

Unaccompanied Child Migrants and Family Relationships

Katie Willis, Sue Clayton and Anna Gupta

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Abstract

The definition of ‘unaccompanied child migrants’ implies that family members have been left behind in their country of origin. In this chapter, we use the case of unaccompanied children who have travelled to Europe to consider the relationships with distant family members, as well as the creation of other forms of family by the migrants themselves, such as with other young asylum seekers, or through foster families arranged by welfare services. The chapter also considers how notions of ‘the family’ and ‘family life’ become mobilised in both national and international law and protocol to either facilitate or police migration. Tensions around these differing readings and outcomes, can be clearly see in, for instance, EU legislation around family reunification (Dublin III regulation), and-claims under the European Human Rights Convention for the right to a private and family life, a convention which has been used by unaccompanied young migrants to challenge forcible removal when they reach the age of 18. While the focus of the chapter is on the unaccompanied young migrants themselves, it also considers the experiences of other family members, such as parents in the country of origin, and foster families.

Introduction

Family members or carers are commonly seen as vital in the protection, socialisation and support of children. Thus, when children migrate internationally without the presence of such individuals, the young people are seen as particularly vulnerable. This has led to the creation of the official category of ‘unaccompanied minor’ (UAM) by national governments and international organisations to facilitate the support for these children (UN CRC General Comment Number 6, Point 7 cited in UNICEF

Innocenti Research Centre, 2006, p.46; Eurostat, 2021). The absence of an adult family member is a key part of the UAM definition; it is what makes those individuals 'unaccompanied'. However, this physical absence does not reflect the ongoing importance of family relationships for individual young people, as well as new forms of family that are created and experienced during the migration journey and through the asylum and welfare system. The construction of being alone may be very different from how the young people feel about themselves having arrived in a new country (Herz and Lalander, 2017). In this chapter, we explore the constructions and experiences of 'family' in relation to UAMs to highlight the importance of using the lens of the family to understand the lives of UAMs, and their search for safety and stability through their physical and institutional journeys.

Families are inherently dynamic due to births, deaths, marriages, divorce, adoption and other routes by which people join or leave a familial unit. Such dynamism would be experienced by individuals through the life course regardless of mobility, but migration can add complexity to the forms of family created and the experiences of family life. For unaccompanied children, their international migration is experienced alongside a move towards adulthood whereby a transition to the legal status of 'adult' is often associated with a sharp break between a receiving state's legal responsibilities to protect children, and the right of states to police their borders. Uncertainty about what may happen when they turn 18 can have a detrimental impact on young people's wellbeing, and affect their ability and willingness to develop caring and supportive relationships (Williams, 2019).

The notions and experience of family may change over time during a young person's journey from their natal family, to a new country and through the asylum system and beyond. For example, Eide et al. (2020) in their discussion on transition in Norway use the notion of 'resettlement' as a form of re-rooting in a new location. This is not just the setting up of a new place of residence, but the dynamism of existing social connections and the evaluation of new ones.

This chapter explores debates around family and UAMs in Europe. In 2020, 13,600 unaccompanied minors made asylum applications within the EU (Eurostat, 2021) and 2,291 applied in the UK (Home Office, 2021). This number is a significant

reduction from the EU-wide figures of 92,000 in 2015 (Eurostat, 2021), but still represents a significant number of vulnerable young people who have arrived in Europe without an adult family member or other responsible adult.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first focuses on the construction of 'the family' in law relating to unaccompanied child migrants, and how laws are implemented through particular regulatory processes. We then move to a discussion of the ongoing nature of transnational ties to family members 'left behind'. This stresses the often continuing emotional ties between child migrant and family members, as well as feelings of responsibility and guilt which are taken on by young people who may have been sent away by family members for their own safety, but at great emotional and often financial cost. The third and fourth sections consider different and novel forms of family or family-like relationships that may emerge as young people move through the asylum process. Key to these in a European context, is the nature of the formal care provision for UAMs. This varies greatly between countries, from a widespread use of foster carers to UAMs being accommodated in immigration-service reception centres. In some contexts, carers and/or young people may see the relationships and environments as 'like family', but there are also significant issues around the provision of emotional care and support for young people within the child welfare systems. Young people may also develop their own social relationships with other young migrants, local people of their own age, members of migrant or religious organisations, and volunteers. These relationships often help young people feel a sense of stability and belonging, although in many cases this is threatened by the pervading sense of uncertainty about being able to stay once they reach legal adulthood. The chapter concludes with a summary of the perspectives on family that emerge when considering unaccompanied child migrants.

