Active survival in the lives of unaccompanied minors: coping strategies, resilience, and the relevance of religion

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ABSTRACT

Asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors contend with numerous challenges as they adjust to living in a new country. Although increasing attention has been paid to their capacity for resilience, little research has been done on the exact manner in which they cope. This paper describes some of the insights gleaned from a qualitative study undertaken with unaccompanied minors living in Ireland. Six different coping strategies are identified, namely: (1) Maintaining continuity in a changed context, (2) Adjusting by learning and changing, (3) Adopting a positive outlook, (4) Suppressing emotions and seeking distraction, (5) Acting independently, and (6) Distrusting. These are described in turn. Particular attention is paid to the potential role of religion in relation to the participants’ coping strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, researchers have begun to pay increasing attention to the circumstances of unaccompanied minors or separated children: children and young people under the age of 18 who are ‘outside of their country of origin and separated from both parents, or their previous legal/customary primary caregiver’ (Separated Children in Europe Programme 2004, p. 2). Research findings, practice knowledge and conventional wisdom all indicate that these young people face multiple challenges in their lives. They face difficulties related to their pre-departure experiences, their flight from home and their lives in exile. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors have often experienced armed conflict, death of loved ones and oppressive circumstances. Some are seeking asylum because of a fear of persecution, whilst others are escaping from conditions of poverty and lack of opportunity (Ayotte 2000; Thomas et al. 2004; Hopkins & Hill 2006; Chase et al. 2008). En route, while many children are well looked after and view those who accompany them as “benefactors” (Ayotte 2000, p. 83), others experience ill-treatment, abuse and exploitation during their journey (Ayotte 2000; Lustig et al. 2004). Upon arrival in a new country, unaccompanied minors usually have to cope with the loss of loved ones, the loss of culture and the associated threat to their sense of identity (German 2004). They are faced with adjusting to new circumstances, often involving an entirely different cultural context, whilst also dealing with the uncertainty surrounding their futures, the stresses associated with the asylum process (Sourander 1998; Rea 2001), and, in many jurisdictions, the difficulties of negotiating the care system (Kohli & Mather 2003; Chase et al. 2008).2

Given the plethora of challenges and the tendency of researchers to concentrate on the difficulties that these young people encounter, unaccompanied minors are frequently depicted as vulnerable individuals, who are emotionally distressed and ‘at-risk’ (e.g. Sourander 1998; Rea 2001; Bean et al. 2007; Hodes et al. 2008). Yet, whilst it is clear that unaccompanied minors face a range of stressful circumstances that constitute a risk to well-being, not all of them necessarily experience...
Instead, for many, both suffer emotionally and behaviourally as a result. It is acknowledged here that the young people in stress and coping strategies inevitably exist side by side. Given that coping refers to efforts to manage demands that are appraised as taxing, may be evident. According to Masten & Powell (2003), resilience refers to “patterns of positive adaptation in the context of adversity” (p. 7). In essence, the resilience of these young people is beginning to be acknowledged, at least to some extent, although German (2004) contends that studies investigating the resilience of refugees are not yet given the same attention as research that looks at their vulnerability. For example, within descriptions of refugee children as either ‘vulnerable’ or ‘resilient’ is over-simplistic. Various authors have commented on the resilience of forced migrants, including unaccompanied minors (e.g. Muecke 1992; Ahearn 2000; Kohli & Ni Raghallaigh and R Gilligan 2008). If we are interested in exploring young people’s experiences of unaccompanied minors in a narrow or diverse manner in which children respond to the challenges of forced migration, and to the fact that many experience. Increasingly, attention is being paid to the mental health implications of coping, the significance of religious faith is highlighted. All but 1 of the 32 participants emphasized the importance of religion in their lives. Religion and spirituality often seemed to facilitate them in the process of coping, and to seek to undertake in-depth qualitative interaction with the young people a certain type of coping strategies that they used. While the participants might not feel able to be open about their experiences of unaccompanied minors. We were concerned that the participants might not trust the researcher undertaking the research. From the outset, we expected that in fieldwork (author 1), perhaps especially given that she had previously worked as a social worker with unaccompanied minors. It was expected that the unaccompanied minors might not trust the researcher undertaking the research. These methods were developed to engage in participant observation in ‘Valley Lodge’, a hostel in which unaccompanied minors live. A decision was made to utilize methods that would enable rapport to be built with the young people. A decision was made to utilize methods that would enable rapport to be built with the young people. A decision was made to utilize methods that would enable rapport to be built with the young people.
In addition, we expected that the participants might consider this research to be sensitive or risky because of the researcher's intention to delve into experiences that might be perceived as "deeply personal" (Lee & Renzetti 1993, p. 6). Therefore, particular attention was paid to ensuring that participation in the research did not cause harm, that consent to take part was both informed and voluntary and that the identities of the young people were protected. In addition, a decision was made not to ask the young people why they had come to Ireland, as it was felt that this was a potentially stressful question that they constantly faced within the asylum process.

