A Day in the Life:
An Exploration of Young Asylum Seekers’ and Refugees’ Perceptions of Self and Identity.

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Childhood and Youth Studies MA Dissertation – 2012/2013
**Abstract**

Drawing on theories of identity, youth and childhood, this paper aims to explore the experiences of young asylum seekers and refugees in the UK in relation to identity and perceptions of self. The paper focuses on the dominant societal perceptions of this group, and aims to challenge and explore their meanings. This is achieved through an ethnographically based research project within a small community befriending group in the town of Basildon on Sea\(^1\). The paper draws on key themes within the young peoples’ lives, using existing literature and theories as a basis for discussions of identity, welfare and belonging. The research reveals a sense of resilience within the young people, in contrast to stereotypical perceptions within society. Significantly it offers important contributions to discussions of young migrants’ contribution and role within society, challenging common stereotypes of ‘economic migrants’.

\(^1\)Name used is a pseudonym
Oh dandelion! Oh dandelion
How beautiful you are!
Your bright yellow make me feel alive
That spring has finally arrived
You survived in any nook and crannies
Out lived the oldest nannies
   I love you
   And I fear you
Your innocent beauty is like a dart
   Straight to my heart
But a bet your pardon...
   Not in my back garden

(Hong Dam – Vietnamese Refugee)

Acknowledgements: A heartfelt thanks to Rachel Burr for her inspiration, encouragement and guidance throughout my project and the course. A special thanks to all the young people who took part and to Nadine and Helen for their help. Lastly to my partner and parents for their continuing encouragement and support. Without these people this research would not have been possible and I am eternally grateful to them all.
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**Chapter 1**

**Introduction**
Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality. But it is also about your social relationships, you complex involvement with others, and in the modern world these have become even more complex and confusing (Weeks 1990:88).

Rationale

Identity is, like many other concepts, multifaceted and ever-changing, with recent theorists suggesting that young people in particular now have much more fluid choices as to their identity or identities (Thomson 2007). Thomson’s work has suggested that the structured identities that once existed for youth are now focused around choice, involving ‘searching and questioning’ (151). ‘Identity is therefore relational, and relies on establishing senses of difference and similarity between different individuals and across and within different social groups.’ (Hopkins 2010:6). In this sense ones identity relies on the acceptance of others in the wider community (Valentine et al 2009) allowing people to be defined as ‘in place’ or ‘out of place’ by their performance of particular identities at particular times (Cresswell 1996 cited in Valentine et al 2009). Research has suggested that identity formation can become difficult for groups for whom society reinforces notions of being ‘out of place’ (Kebede 2010). One such group are asylum seekers and refugees to which research has shown widespread hostility from the rest of society (Coenders et al 2004).

Expanding global economies and widening global conflicts have accelerated patterns of migration in the twenty first century leaving questions over how those migrating form identities in amongst an ever changing hostile society (Valentine et al 2009). Often responsibility for integration is solely placed upon migrants, and not the majority host community (Valentine et al 2009). Youth, as a time of exploration of identities, has been defined as particularly difficult time for young asylum seekers and refugees with society enforcing their presence as belonging elsewhere (Kebede 2010). Negative images in the UK are seen as the key in restricting the possibility of inclusion and belonging for young migrants. Research has suggested that in order to change these societal views, studies of identities are crucial; ‘Research to understand the range of issues faced by refugees is vital in order to comprehend the lives, the experience and the needs of these groups and so develop more appropriate and effective responses’ (Hugman et al 2011:1273). Despite research existing in this field, many of the pre-existing studies have faced criticism for ignoring the views of the immigrants themselves (Ehrkamp 2006; Phillips et al 2007).

Context
This aim of this paper is based around the question: How do young asylum seekers and refugees perceive themselves and their identity? With this in mind the research looks to focus upon the views and experiences of the young people asking them to reflect on both their childhood experiences and their concepts of identity within their lives now, as ‘youth’. It has been acknowledged that there is a lack of research in this area (Sirriyeh 2008). However, theorists (Barth 1969; Ehrkamp 2006; Phillips et al 2007) have suggested the importance of this for wider integration and acceptance of young asylum seekers and refugees into society; ‘integration is not about where immigrants and minorities live, but how they understand their membership in the places where they live, work and raise families’ (Nagel and Staeheli 2008:416).

My own interests in the areas of migration and childhood and youth led me to volunteer with a young asylum seekers and refugees ‘befriending’ group in my local town, Basildon on Sea. My previous studies into the political and welfare issues that affected these young people made me enthusiastic to get to know them directly and report upon their own experiences rather than that reported in academic literature. My time with the group led me to take on a small scale ethnographic research project in the hope that I could express and understand some of the real issues affecting young asylum seeker and refugees identities and integration, as opposed to the prominent media representations. Laoire et al’s (2010) work has noted the emergent attention in the field of childhood, but particular lack of attention to the childhoods of migrants. All of the young people within the research arrived in the UK as children, under the age of eighteen and so it is my hope to both document their reflections upon how this shaped their identity. As with all anthropological work, my intention is not to prescribe any set pathway for my research, but rather to follow the initial question loosely and let the group’s experiences guide my work.

Chapter Overview

The paper begins with an overview of the theoretical frameworks that are prominent in childhood and youth studies and particularly relevant for the subject of this article. These will include a discussion of the key theories regarding childhood, with an overview of the importance of a ‘transitions to adulthood’ framework. This chapter will also contextualize the situation for asylum seekers and refugees, particularly children and young people, within the UK and point to the key areas of concern. Chapter three will discuss the process of undertaking the research, looking at the mixed methodology approach and the justifications and experiences within each of these methods. Importantly this chapter will also focus upon the ethical issues that arose within the research and the limitations of such methods. The paper will then look to analyse the results of the

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2 A pseudonym has been used for the town name.
research, splitting them into key themes; providing an analysis and discussion on each topic. The final chapter will look to conclude and draw together some of the key points from the article, suggesting areas of particular significance to the field and those for further, or more in depth study. The article shall draw on pre-existing literature and research throughout in order to support and contextualize its content.
Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework and Context

Within this chapter the pre-existing literature in the field will be discussed; outlining key theoretical frameworks that are both the underpinning of Childhood and Youth studies and of this particular research. This section will also contextualise the current situation in the UK in order to add further to discussions and analyses later on in the paper.

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

Cultural Politics of Childhood

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has stated that ‘a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years’ (UNCRC Article 1). This has become the predominant definition of a child, mirrored in the UK by the Home Offices definition being ‘a young person who is (or in the absence of documentary proof), appears to be under the age of eighteen’ (Home Office 2007 cited in Hek et al 2012). Biologically the immaturity of a child is a fact; however the meanings assigned to particular ages are complete cultural constructs (Montgomery 2009).

The social sciences view of childhood has been highly influenced by the work of historian Philippe Aries (1962) who proposed the idea that throughout time, society’s understandings and discourses on childhood have changed in conjunction with changing social and political factors of society. Aries claimed that the first conception of a ‘child’, as a distinct category, different from that of an adult was in the fifteenth century. These earlier discourses on childhood revolved around Puritan concepts, seeing children as innately evil and in need of ‘exorcised programmes of discipline and punishment’ (James et al 1998:10). The second half of the seventeenth century saw a departure from religious embedded puritan concepts with the influence of Romanticist philosophers, Locke and Rousseau. Locke proposed, in 1690, that children were products of their surroundings and environments, describing them as ‘blank slates’ to be shaped and influenced by their surroundings (cited in Burr 2006:7). Slightly later on, in 1762, Rousseau developed this conception of the child proposing that childhood was a time of innocence and protection (ibid). Despite facing criticism, Aries historical underpinning of childhood has remained most influential to current studies of childhood (Montgomery 2009). The Romanticist notion of childhood innocence prevails as the dominant western discourse today, influencing the creation of policies such as the UNCRC and Child Protection Laws, developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century to formalise the protection of children and childhoods (Giner 2007).
Despite providing a useful framework, concepts of childhood must be placed within their cultural context and time. Burman’s (1994) work has criticised principal discourses for appearing to provide ‘universal’ definitions and conceptualisations, but predominantly being based upon western ideals:

Childhood is celebrated as a universal stage or period of life which is characterized by protection and freedom of responsibilities. But although it purports to be universal, this representation of childhood turns out to be specific and geographically disturbed. In this view, childhood becomes an entity the deprivation of which constitutes a violation of human rights. The polarities set up between this universal stage and those deemed to lack it map, of course, onto the North-South divide: in the North children develop, and in the South they merely survive if they are lucky... this stage that we all have a right to enjoy is in fact an idealized representation of Northern models of childhood, It achieves globalized status through its inscription within international aid and development policies and legislation (32).