Role of family in law

The family, as a concept within law, is seen as a 'natural and fundamental group unit of society' entitled to 'protection by society and the state' (Pobjoy, 2017, p.70). This view of the family is reflected in a number of international treaties. However, what

'family' consists of within law, and what protection the family enjoys, is much less clear. For unaccompanied child migrants, it is separation from adult family members, particularly a parent or parents, that constructs the individual as a vulnerable subject requiring protection (Sirriyeh, 2015).

Within the 1951 Refugee Convention, people (including children) can claim asylum based on imputed identity, such as the political views of family members. Asylum claims can also be based on fears of persecution not for one's own views, but as an indirect route to target other family members (Pobjoy, 2017, pp. 165-66). While the 1951 Refugee Convention does not include the right to family unity, the family is given specific attention in other international agreements. For example, in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) signed in 1989 and now ratified by all UN member states apart from the United States of America, Article 9 states that,

'States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child' (OHCHR, 2021, no page).

Further, Article 10 states that 'applications by a child or his or her parents to enter or leave a State Party for the purpose of family reunification shall be dealt with by States Parties in a positive, humane and expeditious manner' (OHCHR, 2021, no page).

While these two articles appear to suggest that children have a right to family reunification, in reality this does not usually materialise. In particular, there is an asymmetrical approach to the implementation of family reunification, whereby parents can extend protection to children, but not the other way round (Pobjoy, 2017, p.50). This means that children may be able to join parents who have crossed international borders for refuge, but parents (or other family members) usually cannot join children.

Family protection for vulnerable children is part of the European Dublin III regulation (Regulation (EU) No. 604/2013) which was adopted on 23 June 2013 and implemented from 1 January 2014. Under Dublin III, unaccompanied children arriving in any EU country and claiming asylum have the right to be united with family members in another EU state. They can then have their asylum claims assessed in that member state while living with their family member. The regulation makes the distinction between ‘family’, meaning a parent, legal guardian or sibling, and ‘relative’ which includes adult aunts and uncles, as well as grandparents (British Red Cross, 2019). Despite the adoption of Dublin III by EU member states, its operation has not always been straightforward. This can be clearly exemplified by events in ‘the Jungle’, an informal refugee settlement in Calais, northern France, which had nearly 10,000 inhabitants in 2016 (Clayton and Willis, 2019, p.23). An estimated 1,900 unaccompanied children were in the camp in mid-2016, but no child from the camp had been able to travel to the UK under the Dublin III regulation until the UK charity Safe Passage started negotiating with the UK Home Office, and other grassroots groups working in Calais challenged the Home Secretary in the UK courts. Even with the principle established in law, reliance on volunteers and charities to locate, monitor and advocate for these children meant that progress was very slow, with only two or three children a week being able to travel (Clayton and Willis, 2019, p.24). Following the French police clearance of the Jungle camp in October 2016, more than 550 unaccompanied children were expedited by the UK in a more orderly way to join family members in the UK (UNICEF and Save the Children, 2017). It is likely that there were many more who were eligible to travel to the UK under Dublin III, but they were not processed by the Home Office. This reflects both an understandable lack of awareness of this law on the part of the young people, but more importantly, a failure to act according to European agreements on the part of the UK authorities. Following the Brexit transition period, the Dublin III regulation no longer applies to the UK (Gower, 2020). As of January 2022, there has been no agreement about family reunification processes for unaccompanied children who are in the EU but have family members in the UK.

The notion of ‘best interests’ of the child is fundamental to the CRC and being with family members is usually part of these perceived ‘best interests’. However, the opinions of the young persons themselves are often ignored in such decisions,

despite the CRC including an explicit requirement to consider young people's agency. Allsopp and Chase (2019) also argue in an EU context, that notions of 'best interests of the child' are usually based on 'Westernised' concepts of family reunification whereby children will be reunited with a parent or parents in their country of origin. Such assumptions fail to acknowledge the complexities of the migration process, feelings of collective obligation to the family (discussed below) and the potential harms of reunification.

