Identities on the Move: the integration experiences of Somali refugee and asylum seeker young people

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Definitions: an asylum seeker is someone who has applied for asylum and is awaiting a decision on the outcomes: they do not have the right to work or to benefits and have only limited access to further and higher education; a refugee is someone who has been granted leave to remain in the UK as a refugee.

The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 does not apply to children arriving under the age of 18 who are granted leave to remain under the Children’s Act (1989) under which they are placed into the care of a Local Authority until their asylum claim is assessed at 18.

When the integration policy was tightened in 2002 the number of successful applications for Danish citizenship fell by 72% (Danish Refugee Council, 2004).
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Most research about the experiences of refugee and asylum seekers has addressed the experiences of adults. Little is known about the experiences of young asylum seekers, yet they constituted 23% of all asylum applications in 2005.

This two year study by the Universities of Sheffield and Leeds focused on the lives of young Somalis aged 11-18 in Sheffield, UK. Using quantitative and qualitative methods it explored the ways in which young Somalis’ identities and affiliations are shaped by: their histories of mobility, their experiences of home, school and community life in the UK; and the implications of these experiences for their social integration. The research found that:

Findings:

- Somali children have limited memories or direct experiences of Somali and gain their understanding of what it means to be Somali from their families and communities.
- Experiences of forced mobility and loss of attachment to place mean the identity ‘Muslim’ becomes for many young Somali people the most important and consistent way that they have of defining who they are.
- Young people are wary of claiming a British identity because ‘British’ is implicitly still imagined as a white identity.
- Community space for migrant groups, such as the Somalis, to define their own identities is important in giving these groups the security to feel they belong to the nation.
- Integration policies which stress national identity have the potential effect of legitimising negative attitudes by the majority population towards migrants and their cultures.
- Somali children (and their parents) receive very limited support at school to learn English and to integrate into the British educational system.
- Funding is needed to develop the educational support that Somali community homework clubs provide for Somali young people and to link this more strongly with the British school curriculum.
- Intercultural differences are emerging between the generations within the Somali community. Young people commonly feel their parents do not understand their experiences of trying to integrate in the UK.
- A general crisis of masculinity and lack of male mentors is contributing to a high incidence of youth offending.
- There is an emerging — but hidden — culture of smoking and drinking amongst Somali young people which has implications for the development of health education initiatives.
About the Project

The study employed a multi-method research design combining quantitative and qualitative elements. The quantitative research involved an in-depth survey of young people in schools. This was administered within class time, to all pupils in years 7, 9 and 11 in eight Sheffield secondary schools and one further education college. This provided a database (3313 responses) which allowed the researchers to compare the Somali respondents’ affiliations and identity practices with those of children from other minority ethnic groups and white majority children.

The qualitative stage of the research included work with Somali communities and families in Sheffield UK, as well as additional work in Aarhus, Denmark.

- participant observation in Somali community spaces, such as homework clubs;
- in-depth interviews with Somali children and their parent(s) exploring their particular histories of mobility, senses of attachment, and understandings of their own identities;
- in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (such as representatives from the local authority, schools and community) about the broader contextual issues that shape young people’s identities;
- an online exercise in which, children from Somali homework clubs were given user names and invited to participate in an online WebCT forum;
- and art workshops conducted by professional therapists.

The numbers of Somalis in Sheffield and Aarhus respectively are difficult to estimate because of the complex histories of forced and voluntary, internal and international migration as well as the limitations of how data is collected and categorised. It is estimated however, that about 5,000 Somalis are thought to be living in Sheffield, compared to approximately 4,000 in Aarhus. Given the nature of the diaspora there are close links between Somalis living in Sheffield and Aarhus. This close contact was, for example, experienced in the recruitment of research participants. Some Somali families in Sheffield have either lived in Aarhus themselves prior to undertaking a secondary migration to Sheffield, or have extended family members currently living in Aarhus.

The interviews were conducted in English, Danish or with a Somali interpreter. Quotations from the interviews that are used in this report are verbatim, spoken or grammatical errors have not been corrected. All names of specific people or places have been removed in order to protect the anonymity of the informants.