As Dorling (2009) illustrates ‘age is not universally registered, documented, celebrated or even necessarily known (cited in Cemlyn and Nye 2012:681), and so any definition that aims to be ‘universal’ must recognise this. James Chisholm’s research with Native American Navajo highlights the difficulty in trying to apply western psychologically based models of childhood development to an entirely different cultural system (cited in Montgomery 2009).

**Who are Asylum Seekers and Refugees?**

An asylum seeker is defined as:

Someone who had applied for asylum and is waiting for a decision to be made as to whether or not they are a refugee. In other words, in the UK an asylum seeker is someone who has asked the Government for refugee status and is waiting to hear the outcome of their application (United Nations Refugee Agency 2012).

A refugee has been defined as someone:

Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country ( Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951).

These definitions gain common use within political and public spheres, often with some confusion. Wood’s (1985) work had highlighted that often these terms are placed upon people on their arrival in the UK as a method of labelling people in line with political agendas. Such terms may be unknown to people before their arrival in the UK and as such may not hold the particular connotations that they have come to hold within British society (Hopkins 2010).

In 2012 The UN Refugee Agency reported that there were 193,510 refugees in the UK and 15,170 pending asylum cases. The top three countries of origin at the time were Pakistan, Iran and Sri
Lanka; however this is constantly changing in line with shifting global stability. Immigration and issues of refuge and asylum have long been described as a ‘difficult territory’ (Giner 2007:249), with pressures of trying to combine an inclusive rights based approach on the one hand and harsher policy making and welfare cuts on the other (ibid). Within its website for asylum guidance the Home Office states ‘The UK has a proud tradition of providing a place of safety for genuine refugees’ (‘Asylum’ 2012). This ‘proud tradition’ began within the period of the Cold War when ‘Western states were particularly prompt to respond to a moral claim for compassion and protection made upon them by political refugees fighting communist oppression’ (Giner 2007:250). As such in 1951 The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was created in an attempt to protect the welfare of refugees universally. However, the end of the Cold War, coupled with rising asylum applications in the UK saw the end of depictions of the ‘moral asylum seeker’ replaced, instead, by ‘threats’ and the ‘bogus asylum seeker’ (ibid; Sales 2002). It is now clear from tabloid headlines and political legislation that there is widespread suspicion and hostility surrounding asylum seekers and refugees and the threat they pose to both national security and to our national culture (McCombs 1994; Silverstone and Georgiou 2005; Ivarsflaten 2006). A report by The United Nations Human Rights Committee from 11 different organisations highlighted, and blamed, politicians for encouraging racist hostility within their public attitudes regarding asylum seekers (Observer 1 July 2001 cited In Sales 2002:458). This was raised again in 2009 when The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance expressed its concern at the clear climate of negative opinion regarding asylum seekers in the UK (Pearce and Stockdale 2009).

**Clashing Discourses: The child asylum seeker or refugee**

Examining the predominant discourses of the child, the asylum seeker and the refugee creates obvious contradictions and questions around what happens when a child is an asylum seeker or refugee and how do we view and treat them? The binary opposition that this image creates has been well documented by many researchers (Giner 2007; Seeberg et al 2009; Hek et al 2012; Davidson 2011); with society demanding exclusionary practices for children, but exclusionary ones for asylum seekers and refugees (Giner 2007); ‘We (adult nationals) have a duty to protect children as real or potential victims, but we supposedly need to be protected from “immigrants” who really or potentially make us victims’ (Davidson 2011:463). Our own ideas of what constitutes childhood: ‘innocent’, ‘safety’ and ‘stability’ are all challenged when we think of children as immigrants (Laoire et al 2010). This confusion and contradiction creates instability in policy making and practice on the ground with children, coupled with negative opinions effecting children and young people’s inclusion in society (Sigona and Hughes 2012), more of which to be discussed.
Transitions to Adulthood

Despite dominant conceptions surrounding the child asylum seeker or refugee Montgomery (2007) has highlighted the persistent difficulties that asylum seekers and refugees face when over the age of 18, but still vulnerable. More recent research has highlighted the significance of the life stage of ‘youth’, marked as between the ages of 18 and 25; ‘a notion of developmental stages leading from dependent childhood to independent adulthood’ (Henderson et al 2007:18). The psychological concept of this life stage is perceived as ‘adolescence’ a clear developmental stage (Piaget 1962). However, from a social constructivist stance this period of development is termed as ‘youth’, suggesting that young people position themselves within society at this time. Sociological studies have suggested that the way in which young people transition through this period is characterized by a period of experimentation and formation of identities before reaching adulthood (Erikson 1968; Kroger 1996). Sociologists have drawn specific attention to the period of leaving the parental ‘home’ as particularly important in young people's transitions to adulthood (Montgomery 2007; Henderson et al 2007), emphasising dependency as a crucial marker of difference between ‘children’ and ‘adults’ (Davidson 2011). Despite providing a strong framework for many of the ways that young people in the West experience this period of their life it does not, however, take into account young people whose lives may have been fractured or disrupted or those cultures that simply do not conceive of a period of life such as ‘youth’ (Shildrick and Macdonald 2007).

2.2 Context

Having examined the key theoretical frameworks and concepts of children and young people as asylum seekers and refugees it is necessary to place these within their current political and practical. The following section will examine the current legislation in place for asylum seekers and refugees, with particular reference to children and young people. It will then go on to examine how this is applied on the ground and the difficulties that this may produce before concluding by contextualising the importance of age for asylum seekers and refugees.

Policies

Since the Labour Government in the UK in 1997 this, and successive governments, have been keen to show that they are not a soft touch on immigration with tightening restriction on asylum seekers’ citizenship rights (Giner 2007; Cunningham and Tomlinson 2005). Since then there has been various legislation, with the Home Office releasing papers such as ‘Fairer, Faster, Firmer’ in 1998 proceeded by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Within this the government outlined its belief that welfare benefits were acting as incentives for economic migrants coming to the UK
These reforms have included the restriction of welfare benefits, the introduction of voucher systems and the concept of dispersal to move immigrants to particular areas of the country (ibid).

Seen internally as ‘the moral touchstone of society’ (Pupavac 2002 cited in Giner 2007: 251), the UNCRC was created in 1989 and ratified by the UK in 1991. Of particular relevance to the area of migration was article 3, which states:

In all actions involving children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration (UNCRC 1989 Article 3).

Originally the UK government had placed a reservation on this article which stated that it would not be relevant to those without leave to remain in the UK (Hek et al 2012). This decision faced much criticism from Human Rights bodies and third sector organisations, and after much lobbying the reservation was removed in 2008 (ibid). The UNCRC was, in effect, translated into domestic law within section 55 of the Borders and Immigration act, this decision ‘accepted that all children, irrespective of their immigration status, must enjoy all of the Convention’s rights and protections.’ (The Children’s Society 2012). The Children’s Acts (1989; 2004), and subsequent Every Child Matters legislation, were also seen as positive steps by the government to safeguard the needs of all children. However, with the new coalition government coming into power in 2010 the terminology of Every Child Matters was scraped. Since 2009 the duty has been on the Home Secretary to promote the welfare of children within the immigration system, but as yet this has been without any formal review (The Children’s Society 2013).

Everyday Experiences

Despite legislation in place, the application of safeguarding children that are refugees and seeking asylum has been heavily criticised, particularly from the recent Parliamentary Enquiry into Asylum Support for Children and Young People in 2013. This report showed large gaps in the support system for children and young people seeking asylum both on their own and with families and stated that a number of organisations reported widespread destitution (The Children’s Society 2013). Social workers working with asylum seekers and refugees under the age of eighteen have reported the difficulty of their position and the ‘tension between child welfare and control of asylum’ (Giner 2006 cited in Cemlyn and Nye 2012: 680). It is commonly acknowledged that the interpretation of legislation by the local authorities differs greatly from region to region, with inconsistencies in the quality of care, knowledge and interest depending upon both the individual worker and the local authority (Burr Forthcoming). The case of Victoria Climbé highlights the influence that the overriding ‘culture of disbelief’ can have upon children’s care (Masocha and
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However, central to the tension faced by social workers are the constant tightening of budgets and lack of specialist knowledge in the area of immigration which lead to gaps in the service social workers are able to provide to asylum seekers and refugees. Legislation and welfare reforms have meant that much of the need to support has been left to third sector organisations filling the gaps of spending cuts (Cunningham and James 2007 cited in Robinson 2013; Ferguson and Woodward 2009 cited in Robinson 2013; Sales 2002).

