, therefore, that rather than applications being considered individually purely on the basis of how each one can substantiate a well-founded fear of persecution, there is clear evidence that migratory outcomes in relation to immigration and asylum bureaucracies are patterned in particular ways according to countries of origin.

Young people arriving on their own as children into Europe bring to the fore the power of broader political and media discourses surrounding notions of what constitutes the 'good' and deserving child and how young people not fitting such ideal constructions tend to be met with a culture of disbelief (Crawley, 2007; Bhabba, 2016; Watters, 2014). These issues, for example, created significant media and political furore in the wake of the Dubs amendment in 2016 when the first separated children in Calais were brought to be reunited with family members in England. Media images of young men 'not looking like children' splashed across the pages of the tabloid press sat at odds with idealised and universal tropes of the 'innocent', 'vulnerable' and 'victim' children of war and displacement conjured in the popular imagination. This disconnect created significant media and public backlash, demonstrating the gendered and racialised subjectivities of how childhood is defined as well as the dangers of