Background

Asylum seeker children entering the UK (either as dependents or unaccompanied) have until recently received scant attention in immigration and asylum debates. However, in 2006, the UK received over 23,000 applications for asylum, over one-third of these were made by those aged 20 years or under and of these 3,245 were unaccompanied children (Home Office Asylum Statistics 2006). Indeed since 2000 an estimated 24,000 unaccompanied children have entered the UK without identification, documentation or guardians. In particular, those fleeing from conflict in Somalia have figured among the top five groups of asylum seekers entering the UK in recent years (Henderson 2005). These figures mask important differences,
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However, both in the journeys and asylum seeking strategies, embarked on by young Somalis on route to the UK that have implications for the shaping of their identities. It is known that a large number of Somalis arriving in the UK have first spent time in refugee camps in neighbouring Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti. Other unaccompanied young children have, according to the United Nations, been smuggled to the UK and other European countries, dumped at ports where they are able to seek asylum as unaccompanied minors (IRIN 2003). As the law stands, unaccompanied children are automatically granted temporary leave to remain in the UK until a decision is made on their status at the age of 18. Given that many of those arriving have no papers, the assessment of age is both open to abuse with those over the age of 18 strategically claiming to be younger and subject to error as witnessed by cases of children detained as adults. An increasing, but undocumented, number of young Somalis are arriving in the UK from other countries in Europe, in particular from Scandinavia and the Netherlands where they have already been granted refugee status. This secondary movement following several years of residence in Europe is motivated by the desire to reunify families separated during the conflict and has also been associated with an increase in discrimination and unemployment in Europe.

This increase in the number of asylum seekers, including children, arriving in the UK over the last decade have prompted changes in UK government policy embodied in the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act and more recently the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, 2002. In particular, the creation of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has taken over responsibility since April 2000 for asylum seekers whose claims are being considered and for their dispersal away from London and the south east to accommodation in the regions. For those who are subsequently granted refugee status or exceptional leave to remain, NASS support is terminated and replaced by Local Authority and Social Services support. For this group, new initiatives have been set in place through the Government’s Full and Equal Citizens strategy (2001) to assist their integration as ‘equal members of society’ across a number of spheres including employment, education, housing etc.

More recently the plight of asylum seeker children has been at the forefront of public debate with the piloting of changes in policy targeted at so-called ‘failed asylum seekers’ who are being ‘encouraged’ to return home through removal of all forms of support. This policy has however revealed a lack of understanding of the circumstances of children who are subject to different legislation under the 1989 Children’s Act. As support is removed Local Authorities are obligated to take destitute children away from their parents into care until the age of 18.

Despite these initiatives, the integration experiences of asylum seeker and refugee children in the UK are poorly understood yet it is particularly pertinent to develop policies to support their integration. Firstly, because if young people are equipped with appropriate skills this will help minimise their risk of social exclusion in adulthood. Secondly, childhood is perhaps the best time to intervene to address integration difficulties because young people are more open to learning and change than adults. Thirdly, young people who are not integrated into society are at risk of social harms that can further contribute to processes of marginalisation, such as for example, becoming involved in drugs, or crime. Finally, refugee children require specific measures to address their needs because of their particular social and legal position. Prompted by recent
government initiatives notably the UK Government’s Green Paper, *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003) — which was subsequently incorporated into *The Children’s Act* (2004) — proposing wide-ranging reforms to help children (and in particular minority ethnic children) overcome disadvantage and improve their life chances, more attention needs to be paid to the experiences of young asylum seekers.

**Background on Somalia**

**Migration to the UK**

In 1988 Major-General Mohammed Siyaad Barre, who had ruled Somalia as a political dictator since a military coup in 1969, began a campaign of persecution against the Isaaq clan ordering the bombing of Somali northern towns (a stronghold of this clan) in an attempt to eliminate opposition to his rule. In the backlash which followed Barre was eventually deposed and civil war broke out. By 1992 the UN estimated that one million Somalis out of a total population estimated at anywhere from five to eleven million were refugees, scattered in: Kenya, Ethiopia, Western Europe, North America and Australasia (Berns McGowan 1999). Despite the spread of the Somali diaspora across the globe family members and relatives remain in contact on a regular basis.