In relation to the consent process, gaining access to Valley Lodge and obtaining consent for the participation of its residents in the research was a complex and time-consuming process. Informed consent was sought from the responsible authority (the Health Service Executive) and from staff at Valley Lodge. The informed consent of the young people was then sought, both in relation to participant observation and, subsequently, interviews.

The current paper is primarily based on the interview phase of the study. In total, 18 females and 14 males were interviewed. They came from 13 different countries and ranged in age from 14 to 19 years (see Tables 1 and 2). They had been in Ireland for varying lengths of time. Consequently, they were also at different stages of the asylum process. Overall, a very diverse group of participants was interviewed.

Analysis of the interviews involved a process of open, axial and selective coding of the transcribed data (Strauss & Corbin 1998). These codes were attached to lengthy paragraphs and dialogues rather than to specific words or phrases (Miles & Huberman 1994). This ensured that the voices of the participants were privileged and that their cultural contexts were always considered, an important point given the significance of context in people's resilience (Ungar 2008). This process allowed diverse narratives and coping strategies to be identified. These strategies will now be discussed.5

DEALING WITH CHANGES AND CHALLENGES: MULTIPLE STRATEGIES

Reflecting the existing literature, the narratives of the participants suggested that the young people were faced with multiple changes and challenges in their lives in Ireland. They faced a life without family and childhood friends, and they lacked close relationships. They were negotiating a very different culture – one which, from their perspective, lacked a sense of community. The young people also talked about having to deal with the many challenges of the asylum process, including stressful procedures and the ongoing fear of deportation. Overall, it was evident that the participants had to deal with past traumas, present difficulties and future uncertainties. The question to be asked then, is, how did the young people cope? Through the interactions with the young people during fieldwork and through careful analysis of the interview data, different coping strategies emerged. In addition, it became evident that religion played a central role in their coping efforts.

Maintaining continuity in a changed context

To begin with, the young people appeared to engage in a strategy of 'maintaining continuity in a changed context'. They were embracing opportunities for continuity between the past and the present and planning to maintain continuity into the future. Continuity has been identified as an important aspect of identity (Erikson 1968; Hartar 1990). Having some sense of sameness between the past and the present facilitates...
Ireland: Continuity was also available through religious association rituals with them. Amidst multiple other changes in their lives, faith was something that remained relatively unchanged. One girl, who spoke about attending a Nigerian-led church in Ireland, was asked about the importance of her religious faith. She immediately responded by tracing the thread of religion back to her family origins, thus suggesting the importance of this coping strategy. One girl talked about being able to 'feel the presence of God' and in terms of their religious practice. From the participants' descriptions of their childhoods, it appeared that religion and faith in God had usually been dominant features of their lives in their countries of origin. When they moved away from these countries, they were able to carry religious faith and its associated rituals with them. Amidst multiple other changes in their lives, faith was something that remained relatively unchanged. One girl, who spoke about attending a Nigerian-led church in Ireland, was asked about the importance of her religious faith. She immediately responded by tracing the thread of religion back to her family origins, thus suggesting the importance of this coping strategy. One girl talked about being able to 'feel the presence of God' and in terms of their religious practice. From the participants' descriptions of their childhoods, it appeared that religion and faith in God had usually been dominant features of their lives in their countries of origin. When they moved away from these countries, they were able to carry religious faith and its associated rituals with them.