Importance of Age

As discussed age itself is a cultural construct with varying significance within different cultures (Montgomery 2009). However, the significance of western discourses is crucial to many young asylum seekers and refugees, particularly those arriving into the country unaccompanied. Many of these young people or children arrive into the country with no formal documentation to determine their age giving rise to the already existent culture of suspicion and scrutiny within the border agencies (Hek et al 2012). Determining the exact age of a young person is crucial to the services, such as education, housing and support that the young people may receive (Hek et al 2012; Brighter Futures 2011). The wording of the Home office’s definition of a child ‘appears to be’ creates great debate and allows for a substantial marginal error in the classification process (Hek et al 2012). Reports (Brighter Futures 2011; The Children’s Society 2012) have shown that often the age classification is based upon trivial factors, such as someone appearing mature, or being tall with a push to classify people as over 18. Increasingly these processes have been criticised for paying little regard to cultural and individual factors that may affect the children and young people, with little regard for their experiences prior to arriving in the UK; ‘seperated children may also adopt an older persona due to their challenging experiences in their country of origin and their long difficult journeys to the UK, or having taken on adult responsibility at an early age’ (Hek et al 2012:340).

Crawley’s (2010) research found that children themselves picked up on the cultural barriers at play within the immigration process, expressing that they were aware their experiences were very different to children in the UK. In a system dominated by cut backs and control it was reported that ‘some managers pressurise workers to assess unaccompanied minors as older than they are to save money as adult asylum-seekers are entitled to much lower levels of care than children.’ (Hek et al 2012:340).

The Forgotten (‘Under the fence’)

Any discussion of migration and children and young people must draw attention to the large percentage of children who are unknown to social services, and unknown to statistics. There is
recent growing concern within policy debates for what has been termed ‘the darker side of globalization’ (Davidson 2011; 458), which involves the illegal immigration of children into the UK through child trafficking. Often these children are known to the social services upon arrival in the UK, but large percentages go missing quickly afterwards (Pearce et al 2009). Although a discussion into the welfare of this group of children would require a separate paper, it is important to note at this point that asylum seekers and refugees are just a small number of known children and young people entering the country, and more recognition is needed to those who present even more disturbing clashes with our discourse of childhood innocence.
Chapter 3  Methodology and Ethics

Context of Research

The research was undertaken within a pre-existing project for refugees and asylum seekers in the large seaside town of Basildon on Sea on the South Coast, a self confessed ‘liberal city’ with 48% of its residents described as ‘young, well-educated city dwellers’ (Basildon on Sea Council 2011:3). Due to my pre-existing interest in the area of migration I was already a volunteer with the group and so it appeared an appropriate place to conduct my research. The group’s ethos is to provide a friendly environment for young refugees and asylum seekers, aged between 16 and 25, in the town to come together and to meet other young people from the town, who are described as ‘volunteer befrienders’. The befrienders are all of the same age as the young people and come from local universities. The group takes place in the young people’s centre in the middle of the town and acts as an informal ‘youth club’ like area, with a kitchen for group cooking. This centre has many other youth groups, activities and drop in sessions based there. The nationalities of the group’s members are mixed, coming from countries such as Palestine, Sudan, Yemen and Iran. The sessions themselves are every other week and group members are ever changing depending on who ‘pops in’. The sessions are unstructured, with the main focus being the cooking of dinner, in which group members taking it in turns, usually cooking food from their own cultural backgrounds.

3.1 Methodology

‘Insider’ Research

As a pre-existing volunteer I gained easier access to the group, despite groups of asylum seekers and refugees being noted as particularly difficult to access (Heath et al 2009; Hugman et al 2011). This position presented me with the opportunity to undertake my research using ethnographic methods, to be discussed in detail further on. Inevitably my research was, therefore, ‘insider’ research (Edwards 2002) and allowed for my existing knowledge of the group’s culture and history to strengthen the process (Kincheloe 1991). The group’s familiarity with me, based on our existing relationships, created fewer opportunities for hierarchies to develop, as is often the case with research with vulnerable groups (Heath et al 2009). Heath et al also indicate that age is particularly key to achieving a successful ‘insider’ status, for which I had an advantage, being of the same age as many of the members of the group. Given my position within the group, it seemed obvious for my research to become participatory, including myself as a participant. This allowed for me to
reflect upon and understand what I was asking the participants to do and worked to further eliminate any feeling of researcher hierarchy, or disruption to the group sessions. As well as including myself within the research it became apparent, very early on, that the research would be most suitable to be an activity for the whole group, and so it was agreed that volunteers would also be invited to be participants within the research. This decision, by the project workers and myself, was particularly beneficial in eliminating any feeling, of what Said (1979) terms, ‘exoticisation of the other’, illustrating that we all, as members of the group and as young people, have identities to be discovered and researched.

**Multi-Method Research**

The research used a multiple method approach, taking inspiration from the method of ‘Rapid Rural Appraisal’ (RRA), using multiple methods over a short period of time in order to gain a qualitative overview of a particular community (Chambers 1994). This approach has been suggested as particularly beneficial when working with those whose native language is different to that of the researcher, allowing for more flexibility in communication (Cook and Hees 2007). The main focus of the research was within photo elicitation by the participants, using the photos to form the basis of a focus group discussion. Inevitably, as a member of the group the observations and conversations from group sessions worked to enhance this information, acting as ethnographic observations.

**Ethnographic Research**

The process of recording and interpreting another people’s way of life is called ethnography... Most essentially [fieldwork] entails a deep immersion into the life of a people (Keesing 1981:5).

This stance within my research was both inevitable, due to my background in Anthropology, and most suitable for the group itself. Increasingly ethnographic methods are presented as key in understanding the social worlds of children and young people (James et al 1998), enabling youth to be understood in their cultural constructions (Montgomeroy 2007) and work upon the prevailing concept of children as no longer passive, but active social agents within their own worlds (O’Kane 2000). Ethnographers, due to its method, have also been influential in research with marginalised groups, considered previously as outside of mainstream society and mainstream research (Heath et al 2009). The concept of ethnography, in line with Vygotskian approaches, acknowledge the culture that exists in human practice and, unlike more structured methods, do not set out to test anything but instead allow for researchers to be taught(Edmond 2005). This method suited the
nature of this particular research, allowing it to be led and influenced by the experiences of the participants and the group as a whole.

**Photo Elicitation**

Ethnographic methods have been heralded as particularly supportive to the production of visual methods (Pink 2001:1), working alongside a renaissance in creative methods, as opposed to narrower methods of quantitative knowledge (Robinson and Gilles 2012). Within this field photographic and visual methods have gained particular regard (Mountain et al 2011), praised for their ability to evoke multidimensional, polysemic meanings (Rose 2007) and provide a less intimidating method of research than one to one interviews (Punch 2002 cited in Heath et al 2009). My research used photovoice, or photo elicitation, described as the process where young people are asked by the research to record specific things on camera (Heath et al 2009). The choice for this method lay within its strength for obtaining the perspectives of children and young people, avoiding the all too common adult, or researcher, centred bias that is common in research (Young and Barret 2001). Again, this method has also been acknowledged to be one of the most effective ways of working with migrant communities (Finney and Rishbeth 2006), allowing those with limited English to communicate in a different way (Thomas and O’ Kane 1998). Many researchers have also praised the ability of photographic methods to challenge the more stereotypical representations of marginalised groups, offering a representational, real life view (Ataöv and Haider 2006 cited in Joanou 2009; Campos Montiero and Dollinger 1998 cited in Joanou 2009).