This assumption about family reunification is also expressed through regulations around family tracing, whereby authorities are tasked with seeking to find a young person's family members. In the EU, this is stated in the EU Reception Directive, Article 19(3), which requires member states to try and trace family members of unaccompanied asylum seekers, provided that this is in the best interests of the child. There is also a clear statement that this tracing should not be undertaken if it could lead to harm for the young person or family members (York and Warren, 2019). As with all European directives, interpretation and implementation is decided by individual member states. For instance, in the UK, it is the Home Office which has the duty to trace family members as soon as possible after an unaccompanied child has made an asylum claim (Home Office, 2020, p.13). In Sweden, the responsibility is placed on municipalities (Lundburg and Dahlquist, 2012). Issues around family tracing are fraught with difficulty, not least because of the lack of resources available to conduct such research, particularly in countries where there is ongoing conflict and displacement. Young people may be fearful of the ramifications for their asylum claims or their family's safety if they provide information (York and Warren, 2019).

The importance given to the unit of the family in international law was outlined earlier; at the same time, the family has also been used as a basis for making claims to remain in a country once a young person becomes a legal adult. For example, under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, there is a right to a private and family life. As will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, young people who arrive unaccompanied by adult family members, may develop new family relationships after arrival in a country of destination where they claim asylum. This may be with existing kin, with foster families or with new partners, perhaps including

having children of their own. As young people approaching the age of 18, if they have not been granted leave to remain due to their asylum claim, they may use Article 8 as a reason to stay in the country after they reach legal adulthood. However, this route has not been successful, with judgements including the reasoning that they can maintain their relationship with any children they may have over the phone from another country (Allsopp, 2017). In the UK context, state authorities take the view that some asylum seekers are having children so as to be able to stay in the UK. This example demonstrates the contradictory ways in which 'family' is interpreted and mobilised in migration law: keeping parent(s) and children together is seen as desirable and in the best interests of a child in one context, while in others the creation of a family is interpreted as a strategy to avoid forced removal which would involve the separation of a child from a parent (Griffiths and Morgan, 2017).

Transnational family links

While UAMs are legally defined based on the absence of adult family members, as with all migrants, it is vital to understand their position within transnational family networks of emotional attachment, material obligation and social identity. While immigration and welfare policies usually deal with lone child migrants in an individualistic manner, the reality for these young people may be very different; their success in their new home is not just about their own achievements but encompasses the family sphere. Belloni (2016), draws on her work with Eritrean migrants in Ethiopia, Sudan and Italy, as well as family members in Eritrea to argue that, '[t]he moral, emotional and social ties between migrant and relative in the diaspora are based on implicit rules of ethnic and family membership.' (p.52).

Feelings of love and care for family members left behind are very apparent from numerous studies, with mothers being the particular focus of attention (Allsopp, 2017; Behrendt et al., 2021). However, these emotions are also frequently intertwined with fear about the safety of family members due to the insecurity and violence that the young people may have fled (Hughes, 2019). For example, Thommessen et al. (2015) outline the fears of young migrants in relation to their

families in Afghanistan, while Behrendt et al. (2021) discuss the fears of unaccompanied young people in Belgium. Chase & Statham (2014, p.226) describe the fears of young migrants to the UK, as well as emotions of grief at the death of family members at home or along the journey.

Keeping in touch with family members is often very important for young people's sense of belonging and wellbeing. Drawing on research with service providers working to support unaccompanied young migrants in Scotland, Hopkins and Hill (2010) stress the crucial role of ongoing family connections and also awareness of events happening in the home country. However, this connection is sometimes tempered by logistical issues around international communication, especially if there has been significant displacement due to violence and insecurity. Phone calls and social media, such as Facebook, are of great importance in maintaining contact (Behrendt et al., 2021).

There may also be some reticence on the part of UAMs to divulge ongoing family connections in the country of origin in case this has a negative impact on an asylum claim (see above). In Lundburg and Dahlquist's research with unaccompanied young migrants in Sweden, they highlight how, '[t]heir earlier life, including family life, is restricted to the parts of their life that may allow them to stay in Sweden' (2012, p.73). Young people's narratives about their natal family are shaped by the perceived requirements of the immigration system. This disavowal of ongoing family ties can also add to feelings of guilt among young migrants, contributing to the psychological difficulties they may face in their new home. Based on their research, Lundburg and Dahlquist argue that, '[w]hether or not one has family should not affect the right to apply for asylum or having their asylum grounds tested' (2012, p.74).