The Somali migration to the UK can be divided into different phases: around the turn of the 20th century Somali seamen came to work in the British Merchant Navy, when this was run down in the 1950s, Somalis moved to work in the industrial cities of Birmingham, Sheffield and Manchester. At this point, many of the seamen were joined by their families. From the late 1980s onwards, significant numbers of Somalis arrived in the UK seeking asylum because of the civil war. The last phase of migration began around 2000 when Somalis who had obtained refugee status and later citizenship in other European countries such as The Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, began secondary migrations to the UK. The Somali community in the UK is thus characterised by different arrival scenarios (see figure 1).

Compared to the long tradition of Somalis living in the UK, the period of Somali migration to Denmark is relatively short. The majority of Somalis living here arrived as asylum seekers fleeing the civil war between the late 1980s and the 1990s. Many of these obtained refugee status and have subsequently applied for, and received, Danish citizenship. Recent years have seen a significant trend of many Somali families leaving Denmark.

The numbers of Somalis in the UK is difficult to estimate because of the complex histories of forced and voluntary, internal and international migration as well as the limitations of how data is collected and categorised. It is estimated however, that about 75,000 Somalis live in the UK.

This research found that 28% of the Somali young people who responded to the questionnaire survey had come to the UK direct from Somalia; 33% had migrated to the UK via another European country; and 6% had arrived in the UK via, or from, a Middle Eastern country.

These results reflect the complex patterns of mobility that are characteristic of the Somali Diaspora. The following sections of this report explore the implications of these experiences of mobility for young people’s sense of identity focusing on what it means to them to be: Somali, Muslim, and British. The report then considers specific relationships between language and integration and education and integration, as well as gender issues.
In doing so, we draw on particular academic ways of thinking about identity. In outlining a narrative approach to identity, Margaret Somers (1994: 606) argues that ‘...all of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making’. In particular, we seek to understand how young asylum seekers negotiate and position themselves within social narratives that are not of their own making, that are valued/judged in particular ways by society, and which: define their role as children,
are founded on particular constructions of asylum seekers, Islam and what it means to be British. At the same time, we are also alert to the ways that Somali young people choose to position themselves in relation to these dominant narratives and produce their own personal stories of who they are and where they belong. This involves consideration of the ways that individuals claim or prioritise some available narratives of identity or disavow and reject others.

Of course these identity practices do not occur in a vacuum, rather identities are situated accomplishments that emerge through specific social practices which are produced in, and through different spaces, at a range of scales from: sites such as the home, and neighbourhood community, through to the nation and transnational diaspora. One consequence of this is that a given identity is not just something that can be claimed by an individual rather it is also dependent, at least in part, on an individual being recognised or accepted as such by a wider community. A further implication is that having a particular identity in different contexts can define individuals as ‘in place’ or ‘out of place’; as belonging or excluded according to spatial norms and expectations in that space.

**What it Means to be Somali**

For some young Somalis who remember their homeland it is a powerful part of their identities. These extracts taken from an on-line web discussion forum with Somali young people reflect their attachment to Somalia:

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i like somali so mcuh caz is my conter thanx
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I would love to live in my country somalia because i left behind my family and my friends whom i love so much. The weather is very good. But because of the war there is no good school and there is no peace and also life is hard always.
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Somali is nice and beutiful country
And if you haven't seen somalia you batter go.
And if you seen somalia tall smathing about somalia.
The people who haven't seen
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Most of the children’s parents encourage them to speak Somali at home, they eat Somali food, celebrate Somali festivals and the children strongly identify as Somali. Most of the children however, left their homeland when they were very young or were born while their families were on the move. As such they have limited, or in some cases, no direct memories of Somalia. Indeed, the memories they have are often of domestic life, of pets or school friends. Rather, their knowledge and understanding of the country is largely second-hand, coming from adults in their families who remember growing up there, from their friends who may have visited the country, or from media representations. These young people must position themselves in relation to public narratives about what it means to be Somali that are not of their own making and are predicated on sometimes differing and contradictory accounts of a place of which they have limited memory. Whereas media reporting of Somalia focuses on the civil war, disorder, famine and terrorism, parents tend to offer a more positive representation to their children of a beautiful country and family life,
glossing over some of the hardships and violence which they, or relatives, may have experienced:

My grandmother tells us a lot about it...that it was really beautiful, that they had a good life, had a big house. But then there was the war. So when I think about Somalia I think civil war and then also that it was a beautiful country before this...It’s such a big part of me and I really want to see it. See how it is, how the nature is and see how different it is from here so I can create my own opinion more or less, so that’s not just what everyone else says.