All members of the group were given the opportunity to take part, with the understanding that they could discontinue at any time. All those who wished to take part were given a disposable, 27 capture camera and asked to take pictures of anything they felt was important to themselves and their lives. The criteria for picture taking remained fluid in order to allow for the young people themselves to have agency over the content and amount of pictures, up to 27. This has been noted by many (Clark 1999; Cook and Hees 2007; Mitzen 2005; Orellana 1999) as allowing immediate agency and participation to young people, particularly important when working with vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers and refugees who are likely to have, or currently experience, disempowerment within their lives (Quinn 2013). The frequency of the group sessions meant that they had the camera for a two week period and it was explained that they could take pictures at any time within that period. During this I was able to use a ‘Group Message’ on a social media site to remind members to bring in their cameras which was particularly useful with the tight time constraint of my project.
Focus Group

The photographs, although important in their own right, became the basis for discussions within the focus group. Joanou’s (2009) work has stressed the importance of not leaving photos un discussed for assumptions to be made. Several academics (Rose 2007; Mountain et al 2011; Cook and Hees 2007) have also praised the use of photographs for this purpose stating that they allow for deeper discussion and reflection which would not occur from a solely verbal approach. The photographs allowed for multi-reflection from the participants and myself, ‘looking at’ and ‘looking behind’ the photos (Wright 1999), providing powerful opportunities to explore areas of their lives that written work may have overlooked (Rose 2007), or that I may not have previously seen. As a participant myself I found the process of choosing photos to take difficult, but thought provoking. Similarly throughout the focus group many of the other participants commented on the difficulty they had in choosing photos to take to truly represent themselves.

A focus group is a planned discussion geared at obtaining perceptions on a specific topic in a safe environment (Webb and Kevern 2001 cited in Ruppenthal et al 2005:738).

Although a planned discussion, the focus group was particularly informal and involved the use of mapping materials with a large sheet of paper in the middle of the group and pens and pencils. The focus group lasted for approximately forty five minutes. After looking at the photos themselves, the participants were invited to place any photos that they wanted to share in the middle, and write a caption beside if they wished. I had originally intended for the focus group to be completely unstructured. However, with the advice of the project workers, I created a question sheet in order to guide the young people in thinking about their photos (See Appendix D). On reflection this added to the group discussion and some members worked through the questions together, allowing for me, as researcher and participant, to take a more participatory role. Within the session I had the opportunity to talk to each of the group members about their photos, with some sharing and some not. Collier and Collier’s work (1986) has commented ‘The projective opportunity of the photographs offers a gratifying sense of self-expression as the informant is able to explain and identify content and educate the interviewer with his wisdom’ (106). As a researcher and participant that I was able to both share and learn with the others in the group.

Throughout all of my time and research with the group, I maintained an un-structured approach and chose not to record any of the discussions or the focus group. This is common within ethnographic research and in this case allowed for the informality of the group to be undisturbed. This method was also particularly important with the group I was working with. As Hopkins (2008) illustrated within his research, it is important not to use formal recorded interviews with migrants.
as it can bear resemblance to those that occur within their immigration process. In this sense, my informal method also allowed for the group members to discuss what they felt they wanted to, but did not force them to talk about the past or particular issues that may have been traumatic or sensitive to them.

A selection of the focus group ‘mapping’ activity – this photo was chosen specifically for ethical reasons as the photos are not recognisable.

**Analysing Results**

As discussed, I chose not to record anything while at the group sessions. This meant that I recorded notes and thoughts after each session in a diary format, as with much ethnographical research. By doing this immediately after the group it allowed me to remember and note down many of the conversations and reflect on some of the things that had happened within the group session. After the focus group, and when clearing away the mapping activity, I had noted down the comments that the young people had written alongside their photographs and I noted down what some of their photographs had included. I was also able to collect in the question sheets from the young people that gave me permission to.

I had begun the research with a few sub questions, related to my overall question of: How do young asylum seekers and refugees perceive themselves and their identity?, these were:

- Are labels of ‘refugee’ or ‘asylum seeker’ helpful in the construction of identity or do they become irrelevant?
- How does cultural homeland play a part in their formation of identity and belonging?
What is important to them? And how does this affect their identity?

Does food play an important part in their sharing identity within the group?

These questions were based on prior research, expectations and assumptions that I had about this area of research. I used these as my starting point for analysis. However, as mentioned, I was guided directly by the experiences of the young people and was not looking for answers, as such. By looking at all the data together it allowed me to draw out key themes, with the support of the key theoretical frameworks and context review that I had undertaken. From this I was able to make connections and analyse some of the experiences from within the group. I was careful only to include stories and conversations from those people who had given consent to be in the research, despite others being present at some of the groups.

Throughout my interpretation of results I was aware of the role of reflexive practice among my work and aimed to incorporate this positively within my analysis.

Whether we like it or not, researchers remain human beings complete with the usual assembly of feelings, failings and moods. All of these things influence how we feel and understand what is going on. Our consciousness is always the medium through which research occurs; there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher. (Stanley and Wise 1983:157).

3.2 Ethics

A set of moral principles and rules of conduct (Sieber 1993 cited in Morrow 2008:51). As Sieber’s (1993) work has highlighted, it is vital that ethics are considered throughout the research process and not as separate considerations or after thoughts. This was a key consideration throughout my time with the group, particularly due to their vulnerability (Jacobsen and Landau 2003). Although my research gained full ethical approval from the university (see Appendix A), ethical considerations determined the group that I could work with. Research with children raises particular concerns because of the way that we, in the West, construct childhood to be a time of innocence and protection (Morrow 2008). As such my study group, with one exception, were all between the ages of 18 and 25. Despite one member theoretically being classed as a ‘child’ it was considered important to include him within the research, rather than create exclusion within the group. The young people were however, able to reflect on their experiences as children, and their age meant that the transitions they were experiencing were equally as interesting to consider within the research.
Key to ethical considerations was the anonymity of the participants, ensuring that they experienced no adverse effects from the research (Heath et al 2009). In order to do this I changed the names of the participants’, using cultural equivalents, and the name of the town within which my research took place. Before beginning my research I obtained ethical consent from all participants that wished to take part. This involved them signing a form as well as being given some information about the research for themselves (see Appendix B and C). I was aware that the consent process involved much more than simply agreeing to participate (Alderson and Morrow 2004), but involved a process of continued understanding by the participants. The informality of the group setting meant that I was able to present my research to group members in small groups allowing them time to ask me questions and discuss any issues they may have. This was supported by the project workers helping the young people to think through their involvement within the research and help with any language problems. I was particularly aware of the pressure that some young people, particularly those that may be vulnerable, feel in taking part in research (Hopkins 2008) and so I was keen to reiterate throughout the process that participants could opt out at any time and their consent was ongoing and not fixed. The fact that the young people could choose to give their camera back to me at the next session, I hope, allowed for them to actively choose their participation. This was reflected through some of the young people choosing not to return the camera to me or giving me back the camera unused. Throughout my research with the group I retained the idea that my research, and myself as a researcher, had responsibility to the participants, particularly relevant when working with such vulnerable young people who are more likely to experience disempowerment within their everyday lives due to their ‘status’ (Quinn 2013). Alongside this, as Joanou (2009) acknowledges, it is fundamental that researchers remain aware of the longer lasting effects that research, such as this, can have upon its participants and recognise the level of responsibility that research has in its representations of vulnerable people (Barnes cited in Hugman et al 2011).

Rose’s (2007) work has highlighted the particular importance of ethics when using visual methodologies, with anonymity being key. When explaining the research to the young people I highlighted that I, as a researcher, would not look at the photos when they were developed and that they would be the first to do so, sharing only those that they wanted to. I was able to ensure them of this by explaining that the photos packet would have a seal on after it had been developed and this would therefore be a sign if anyone had looked the photos before them. This helped to give the young people ownership of the photos, as well as being told that I would not keep or use the photos after the session. Despite this, I was aware throughout the research, as others have pointed out (Mountain et al 2011), that the group audience affected the choice of pictures and how
they were presented. However, the groups pre-existing relationships with one another and myself as a volunteer meant that these barriers were less likely.

When reflecting upon the use of photos, other similar research projects (Mountain et al 2011), have suggested that participants can feel that the representations through the photos are not true reflections of themselves, and at times making their lives look bad. Within my question sheet I included the question. Below is Sally’s\(^3\) answer:

**Do you think the photos represent you and your life?**

*In terms of places – very much so. They captured the places where I grew up and where I live now.*

Allowing for this reflection meant that participants had the chance to assess how the photos they had taken depicted them and their lives. I was also aware throughout the focus group that photos can often act as stimulation to other memories and thoughts (Rose 2007). Having the project workers present was useful in order for them to follow up any further thoughts with young people. My ongoing involvement with the group also allows for the members to question or raise anything with me later on after the research process has finished.