Forms and levels of connection with family members vary over time. Limited connections early in the migration journey may reflect logistical challenges in accessing technology, such as having no mobile phone, or having no signal or credit. Family displacement may also mean that young migrants do not know where other family members are or how to contact them. This, combined with worries about the asylum process, may result in significant periods of disconnection from family members. In their longitudinal study in Belgium, Behrendt et al. (2021) highlight how

most of the young people in their study did not have contact with families when they first arrived, but that this increased over time as they moved through the asylum system and were logistically able to reconnect with family members.

For many young migrants, there is a feeling of ‘collective obligation to family’ (Allsopp and Chase, 2019, p. 298) in relation to finances, as family members will have paid for the journey and there is likely to be an expectation (sometimes implicit, rather than expressed overtly) that financial remittances will come from successful migration. There is an assumption that members of the diaspora have greater access to resources than those at home (Belloni, 2016). The inability to provide resources to repay the family back home can lead to feelings of guilt among young migrants as they are not able to meet what are felt to be their socially-sanctioned obligations. Such shame and guilt may result in young people choosing not to contact their family members (Belloni, 2020b). This may be the case even for those young people who have been sent away from their natal families against their will (Allsopp, 2017).

Gulwali Passarlay’s journey from Afghanistan to the UK demonstrates the emotional resonances of decisions to send children away for their own safety. Following the killing of his father and grandfather, 12-year-old Passarlay was sent away from Afghanistan with his brother Hazrat. The family were concerned that their lives would be threatened due to perceived allegiances, as they were caught between loyalties to the Taliban and NATO forces. Passarlay acknowledges the reasons for his exile: ‘My mother sent me away so she didn’t have to bury another person whom she loved’ (Passarlay with Ghouri, 2015, p.350). However, this decision came with significant personal loss: ‘By sending me away she definitely saved her son, but she also lost him’ (p.354).

Such narratives of exile are very common as it is usually family elders who make decisions about the movement of young people. Drawing on her work on Eritreans, Belloni (2020a) provides a counterpoint in critiquing the blanket representations of young migrants’ lack of agency in decisions to migrate. Her ethnographic work in Italy, Ethiopia, Sudan and Eritrea suggests that sometimes decisions are made individually by young people themselves, albeit within the context of wider family

relations. It should be stressed at this point that Belloni's work includes both young people above the age of 18 (and this not included in official definitions of unaccompanied minors), as well as those who crossed international borders before the age of 18.

Rather than fleeing immediate physical danger, many Eritreans move in response to 'protracted crisis' in the country and a future which Belloni describes as a 'wasted life'. All Eritreans are required to complete military service at age 17 but despite this service being of a specified length, in many cases young people are stuck in a form of perpetual servitude, with low pay in remote locations, unable to escape (OHCHR, 2015). Thus young people are confronted with the dilemma of staying at home and having no future, or embarking on a hazardous migration journey. For Belloni, the Eritrean situation demonstrates the intersecting of individual and family aspirations: 'Personal aspirations to access freedom, contribute to family stability and achieve moral recognition are thus intrinsically intertwined with more or less explicit social pressures to achieve a life deemed impossible at home' (2020a, p.349). As well as this perception of a bleak future among many young Eritreans, for some restrictions on religious freedom and the persecution of religious minorities (Amnesty International, 2018; OHCHR, 2015) prompt their departure.

In some cases, as outlined in the previous section on law, it is the family links themselves that have created situations of danger for the young people due to family-based persecution resulting from perceived or actual political activities of family members or family feuds (Allsopp, 2017). In other situations, it is fear of violence from family members, which has driven young people to flee (Allsopp, 2017) and claim asylum, such as in cases of female genital mutilation (FGM) (Home Office, 2020; Middleburg et al., 2016; Mishori et al., 2020; UNHCR, 2013).

Establishment in a new location does not necessarily mean a breaking of existing emotional and material ties with family members, but rather can lead to a new form of transnationality whereby the young person settles into a new life with opportunities that come from stability and security, while keeping in touch with natal family members, and perhaps sending money. Börjesson and Söderquist Forkby (2020, p.480) discusses the case of Zabihullah who arrived in Sweden as an

unaccompanied child. Following the processing of his application and granting of a residence permit, he was able to contact his birth family to say that all was well as he could now pursue an education. This reflected a form of belonging in a new location, as well as ongoing transnational familial belonging. Eide et al. (2020) discuss similar cases in Norway whereby most of the young people in their study kept in touch with families and sent money back, but they also wanted to have a good life in Norway.