(girl, aged 15)

Somali parents acknowledge their children’s lack of understanding of their homeland and their curiosity to experience it for themselves and so in recent years many families have travelled back to Somalia on visits where the children can get to know ‘their’ country and its people. On these trips however, some children described feeling out of place and that they did not belong. It is not enough to claim a self-identity, rather belonging requires that an identity must also be recognised or accepted as such by a wider community. The children who have returned on visits described experiences for example of: being stared at; being accused of having a pale skin or not speaking Somali properly; being hassled for money or English lessons.

When we used to go to Somalia a lot of people used to say ‘oh you lot, people from England’. And I just said to my Mum ‘how do they know?’ And My Mum goes ‘that’s how they are because of your walk and the way you talk’. Cos I used to talk English to my brother in Somalia and they used to turn round and stare at us and they knew that we were not from here... A lot of people, now these days that are scared to go to Somalia because they’re like people stare at you and they talk about you. (girl, aged 17)

Sometimes I feel Somali and sometimes I feel British. Like if I went to my country they would make me feel British. They wouldn’t even call me Somali. Even if I spoke perfect Somali they would say to me ‘You ain’t Somali you just learnt it like a language’ [laughs]... And then they’re like ‘You know where the airport is, you know your way back’. (girl, aged 17)

Return visits have had a powerful impact on a number of the young people interviewed. Several of the children described how these experiences made them more appreciative of life in the UK, and particularly the education opportunities which they have received. One boy described for example, how he used to be disruptive at school, but having been to Somalia he had become motivated to pursue an education so that he might give something back to his country in the future. Girls, in particular, recognised that as young women in the UK they are not so confined by gender roles and responsibilities and have more opportunities, than their counterparts in Somalia. In such ways, return visits gave young people a stronger sense of the value of life in Britain, cemented
their recognition of Britain as a positive place to live, and in some cases led young people to re-consider whether they should self-identify as British as well as Somali. Yet, despite the shock of ‘being out of place’ or not belonging in Somalia, and in some cases losing the ability to communicate effectively in Somali, all the young people nonetheless continued to identify themselves first, and foremost, as Somali.

The Importance of Being Muslim

Virtually all Somalis are Muslims, representing a significant non-Asian and non-Middle Eastern Muslim voice. Previous studies of Somali refugee and asylum seeker communities (e.g. Berns McGowan 1999) have argued that prior to immigration many Somali adults took their religion for granted but that following migration to Europe or North America their faith became a more important focus of their lives and identities. This research suggests that many Somali refugee and asylum seekers study the Qur’an, ensure that Qu’ranic education is an important part of their child’s education, and that women dress in accordance with Islam in ways that they would not have done when they were in Somalia. This increased importance of a Muslim identity to Somali refugees and asylum seekers adults stems from the fact that faith provides an important anchor within their broader experience of mobility and dislocation, and provides a means of ensuring that they do not lose their children to an ‘alien’ western individualistic culture.

When I was in Somali everyone, not only me, women, there’s no compulsory to put scarf...that’s the way I like and the way I grow up. But if I walk in [Sheffield place name removed] without scarf the whole community will embarrass me... I got some school mates here and when we come together we talk about why, you know we have, we never have scarf in Somali why we having it now in here...There’s no good answer but I think people are now interested with religion and coming more religious than before...People don’t want to lose their identity of Islam, so if me and you walked together in the street and I got the hijab, everybody knows I’m a Muslim woman and whether you are a Christian, Jewish or Hindu, they know you are different from me, so that’s identity of the Islam woman. (Mother)