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Adjusting by learning and changing

The young people wished to retain elements of their culture, including food, language, and traditions, which they had known at home. In this way, the young people coped with the discontinuity that was associated with it: addressing loss of home. People from their own cultures were particularly important in terms of facilitating continuity of culture and conversation. Often, the addition of these people provided an opportunity to talk about the past and about familiar people and places. For the young people in this study, culture and ethnicity appeared to be the most important aspects of the young people's identities. In this study, culture and ethnicity appeared to be a positively valued ethnic identity into their sense of self. In this study, culture and ethnicity appeared to be a positively valued ethnic identity into their sense of self.
present life circumstances. One boy said: ‘If I
have a lot of hope facilitated them to cope with their difficult choices (such as the avoidance of alcohol). Their sense of hope was a powerful source of positivity. What they perceived to be less favourable circumstances in their countries of origin. In essence, they made meaning out of their current difficulties by focusing on the positive aspects of their situations. They frequently expressed appreciation for the good things in their lives and hope for the future. Such expressions of gratitude represented a way of coping with the difficulties and potential losses. By hoping and believing that their new lives would provide high quality education, good career prospects and positive childhood experiences for their children, they were able to cope with their many difficulties. Appreciating what they had and having hope for the future served as powerful sources of positivity.

A third coping strategy was that of ‘adopting a positive outlook’. Many of the young people seemed to cope by adopting an ‘integration acculturation strategy’, including having a bicultural identity. Research by Berry et al. (2006) has tentatively suggested that these participants were not set out to evaluate the effectiveness of the various coping strategies, research by Berry et al. (2006) has suggested that those who adopt an integration acculturation strategy, including having a bicultural identity (Phinney 2008) study, the young people ‘selectively placed them in the context of past problems and future opportunities. As was the case with the Sudanese unaccompanied youth interviewed by Goodman (2004) in the USA, hopefulness arose from hopelessness. The influence of religious faith was again present in their words: ‘But I’m trying to keep my head up... You know, because I won’t. I’m hopeful. It won’t be this way every day. You know I mean, I believe that I know things one day are gonna get better. Yet, despite these concerns, it was evident from the interviews with the young people that, for them, ‘active survival of unaccompanied minors represented a way of coping with the difficulties and potential losses. By hoping and believing that their new lives would provide high quality education, good career prospects and positive childhood experiences for their children, they were able to cope with their many difficulties. Appreciating what they had and having hope for the future served as powerful sources of positivity.

A fourth strategy involved the young people ‘suppressing emotions and seeking distraction’. Elsewhere, Beiser & Wickrama (2004) has stated that this pattern of coping ‘though effective in traumatic situations, can be problematic in the long run’ (p. 1192). Similarly, Beiser & Wickrama (2004) has stated that this pattern of coping ‘though adaptive in traumatic situations, can be problematic in the long run’ (p. 1192). Similarly, Beiser & Wickrama (2004) has suggested that, in their daily lives, they often wished to maintain their heritage and to preserve their identity. They wished to maintain their heritage and to preserve their identity. In doing so, they sought interaction with Irish culture. Often, religious beliefs represented a way of coping with the difficulties and potential losses. By hoping and believing that their new lives would provide high quality education, good career prospects and positive childhood experiences for their children, they were able to cope with their many difficulties. Appreciating what they had and having hope for the future served as powerful sources of positivity.

For many of the participants, distraction served as a powerful strategy. ‘I no like talking about this. Every time you thinking this, you talking about this, I feeling crazy, you know.’ For this girl, hope was possible through God: ‘I believe he’s the one that brought me to this, eh, country, you understand? I believe he’s the one that’s still protecting me up till now. I believe with him everything is possible.’ Thus, for this girl, hope was possible through God.
Active survival of unaccompanied minors

Despite the stress and difficulties associated with their situation, participants in this study felt an increased sense of control by adopting an independent self-perception, the participants never came across as dependent on these relationships. They tried to deal with their own difficulties: “You don’t think about anything else.” They relied on themselves and to engage in suppression and distraction, “You understand? Get my status. Have a nice job. Live a nice life with my family...” They were proud of being able to act independently and saw their strength in this aspect. Indeed, Mitchell (1990) asserts that “no major or enduring relationship can exist happily or comfortably without trust” (p. 849). However, Eisenbruch (1991) has identified the inability to trust as a barrier to development. The young people attributed their distrust to past experiences, being accused of not trusting others. The young people attributed their distrust to past experiences, being accused of not trusting others. The young people were proud of being able to act independently and saw their strength in this aspect. Like the homeless young people, the narratives of the participants in our study suggested that they were able to cope with some of the stressors that they faced in this way. Young people were able to cope with the stressors that they faced in this way. For example, one young person stated: “You are no longer Mammy’s boy or Daddy’s boy. You grow up, you take care of yourself, you have to learn to live on your own.”

