

Unaccompanied Refugee Young People: The social and cultural construction of identity

Máire Stedman

Young people who come seeking asylum can potentially lose their sense of ability to *become* something due to the constraints of societal stories, which present them in a negative light. These dominant narratives, which exist in relation to refugees and asylum seekers, can influence their sense of ability to mould their own narrative and with it, their confidence to develop particular storylines producing a sense of self.

Adolescence is considered a time in which identity gets formed (Erikson 1968) although this concept is described differently in different cultural contexts (Shweder & Bourne 1991; Sue & Sue 1990). Nevertheless refugee young people have left their familiar cultural context, which offers particular possibilities for being, such as how to behave as a man/woman, young adult. Expectations from non Western contexts can be quite different to Western ones, and has been the subject of cross-cultural psychology (Sue & Sue 1990; Context 44 1999; Shweder & Bourne 1991). The cultural context from which young people have come and therefore their culturally learned normative patterns and with it their blueprint for *becoming* (Gilles Deleuze); is the template or sense of self with which they come into therapy.

This coupled with their notion of what they can *become*, based on their cultural template (obviously individually interpreted) and doxic patterns (Krause 2002) [see definition below] may nonetheless (possibly in parts), not be a good fit for their current cultural context, and different from that cultural context's normative pattern. Therefore, one of the tasks of the therapist, who is positioned in and therefore knowledgeable about the current cultural context, is to enable the young person to *transport* what they value from their culture of origin into a different cultural context with different opportunities, and therefore, a different set of possibilities for becoming. One of the functions of the therapeutic encounter is to help identify the values that the young person holds dear at a period in their lives when, within most cultures they are forming their identity; so that the therapist can identify possibilities for *becoming* in a way which holds on to their values and sense of self. Slugoski and Ginsberg (1989) warn that: "*The dominant discourse positing identity achievement as psychologically normative is especially pernicious because it can lead to a stage of false consciousness. That is, the dominant set of personality descriptive discourse devices within a culture,.....will be shared by all members of the culture and will be presumed by each to be shared by all*". (p. 48)

The therapist, having got a sense of the young person's values and how they relate to their culture of origin, has a responsibility to hold onto that sense in opening up *flight paths*ⁱ (Gilles Deleuze), which make sense of that culturally held sense of self which therapist and client need to carefully craft, co-evolve and bring forth in their discussions. The therapist is in a different location and can serve as a bridge to '*becoming*', being aware of the possibilities within that cultural context, and having recently acquired a knowledge of, what the client holds dear, within their value system, normally significantly evolved from within their cultural context. It is critical that therapists let go of or suspend their culturally held beliefs in order to be available to the young person in front of them (Dwivedi 1996). As we are aware many of those culturally held beliefs are not always available to us, (doxic patterns) which is why it is important for the therapist to draw on other sources of knowledge such as interpreters, bi-lingual co-workers and literature (Tribe & Ravel; 2003 Context 44 1999; Messant 2003.) as well as country information, if they are not familiar with the conflict in the young person's country of origin. Therapists who are from the same culture or other therapists who have had significant experience of working with that particular ethnic or cultural group, have a different set of constraints in that they can make assumptions based on prior knowledge, which may not sufficiently bring forth the voice of the young person. Therefore practices of self reflexivity are critical for all therapists involved with this work.

Many refugee young people find themselves in a totally unfamiliar context which challenges many of their culturally held beliefs, at a time when they are also forming their own identity as adults and establishing themselves in a new as well as very different environment. They may continue to be influenced by familial and culture of origin patterns, while at the same time having to make adjustments to totally different cultural and ethical values. There is no blueprint from which to rebel or conform, other than one that they have not yet quite assimilated. Britt Krause (2002) references *doxic patterns* which she describes (quoting Bourdieu (1990) a sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher) as: "*The coincidence of the objective structures and the internalised structures which provides the illusion of immediate understanding, characteristic of the familiar universe, and which at the same time excludes from that experience any enquiry as to its own conditions of possibility. [p.20]*" Krause goes on to state: "*it is part of our work – to facilitate making doxic experiences, or some of them, conscious, at least to the extent that these*

experiences can be reflected upon and, if need be, changed or understood in a new light" (Krause p.38 *ibid*).

For many young people attempting to express ideas about who they are has many obstacles, not least of which is the immediate obstacle of having what they say, translated into English (for a significant percentage, whose first language is not English). This highlights the need for an innovative approach to interpreting. Quite often I find myself in the middle of a session with a young person and an interpreter and stop to have a conversation with the interpreter, in front of the young person, about a particular word or concept which they are trying to express, to ensure that I have grasped exactly what it is that the young person wants to express. Sometimes the desire to express the 'gist' of what the young person is saying, can lead to only part of the story being expressed or a concept being translated, but without the range of other possibilities for meaning making, including culturally specific nuances.