Ongoing emotional attachment and obligation also mean that for many young migrants, the ideal outcome would be for their family members to join them in their new home country through a process of family reunification (see Thommessen et al. 2015 on Sweden; Kalverboer et al. 2017 on The Netherlands). However, this is very rarely permitted in immigration law (see earlier discussion of asymmetry in family reunification) (Pobjoy, 2017). In Sweden, family reunification is allowed under the 1951 Refugee Convention, if UAMs have been granted a residence permit, with reunification including parents and any siblings who are under 18 (Lundburg and Dahlquist, 2012). However, Swedish immigration laws were made increasingly restrictive in 2015 in the context of the massive increase in refugee numbers in Europe (Lidén, 2019). Similarly, Lauko and Forsberg (2018) outline the impact of the tightening of immigration law in Finland, whereby parental or sibling reunification with children was increasingly restricted, leaving young people to abandon hopes of permanent reunification and instead focus on desiring frequent visits.

Transnational family networks operate not just between the current country of residence and the country of origin, but also through a wider kinship network. Behrendt et al. (2021) outline the role of other kin in Europe in providing practical and emotional support and advice to unaccompanied young people who arrive in Belgium (see also Jani et al. 2017 on similar forms of cross-border kinship support for unaccompanied children arriving into the USA). The network of family relationships across international boundaries demonstrate the complexity of diaspora links. As Allsopp and Chase state, '[t]he family itself maybe part of a diaspora that does not map neatly onto traditional geographical mappings of the "nation"' (Allsopp and Chase, 2019, p. 305).

Foster families

The child status of UAMs requires them to be given particular support because of their perceived vulnerability. As discussed in the section on law above, the state needs to provide the care, protection and support expected of family members. The nature of this welfare and care provision varies between countries and also depends on the age of the child and in some cases, the stage of the asylum process. A study by the European Union (EU) Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) concluded that younger children should be placed with adult relatives or foster families, whereas older more mature young people could be placed in more residential group care that offers more independence but still with adults responsible for their care (FRA, 2011). In terms of accommodation arrangements, the main forms of provision in the EU are foster care in a private household, a residential home with live-in staff, or semi-independent living with other young people with social services support.

However, at particular times when there are a large number of unaccompanied young migrants arriving in a particular location within a short period of time, there may be insufficient local authority provision. For example, in France, in cities such as Poitiers and Toulouse, the local authority welfare infrastructure has been insufficient to provide accommodation for the numbers of unaccompanied children arriving from 2015 onwards. This has led to informal systems of host families or even squatting as solutions (Gimeno-Monterde and Gutiérrez-Sánchez, 2019). Similarly, in 2018 the four accommodation centres for unaccompanied young people in Brussels were full and hence unable to house the estimated 1,855 unaccompanied 14-17 year olds in the city (Papadogiannakis, 2020). In Kent, in South-East England, the local authority has also highlighted the challenges it has faced in meeting the needs of unaccompanied children that it has a statutory duty to look after. From 2021, there has been an increasing number of UAMs arriving by boat across the English Channel, on lorries travelling through the Channel Tunnel, or on ferries (*The Guardian*, 2021). Many of these young people were held initially in detention facilities, including the Kent Intake Unit (KIU), about which a report by the Chief Inspector of Prisons, concluded that unaccompanied minors placed there ‘experience very poor treatment and conditions’ (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021, p.3).

In the UK and the Republic of Ireland, children under 16 are usually placed with a foster family. Older children are also fostered if they are seen as particularly vulnerable (Gupta, 2019; Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh, 2018). In The Netherlands children under 15 are usually fostered (Rip et al., 2020). The notion of 'family' in 'foster family' can be seen as a way of upholding the perceived value of family-like relationships in caring for, supporting, encouraging and guiding young people. However, as Ala Sirriyeh (2013) argues, drawing on her work on fostering in England, different forms of relationship can exist within foster families. She categorises these as lodger, guest and family-like relationships. Viewing the foster child as a lodger suggests that the focus is on the service provision foster carers are providing for which they receive payment, in this case from a local authority. Guest relationships stress hospitality and respect, but the dynamics suggest that the child is separate from the host family. A 'family-like' relationship suggests something more meaningful and engaging, involving trust and reciprocity. As Wade et al. (2012) discuss in their research on fostering unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people in England, 'In the best of the families that we studied, family structure, relationships, routines and practice were adjusted to incorporate the young person as an active participant, enabling them to help shape family practices in ways that were meaningful to all concerned' (p.5).