For the majority of the young people who participated in this research (their forced history of mobility both moving between various countries before arriving in UK, and also between cities/places within UK) has left them with a relatively ‘rootless’ identity and a confused attachment, or no particular attachment, to place. Yusef for example, is 11 years old, he was born in Europe and was eight years old when his parents moved to the UK. Most of his Somali peer group in Sheffield have lived in different countries (e.g. in Ethiopian and Kenyan refugee camps, or other European countries such as Denmark and Netherlands), but Yusef dismissed these experiences as irrelevant to their identities, explaining that they do not talk among themselves about the diverse places in which they have lived because ‘it’s just countries’. Rather, in this context of mobile childhoods the identity ‘Muslim’ becomes for many young Somali people the most important and
consistent way that they have of defining who they are. Notably, 92% of the Somali respondents to our survey claimed that their Muslim faith was ‘important to their everyday life’. This role of religion was significantly higher than for all other minority ethnic groups surveyed. In this context it is possible to see how, and why, the identity ‘Muslim’ becomes for many young Somali people the most important and consistent way that they have of defining who they are.

I’m a Muslim and I’m always a Muslim and my Mum goes no matter where I am I’m always a Muslim. (girl aged 15)

Well Muslim…that’s my faith and before anything else that comes first in my life [...] So that’s the most important thing to me in my life. That comes first before anything; parents, friends, anything. That comes first. (girl aged 11)

Young women in particular experience strong social pressure to practise their faith by managing their identities (for example, in terms of wearing the hijab, speaking Somali) in a modest, respectful and controlled way in order to maintain their own and their family’s reputation within the neighbourhood. Although, young women also described some of the ways that they get round or re-negotiate these expectations.

Ambivalence about being British

Only 19% of the Somali respondents stated that being British was important to them. Many of those interviewed already hold a British passport or aspire to one. Most acknowledged that Britain has given them a safe home, an education and many opportunities. Indeed, some acknowledged that they now speak English better than they speak Somali. However, there was a general wariness about publicly claiming a British identity. This is because of fears that to do so would be received negatively by family members and the Somali community as it would be read as shame at, or rejection of, their Somali heritage, particularly given that many parents retain a belief that at some point their families will return to live in Somalia.

Britain even though I’ve lived here all my life, I just don’t think like it’s our country… Somalia’s my country cos you’ve got all your family there… I just don’t think British is important…Like there’s a lot of Somali/British people out there, they don’t think being British is important. Like mothers don’t think British is, [they say] ‘you can’t just keep saying your British, you’re Somali, it’s your country, Britain’s not your country, Somalia’s your country’. And you’re like, yeah it is, that’s how it is…My Mum used to say that…she said to me when I was a little kid you’re going to Somalia and then she goes, we’re going back to your country. I goes ‘That’s not my country, Britain’s my country’. She’s like ‘No, Somalia’s your country’. (girl aged 17)

At the same time, some of the young people were also wary of claiming a British identity because ‘British’ is implicitly still imagined as a white
identity. Some recalled for example, experiences of when their assertions of Britishness were challenged by others. As such, several of the interviewees acknowledged that a British identity can only be claimed at particular times and places to particular audiences.

It's like sometimes it sounds weird coming out of my mouth 'oh yeah British'...I'm British holding a passport and everything but when I'm talking to my friends like the ones what have lived in the UK all their lives they're like ‘No you're Somali’... The thing is yeah, Somalia always going to be my home in my heart yeah...but if I go to Somalia I feel like a visitor there and when I'm here [in UK] I just feel, I don't know, at home...Britain is where I feel comfortable...but they're going ‘Oh you're not British, you're not from Britain you're not British’...I goes I bet you I know more about Britain than your daughter whose white and born here and everything and they're like ‘Oh no, no’. I'm like I probably do...and like most of the time I'm always right. (girl aged 17)

I’ve only lived in Sheffield for five years now, nearly six... but it doesn’t mean you’re not a Somali. I might live in Sheffield...I might have their accent or whatever but when people ask me ‘Where are you from?’ I could say ‘I’m British’.

