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Article

‘We need to talk about Bona’: An autoethnographic account of fostering an unaccompanied asylum seeker

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Abstract

This article offers an account of the authors’ experiences as foster carers for an unaccompanied asylum seeker (and through him, supporting other asylum-seeking boys). We are both qualified and experienced social workers, now social work academics living and working in Scotland, whose practice is informed by socio-pedagogical perspectives. Our backgrounds have given us unique and finely grained insights into the daily care issues facing young asylum seekers set against a backdrop of global movement. We discuss the need to provide care that offers cultural safety; the centrality within this of recognising and seeking to understand religious beliefs and practices; the experiences of young people growing up in conditions of liminality, negotiating two very different cultures; the inadequacy of current social work responses; the importance of everyday care and relationships and the need for a curious and reflexive orientation from caregivers.

Keywords: foster care; social pedagogy; social work; Muslim, asylum; refugee; unaccompanied; autoethnography; Scotland

Introduction

In 2015, media images highlighted the plight of hundreds of thousands of displaced people seeking asylum in Europe. They came from countries across the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa that we had heard of but would have had difficulty pointing out on a map. Many didn't make it across the North African desert or perished in Libyan labour camps – others met their fate in the Mediterranean Sea. These casualties, especially the children, elicited sympathy and perhaps some outrage on account of their situations. Those who did make it to mainland Europe traversed the Continent, their journeys often culminating in the Calais refugee camps; they elicited more mixed reactions.

There were, of course, humanitarian responses. But there were other less favourable reactions to what [Bauman \(2016\)](#) termed the strangers at our door. Much political and media discourse around asylum seekers is underpinned by what [Masocha and Simpson \(2011\)](#) termed xenoracism, which reflects a fear of the displaced, the dispossessed and the uprooted. There were fears across Europe that our systems and ways of life would be overrun and claims in the press that many of those seeking asylum as minors were actually considerably older, a belief that led to calls for various checks to verify ages and for restrictions on numbers. Social workers can be caught up in such discourses, highlighting ethical dilemmas for the profession ([Masocha and Simpson, 2011](#)).

In the UK, the former Labour Party politician Lord Dubs brokered a resettlement scheme to accept 3,000 asylum-seeking youngsters from the Calais camps. The resultant National Transfer Scheme came into force in July 2016, with an expectation that each local authority would accept unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) at a level proportionate to its child population. In the event, due to local authorities struggling to provide adequate numbers of placements and in response to hostile public and political opinion, the original numbers were reduced from 3,000 to 350.

Scotland, representing around 10 per cent of the UK total population, accepted 40 UASC (mostly boys) in November 2016. They were placed in a range of care settings, including foster placements, children's homes and supported accommodation. The Scottish city we live in agreed to take five. We were already registered foster carers, having been long-term respite carers for disabled children. When an email came around asking if we might consider extending our remit, we spoke to our own (now adult) children and agreed to offer a placement. Within days, the process of introductions began and a week or two later Bona (name changed), a 16-year-old African Muslim boy, moved in. Over 60 per cent of UASC to the UK are Muslim, their culture conforming to Islamic shari'a law and evident in their mentality, customs and behaviour ([Al Jawdah, 2020](#)).

This happened at a particular point in our family life, which impacted our capacity to respond. Maura had left social work practice after 30 years to undertake a PhD and has subsequently taken up an academic post. Mark had made that move from residential childcare practice to academia some years earlier and was about to go on sabbatical leave. Our own three children had left home, so we had both flexibility of time and space at home. More personally, we are Catholics, not dogmatic, but practising, and it is likely that a sense of responsibility towards the disinherited of the earth, expressed in Catholic social teaching, influenced our decision. We mention this religious sensibility not just in terms of motivation but because it has, as Bona's time with us has progressed, allowed us to recognise the centrality of religion in the lives of many asylum seekers ([Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010](#)), but perhaps also to offer Bona a religious connection even when there was not always a meeting of minds between our two traditions.

