

Stories Too Big for a Case File: Unaccompanied Young People Confront the Hostile Environment in Pandemic Times

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Aissatou

Children Caring on the Move

Evangelia Prokopiou 

University of Northampton, UK

Lucy Leon

University College London, UK

Musharraf Abdullayeva

Children Caring on the Move

Mirfat

Children Caring on the Move

Osman

Children Caring on the Move

Pauline Iyambo

Children Caring on the Move

Rachel Rosen 

University College London, UK

Rebin

Children Caring on the Move

Veena Meeto

University College London, UK

Zak

Children Caring on the Move

In collaboration with Louis Brown

Corresponding author:

Rachel Rosen, UCL Social Research Institute, University College London, London WC1H 0NR, UK.

Email: r.rosen@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

What imagery best evokes the violence unaccompanied child migrants feel when asked, or made, to tell their story over and over, as well as the violence of not being asked nor being heard? How can we show both strength and struggle in difficult times and often uncaring places such as the UK's hostile migration regime? Taking these questions as a jumping off point, this article offers three key responses, drawing on experiences of co-producing the research-based film, *Stories too big for a case file*, which accompanies this text. These reflections highlight the importance of participatory, change-oriented research that 'cares' for participants; the value of creative forms of knowledge production and aesthetic modes of expression for communicating the affective complexities of research material; and, the importance of turning the representational gaze outwards towards systems and institutions to avoid situating social inequities as individual failings and to, instead, invite viewers to 'walk together' in solidarity with research interlocutors.

Keywords

care, COVID, migration, hostile environment, online research, participatory research, separated child migrants, unaccompanied asylum seeking children



It is never easy nor comfortable to turn rich and textured research conversations about people's lives into a brief article or a short film. In putting together our contribution for this special issue, we asked ourselves: What imagery best evokes the violence unaccompanied children and young people¹ feel when asked, or made, to tell their story over and over – to the Home Office, solicitors, social workers, and more, as well as the violence of not being asked nor being heard? How can we show both strength and struggle in difficult times (a global pandemic) and often uncaring places (the UK's hostile migration regime)? In what follows, we discuss our ethical, political, and intellectual responses to these questions in relation to the film this text accompanies: *Stories too big for a case file*.

Stories

Our film begins with multiple overlapping voices. In this soundscape, single words or phrases emerge, their meaning fleetingly coming into view and then fading into the clamour. 'Overspeaking' is what this layering of voices is labelled in the written transcripts of our research interviews. This happens a lot as we learn to wait out the time delays, static and even disconnections of online communication. These are symptomatic of having to shift our participatory research online because of the COVID pandemic. But this 'overspeaking', which we transpose from research to film, is not simply a mistake that happens because of inadequate wifi, old phones, or limited data plans which unaccompanied young people have to contend with, including while in the 'care' of the state.

In this mix of voices, overlaid on introductory text which deconstructs in the crackling of static like a bad videocall connection, a feeling of pressure and multitude is evoked and experienced, rather than simply told. The sounds and imagery are suggestive of the collective stories and common problems unaccompanied young people face in the UK's hostile environment in pandemic times. They convey what it is like for so many young people to navigate 'the system', a tangled web of legal, social, and political institutions, rules and individuals who are meant to care, but often do not (Crafter et al., 2021; Rosen et al., 2021).

Our film speaks to the substance of our research with unaccompanied young people and how we are collectively analysing the conditions of their lives. 'We' are the co-authors of this text and the co-creators of the film it accompanies, alongside artist/filmmaker Louis Brown. For almost 2 years, we have been working together as Young Researchers with migration experiences and university-based researchers on the Children Caring on the Move (CCOM) project.² We are investigating the experiences of children and young people who have come to England without parents or carers. We are particularly interested in unaccompanied young people's experiences of care: what care means to them, who cares – including young people themselves, and how the hostile environment shapes care.