Working as I did for many years at the Medical Foundation, I was very fortunate to have access to a group of highly professional interpreters who were in essence bi-lingual co-workers. Sometimes they would interject, when they became familiar with my style of working, and explain that this was how a concept could translate but that there were other possibilities. This was where the expertise of the young person came into play in clarifying what it was that they were trying to express. (Although Krause (2002) warns us that it is not always possible to bring all doxic patterns to awareness). Sessions became like a tri-partite excavation, with three different foci coming together to craft and give life to a picture or story that fitted for the young person [Stedman 2003]. Young people have in turn valued the modelling which this has offered and used it in other contexts.

It is important that the context for such conversations is explained to both parties. One interpretation that a young person might make is that what they are saying is being scrutinised from a position of disbelief - hardly surprising, given the wider context of disbelief surrounding refugee experiences. From an interpreter's point of view it could feel like their linguistic skills are somehow being questioned. Also not surprising given the hierarchical nature of many organisations, where the extent of the skills which many interpreters bring is not always valued. (Tribe, R. & Ravel, H. 2003) Many words do not always translate (directly) across languages (see Hoffman, E. (1989) 'Lost in translation'). These conversations are akin in many ways to the introduction of the reflecting team idea (Andersen, T. 1987) or 'definitional ceremony' (White, 2000, 2007) into therapy sessions and need a similar explanation as to what is happening so that the reasoning is not misinterpreted.

Conversations with young people (once a trusting therapeutic relationship has been formed [see Stedman

2003]) indicate just how disoriented they can be on arrival in the UK. For example young men and women find themselves offered alcohol at parties, which are an opportunity to integrate with other young people of their age. They have often not had an opportunity to work out what kind of relationship they would like to have with alcohol, if any. The laws of the British society state that they must be over 18. Many of their familial and religious beliefs state that alcohol is taboo. Mourning, as they often are, their loss of culture and family (many have had familial and close friends killed or seriously injured) [see Eisenbruch, M.; 1990]; rebelling against what they stand for, often does not feel right. However their new cultural context states that the only restrictions relate to the sale of alcohol.

Alcohol can lead to loss of inhibitions and a number of young people have experienced sexual abuse and consequently are in the process of thinking about how they feel about sex and sexuality. Once again there are pointers from culture of origin and family (which may not necessarily always be in harmony) but the dominant cultural code in the UK is often about safe sex and protection against sexually transmitted diseases. There can be quite a different moral code relating to these issues which the young person is left to make sense of.

Even the psychotherapeutic model or the sense of meaning making arising out of the interaction between young person and therapist, is culturally mediated.

Laurence Kirmayer reminds us "*that every system of psychotherapy depends on implicit models of the self, which in turn are based on cultural concepts of the person. The cultural concept of the person that underwrites most forms of psychotherapy is based on Euro American values of individualism*" (Kirmayer 2007) Anthropology has been a rich source of knowledge as well as alternative ways of thinking.

An 18 year old Afghan young man was in a real quandary when his younger and more outgoing brother appeared on the scene – what was he to do? My client was afraid that he would not be able to uphold the Islamic as well as Afghan cultural expectations. I checked what his fears related to and recognising his brother's outgoing personality as well as having some rudimentary personal experience of the British education system, he stated that his worry related to whether he would be able to stop him from getting involved with girls, alcohol and or drugs.

Although we continued to reference his brother from time to time, some months later when I enquired how he was feeling now, about being a carer for his brother, he was able to comment on how his values and expectations had shifted some what. He smiled and said "Well he has a girlfriend" but he hasn't done the "naughty thing yet". We looked at the adjustments which he had made and how he had arrived at a compromise that fitted for his evolving sense of self as a carer for his younger brother but in a cultural context which differed from their country of origin. He was

able to evaluate his own shifting position and identify the many small steps which we discussed along the way. He commented to me, from a position of knowing more about British Society, 'you were so patient with me and never tried to change what I was thinking, you must have thought I was crazy'. I on the other hand wanted to create a safe space where he could reflect and consequently feel confident in asserting the values and beliefs that fitted for him and the situation. We looked back at the different steps, and he was able to identify how his thinking had changed. His religion was very important to him and he was able to see that he was a lot more conservative than his brother but he was pleased that he was able to shift and accommodate a different sense of who his brother had become. There were still taboo areas, as outlined in his quote above, about which he recognised he would not (at this point in time at least – if ever) want to shift.