**Limitations**

Despite the participatory value of photographic research, Cook and Hees (2007) have pointed out that to be truly participatory to its participants, the topic and the method should be chosen by the participants themselves. Within this particular research the time constraints meant that it was difficult to include the participants fully in the design process. However, the fluid and unstructured nature of the research was aimed to be adaptable and helped the participants to mould the process and findings. The use of cameras also brings with it practical limitations, the most simple being the disposable cameras. Although cost effective, they can only give participants a certain number of photos to take, limiting the participants’ ability to represent themselves. This has been recognised in other photographic research (Richards 2009). The disposable cameras also had a self-operated flash which, in some cases, didn’t work and so provided barriers to some participant’s representations, as illustrated below with one volunteer’s reflections:

**Do you think the photos represent you and your life?**

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\(^3\)Name used is a pseudonym
I think some of them do but a lot of my photos didn’t come out (about half) and I think without them these photos don’t fully represent me, e.g. missed that I have a sister, my artwork, food I like etc.

On reflection I should have done, as Joanou’s (2009) photography project with children working on the streets of Peru did, and have taken two photos with the participants in order to allow for them to see how to properly use the camera, and it’s flash. Joanou’s (2009) study also found that cameras changed hands and therefore true representations of people were questionable. Within my own research this was an evident possible limitation for the research. One participant laughed when looking at her photos and said that she had some funny photos that her friend had taken as a joke. Despite this I feel these pictures continued to add to the research.

The time at which I carried out the research coincided with the month of Ramadan\(^4\). The majority of the group being Muslim meant that attendance at the group sessions was much lower than normal at this time. Although this added to my understandings of the significance of religion to many of the group members, as illustrated within the finding chapter below, it did mean that I didn’t receive some of the cameras back. Much of this limitation was down to the short scale nature of the research, meaning that I could not wait until Ramadan had finished, and people returned to the group, in order to get more participants.

Despite the apparent advantages of insider research I was aware throughout of the difficulty that researchers can face in trying to make the familiar unfamiliar in order to research effectively (Delamont and Atkinson 1995). This was an evident limitation within my research, and through reflexive practice I was able to recognise my own role within the results. Prosser (2000 cited in Joanou 2009) has argued that it is important to recognise that the photos do not offer complete truthfulness, but are constructions of a particular given place and time (Heath et al 2009). Therefore research, such as this, can be difficult to generalise to a wider contextual settings and debates, but must be recognised for the representation that it offers.

\(^4\) Ramadan: ‘the ninth month of the Muslim year, during which strict fasting is observed from dawn to sunset’ (Oxford English Dictionary 2004).
Chapter 4  

Findings from Research

The following part of this paper discusses and analyses the findings from the multi-method research, identifying and concentrating on some of the key themes that have emerged. By adopting an ethnographic approach, I was able to follow up and develop themes, which I could not have had prior expectation of. In reality my findings provide only a brief snapshot of what it means to be a young refugee or asylum seeker living in the UK. However, the findings are of wider relevance particularly in relation to identity formation and ideas about belonging. As discussed, identity and issues of belonging are multifaceted concepts, without clear constructions (Weeks 1990). This chapter draws upon the themes that young people referred to. Sometimes young people are quoted and in one case a case study approach is adopted.

Prior to my research, based upon my literature analysis and exploration of theoretical frameworks, as seen in chapter two, my assumptions were that young people forced to leave their birth country were likely to feel displaced and to have problems adapting and reforming their identities. As with much ethnographically based research, my assumptions were quickly challenged, and my findings involving the experiences of the young asylum seekers, refugees and the volunteers illustrate the similarities in issues that all young people, regardless of background, face in their transitions to adulthood. I quickly discovered that this process was not only beneficial for my own research, but to the young people themselves, allowing for self-reflection upon their own lives. Two of the volunteers commented as follows:

Any other comments

Phoebe5: Really fun project! Interesting for myself to analyse myself.

Sally: Thanks for the opportunity to share some good things in my life with you!

Labelling

As previously discussed within chapter two, the labels of ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’ are central to preconceptions of identities, placed upon this group by particular political images and perceptions (Wood 1985). I expected the young people to have some kind of knowledge of the labels that society gave them and I had previously presumed that the group worked to safeguard the young people from the persistent negative stereotypes that occur. Going into my research with this knowledge, and accepting that it was these ‘labels’ that had led me to the group, I was surprised to find, that they made no direct reference to themselves in terms of being ‘asylum

5 Name used is a pseudonym
seekers’ or ‘refugees’. It was also apparent that all group members, including the project workers, had very little knowledge of the immigration status or specific labels of other members of the group. In this sense it is interesting to highlight the contradictory use of these terms for the young people. In one sense their identity as ‘asylum seekers’ and ‘refugees’ is key to their belonging in the group, and by the same logic is central to the volunteers attraction to the group. However, it was evident that these labels were not a major part of the young people’s identities, or moreover was not a part that they felt they wanted to share or represent.

Cemlyn and Nye’s (2012) research suggested that the term ‘asylum seeker’ in particular ‘is constructed within a political discourse that is primarily designed to put boundaries around people’s status and rights’ (676). Contrary to their research, my research has shown that the terms of ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee, in this case, have worked in the opposite way and allowed the group to form, providing them with support and a community inaccessible to the young people unless they self identify with the labels placed upon them. This is interesting to contrast with the fact, as previously mentioned, that they did not explicitly use these terms of reference for themselves and so present mixed use of the terms for different aspects of their identities. I did not explicitly ask any of the young people what the terms 'asylum seeker' and 'refugee' meant to them, this was a conscious decision due to the nature of both my research and the group itself. The lack of use of these particular labels within the group worked to free the young people up from these identities and allowed them to exist within the group as simply young people, again working to eliminate feelings of difference among themselves and the volunteers. The dual use, or non use, of these labels for the young asylum seekers and refugees represents the fluidity of identities that young people experience (Thomson 2007).

Home

The home functions as a repository for complex, inter-related and at times contradictory socio-cultural ideas about people’s relationship with one another, especially family, and with places, spaces and things’ (Mallett 2004:84).

The fluidity and complexity of home is illustrated in the above extract, of which such notions have been noted as particularly relevant for migrants (Kebede 2010). I have aimed to reflect this fluidity throughout my findings by referring to home as ‘home’, to represent the metaphorical and fluid meaning that the group appeared to associate with the term. The theme of ‘home’ was central to many of the discussions both within the group informally and in the focus group and lead on to many other conversations about different aspects of the young people's identities. For many of the
members of the group, who had filled in the question sheet, the question of what do the photos mean to you created responses centred on the theme of ‘home’.

**What do the photo/photos mean to you?**

*Remind me of great memories here and at home (Janet*).

**What do the photos mean to you?**

*I feel happy when by the sea (Aamir’).*

The multi-complexity of what ‘home’ meant for the group members was apparent in that all members, including volunteers and myself, had moved to the town from somewhere else and as such had a dual concept of where ‘home’ was. All of the volunteers, like myself, had moved to the town for studying and were either still studying or had stayed on afterwards in the town. Sociological studies have documented that movement is about more than its literal meaning, concerning transitioning and self development (Montgomery 2007). Leaving the parental ‘home’ is seen as of particular significance in young people’s transitions to adulthood (Montgomery 2007; Henderson et al 2007). For the volunteers this model of transition was clearly illustrated throughout their experiences, as many of the volunteers expressed a notion of childhood and memory relating to their parental ‘home’. Sally was particularly keen within the focus group to show pictures of places that were important to her, which she classed as her two ‘homes’. The captions that she chose to write underneath the pictures reflected this:

*Exeter Quay, where I grew up.*

*Fingle Bridge in Devon where I have good childhood memories.*

*Nearby where I live in Basildon on Sea – beautiful on a sunny day.*

I myself had taken pictures which tried to express my dual concept of ‘home’, both in Basildon on Sea and my childhood, parental ‘home’. However, reflecting the western bias in cultural conceptions of a 'transitions to adulthood' model, many of the young refugee and asylum seekers in this research had left their parental ‘home’ and moved to the UK well before the prescribed ages of transitions to adulthood and were, in popular constructions of childhood, still children when they made this transition. As such these young people still appeared to make a significant transition, but were doing so at an age in which we, in the UK, perceive that children should be

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6 Name used is a pseudonym
7 Name used is a pseudonym
within the protection of the family ‘home’ not yet ready to become adults. As such, the different experiences of the young volunteers and the young asylum seekers and refugees reflects the diversity of experience and the need for models of individualised support rather than legislation prescribed by specific chronological models of age and transition.