A further contextual factor is the national one. Scotland has its own devolved parliament within the UK with control over functions such as education and social welfare but not immigration, which remains a UK Home Office function. Since 2007, however, the devolved administration has been dominated, politically, by the Scottish National Party, which wants independence from the UK. It has sought to use social welfare and specifically claims to be a progressive, inclusive European nation as a feature of its nation-building project ([Smith and Cree, 2018](#)). Specifically, the country has set out its stall in its *New Scots* strategy ([Scottish Government, 2017](#)) to be welcoming of refugees. This is in contradistinction to the 'hostile environment policy' followed by the Westminster government ([Grierson, 2018](#)), which was intended to reduce the attraction of the UK to prospective migrants and to encourage people to leave if their asylum application was unsuccessful. Divergent political ideologies and the politicisation of asylum

issues has highlighted tensions between immigration legislation, which is reserved to the Westminster government and child welfare legislation – a devolved responsibility (Ramsay, 2020).

Some of the Scottish government rhetoric would seem to have filtered through to ground level. Until recently, Scotland was a particularly monocultural society; it has not had the English experience of mass immigration from former colonies to inner-city areas – divisions have been more evident around religion (between Catholic and Protestant) than around race. In recent decades, it has seen an influx of – mostly European but also many African – immigrants and is noticeably more diverse. And although still very white (and any new arrival from Africa would be confronted by that fact), the political and civic tone is generally a welcoming one. This was the wider context that Bona entered into and became part of our lives.

Caring for Bona has extended to substantial contact with other asylum-seeking boys, both in a respite-caring capacity but also more informally as they would gather at our house after Mosque on a Friday and more generally would spend extended periods of time here. We have become, and remain, the de facto advocate and support for a number of them. Our direct care of Bona and these extended relationships have offered rich and textured insights into the asylum and refugee experience which, when combined with our backgrounds, brings both practical and academic understandings beyond those available within the dominant policy or psychological discourses that frame this issue. We go on to set some of the context of caring for UASC and then to introduce our own experiences and insights into doing so.

The needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC)

Much existing research, drawing largely from psychiatric and medical perspectives, focuses on UASC as a particularly vulnerable category (Wernesjö, 2011). Having travelled from their country of origin and separated from their parents (Halvorsen, 2002), their experiences are conceived of as beyond the realm of what is considered a normal childhood. Their situations inevitably evoke themes of loss, uprooting, separation and trauma, constructing UASC as passive and vulnerable. However, such assumptions of psychopathology can both impose ethnocentric and over-generalised perspectives (Burman, 2016) and underplay the resilience of UASC. Wade, Sirriyeh, Kohli and Simmonds (2012) identified only a small number of UASC as requiring formal mental health intervention and many showing noticeable resilience and adaptation to their life circumstances. Goodman (2004) noted four strategies through which UASC adapt: a focus on collectivity and the communal self; suppression and distraction; making meaning; and emerging from hopelessness to hope. In this way, children become active agents, able to handle diverse situations.

Ní Raghallaigh (2013) suggested that there is a need for approaches to working with UASC to place greater emphasis on these individual and collective strengths. This can challenge assumptions that derive from a dominant trauma perspective; Hopkins and Hill (2008, p. 404) quoted a social worker who said ‘children don’t need therapy, they need a life’, suggesting that it was better to engage in new experiences which would help forget, rather than to focus on, past trauma. The same article identified the needs of UASC as mostly practical, centring around accommodation, information and legal support and the importance of education to capitalise on their commitment to doing well academically and moving forward in their new lives.

A social pedagogical orientation to foster care

Our approach to foster caring aligns with the practical and everyday aspects identified in the literature above. It is, very largely, a social pedagogical orientation, influenced by backgrounds in direct care and intellectually by Lorenz (2008) whose analysis focuses on the historical interplay of social work and social pedagogical ideas. We would identify with Petrie et al. (2009) and their key principles of social pedagogical practice as focusing on the child as a whole person; the practitioner seeing themselves as a person in relationship with the young person; sharing of a common life-space; reflexivity; drawing on theoretical understandings and self-knowledge; a practical and creative approach to daily living; an awareness of young people’s associative life as an important resource; an understanding of children’s

rights that is not limited to procedural matters or legislative requirements; and valuing the contributions of others – family members, other professionals and members of the local community – in ‘bringing up’ children.

In this sense, our orientation diverges from traditions of professional foster care, which can betray a heavy psychological influence, drawing particularly on attachment theory. This has formed the basis of most professional training and practice guidance (Reimer, 2010). Reimer (2010) went on to note, however, that attachment does not constitute the only appropriate approach and questions of wider culture are increasingly recognised.