Gergen (2008) comments: "*For many anguished people, the affirming voice of the therapist may remove plaguing doubts and restore a sense of ontological security. With potentials restored, they may also move more effectively in the extended dances of relationship.*" (p. 344)

A great deal of discussions with young people, pertain to how they may be seen by others, e.g. school/college friends. Information about them placed in the public domain has a defining impact on them. Thus for example, when there was a programme on BBC entitled 'Tea with the Taliban' (prior to the war in Afghanistan) a number of Afghan young people that I saw were distressed by these images. These young people were upset about the fact that their country was portrayed as one with enormous poverty and factional divisions and they expressed an embarrassment about this. Leaving aside any discussions about the morality of acts committed by the Taliban, I shared with them some of the things that I saw when I looked at that programme. These called forth subjugated narratives, which I hoped would challenge the dominant narratives, only serving to further depress the young people. I said that I saw a warm welcome with which the journalists were greeted and the hospitable way in which they were offered tea, in circumstances, on the side of a mountain, where it was difficult to prepare tea. Although this may be a skill perfected by many in those regions, it could nevertheless be seen as an accomplishment for many Westerners whose patience would have been considerably challenged by such circumstances! This very quickly led to a *thickening* of my description, where different young people enhanced this alternative image with varying additions. Some picked up on the hospitality issue, taking off with great enthusiasm to inform me of the many acts of hospitality that Afghans are famous for. Others choose to pick up on how resilient Afghans were. Their change in demeanour was electrifying. A little spark in a positive direction brought forth a *thickening* of these preferred descriptions.

Ugandan young people that I saw, despite being from the city, were questioned about lions and tigers. This was not the image that they would have wanted for themselves, but one that they had imposed upon them by the perception (or misperception) of classmates. Narratives of who they were, were being defined, and thus potentially restricting who they might become. Therefore it is important to open up the wonderful phrase used by Gilles Deleuzeⁱⁱ, 'swarms of difference' so that alternative points can be constructed with the young person, which prioritises the values which they may hold dear.

A brother and sister from Riwanda were quite stuck and felt unable to engage with anything within the UK. They felt terribly guilty that they had partly slept through and remained in hiding during the massacre of their entire family.

There were days when this story was too much to bear and they wanted to discuss practical things and others when they were tortured by such intense feelings that they wanted to go over elements in great detail. I thought that it was important to bear witness to this pain, but I did not want them to continue to re-experience the trauma in a way which was not beginning to deal with their distress.

One day, through some questioning, the focus shifted and I picked up on an aside comment about how their father had instructed them to remain upstairs if they ever heard any noises at night. On this day we were able to follow a different storyline, one which connected with the importance of the authority of parents culturally. This one sentence provided a 'flight path' for them to reinterpret their lack of response, as one of carrying out an instruction given by their father, which was to save their lives. Gradually they came to accept that resistance would have been of little value in the face of a machete. This enabled them to thicken their storyline some more. Instead of seeing themselves as guilty of neglect, they were able to see themselves as young people who followed the instructions of their parents. A concept very dear to many African young people's sense of self.

Somehow, this helped them with their feelings of guilt and we were slowly able to move on to what they should do with their lives in order to celebrate the life opportunity that they had been given.

Many refugees can be so consumed by guilt that they are unable to avail themselves of the opportunities on offer. That guilt can be survivor- guilt and it can involve ruminating over what they might have done differently so that others might also remain alive.

Re-membering their parents in a way that allowed them to make plans for the future, which they now felt they were worthy of living, we were able to think about what would have made their parents proud, while also considering the kind of education that they thought they might be able to engage with. *Re-membering* conversations have for me allowed me to enquire about the values and aspirations of people who are either dead

or missing but who were (and still are in a virtual sense) important influences for these young people.

When I initially started questioning in this way, I saw it as a form of circular questioning that I did with individuals whose families were not present in the room. Reading about *re-membering* practices and the *Saying Hello Again* (White 1988) paper was like finding a hidden pot of gold! These descriptions fitted much more accurately than saying that I had adapted circular questions to working individually, where people's families were absent. Sharing this and the hidden treasures that I had discovered in anthropology made for a very animated conversation with Michael White during the conversations referenced in the editorial (Bowen, B. & Stedman, M; Context 105).

A number of the young people that I have met have been child soldiers. To draw on intra psychic, individualised models would mean that the focus would be on working with the guilt that they may feel, having committed various atrocities under the orders of the militias. Contextualising, these actions while not wanting to remove agency, helps the young person to view the situation in quite a different way. There are other stories that they can call forth, such as, the fact that the choice they were faced with at the time was intense and included overwhelming fear for their own lives.

Revisiting these scenarios means that it does not take long for the young person to reconnect with what it felt like to be back in that context. With time for reflection outside of the context that they found themselves in, the judgement of their actions, as well as the shame that they may feel in the current context, needs to be contextualised. Actions which they took were in the face of the possibility of losing their own lives, if they had not complied with the orders of the militias. (Bracken and Petty 1998)

I was fortunate enough to have had some conversations with Michael White about my work during the *intensive* that I attended at Dulwich Family Centre where we agreed that it was such a privilege that these young people were willing to trust us enough to share their stories with us and not a burden as was implied with notions that some work was too traumatic.

Michael and I concurred, that it was the politics of organisations and limitations imposed in this context, which was far more distressing than bearing witness to what can nevertheless be quite profoundly tragic stories.

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Máire Stedman is employed in the NHS in a CAMHS setting and has a private practice where she undertakes Expert Witness and Immigration reports while also providing Systemic Psychotherapy, Training and Consultation. She can be contacted at mairstedman@yahoo.co.uk