The subject of ‘homeland’ occurred naturally within conversations within the group, and for the most part arose around meal times when a particular group member may have cooked a traditional dish, or was reminiscing about the food in their country. For some of the group members their turn to cook seemed to signify their turn to express a part of their culture. This was particularly true of Motaz\(^8\) and his love of spice, as opposed to ‘Boring English Food’. Anne Murcott’s (1982) work on the cultural significance of food has suggested that ‘The preparation and consumption of food provides, moreover, a material means for expressing the more abstract significance of social systems and cultural values.’ (204). For the group, food provided a structure, allowed for self expression and on a more basic level provided the young people with a cooked meal. The project workers were keen to work on this self expression with the young people with the hope of creating a cookery book with the group, although as with many voluntary sector projects, funding was proving to be an obstacle.

Despite reference to ‘homeland’ none of the young asylum seekers and refugees had tried to depict this within their photos, perhaps simply because they did not have pictures to do so. There were never discussions of the young people’s actual experiences within their ‘homeland’ that lead them to the UK. Young people did, however, speak about family members and friends that were still in their countries, and the general feeling within the group was that this was difficult. Miriam\(^9\) shared with the group a happy story of meeting up with her old school teacher who had managed to come to England, but this also led to her talking about her aunt who was unable to come. At another session Miriam and I had been talking about doing exercise, she was always quite concerned with her weight and reminisced that she had been much thinner in Sudan. She explained to me about a cultural practice of being wrapped in towels and rolled, which was apparently excellent for weight loss. She didn’t feel that she could do that here in the UK, and so we reflected on how she might be able to join exercise classes or go swimming in the local pool. There was a sense, particularly within Miriam’s accounts, of missing both the people and some of the practices in their national ‘homelands’. Griffiths (2002) has suggested that often the role of the past, memory and loss are all important factors to the formation of refugee identities.

\(^8\) Name used is a pseudonym
\(^9\) Name used is a pseudonym
Contrary to perceptions of the transient nature of young migrants’ lives, the young people within my research appeared to be settling and to be making lives for themselves. This was reflected at the simplest level within the formation of the group itself. It was also evident that all the young people intended and were making Basildon on Sea and the surrounding towns, their ‘home’. It could be possible that for many of the young people making ‘homes’ and presenting themselves as ‘settled’ was a coping strategy of resilience to their situation. Boyden and Mann’s (2005) work suggests that children and young people who have experienced adverse circumstances, such as forced migration, can thrive from these experiences and appear resilient. This is not to say, of course, that these young people do not still need support.

The young refugee and asylum seekers’ pictures and discussions did not take too much time to reflect on their ‘homelands’, but instead showed pictures of their flats or houses in the UK. Often talk of houses came up in conversations within the group, as people moved and were moved to different places. Early on with my time in the group I had mentioned to one of the young people, Rahil¹⁰, that I had seen him in a second hand furniture shop in town. He explained that he had recently moved into his own flat, after spending three years living at the YMCA. At the time I had seen him, he had been trying to use vouchers, given to him by the council, to buy furniture and he was having some difficulty. The use of vouchers, or voucher card systems are a common method of welfare support for asylum seekers and refugees (The Children’s Society 2013). However, Fell and Hayes (2000) work has criticised this system for the way in which it works to enhance the manifestation of ‘the other’ in the experiences of young migrants within society. I am unsure whether this was the case with Rahil or whether the joy of having his own flat outweighed any feelings of ‘other’ that he may have experienced upon my spotting him.

Other young people had taken pictures of the physicality of their ‘homes’, showing views from the window and the individual rooms. From talking to Aamil his pictures depicted a flat that he was proud to have, as was the case with Miriam who showed me pictures of her family members neatly lined up on the sofa in their sitting room. Aamil had also taken pictures of him at the town beach, many of which included him and his girlfriend. Aamil was very keen to check with me that he could keep these pictures after the focus group, and was happy when I said they were all his. When discussing the photos in the focus group he told us that he had met his girlfriend in the town. Aamil blushed as many of us commented on how pretty she was. This promoted a discussion within the group:

Motaz (to Aamil): You are lucky to have love.

¹⁰ Name used is a pseudonym
Miriam: I am unlucky.

Motaz: I want this kind of love.

The forming of new relationships is considered a key part of transitions to adulthood (Arnett 2000) and in Aamil’s case signified his settling in the town and making a life for himself. Accounts of asylum seekers’ experiences (Burr Forthcoming; Kohli 2002) have drawn upon the loneliness that some young people can feel when coming to the UK on their own. I had later asked Aamil, prompted by another young person’s photo of their sister, if he had any brothers or sisters:

Aamil: Yes, I have 3 sister and one brother

Me: Are they here in Basildon on Sea?

Aamil: No, they are in Iran

Me: Oh, can you keep in touch with them?

Aamil: No, I haven’t spoken to my family in five years.

Other talk about people at ‘home’ reflected a similar tone, with group members discussing friends and family that wanted to, or were trying to come to the UK.

Throughout my time in the group I spent a lot of time talking to Motaz. His lively attitude, at times, was quite infectious and he enjoyed making jokes. When I had presented him with the disposable camera, once he had agreed to take part, he laughed and said ‘what is this cardboard camera? I will take you nice pictures on my camera, it is not cardboard!’ Some weeks later I had asked Motaz if he had taken any pictures with his camera. He explained that he had been moving house and hadn’t had time. While Motaz and I cooked together in the kitchen over a few sessions, which involved trying to make a cake for his old foster family, I learnt more of his story.

Case Study – Motaz arrived in the country at 16, on his own. He lived with a large foster family in a smaller seaside town of Sidney on Sea. At the age of 18 Motaz was then moved to Basildon on Sea, told that he could live in a communal house with other people in a similar situation to himself, and it would be easier for him to get his benefits. Then, recently, at the age of 21 Motaz was told that he could no longer live in Basildon on Sea and that he must move back to Sidney on Sea where the rent was cheaper. Motaz now travels for fifty minutes on the bus each day to attend college, five minutes’ walk from his previous house, and the groups and friends that support him.

11 Name used is a pseudonym
Motaz remained upbeat in talking about his difficulties in housing, commenting on the particular support that he gained from the project workers at this group and another similar group in Basildon on Sea. When discussing his foster family, in order that I could help to make them a cake, he commented that he owed them a lot and now that he lived back in Sidney on Sea they were helping him again. However, he also spoke about the long bus journey that he had to take every time to groups and college and how he wished it was easier. Motaz’s changing concept of ‘home’ and place reflects the ever changing influences upon the lives of young asylum seekers and refugees. The inter-changing aspect of Motaz’s support also draws attention to the shifting and unstable legislation for young asylum seekers and refugees after the age of 18. As discussed in chapter two, with no clear guidelines in the UNHCR it becomes difficult for those working with young people to know what support to give as they leave child services (Stein 2006; Wade 2011). His story highlights the limited nature of applying chronological and psychological based models of age to situations and circumstances that are much more complex. However, Motaz had been lucky in the sense that the local authority of Basildon on Sea had continued to support him in housing until his twenty first birthday, something which is ever changing at different times, within different local authorities (Jones 2001; Burr Forthcoming). Both project workers spoke to me about the complexity of Motaz’s situation and the difficulty that was involved in trying to provide for young asylum seekers and refugees when they are after the age of 18 but still vulnerable and in need of support. They commented on the huge amount of support he had gained from his foster parents. This highlights the need for foster parents as a protective and preventative to enable a safe family unit, as outlined in the UNCRC.