Pithouse and Rees (2011) outlined a conceptualisation of foster care that highlights family culture, describing it as happening ‘within the interdependencies and everyday moral “workings out” between people in caring relationships. These relationships emerge from care itself as a social process and daily human activity in which the self exists through and with others’ (p. 196). Care, they go on to assert, is demonstrated ‘in broadly cultural and practical actions such as the symbolism of food, issues of the body and aspects of touch’ (Pithouse and Rees, 2011, p. 196). In this sense, foster carers might be thought of as experts in the everyday (Cameron, 2020).

Wade et al. (2012) made similar points relating to this idea of ‘workings out’ or ‘fit’ between carers and foster children. In our situation, those workings out were aided by Bona’s particular aptitude for and motivation for education, which we were keen and able to support.

Autoethnography

We did not enter into the fostering relationship with the intention of writing about it, but knowledge can emerge out of the practice of caring (Ricks, 1992) and we quickly realised that we were gaining unique insights into the lives and needs of asylum seekers and how to care for them. We found ourselves naturally processing and reflecting on our experiences in caring for Bona, individually and in conversation (hence the title of this article), and setting our observations and thoughts in wider context. Personal experience is said to offer a unique vantage point from which to approach social science by considering ‘macro and micro linkages; structure, agency and their intersection’ (Laslett, 1999, p. 392). This lifeworld process we were engaged in might be thought of in research terms as autoethnography, a method of qualitative inquiry that uses the researcher’s personal experience to describe and critique sociological understanding, cultural beliefs, practices and experiences. Bringing the self into writing can involve calls on memory and hindsight to thoughtfully reflect on experiences (Gadamer, 2004). Visse and Niemeijer (2016) suggested that, in a care context, autoethnography can help us ‘capture, reconstruct, understand and communicate singular lived experiences’ (p. 302) and, thus, to surface voices otherwise unheard, without descending into sentimentality. They noted, too, that the participants in any autoethnographic account are ‘interdependent people whose selves and whose narratives are not static and separate but constituted by the relationship they have with one another’ (Visse and Niemeijer, 2016, p. 302). In that sense and in the context of the relationship we have with Bona what we attempt to present here is a co-constructed story.

Adams, Ellis and Holman Jones (2017) presented several criteria for good autoethnography: that it makes a substantive contribution to knowledge; that it values the personal and the experiential and that it demonstrates the power and craft of storytelling, writing reflexively to bring readers into the story. Styles of autoethnographic writing vary, some becoming very introspective and conversational, which can come in for some critique from more traditional researchers. Wall (2016) stressed the need to balance the value of personal experience while maintaining scholarly rigour. The approach we take here is consistent with Atkinson’s (2006) discussion of autoethnography in interspersing personal reflection with more conventional academic writing.

Ethical issues

There are particular ethical considerations attached to autoethnography. In trying to make sense of what might be going on, there is a risk of appropriation, which requires an ongoing need to think about how we rewrite others’ stories. In our situation, there was the obvious asymmetry of a care relationship and dependency, especially in a context where we knew the cultural rules of the game in a way that Bona

did not. Conversely, there was also a temporal aspect to this as Bona has grown to adulthood over his time with us and his erstwhile dependency relationship has, to a considerable extent, moved on.

In writing this article we sought advice through our university ethics channels which took the view that we were not seeking empirically valid research data but offering personal and professional reflections that might provide insights for better understanding and practice. Procedural ethics would in any case prove inadequate in most instances of autoethnography, within which ethics are often argued to reside in a relationally responsible approach (Ellis, 2016). In our situation, proper ethical consent could only reside in the relationship of trust that exists between Bona and ourselves. He knows we are social work academics. We have, throughout, discussed our writing with him and our reasons for doing so in terms of coming to a better understanding of how to care for him and through that to offer insights that might be helpful, more broadly, to the care of asylum seekers. We have changed names and slightly altered scenarios but in all autoethnography, there is a risk that identities might be discerned (Ellis, 2016).

In autoethnography, researchers retrospectively and selectively write about moments or themes that assumed a particular significance and draw on social scientific understandings and conventions to analyse these (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). In what follows, the themes we discuss have emerged in conversation and reflect what have been some of the key points of learning. Our particular contribution to augment the empirical and theoretical material in previous sections is to offer finely grained insights around culture and upbringing developed through everyday relational encounter and reflection upon this. We start by outlining Bona's journey.