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unable to tell the truth, and not knowing people well. It seemed that their past experiences interacted with their current difficulties and future uncertainties and created a situation where trusting others became a challenge. When one young person was asked why he found it difficult to trust, he stated:

"Every reason you can think of... [I just found it hard to trust a human being. I trusted Mary and I trusted my friends, but, I grew up with them, so, I thought I could grow up and talk to them. So, when I'm here, like there's people I don't know, I don't feel like talking to them or trusting them or anything like this because... It's just... I don't know why, I just don't... trust..."

Threaded through explanations such as this one was the idea that distrust was 'functional', as has been suggested elsewhere by Kohli (2006b, p. 712). Yet, whilst trusting people was seen to be difficult, the participants talked about their trust in one particular being: God. In the absence of other close relationships, God was reported as particularly important to them. They spoke enthusiastically about trusting and loving God and about relying on him for guidance and support. One young person stated:

"The only, only, only friend [laughs] I trusted all the time, that's God. [...] I don't have any more friends, I trusted more than God, I don't think so. You know because, always God knows more than everybody. And God's gonna help you all the time. [... ] God always gonna help"

Thus, coping was again facilitated by a belief in God. Distrusting others was perhaps easier in the knowledge that at least God could be trusted. Overall, 'distrusting' appeared to represent another coping strategy. Distrust helped the participants to deal with the challenges and changes with which they were faced, especially by increasing their sense of self-reliance and by minimizing the risk of being hurt or betrayed. Distrusting was often something that the participants decided to do, as a means of protecting themselves. While it must be acknowledged that interpersonal difficulties may arise because of this lack of trust (Mitchell 1990; Anderson 2001), the participants seemed to find that distrust was functional in their immediate circumstances.

DRAWING THE COPING STRATEGIES TOGETHER

Figure 1 shows the range of different coping strategies that were found to be used by the group participating in this study. These strategies are abbreviated as adaptation, positivity, suppression, independence, continuity and distrust. Each of these has been discussed previously, and overall, they form part of the active survival of the group of young people who participated in this study. While this study has not sought to explore the connections between these different strategies, exploration of the strategies showed one clearly common element between all of them. This element was religious faith.

By examining the coping strategies of the participants in depth, it became evident that for all but one of the young people religious faith was an important part of their lives, and significantly, it played a role in their coping efforts. Practising their religion and having a strong belief in God facilitated the young people in their use of the different strategies. Thus, in Fig. 1, smaller 'religion' circles have been placed inside each coping strategy. This suggests that although the coping strategies were frequently used independently of religious faith, often, the young people's religious beliefs and practices formed a part of the different strategies. For instance, as regards the first coping strategy, in dealing with the challenges of living in a very different cultural context, religion provided continuity for the young people – continuity in terms of their relationships with God and their religious practice. However, it also served as a way in which the young people could use the strategy of adapting by learning and changing. For instance, whilst they held on to their beliefs, their religious practice and ideas about faith sometimes changed in order to accommodate their new environment.
example, in choosing to maintain continuity whilst present and the various coping strategies. Firstly, for suggesting the connections between the past, the stances circle into the inner active survival circle, thus Fig. 1 by the arrows going from the outer circum-
Ungar (2008), amongst others. This is illustrated in
are context-dependent, as has been suggested by
individual, thus highlighting that coping and resilience present social and contextual circumstances of each
strategies to use was influenced by the past and
the way that they did. The choice of which strategy or
The young people had a clear rationale for coping in their circumstances. As such,
chosen as they believed them to be the most compel-
other ways in which they coped.
in dealing with the difficulties and vicissitudes of their lives. For most of them, religion held a central purpose
religious coping was used frequently by the young people because of the multiple purposes that it served, reli-
right to them (Pargament 1997). As a result, and
religious coping as a worthwhile way of dealing with
was 'relatively compelling' as a coping resource in that
religion served as both a 'relatively available' and a
1997). It was 'relatively available' as it had been a
'relatively compelling' coping resource (Pargament
centrality

1997). In the overall context of having grown up
which seems to depict the coping strategies that were
explanatory framework. It is a preliminary offering,
minors, it is not being proposed as a completed
lives that they were actively engaged in surviving the chal-
different coping strategies. In doing so, they showed
by those who had been trusted. Hence, influenced by
adopted because of past experiences of being let down
longer available in the young people's new circum-
that those who were available in the past were no
of independence often emerged because of the fact
expression of thoughts and emotions. Fourthly, a sense
choosing to distract themselves and to engage in sup-
facilitating the process of suppression, the fourth
means of distraction and of companionship, hence
by God. Religion provided the participants with a
the participants expressed hope in a future influenced
strategy – adoption of a positive attitude – as many of
addition, faith facilitated the use of the third coping