The reinforced rhetoric of ‘us’ and ‘them’ so often seen in the tabloids works in conjunction with policies which aim to restrict migrants, as illustrated in chapter two (Robinson 2013). Within the research period I observed very little distinction, or separation between the young asylum seekers and refugees as discussed at the start of this chapter. However, at times issues of welfare rights were presented in group conversations and discussions. As a group of young people it was common that issues such as finding jobs, paying rent etc came up for volunteers as well as for refugees and asylum seekers. However, on some occasions even more serious concerns changed the group formation. At one particular group session Miriam’s suddenly said ‘we are going to have to move away from our house’. Her brother, Mataki was nervous and quickly said they were not.

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12 Name used is a pseudonym
13 Name used is a pseudonym
Miriam went on to explain that the council would be moving them from their house if it wasn’t tidy enough and that their roof had leaked and they hadn’t been able to fix it. This story brought a visible sense of fear to Miriam and Matak, and left volunteers, myself included, unsure of what to say. Similar situations to this, regarding issues of welfare, occurred within group sessions and suddenly presented a feeling of fear in an otherwise cheerful and chatty group session. Miriam and Matak’s conversation highlights the level of dependency and temporality that surrounds ‘refugees’ and ‘asylum seekers’ ‘homes’ (Griffiths 2002), and the tightening welfare system aimed at supporting them (Cunningham and Tomlinson 2005). Despite the over-riding discourse of temporality for those in the Diaspora. These young people, although dealing with changing ‘homes’ at times, had settled in their homes and used them as the sight of expression for other areas of their identities. The remaining half of this chapter will be used to discuss these.

Religion

Religious adherence and practice is far more common in many of the countries from which people come to seek refuge than in the highly secularized west (Pirouet 2011:107).

Pre-existing literature, such as Pirouet, made me aware that religion may play a large part in the formation of identities for young asylum seekers and refugees. Research (Valentine et al 2009) has suggested that often religious faith, such as being Muslim, forms more a part of young people’s lives and identities than their nationality, for example being Iranian. The importance of religion within my research may have been heightened somewhat due to its coincidence with Ramadan, as previously mentioned. As such many group members were absent from the group. However, this time created much discussion of religion within the group, providing useful insights into this aspect of the young people’s identities. This dialogue within the group highlighted another area of distinction between the volunteers and the young asylum seekers and refugees, reiterating the original quote by Pirouet (2011) which suggests a lack of religious importance to young people from the ‘highly secularized west’ (107). Volunteers did not express any reference to religion within the research, neither in conversations, pictures or the focus group indicating a lack of importance of religion to them, or a desire not to share this with the group or myself.

During one of the sessions of Ramadan there were only a few group members present, naturally this created conversations in the group about Ramadan and the absence of many of the members because of this. As previously discussed the absence of members was due to the central aspect of food within the group sessions. While eating dinner together one session I was asked by Motaz14 whether I would be fasting in Ramadan. I explained that I wasn’t Muslim and there was also no way

14 Name used is a pseudonym
I could go without food for that long! I replied by asking him why he wasn’t fasting, as I was aware he was Muslim:

Motaz: ‘It is hard in this country, no food, no drink, no sex it’s too difficult’

Motaz explained that when he was in his ‘home’ country he found it much easier, surrounded by family and friends, to adhere to Ramadan and the cultural expectations of the Muslim faith. He explained that he didn’t feel it worked in the UK because most of the country was not taking part in Ramadan. He pointed out another group member, who had dropped into the session earlier, but left before dinner:

Motaz: ‘Did you see him; he’s so weak and tired’.

Motaz had previously explained to me that he did identify himself as a ‘Muslim’ but did not attend mosque in the UK. He spoke of the difficulty that he found in trying to uphold his religious practices with many other distractions around. Motaz’s experiences highlight the reworking and transformation that occurs for migrant young people of the hegemonic narratives when immersed in a secularised culture (Valentine et al 2009).

Miriam and Matak were the only members of the group who outwardly described themselves as Christians, as opposed to Muslim. Miriam in particular was keen to express this in a conversation with myself and Motaz about Ramadan:

Miriam: If people ask me if I do it I say no because my one God is the truth

I later discovered, from small crosses that Miriam and Matak had tattooed on their wrists, that they were part of the Coptic Orthodox Church of which there is a small minority within their, majority Muslim, country of Sudan. Within the focus group discussion Miriam showed me some of the pictures she had taken which were of religious scenes hung on the walls of her family sitting room. She explained to me the relevance behind them, indicating the Holy Father in each one. She had also pointed out a picture of her brother Matak, at the bus stop waiting to go to church, ‘we go every week’. At the next session Miriam and Matak were telling the group excitedly about a church trip to Germany that they would be going on in the next few weeks. Miriam’s connection, in particular, to religion indicated an important part of her, and her families, life and identity in the UK. In contrast to Motaz’s reflections, Miriam and Matak’s religious practice appeared to be a growing part of their life in the UK, Berns McGowan’s (1999) work has suggested that often for those who are dislocated, religion can provide stability in otherwise unstable, transient lives.
If we want to understand how religion fits into young refugee and asylum seekers’ identities we can look at the different experiences of the group. For Motaz his identification with religion was reworked for his identification as a young person living in the UK. However for other members of the group taking part in Ramadan, and for Miriam and Matak, religion proved an important part of their identity in the UK and a chance to identify with other fellow Christians or Muslims. These experiences of faith bear contrast to the British members of the group who did not refer to religion in reference to their lives.

**Studying**

The settled nature of many of the young people was reflected within their expanding opportunities. Research, mainly from third sector agencies (Dryden – Perterson 2011; Gladwell 2011; Save the Children UK 2009; Stevenson and Willot 2007) has suggested that the young refugee and asylum seekers that they came into contact with often prioritise education within their lives in the U.K, seeing it as a chance to make something of themselves and their opportunity in a new country (Kohli 2002). For all the members of the group within my own research, studying presented as a key part of their lives and for the volunteers this had been key to their move to Basildon on Sea. Much of the day to day conversation revolved around young people talking about college or university. Many of the young asylum seekers and refugees expressed an interest in signing up to more courses, and the project workers were particularly helpful in advising them with this. Within the focus group I spoke to Aamil individually. Aamil was quiet in the focus group, reflecting his more reserved character; however he was enthusiastic to show me pictures that he had taken of a carpentry photography display in the hallway of his college. As we looked at the pictures together, he explained that he went to the local college and was studying carpentry; he hoped that he would one day be able to make pieces such as those in the picture. Many of the other young people were learning skills such as brick laying and hairdressing at local colleges. Doyle and O’Toole’s (2013) research has highlighted the importance of learning skills for many young asylum seekers and refugees, in that it gives them opportunities to become more employable in the future. Their research has also suggested that for many, developing skills can provide motivation while waiting for decisions from asylum applications. As stated, I am unsure of the status of applications for the young people, but there certainly seemed a determination and eagerness to learn within many of them.

Among my time with the group, as well as their desire to study and learn skills, it emerged that they were all dedicated to keep learning English. All group members, in my opinion, spoke English to an adequate or high standard and conversations between them and volunteers were fluent and
natural. At one session Janet, a volunteer, had devised a ‘get to know you’ guess who game, which involved writing down the answers to questions about ourselves, including languages that we spoke, and others having to guess who it was that was being described. Most of the asylum seekers and refugees in the group found it really funny that they were easy to guess because it wasn’t likely that any of the volunteers would speak Farsi, or Arabic. I joked with Motaz:

Me: I could speak Arabic

Motaz: Do you?

Me: No, of course not

Motaz: You could, I could teach you Arabic and you could teach me English?

Me: But you already know and speak English?

Motaz: Not well enough, I need to know more, it is the only way to get on in England. My friend told me about a Chinese man who had been in this country for 25 years and still he cannot speak English! What is the point? It’s Stupid.

Motaz’s anecdote reflects the pressure that asylum seekers and refugees face in needing to integrate and recognising the significance of language for this integration (Doyle and O’Toole 2013). This has been reflected in recent policy (2007) which showed that not knowing the language was a key barrier to ‘Britishness’ (Valentine et al 2009).

Volunteering

Although going in to the group with very few expected findings, the aspect of volunteering in the young people's lives and identities was a particular surprise to me, and, I feel, makes a significant contribution to current discussions and debates in the field.