Getting here

Much of the media coverage of the migration crisis spoke of people being trafficked into Europe – traffickers became the villains of these pieces. Casual conversations with Bona introduced some nuance to this depiction. There is some distinction but probably also some crossover between traffickers and smugglers, the former seeing the transport of people as a commercial enterprise, the latter acting in good faith to remove individuals from life-threatening situations in their homelands. Bona experienced both; when his situation at home became untenable, he was sent by his mother to a local man who protected him and ensured his safe passage to the country's borders. Thereafter, he was passed from one set of traffickers to another, each looking for further sums of money to be wired from an uncle living abroad. This itself might suggest that those who make the journey are able to call on a relative to pay for it.

Again, contrary to much of the media discourse, the mass movement of people was not about economic migration; that would have required some idea of what was happening and where it was going to end. The experience was far messier than that; the (mostly) boys and men had little idea where they were going or probably any notion even of what or where Europe was. Rather, they only knew they could not go back, so the caravan had to keep on rolling. That forward movement led them through the North African desert to labour camps in Libya and eventually onto rickety boats to cross the Mediterranean Sea. The lucky ones made it to Southern Europe or were picked up by coastguards. International law would determine that they should have been processed and offered asylum in the country of their port of entry but those countries receiving this influx of migrants feared being overwhelmed and essentially, left the migrants to start their journeys northwards. In Bona's case this entailed travelling the length of Italy, hanging around trying, unsuccessfully, to gain entry to Switzerland and resuming the journey through France to the Calais camps. They travelled by jumping on trains and slept where they could, the streets above Paris's Métro stations which emitted warm air proving particularly attractive.

When the decision was made to clear the Calais camps, boys were screened for entry to the UK and if successful taken to a holding camp before being flown, in Bona's case, to Scotland. He and the other boys coming to our local authority were placed in residential care before he moved to live with us.

Moving in

The literature on fostering describes the range of strange situations encountered by children entering any foster care situation: 'from brushing teeth and eating together at a table, to the tendency for foster carers to show a keen interest in their personal and daily life' (Reimer, 2010, p. 15). This cultural

confusion that is commonly experienced among children in foster care must be magnified exponentially for Muslims when their faith, traditional values and way of life are inevitably destabilised (Al Jawdah, 2020). We could only imagine the confusion and uncertainty Bona must have felt attempting to work out who was this unknown family he was expected to go and live with and what the status of that relationship might be. He later disclosed that coming to live with us was the most stressful experience in his life, the magnitude of which statement can perhaps be best appreciated in the context of the situation he had left in his home country and the journey he made to get to the UK.

Cultural safety

A primary concern in caring for children is to establish a sense of cultural safety which Fulcher (2003) describes as involving ‘the state of being in which a child or young person experiences that her/his personal wellbeing, as well as their social and cultural frames of reference, are acknowledged – even when not fully understood’ (p. 20) by those caring for them. It also requires that children are provided with reasons for feeling hopeful that their needs will be attended to in terms that they will understand, and that family members and kin are accorded dignity and respect.

A natural starting point for us in beginning to care for Bona was to find out something about where he came from and who he had left behind. We knew little about his home country and nothing of its ethnic, cultural and religious composition, the tensions within which were fundamental to Bona’s need to leave. His family was from an ethnic grouping which, though the largest in the country, was denied political power and its largely agrarian way of life was being encroached upon by foreign capital developers. This led to protests and the murder of close family members. As Bona reached adolescence, he, too, began to be seen as a threat by the security services and was forced to leave under fear for his life.

Fulcher (2003) observed that carers’ personal experiences of acculturation and socialisation leave them with taken-for-granted assumptions and mindsets. While, in our personal and academic positions, we might have thought of ourselves as reasonably well informed, we soon realised that we actually knew next to nothing about majority world cultures. Brought up in a Christian tradition, we did not even realise that so much of Africa was Muslim. Over recent years, there has been an increase in ethnic children coming into care in the UK, with around 3,000 of them being Muslim, of whom more than half are placed with non-Muslim families (Al Jawdah, 2020). However, there is little to draw upon in the fostering literature as to what might be helpful in this regard. A review for Fostering Fostering Network (2019) concluded that not only had little been written about Muslims and foster care in the UK, but also globally. Sidery (2019) notes that while there are increasing expectations of foster carers to take UASC placements, there are no training courses that might equip them to do so. This is important, for the experience of the foster carers in Sidery’s (albeit small) sample was one of cultural ‘otherness’. To offer care that was vaguely culturally consonant for Bona required that we develop some understanding of Islam, our knowledge of which was decidedly sketchy, right down to not knowing the basic five pillars upon which the religion is based:

1. Profession of Faith (*shahada*) – the belief that ‘There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God’
2. Prayer (*salat*) – which is required five times a day
3. Giving of alms (*zakat*)
4. Fasting (*sawm*)
5. Pilgrimage (*hajj*) – at least once in a lifetime to Mecca

Chatting round our kitchen table one day, Obsa, a school friend of Bona’s, Muslim but brought up in the UK, said something to us to the effect, ‘You just don’t get it, but Islam affects every aspect of our lives.’ Islam is a way of life, encompassing the outlook and functions of the daily life of Muslims (Al Jawdah, 2020). It is performed in rituals around cleanliness and ablutions and in *Dua*, the invocations recited on entering everyday situations. Culture and tradition intertwine in an immersive lifestyle, which can be hard to understand in non-Muslim homes (Al Jawdah, 2020). For migrants especially, culture, often expressed through religion, is a way of keeping connected to their past and has great significance for personal identity (Simpson and Littlechild, 2009). Undoubtedly, Islam, for Bona, incorporated religious

but also fundamental cultural and identity dimensions. Ramadan, the annual period of fasting from sunrise to sunset, was a case in point. It certainly held some religious significance for the boys but perhaps more so was a time of cultural bonding and solidarity.

Rituals of encounter

Fulcher (2003) made the case that cultural safety develops through the rituals of encounter that emerge between carers and children; these give personal meaning to caregiving and care-receiving behaviours, and to the relational dynamics of childcare practice. These rituals are played out in everyday events. A key ritual of encounter is around food.

Food assumes not only a social and symbolic significance, beyond its necessity for sustenance, in caring generally (Dorrer, McIntosh, Punch and Emond, 2010; Rees, Holland and Pithouse, 2012) but also particular connotations in certain religious traditions. For refugees in foster care, it is implicated in a sense of comfort and of finding sanctuary, negotiating belonging and evoking a sense of 'home' in a new land (Kohli, Connolly and Warman, 2010).

Food practices have particular significance for Muslims. We knew the term halal as it applied to food and the means of slaughtering animals for meat but not really in its wider role in defining what is permissible across the gamut of daily life and indeed across the life-course. That which is halal exists in relationship to its converse, haram, which sets out that which is forbidden, and this encompasses a whole range of daily life practices. In food terms, we undertook to ensure not just halal meat but went out of our way to source particular breads and spices that would have been staples of Bona's diet at home and we sought to cook traditional meals. This latter endeavour met with only limited success as Bona was not overly impressed by our efforts. It was well into his being with us that he had developed his English sufficiently to be able to tell us that he used to drive his mother mad as he was a 'fussy eater'. While there was some consolation to be taken from this in that it did not necessarily reflect on our cooking skills, it also brought home to us the need to factor in not just culture but personal traits and dispositions in how young people might respond in care settings.

Language

This experience, in turn, brought home to us the centrality of language in how asylum-seeking youngsters can make sense of and articulate their experiences. Although Bona's English was good and he could communicate to a high level in the day to day, there are particular words and the wider ideas these convey that he, understandably, did not have – it took him a couple of years to be able to explain that he was a 'fussy eater'. That led us to think about how he and others might be able to pick up the gist of a conversation but there would inevitably be gaps as they came across words and concepts they just did not get. The significance of this realisation highlights the need for policy and practice with UASC to recognise and pay attention to the importance of language as the gateway not just to making sense of conversation but also attunement to cultural frames of reference. Asylum-seeking and refugee children themselves identify the acquisition of language skills as their primary concern in respect of their personal and social development (Hopkins and Hill, 2008) and their entry into the labour market (JustJobs Network, 2018). We became aware of many of Bona's friends who, for various reasons, had not developed their English language skills and this consigned them to a very narrow social network with implications for access to employment, learning opportunities and consequent cultural integration.