Sirriyeh (2013) draws on the work of Morgan (1996) and Finch (2007) to discuss domestic practices that can be seen as ways of 'doing family'. This may include activities such as communal cooking and meals together, and involving the fostered child in family celebrations. Drammeh (2019) draws on the narratives of young people and foster carers she met as a local authority social worker to highlight how dynamics within the home may change over time, reflecting different aspects of Sirriyeh's typology. The development of trust and understanding is not automatic, and is built through small daily interactions which may help a young person feel secure and 'at home'. For Sirriyeh, foster families in her research 'did not seek to replace bonds with birth families, but rather used family practices to enact new creative kinship' (2013, pp.12-13).

In The Netherlands, foster families are also seen to provide a better environment for the care of unaccompanied young people than other forms of residential support. This is partly because of the perceived benefits of the emotional support that comes from such a setting, but also because living with a local family helps develop language skills, an understanding of Dutch culture, and therefore help facilitate integration (Kalverboer et al., 2017). While there is a diversity of experience in fostering situations for young people under 15 in The Netherlands, Rip et al. (2020) found that most young people in their research preferred to live with foster carers than in asylum centres.

As with fostering and adoption more generally, there are debates around whether culturally-similar foster families are more appropriate to provide support to an unaccompanied young person who has experienced significant disruption and trauma. A familiar language, cuisine and/or religious practice may help a child adapt to their new environment, but evidence is very mixed. In The Netherlands, children under 15 are put in foster care, with a preference for a culturally-similar foster family if possible. This can be very positive, especially if there are co-resident children of about the same age (Rip et al., 2020). In Flemish foster families, it is the nature of the relationships that is more important, rather than the similarity of cultural backgrounds. This is also the case in England and Ireland according to Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh (2015), who also warn against essentialising culture. In placing children with foster carers who have the same cultural background, there is a need to be particularly careful about the safety of the birth family if there are links back to the country of origin (Rip et al., 2020). A review of the research on unaccompanied refugee minors and foster care (Van Holen et. al., 2020) found it impossible to conclude from the literature a preference for culturally-matched or cross-cultural placements, and that the individual needs and wishes of the young person should determine the placement.

The foster family environment can be seen as ‘family-like’ not just by the unaccompanied young person, but also by other family members. Fostering a child who has fled violence and insecurity, experienced the difficulties of the migration journey, and arrived in an alien environment, can come with challenges that even the

most experienced foster parents may find difficult to deal with. Additionally, many carers may be unfamiliar with the asylum system and the threat of forced removal after the age of 18 if the young person is not given leave to remain (Drammeh, 2019). All of this can generate significant emotional work and impact on carers, although there has been less research on these elements of the fostering experience (Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh, 2018).

Other forms of support and significant relationships

While the 'foster family' notion has a very clear engagement with the idea of familial relationships, albeit ones that may vary greatly in reality, state-provided welfare support for unaccompanied minors may take on other forms. These again may be discursively constructed as 'family-like' or may involve experiences which young people or others may describe in terms of family relationships, although there is significant diversity.

In the UK, foster families are the usual caring environments for UAMs aged 15 and under, but in other parts of Europe fostering is much rarer. There is, however, some acknowledgement of the different needs of young people, differentiated by age. In Norway, for example, during the asylum process UAMs are looked after in 'care centres' run by child welfare services if under 15 and in immigration authority-run reception centres if 15-18 (Eide et al., 2020).