When looking at mainstream public perceptions, reinforced through the tabloids, suggesting Britain is being swamped with economic migrants (Gale 2004; Wazana 2004), it is perhaps not surprising to think of young people searching for more education opportunities. However, a constant emerging theme from within my research was the influence of volunteering within the young people's lives. This was of course obvious with the volunteers themselves. However, throughout my time with the group I discovered that all of the young refugee and asylum seekers volunteered elsewhere in the town. This emerged in the focus group, pictures and in dialogue within the group. Miriam and her brother Matak often spoke about the volunteering that they were doing at the time. Matak shared one picture with the group of his volunteering at a
community garden in the town, and he was often telling the group about going there. When I chatted with Matak about the rest of his photos he said that he had taken them all in one day at the community garden, these included pictures of some of the people that he worked with there:

Which is your favourite photo?

Gardening

And why?

Because they have a good job and people are friendly.

Similarly Miriam volunteered at the garden; she told me one session that she loved going to the gardens because from there she could see the whole of Basildon on Sea. At the start of another session Miriam was particularly excited to tell me that she had also been to visit a charity shop where she would be volunteering in the next few weeks. I spoke with Miriam a bit more about her volunteering and she explained that while she was not at college over the summer she wanted things to do and that she liked to meet new people.

Aamil was often at the young people’s centre before the rest of the group, and he explained to me that it was because he volunteered all day in the kitchen at the young people’s centre, making food for the drop in sessions that the centre ran. Each session he spoke about what he had been cooking each day, and was once keen to show me a beef joint of meat that he would be cooking the next day for the group. Aamil seemed enthusiastic about the volunteering, although he was discussing with the project workers at the group how he might be able to work slightly less hours so that he could have time for college and his other commitments as well as volunteering. Some of the young people in the group were also involved in a youth theatre and circus group in the town and had performed a version of the Asylum Monologues during refugee week. Miriam had taken a picture of some of the rehearsals for this. When this photo was shown in the focus group it created much excitement and discussion within the group with many of the group members talking about the fun they had had performing it and the volunteers watching it. Many theories surrounding integration, suggest that often the responsibility relies with the immigrants themselves, rather than the host nation (Valentine et al 2009). The young people within the research were actively integrating themselves within the community reinforcing this notion.

If we want to understand how young asylum seekers and refugees position themselves within society this is a prime example. Contrary to right wing, punitive rhetoric of common claims of ‘foreign scroungers’ (Daily Express 2012) these young people appear to be contributing to our
society. This image depicts what Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, described in his electoral campaign, in 2010, as ‘The Big Society’. This concept has continued on from Douglas Hurd, Conservative Home Secretary in 1980’s, concept of ‘active citizenship’, pushing to get young people to help those less fortunate than themselves (Kisby 2010). The Prime Minister is now pushing for a ‘Big Society’, in which he hopes ‘there is a way of encouraging young people to volunteer and get involved’ (Cameron 2011).

The contributions that these young people are making to society imply a sense of ownership, that they feel a need to contribute to the country in which they have chosen to settle and use it as an opportunity to develop skills and meet people. The very concept of young asylum seekers and refugees helping others stands in binary opposition to prevailing discourses of vulnerability and risk that society too easily places upon their identities (Giner 2007: 249). In contributing to ‘The Big Society’ the young people are immediately positioning themselves in the collective ‘us’ and not ‘the other’, as is so often claimed. They are rejecting the image of themselves as the vulnerable ‘less fortunate’ that the Prime Minister suggests we should looking to help and placing themselves within the mainstream society. The notion of ‘Big Society’ has faced some widespread criticism from those that feel it attempts to distract attention away from the large-scale welfare cuts, shifting responsibility onto citizens, rather than the government themselves (Kisby 2010). The young refugees and asylum seekers within the research did not appear to be making a conscious decision to reject or work against these claims, but their doing so is inspirational and informative not only to this research, but also to wider discussions and public opinion. Woodock (2010) noted, within his project, that: ‘witnessing those tabloid-reviled asylum seekers and supposedly selfish economic migrants giving up their own time to help out more vulnerable members of our community really has changed attitudes.’
Chapter 5 Conclusion

Before beginning my research I had expected to find the lives of the young asylum seekers and refugees vulnerable and difficult. My initial question of how these young people perceived themselves and their identities was proposed due to my previous, literature based, research and the current, common public perceptions. I expected that these young people would have difficulty in forming their identities, due to their status as asylum seekers and refugees. My research time with the group challenged these pre-conceptions and drew attention to the particular resilience, illustrated throughout the findings of the research.

Key Findings

As discussed, all of the young people arrived into the country to seek asylum as children. Their situations as children meant they were caught within the troubling binary oppositions of what it is to be a child and what it is to be an asylum seeker (Davidson 2011; Giner 2007). Western models of childhood and Attachment Theory (Ainsworth 1963; Bowlby 1940) would suggest that these children, whose childhoods have been unsettled, are likely to experience problems later on in life. As such many studies point to the widespread mental health problems affecting many young asylum seekers and refugees due to their fragmented childhoods. While not denying that this is a troubling issue for asylum seekers and refugees, this research has illustrated the resilience of this particular group of young people.

Recent research has paid attention to the way in which young people can thrive from situations of adversity within their childhoods, and the due regard that must be paid to this;

> Whatever stresses an individual may have encountered in early years, he or she need not forever more be at the mercy of the past... children’s resilience must be acknowledged every bit as much as their vulnerability’ (Schaffer 1996:47).

The current model of resilience focuses upon wellbeing, and what it means to be a ‘healthy teenager’ (Robb 2007:204). The young people within this research have demonstrated their development of ‘homes’ for themselves within the UK, using these as the site to construct their identities. Their settlement in the UK is reflected through, for some, the forming of new relationships and for all members of the group this is reflected in the formation and continuation of the group itself. Neo-liberal ideas, reflected in recent government policies, suggest that young peoples’ emotional literacy and spirituality are key to resilience and positive mental health (ibid); ‘young people who had a religious faith
apparently expressed a more hopeful and positive attitude to life than their more sceptical and secular peers’ (Francis and Robbins cited in Robb 2007:205). The young people within this research demonstrated the importance, and reworking, of their religious faith within their lives in the UK. Central to much of the research was that these young people did not use the terms ‘asylum seekers’ or ‘refugees’ and did not describe themselves as such. It appeared for them there was much more to their lives in the UK than the labels that society has chosen to put on them. The labels, as such, appeared important for their access to support, such as the group, but did not feature in the way they saw themselves as young people.

The resilience demonstrated by these young people must, however, be acknowledged within its wider context. These young people appear to have support networks, despite their changing nature, around them and the influence of the group upon their stability is evident. It cannot be forgotten that for these young people their situation on arrival to the UK could have been different. Studies such as this must not forget those children and young people who are unknown to support networks, social services or even national statistics. As touched upon in chapter two, there is a large percentage of children trafficked into the country or who disappear shortly after their arrival. Talking about the resilience of the young people in this study must be done so in the broader context of migration and its ‘darker side’ (Davidson 2011). These possibilities illustrate the importance both of further research and of support systems for children and young people.

Future Directions

This paper has highlighted a new area for further academic, public and political concern and research: the area of volunteering and the contributions that young immigrants are making to their surrounding communities. This has been particularly illuminating to think of alongside the predominant public discourse placed upon these young people; ‘In spite of Britain’s multicultural population, migration has been seen as a concession to be granted reluctantly rather than a positive benefit to the economy or society (Sales 2002:457). These young people chose not to ‘other’ themselves or actively identify themselves as ‘asylum seekers’ or ‘refugees’, but rather recognized themselves as part of ‘The Big Society’ (Cameron 2011).

Given the time constraints of this research it would be interesting to undertake a longitudinal biographical study, giving participants cameras at multiple times throughout their lives as both
children and young people. This would allow for a deeper understanding of identities and the importance of, and cultural constructs, of age in relation to theories such as resilience and transitions. I, as a researcher, would be fascinated to follow up research with the young people in this study in a few years time, taking a biographical stance to see the ways in which their lives and perceptions of themselves have altered. It would also be interesting to undertake similar research with young asylum seekers and refugees throughout the UK, both in support groups and not, to allow for research to be further generalised and to make contributions and suggestions to welfare and inclusion policies.

By following an ethnographic approach within the research it has allowed for myself, as researcher, and readers of this paper to be informed by the young people themselves about their own identities and the aspects of their lives within the UK. Nevertheless, there is still more to learn and academics must be careful not to leave research in this area up to the third sector agencies that are left to support these young people. It is only through developing research into identities that public and political opinions will change about this valuable group of young people.
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