The lifeworld and the system

The distinction between the *lifeworld* and the *system* found in Habermas (1989) has proved a helpful frame in making sense of caring for Bona. The lifeworld is the everyday world within which we lead our social and personal lives, based around implicit shared meanings and understandings. The system, by contrast is the apparatus that serves the interests of institutions and organisations. The system grows at the expense of or, in Habermas's words, *colonises* the lifeworld. In our situation, Bona's care needs have been well addressed within his lifeworld but rendered difficult by the system that surrounds asylum. In many respects, this observation might be thought to turn on its head the assumption that racism and

discrimination is individually perpetrated and that an objective, rational system exists to mitigate personal prejudice. This has not been our experience.

Bona and his friends have encountered very little individual racism. Rather, they have experienced many acts of kindness from our neighbours, extended family, teachers and, perhaps, most of all, from football coaches, who, instinctively looked out for and sought to include the boys. Football, more generally, has been a central feature of the boys' lifeworlds, what might be thought of in social pedagogic terms as a common third experience (Hadi and Johansen, 2018) providing opportunities for participation and inclusion, a powerful support network and, arguably, their strongest signifier of cultural safety. All of them were football fans and each had a favourite English team. One of the defining moments in his settling into our family was when, early in placement, one of our sons, who coincidentally followed the same English team, took Bona to London to a game. Family members also involved him in playing in regular five-a-side football games. Football can provide a sense of identity and belonging for children in care (Steckley, 2005) and for UASC it does so in a context where they do not need to know the language to know what is going on, to express themselves, to be understood and to gain status.

The same positive experience cannot be claimed for the system. Engagement with the immigration authorities has shown them to be obstructive and downright incompetent. Even though the boys had been screened for entry to the UK, they had to undergo the process of achieving refugee status all over again. Decisions on this process are capricious, guided as much by targets for refusal as by individual circumstance. The extent of this incompetence extended to one of the boys being sent papers refusing him refugee status and detailed a journey he had never made; they were obviously someone else's. Lawyers dealing with the boys were a mixed bag – some went through the motions, carrying out the minimum administrative functions that Home Office funding covered them to do. Other smaller legal firms took on a more activist position and were very helpful to us as we sought to navigate the system. Generally, the boys' experiences with formal systems reflect what Bourdieu (1991) identified as symbolic violence; small administrative acts such as sending documentation in English, knowing or not even thinking that the boys would not understand it, or failing to send important identity documents via tracked delivery because the boys hadn't asked for this (because they did not know of the existence or desirability of such systems).

The response from our own profession of social work has been very mixed. Kohli (2006) found that social workers generally cared for migrant young people well. Conversely, more recently Lalander and Herz (2018) failed to discern the positives evident in Kohli's research. Although it found some examples of good relationships between young people and social workers, this was the exception rather than the rule.

Our experience reflects both positions. Bona's first allocated social worker went out of her way to find out about his cultural background and needs (seeking to bake traditional bread with him), resisting age checks and advocating tenaciously on his behalf. However, she retired and subsequent workers showed no apparent awareness or interest in the significance of culture in how they might go about their role. But, perhaps more concerning, was the institutional inability to respond to the UASC's unique situations beyond following standard procedures. An example might be of one of them, placed in a group home, who went to visit friends in a neighbouring city. He missed the last train back and phoned to say he would return the following morning. Despite knowing this and knowing where he was, the home applied missing persons protocols and informed the police, who visited several homes looking for him. Two police officers turned up at our house the following morning to speak to Bona who had been the last person to speak to his friend who, by this time, was on his way home. You can imagine Bona's incomprehension at being faced with police officers concerned that a boy who had traversed Africa and Europe for 18 months might be unsafe among countrymen in a Scottish city 50 miles away.

On another occasion, several of the boys placed in one city were reported by social workers to the police for shaving their heads lest their actions, borne out of boredom, might be indicative of radicalisation. Fear of radicalisation has become a political concern across much of Europe. In the UK, the political priority to be seen to be addressing it is central to the UK government's Respect agenda. The human rights and civil liberties implications of this agenda and, in particular, its impact on Muslim communities is the subject of considerable academic concern (Al Jawdah, 2020). It also reflects a worrying development in

social work, which (with little resistance at institutional level) has been co-opted to engage with agendas and practices that associate it, fundamentally, with a policing role (Kettle and Daly, 2018).