In Sweden, unaccompanied young people are often accommodated in residential care units with live-in staff (Börjesson and Söderquist Forkby, 2020; Söderquist et al., 2016). The shared living space between the adult employees and the young migrants involves shared responsibility for all those co-habiting. The residential care unit staff use the word 'family' to describe the situation, but as Söderquist et al. (2016) outline, the legal and institutional regulations place boundaries on the nature of this family relationship. For example, staff time is controlled and the flexibility which a parent might have to interact with a child does not exist. In addition, there are clear rules banning the exchange of personal gifts between staff and young people. For the staff, they are seeking to provide care and safety for the young

people, but are not seeking to replace existing family relationships; they 'act and think of themselves as substitutes rather than complements to absent parents and significant others' (Söderquist et al. 2016, p.595). Due to young people's precarious legal position while they navigate the asylum system, residential accommodation may be less like a family home, and more like a space of incarceration as limits are placed on overnight stays elsewhere (Herz and Lalander, 2017).

Guardianship schemes are also part of some formal support for unaccompanied young people, for example in Austria (Raithelhuber, 2021), Belgium (De Graeve, 2015; De Graeve and Bix, 2016, 2017), The Netherlands (Kalverboer et al., 2017), Scotland (Crawley and Kohli, 2013), Sweden (Börjesson and Söderquist Forkby, 2020). Guardianship involves supporting a young person through the asylum system, playing the role of advocate for that young person. The relationship between guardian and young person is officially defined, and may remain distant and formal, but there are examples of such relationships being described and experienced more like 'family' relationships, with some young people participating in the family life of the guardian although they would not be living with them. Drawing on their work in Sweden, Börjesson and Söderquist Forkby (2020, p.481) describe how Ali, one of the young people involved in their study, said that he was 'like a son' to his guardian, and his guardian's family also described him as 'one of the family'. However, as Thommesen et al. (2015) highlight in their study of guardians in the Swedish system, while some provide guidance and give advice when asked, not all those involved in the study were positive about their role.

Similar debates and experiences around guardians' roles have been revealed in studies by De Graeve and Bex (2016, 2017) in Belgium. All unaccompanied minors are provided with a guardian, but that role formally ends when the young person becomes 18. The guardian plays a number of roles in the young person's life, including being a legal representative and being responsible for supporting their social wellbeing and being involved in decisions about their accommodation and education (de Graeve and Bex, 2017). All of these may be seen as replacing what a parent or other adult family member would do, but it is in the sphere of emotional care that there are contrasting viewpoints. Many guardians do not want to be seen as a parent, replacing someone who is not physical present, or may even have died.

However, in some cases young people may see them in that role (De Graeve and Bex, 2016). Guardians may also consider the importance of keeping a 'professional distance' (De Graeve and Bex, 2017, p.84) between the guardian and the young person. This may be because of the concerns about safeguarding, but also because of the potential traumatising impact of a close relationship being ripped apart once the young person becomes 18 and may be forced to leave the country if their asylum or other humanitarian claims are not met. In such cases the guardian may feel that it is in the best interests of the child not to set up a situation of family-like relationships which are likely to be fractured in the near future. As in the Swedish case, some guardians consider that the individual child's need for emotional support in a family-like environment is important and they seek to include the young person in their family's activities, although the young person would not be living with them. In De Graeve and Bex's research (2016, 2017) some of the young people appreciated these invitations, using family terms to describe individuals and seeing themselves as part of the family. In some cases, guardians continued to support a young person after the age of 18. For De Graeve and Bex, the inadequate provision of emotional care reveals a gap in the system: 'The current Belgian care system for unaccompanied minors does not structurally provide the minors with an emotional caregiver, someone who is supposed to have a close and affectionate relationship with the minor (apart from foster parents, yet only a small minority of the unaccompanied minors is placed in foster care)' (2017, p.87).

Stability in terms of relationships in a new location can be incredibly important to young people who have experienced significant physical and social disruption during their migration. As part of formal care systems, young people may be moved to different accommodation at short notice. While this may be seen as in the best interests of the child for physical security, it may involve further dislocation from significant relationships as outlined by Herz and Lalander (2017) in the Swedish context and Behrendt et al. (2021) in Belgium. Kauko and Forsberg (2018) point to similar disruptions in Finland, giving the specific example of a young man separated from his girlfriend and girlfriend's family once he had received his residence permit.