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

simplistic way. Within all of the insights that emerged
circumstances should not be described in a static or
young people are complex and dynamic. Hence, their
nuances of the lives of these young people need to be
relevance to these young people's lives and to the lives
of religious faith in the coping efforts of other unac-
lives, the participants in this study purposefully used

The narratives of the participants suggested that the

were clearly influenced by the cultures and soci-
also adjusting by learning and changing, the partici-
also by God's help meant that they did not feel the need to
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strategy. Religious beliefs also helped the young

facing multiple challenges

Active survival of unaccompanied minors

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Ahearn, F.L., Jr. (ed.) (2000) Psychosocial Wellness of Refugees: Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Research Centre and the School of Social Work and National Children's Office, and by the Children's Children and Youth Affairs, Dublin (formerly the funding provided by the Office of the Minister for study. The authors would also like to acknowledge the thank the young people for their participation in the College Dublin. The authors would like to sincerely this paper is based on doctoral research conducted in committed to empowering these young people. Hopefully, it may also encourage a form of professional practice respectful of these attributes and com-

people's resilience and to their "adaptive strengths" ignored, more attention needs to be paid to the young religious faith, the findings are in keeping with a per-

varieties of individual ways depending on what they coping strategies, including the role of further research is needed into the long-term effects of important role in their efforts to cope. Although In addition, it is evident that religious faith plays an unaccompanied minors are "agentive purposeful people give credence to the view that, frequently, narratives of the young various coping strategies in their efforts to deal with

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The situation of the participants in this study.

The findings from this literature are still of relevance to such children and young people are quite different,

...the purpose of this paper, 'Ireland' is used to refer to

...as young people living outside of Dublin were

...of children and young people in different circum-

...that the numbers increased rapidly from 1996 and that the numbers increased rapidly from

...that the numbers increased rapidly from

...the Republic of Ireland'.

The term 'unaccompanied minor' covers a myriad

...the 'Republic of Ireland'.

...the first unaccompanied minor will be used throughout. For

...the numbers applying for asylum –

...being made by unaccompanied minors between 2004

...being made by unaccompanied minors between 2004

...due to their country of birth. They arrived in Ireland

...the numbers applied for asylum within given periods:

...data from the Office of the Refugee Appli-

...or those who lived in temporary accommodation with

...accompanied by one or more family members

...accompanied by one or more family members

...some children may be living with extended

...some children may be living with extended

...unaccompanied minors is focused on children who

...unaccompanied minors is focused on children who

...spent time in refugee camps. Much of the research on

...spent time in refugee camps. Much of the research on

...children who previously lived in refugee camps (e.g. Goodman

...children who previously lived in refugee camps (e.g. Goodman

...UNHCR resettlement programmes following

...UNHCR resettlement programmes following

...the purpose of this paper, 'Ireland' is used to refer to

...the purpose of this paper, 'Ireland' is used to refer to

...as young people living outside of Dublin were

...as young people living outside of Dublin were

...Valley Lodge. However, only eight of the young people

...Valley Lodge. However, only eight of the young people

...would be recruited amongst the young people living in

...would be recruited amongst the young people living in

...was used by the young people. Although this

...was used by the young people. Although this

...addition, it leaves our insights open to greater scrutiny

...addition, it leaves our insights open to greater scrutiny

...the young people who had been interviewed. In

...the young people who had been interviewed. In

...approach would allow us to more adequately repre-

...approach would allow us to more adequately repre-

...approached and invited to participate. Overall, 24 of

...approached and invited to participate. Overall, 24 of

...as young people living outside of Dublin were

...as young people living outside of Dublin were

...people living in other hostels in Dublin as well

...people living in other hostels in Dublin as well

...there were interested in taking part. Therefore, young

...there were interested in taking part. Therefore, young

...Valley Lodge. However, only eight of the young people

...Valley Lodge. However, only eight of the young people

...would be recruited amongst the young people living in

...would be recruited amongst the young people living in

...UNHCR, Geneva.


M Ni Raghallaigh and R Gilligan

Trends in Unaccompanied and Separated Children

UNHCR, Geneva.
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