Concern about the nature of the social work role might be extended to the discourses that frame its approach to the care of asylum seeking and refugee youngsters. Fulcher (2003) identified that dominant ideas around childcare rely heavily on Western theories of child development and relationships and fail to accord sufficient significance to culture. Despite the literature identified earlier (Hopkins and Hill, 2008; Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010; Wade et al., 2012) cautioning against pathologising UASC and encouraging, instead, everyday support, dominant social work responses to understanding their needs reflect the current vogue for trauma-based approaches. But trauma is really only evident in its symptoms and there were few if any in Bona's case. He slept well, he was focused on school, engaged in activities and able to make and sustain friendships. A doctor told us he must be traumatised and the symptoms would emerge at some point, but four-and-a-half years in, we are still waiting. Of course, he has had experiences that were terrifying, but he does not see himself as traumatised. This observation is offered wider empirical support in a range of studies of refugee children (Summerfield, 2000). Despite this evidence, it is not a little disturbing that a trauma perspective should take precedence over that formed through the experience of everyday care sustained over a prolonged period.

In the UK, trauma discourse converges around Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Felitti et al., 1998). As a framework for understanding the impact of early experience on current functioning, this is increasingly recognised as problematic (Edwards et al., 2017). As foster carers, we were invited to a training session on ACEs. Applied to UASC it is at best unthinking but, more broadly, might indicate social work's complicity in oppressive and racist practices (Masocha and Simpson, 2011). In assuming past harm, it locates children's difficulties within intra-familial contexts (which, for most of those we know, were actually very good) and takes no account of their situations being located in global capitalism, corrupt government and out-of-control security forces, none of which feature in the ACEs framework!

More generally, social work responses based around ACEs and trauma perspectives perpetuate an image of the 'child in need', held back by past experience. This contrasts with the 'rich child' of social pedagogic discourse, which recognises children as competent and resourceful and able to actively engage with and influence their surroundings (Eichsteller, n.d.). The very fact that Bona and others are successfully marking out and negotiating new lives for themselves is testimony to their fortitude – we do them no favours by transposing Western ideas of trauma upon them.

Caring between two worlds

UASC exist in a state of liminality (Kohli et al., 2010), navigating the space between their home and host cultures. This introduces a tension between them integrating into the host culture and maintaining their religious and cultural identities. Caring for Bona in this space has involved an inversion of what we would have considered to be normal upbringing practices. A key feature in Mollenhauer's (2013) idea of upbringing is of adults passing on a valued cultural heritage to a young person. While this might be a suggestive idea in a monocultural society, it becomes problematic in contexts where what is valued in a culture can seem very different between carer and cared for. In caring for Bona, our task has been, largely, to negotiate a *modus vivendi* between two very different cultures, ideally encouraging a comfort across both, but always sensitive to the pull of Bona's birth culture, particularly in times of stress. While with our own children the parental role was often to shield them or to pace their entry into the adult world (Mollenhauer, 2013), the task with Bona has been to encourage him to reach a 'position facing the world' (Smith, 2013) – but to allow him to do so comfortably and without feeling that he is betraying his religion and his cultural identity in so doing.

Our experience has been that at times Bona has moved towards a rapprochement between his two worlds. At other times, when other things are difficult, he understandably reverts to the safety of what he knows. Many of the difficulties he has encountered relate to spikes in political tensions in his homeland and the anxiety these caused. From a caring perspective this has required us to be aware of and conversant with the shifting political situation in his home country so that we might at least acknowledge these with him and recognise their impact on his functioning.

In dealing with the uncertainties and worries of what might be going on in his homeland, Islam and the certainty of its message that what happens to an individual is willed by Allah, has unquestionably been central to Bona and other UASC's survival and resilience. However, the literal interpretation of the Qur'an introduces some tensions and sensitivities in everyday care. A small example is that the Qur'an, like the Bible, decrees that one should not speak about oneself. From a Christian perspective, we might understand this as not being boastful, whereas a literal interpretation has made it difficult for Bona to talk to us or indeed among friends about some of the issues that inevitably bother him. Attitudes towards alcohol are further points of divergence. The identification in Islam of alcohol as haram can extend to a reluctance to even go to places where alcohol is served, which can cut off everyday opportunities such as watching football games in a bar with friends.