In the UK, the spatial mismatch between the number of unaccompanied young people requiring support and the ability of local authorities to provide the statutory

care required, has led to a 'transfer protocol' whereby young people are relocated from their point of arrival to elsewhere in the country. As Humphris and Sigona (2019) argue, this is driven by budget restrictions, rather than the 'best interests of the child', particularly in a context where funding for children's services has experienced massive cuts as part of austerity measures. Such relocation can be a vital part of the provision of appropriate shelter, healthcare and education, but there can be significant problems if young people are uprooted from the social relationships and familiarity they may have developed during their journey. This also includes a lack of a continuity of care from individual social workers (Humphris and Sigona, 2019).

Plans for future families are also important in supporting young people in their new home, alongside their aspirations for education and employment. Kauko and Forsberg (2018) in their research in Finland found that many of the young people they spoke to included setting up their own families in their visions of their future lives. However, for young people who are stuck in a position of significant uncertainty due to temporary residency rights and the threat of removal when they become adults, such dreams of a future family life may be too difficult to contemplate.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the myriad other relationships which young people develop and from which they gain different forms of support after leaving their original family home. These relationships may provide material, emotional and practical support that may be seen as often coming from family members, and young people may use the language of family to describe the relationships, although it is important not to homogenise the notion of family and how an ideal family should operate. However, some contacts and networks may be fleeting (Wells, 2011) and the nature of these networks are likely to change over time. For example, research in Belgium (Behrendt et al., 2012¹) revealed that social networks shift from consisting of co-ethnic young people met on the journey and on first arrival, to including other members of diaspora groups with religious organisations being particular important for some nationalities. Over time local peers become more important as young people become more familiar with the context and feel more established. This develops alongside relationships with formally-appointed social workers and guardians, as well as volunteers working in support services. These social

relationships help create a sense of belonging (Drammeh, 2019), which can be devastatingly ruptured if an asylum claim is not accepted and a young person is forcibly removed once they have legally become an adult. This destruction of a settled life and supportive relationships is clearly seen in the interviews with young people who were forcibly removed from the UK to Afghanistan (Allsopp and Chase, 2019, p. 304) and in the experiences of Hamedullah whose story of forcible removal from the UK to Afghanistan is shown in *Hamedullah: the Road Home* (2011) a film directed by Sue Clayton.

Conclusions

This chapter has highlighted how the experiences of family and the mobilisation of 'family' as a concept are woven into the international migration of unaccompanied children, using examples of migration to and within Europe. The family situation may be the driver for young people to migrate alone, being sent away by family members for their own safety, or fleeing violence from other family members. A sense of obligation and responsibility towards the natal family may also push individual young people to migrate and continue to shape their emotional and material links to family members during the migration journey. There may be significant logistical challenges in maintaining contact, but the operation of migration and asylum regimes may also restrict contact, often implicitly through the concerns that young people have of mentioning details about their families in case it undermines their asylum claim. The very slim chance of family reunification in the country of destination means that young people are embarking on a journey which will likely result in a future of transnational family practices before they have even reached adulthood.

Experiences of family or family-like relationships may be part of an unaccompanied child's experience of state-supported welfare provision after claiming asylum. The degree to which a sense of emotional wellbeing, care and safety are experienced will vary significantly depending on the form of support provided, but also the individual relationships involved. A significant challenge for the development and maintenance of these relationships is the threat of forcible removal once a young person reaches 18 if they have not been given residency or leave to remain.

The notion of ‘family’ is mobilised in a number of ways by state and non-state actors involved in the migration of unaccompanied young people. For the young people themselves, members of the family ‘back home’ often remain the most important familial relationships. Some seek and find solace from family-type relationships in their new homes, while others may not have this available to them, or they may feel guilty about developing such relationships with foster carers, guardians or friends. There may be similar ambivalence on the part of foster families, guardians and live-in staff in group accommodation facilities.

‘The family’ is identified as a particularly important social unit in law, requiring protection. However, as this chapter has outlined, what counts as a family, or a family member can be highly constrained, and its protection is highly context-dependent. For unaccompanied child migrants, laws construct them as vulnerable due to the lack of co-present family members. The state therefore has a duty to step in and provide care and guidance in the absence of family. Despite the value placed on the family, family reunification policies are usually very asymmetrical, with children being able to cross international borders to join parents or other family members, but not the other way round. Similar downplaying of the importance of family and acting in the best interests of the child is also seen in the forcible removal of young people whose asylum claims have not been successful once they reach 18, even if they have family members (including children) from whom they will be separated. Here, the desire for strong national borders outweighs the importance and value placed on a universal notion of ‘the family’.

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