Stories too big for a case file

In our film, individual voices emerge from the cacophony. They show that everyone is unique despite facing similar challenges: 'Because I can't walk in your shoes, remember?' is how one of the Young Researchers puts it in a zoom interview with a participant

one day. The individual voices speak back to the violence that unaccompanied young people feel when they are reduced to a case file in the hands of the Home Office or social services, especially when such files are riddled with mistakes and suspicions. As one participant insists in the film, 15 minutes for the Home Office to read a case file is not enough: 'That's your life in there.'

The surfacing of unique voices in the film reflects our effort to hear what unaccompanied young people want to say about themselves and their experiences, and to depict this in our film. Our mantra since the start has been 'this is not a Home Office interview', in reference to young people's experience of facing disbelieving questioning and their limited rights to set the pace, flow, or content of asylum interviews. We hope, and like to think, that conversations with our research team help to punctuate the moments of prolonged and anxious waithood (Rosen, 2021) that participants speak about so eloquently in the film. Building on the participatory model of research we have been developing together,³ this text and film represent our collective efforts to 'listen with respect' (see discussion about the sociability and solidarity across difference that is implied here in Rosen (2022) to each other and the participants we work with.

We began the process of making our film by discussing: What creative form do we want to use? What stories are we hearing and what stories do we want to tell? Who do we want to speak to? We agreed that a film would be a compelling way to reach a wide-ranging audience. For us, film can offer textured understandings and affective engagements with how hard the system is, depicting its impact on the most banal moments as much as life changing events. As Young Researchers and university-based researchers, we reflected on the themes we had been hearing about in our joint interviews with unaccompanied young people: indeterminate periods of waiting, having identities stolen or demeaned, being subject to control and surveillance, precarity, and a desire to care and be cared for regardless of age or status. We spoke about the ways that the United Kingdom's exclusionary immigration regime (Rosen et al., 2021) limits or denies legal routes to entry for young people on the move, restricts social support and subjects them to a climate of suspicion and nativist racism (Rosen and Crafter, 2018).

At the same time, we wanted the film to speak to young people's efforts to confront the hostile environment's destructive effects, which have been exacerbated by a global pandemic. The film conveys the everyday ways unaccompanied young people refuse to be ground down, mistreated and dehumanised: through exercise, study, affirmations, prayer, helping others, and making new families with friends. As one of the participants says in the film, it is also about continuing to 'fight', often for years, for the right to asylum and to prove the basic fact that 'this is me'.

Following our early discussions, the university-based researchers in our team combed through our interview transcripts searching for quotes from young people. We looked for those that had been specifically mentioned in our planning discussions, as well as others which spoke to the themes we had identified. Each Young Researcher then chose a selection of participants' quotes they wanted to 're-voice'. In some cases, Young Researchers chose quotes from interviews they had conducted and felt intimately connected to; in others, they chose quotes that spoke to their own experiences.

Social distancing rules meant we were unable to be physically together to record and produce the material. As we continued discussing the film, we realised that need not be

a barrier. Instead, we sought to make experiences and research in the time of the pandemic visible and audible. We agreed the team would record still and moving images on our smart phones, just as our communication with our research team, participants, and others in our lives had become framed by rectangular screens and the vagaries of digital connectivity.

Heeding Tuck and Yang's (2014) critique of pain and suffering narratives, familiar in depictions of individual children gazing mournfully up at the camera (Ruddick, 2003) or alone in hardship or even horrifying deaths, like that of the Syrian-Kurdish toddler Alan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach, our cameras turn the other way. We seek to avoid tropes which reduce unaccompanied young people to 'vulnerable victims' and tragedy (Duffy-Syedi and Haleem Najibi, 2022). Instead, our gaze focuses on the places which young people spend their time, the structures that entrap and harm, as well as spaces of strength, care, hope and solidarity. Our smart phones recreate the bedrooms, streets, and parks young people have spoken to us from, as well as the imagery they have narrativized in their interviews. The gaze of the cameras focuses on what unaccompanied young people might see, an effort at situating them as protagonists of the film at the same time as recognising that we have become a part of their stories through our research encounters and film production.