Another area requiring awareness of religious mores is around sex. When Muslim boys reach puberty, there is an expectation that female teachers, carers and other female family members who had reached puberty should wear hijab around them (Al Jawdah, 2020). Obviously, this was not the case at the local school Bona attended, where girls were part of his friendship group. Muslim attitudes towards sex are set out in the Islamic concept of Zina, which decrees that sex should only happen within marriage. The need to commit Zina is mitigated in Muslim countries through early marriage, which is obviously more complicated for UASC. Even if marriage were practical, it would be highly unlikely to find a girl from a similar cultural background given the imbalance between sexes among UASC.

More broadly, this brought home to us the fact that so many UASC had left their countries of origin as boys, having only seen sexually mature females in Muslim dress, then arriving in the West as young men, to be confronted with girls' bodies and with their own sexualities in a cultural context where sex is not necessarily considered haram. How might carers acknowledge such matters with them? Having that conversation can be awkward at the best of times (Fewster, 2001). It is made even more difficult in Muslim cultures where there are strong taboos around speaking about sex. So, one needs to grapple with what diverse sexual moralities and sensibilities might mean in terms of how asylum seekers negotiate relationships in a new and strange world.

None of this is mentioned or even considered in how social work engages or fails to engage with such complicated issues. The only social work response relayed to us in this regard did not go beyond the arguably racist stereotype that they (Muslim youth) don't respect women. That has certainly not been our experience but even if it were, it betrays a Western view of gender that does nothing to illuminate the complexity and ambiguity brought about by radically different cultural and religious contexts.

Caring behind gossamer walls

It is hard to overestimate the sense of cultural alterity or otherness between Bona and ourselves, although harder to know how much of this is religious and to what extent religion intersects with personal disposition. Some of Doucet's (2008) writing on reflexivity becomes suggestive in this regard. She talks of the gossamer walls which make opaque the objects of our research or in this case our care, but we nevertheless see enough through these walls as to be able to make some sense of what might be going on. This was, perhaps, made more possible by virtue of our own religious backgrounds, which entailed that religious rituals, injunctions on sexual morality and even restrictions on what and when you are allowed to eat, which although undoubtedly amplified in Islam, were nonetheless recognisable in the context of Catholicism in the not-too-distant past. We could also connect across those gossamer walls to recognise aspects of ourselves in Bona's situation, to feel for his homesickness, for what his mother must be feeling and to identify with some of his struggles of becoming a young man in a context that is both very different but contains traces of the same struggles that all teenage boys have to traverse. It was perhaps such spectral connections that have allowed us to make the sort of relationship whereby we can begin to make some sense of one another – however tentative and incomplete.

Conclusion

When Bona first came to live with us, friends who were social workers cautioned that foster placements for UASC often broke down. Sure enough, the placements of several of the boys who arrived

with Bona did break down. Looking back, this is perhaps not surprising. As Wade et al. (2012) reported, successful placements require that foster carers and their family and the young person have to be adaptable to the process of integration. Yet the complexity of this process is not recognised or supported in the way that the foster care system approaches the care of UASC (Siderly, 2019). Our experience was that within a social work frame of reference, responses struggled to move beyond dominant, psychologised perspectives of attachment theory and child protection discourses rooted in assumptions around the impact of past harm to begin to understand the multi-layered needs but also the strengths of asylum-seeking and refugee youngsters. In particular, the starkness of cultural difference and the challenges but also, for us, the stimulation, of working across this, was absent in the established institutional frameworks and mindsets that are intended to support such placements.

Bona's placement has been successful because we have had the confidence in our own parenting skills and our own wider understanding of children's needs to be able to ignore the narrow Westernised and 'professionalised' ways in which these are understood and accorded universal status within the childcare establishments. This has allowed us to operate from a position of cultural humility, within which curiosity is key (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington and Utsey, 2013), to set aside assumptions of trauma and treatment and to come to comprehend the caring task as a hermeneutic, iterative interplay of emerging interpretation and understanding. This has involved the need for a reflexive fusing of horizons between both Bona's and our own past and present, between the immediate and the more general and between the personal and the cultural.

If the above paragraph seems rather too abstract, our care has been characterised by the social pedagogical staples of engagement in everyday activities, largely centring on supporting education, encouraging involvement in sport and creating opportunities for Bona to take steps towards young adulthood in a cultural and relational context within which he feels safe to do so. In this sense, social pedagogy offers a more appropriate paradigm than current-day social work through which to achieve this, moving beyond narrow, individualised and deficit-based notions to considering broadly socio-educational interventions.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest with their work.

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