The unique voices which emerge from the cacophony are words spoken, and lives narrated, during our research. Interview transcripts can be troubling, a flattening of complex lives, difficult to understand as they are devoid of context, tone, and interaction. Just as we have learned that the moments that are marked in the cold language of transcription as 'inaudible' or 'cuts off' do not have to be brutal end points for our online dialogues, we have found that the medium of the film allows us to breathe new life into truncated words and phrases on paper. No person is ever just one sentence or a single story,⁴ an insight we seek to capture in the film through young people's re-voiced words in combination with dynamic, fractured, and overlapping images. The complex layering of voicing, listening, and re-voicing; scenes witnessed, imagery regenerated, and images made; and multiple interpretative layers are an effort to convey the textured and relational lives that people lead. We do this to assert that people's stories are always *too big for a case file* and to speak back to the ways that labels of 'migrant', 'asylum-seeker', 'unaccompanied minor', and 'child' mask people's complexity and richness.

Throughout this process, the artist/filmmaker Louis Brown, from East London Cable,⁵ has been pivotal in helping us develop our rough ideas and analytic vision, and turn our lo-fi visuals and recorded testimonies, into a powerful visual and auditory response.

Unaccompanied young people confront the hostile environment in pandemic times

We see our film as part of our larger commitment to critical, change-oriented research. It speaks to the public, as well as the Home Office, social workers, and solicitors. The voices and imagery which set out the complexities of unaccompanied lives invite efforts to understand how young people feel and what they think by asking the viewer to walk alongside unaccompanied young people. Our hope is that the film will reach a broader

audience than text alone. More, we hope that the film's provocative visual, auditory, and emotive languages will serve as a catalyst for dialogue, urging representatives of 'the system' to analyse the injustices of their approach and to change how they treat unaccompanied young people.

Our film also speaks to other unaccompanied young people. We hope that they recognise their experiences in this film. We hope that the cinematic form, layered imagery, and complex soundscape helps the film speak across differences of language, immigration status and age. Perhaps most importantly of all, we hope that when they see this film, they know that we are not just doing this research for ourselves but for others too. We do it because we care about them, and we want them to know they are not alone.

Authors' note


Each author has chosen their preferred way of being named. We agree on the importance of crediting every team member as a matter of respect, equity, and decolonising social inquiry (Bejarano et al., 2019). We have ongoing discussions about balancing these principles with the potential risks of exposure, especially for people with insecure immigration status and in the care of the state. Research participants have self-chosen pseudonyms.

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ORCID iDs

Evangelia Prokopiou  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0827-6549>

Rachel Rosen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9916-5910>

Notes

1. We use the term 'unaccompanied young people' broadly and colloquially, in reference to those who may have been separated from parents/primary carers at some point on migration journeys. When used in policy contexts, 'unaccompanied' refers to migrating without adult relatives; however, many young people maintain transnational relationships or reunite with parents/primary carers and are often accompanied by other kin and non-kin adults and children. While the majority of our participants have applied for asylum, not all unaccompanied young people do so. We recognise that many of these young people may be age contested or not view themselves as 'children' from a social standpoint, while recognising the importance of legal recognition for being under 18 years old.
2. <https://www.ccomstudy.com/>
3. We trialled different approaches to data generation and, together, we selected, refined, and practised our methods. These draw on material cultures research, as well as photo and video elicitation. Our aim with these methods is to stimulate research conversations and add material texture to interview talk, especially about topics that are time and space sensitive (Mizen and Ofofu-Kusi, 2010) or difficult to introduce verbally (Croghan et al., 2008), in ways which allow participants to determine what to share and how (Kenten, 2010).

4. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en
5. <http://elc.vision/>

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Author biographies

Aissatou is a Young Researcher on the Children Caring on the Move project and has been involved in shaping the research design and ethics, leading on interviews with unaccompanied young people, and data analysis and dissemination. Aissatou is committed to learning about young people's experiences of care to make improvements to the system and making unaccompanied young people's lives better. She is studying Level 3 BTEC Science at college and aspiring to be a medical doctor.

Evangelia Prokopiou is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology and lead for the Diversity, Community and Identity SIG of the Centre for Psychology and Social Sciences at the University of Northampton. Her key area of teaching and research interest focuses on dialogical self theory; the impact of immigration and cultural change on identities, families and communities; and on the constructions of diverse, 'non-normative' childhoods. She is particularly interested in exploring

the ways children and young people with multiple cultural affiliations construct and negotiate their identities in culturally diverse settings. This interest has led Evangelia to become involved in a number of projects exploring child language brokering in schools, young people's experiences in supplementary schools and separated child migrants' experiences of care and caring relationships.

Lucy Leon works as a researcher at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. Her background is in practice, policy and research working with refugee and migrant children, young people and families in the third sector. Lucy previously worked as a Research Assistant at UCL's Social Research Institute on the Children Caring on the Move project and prior to that, as a policy and practice adviser for refugee and migrant children at The Children's Society.

Musharraf Abdullayeva has been actively engaged in advocating locally and nationally for the rights of refugees, migrants and those seeking asylum, as well as the climate crisis, disability rights and youth rights more generally. Musharraf's personal experience of navigating the UK's asylum maze has led her to want to fight to improve the situation and experience of others, through the field of law. Musharraf is currently studying Criminology at university and is hoping to explore this further in her career path as a lawyer.

Mirfat is a Young Researcher on the Children Caring on the Move project and has been involved in all stages of the research. She is passionate about changing the system and people's mindsets to achieve bright futures for unaccompanied young people, so they don't have to go through further pain and damage. Mirfat has studied Aviation and Engineering and is hoping to reach the sky by going onto study Aerospace Engineering at university.

Osman is from Sudan and travelled to the UK when he was a teenager. He was an asylum seeker for almost 4 years, during which time, he joined the Children Caring on the Move project as a Young Researcher. Osman was central to designing project research methods and exploring ethical issues. He plans to study Biomedical Science at university, aspires to become a surgeon, and is passionate about making change in the wider community and helping others.

Pauline Iyambo is a Criminology graduate and was awarded for her outstanding performance on the module Diversity and Discrimination. She is a young migrant researcher on the Children Caring on the Move project and has contributed to all stages of the research. Pauline is passionate about changing the system for unaccompanied young people and improving the care they receive. She would like to see institutions treat unaccompanied young people as humans, with dignity, respect, and compassion, and for young migrants to have a positive perspective on the care they receive and be able to advocate for others in the system.

Rachel Rosen is an Associate Professor of Childhood at the UCL Social Research Institute and co-lead of the Children Caring on the Move study. Her research, teaching, and public engagement focus on children and families with precarious immigration status, and their practices of sustenance, care, and solidarity in the face of the restrictive welfare and border regimes which shape their lives.

Rebin is a Young Researcher on the Children Caring on the Move project and has been involved in all stages of the research. He is committed to trying to improve things for asylum seekers and

young people who came to the UK without their parents. Rebin is working at the moment and hoping to set up his own business in the future.

Veena Meeto is a Lecturer in Sociology at the Social Research Institute, University College London. She is a postdoctoral researcher on the Children Caring on the Move project, working closely with the Young Researchers on research design, peer-led data generation, analysis and dissemination.

Zak is a Young Researcher on the Children Caring on the Move project. He is doing the research to hear and share stories about the issues unaccompanied young people face, including challenges with mental health because life is difficult. Zak is from Sudan and came to the UK at a young age. Being part of the research has helped Zak speak out and send a message of change. He wants all unaccompanied young people to receive the care they deserve and be treated as human beings. He is currently working and studying and hopes to become an engineer.

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