I’ve got a British passport. I live here. But I don’t. I say ‘Somali’ because that’s really important. It’s like I don’t need to be ashamed of my country. I don’t need to be ashamed of who I am or who my people are...But at the same time I am kind of British because I live here. I eat their food...I shouldn’t be ashamed of saying I’m British because it’s the country that actually gave me something. They gave me education and things like that. But at the same time people say if you're not white why should you call yourself British?...I wouldn’t go to anyone and say I'm British. ....it depends on the person that I say it to. Some people I'll say ‘I’m Somali’. Some other people...then I’ll say ‘I’m British’...It’s a bit difficult when you come out with it — It’s like ‘I don’t think you're British’ [mimicking response]...just because you’ve got a passport in this country doesn’t mean’...so you have to be careful who you say it to... (girl aged 17)

In contrast, the Somali children interviewed in Aarhus, Denmark emphasised that they do identify as Danish (among other things e.g. Muslim, Somali and so on). This is perhaps not surprising given the emphasis the Danish State places on the need for migrants to assimilate. In Aarhus there is a relatively small Somali Muslim community which is fragmented and relatively unstable. The Somali community has not had space to establish its own identity in Denmark because the Government has placed great emphasis on the importance of migrants becoming...
Danish. All newly arrived adult (18+) refugees must take part in a three year ‘integration programme’ where they are taught about Danish society and culture, to speak the language and undergo other training to prepare them for the labour market. In order to get permanent status a refugee must complete the integration programme, pass a Danish language test and a test about Danish society and have no convictions or debts. Likewise, upon starting school in Denmark refugee children are sent to ‘reception classes’ in specific schools where they are taught Danish intensively, alongside other subjects, with a focus on preparing them for entry into a mainstream classroom. Increasingly, new initiatives to provide kindergarten places for refugee children are being introduced to ensure that they are able to speak Danish before they reach school-age. Indeed, many of the Somali families living in Aarhus speak Danish within the family home as well as in public space whereas Sheffield Somalis predominantly speak Somali at home.

The Somali community in Aarhus is located within neighbourhoods that have a significant but very diverse minority ethnic population. These areas are regarded as quite ‘rough’ and so there is a tendency among Somali families to try to move out as soon as possible to better neighbourhoods or to areas just outside Aarhus which tend to be predominantly white. Others regard Denmark as a stopping off point rather than a final destination and so have international mobility on their minds. As a result the Somali Muslim children in Aarhus are sometimes isolated in predominantly white schools where they encounter institutional and peer pressure to conform to secular Danish culture. Yet despite enacting a Danish identity through language many of the Somali young people interviewed in Aarhus described encountering significant experiences of discrimination and harassment in everyday life (c.f. Essed 1991). While Danish society has traditionally imagined itself to be a liberal and tolerant place predicated on a strong commitment to social equality in the context of a supportive welfare state, commentators have observed a significant shift in social attitudes as a reaction to the perceived threats of European integration and associated immigration (Wren 2001). Since the early 1990s there has been growing concern within Denmark about immigration and integration which has seen a tightening of Denmark about immigration and integration which has seen a tightening of Danish asylum legislation, an increased focus on the importance of preserving ‘Danish’ culture, a discouragement of immigrants from maintaining transnational relations with their diasporic communities and the emergence of far-right groups (Østergaard-Nielsen 2002). Indeed, immigrants are often referred to as ‘the strangers’ in popular discourse illustrating their perceived lack of belonging in the national imagination. Research has identified evidence of widespread discrimination in terms of housing policies and the compulsory dispersal of refugees, practices which have faced little significant opposition from the liberal professional establishment (Wren 2001). The reception of Somalis in Denmark has, according to some commentators, been negative compared with the response to other war refugees such as Bosnians, with the media and politicians frequently focusing problems of integration, and targeting Somalis for special measures such as repatriation (Fadel et al 1999). This phenomenon in Danish society has been described by some commentators as ‘Somaliphobia’ and has provoked Somali representatives to complain to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and to request that refugees be located in a more tolerant country (Fadel et al, 1999). Perhaps not surprisingly, it is a desire to escape such prejudice and discrimination which is one of the most common motivations for Somalis to undertake secondary migration once they have a European Union passport from Denmark to the
UK. Indeed, some commentators (e.g. Hamburger 1990) have argued that although the aim of Danish policy has been to integrate migrants into Danish society, the effect has been to legitimate negative attitudes by the majority population towards migrants and their cultures. The extent of this hostility is apparent in the way Somali young people themselves reproduce popular discourses about themselves as ‘foreigners’ and ‘dark people’ when describing their own everyday lives.

In contrast to the Danish respondents, and despite disavowing the identity British, or being fearful of claiming this identity, the majority of the Sheffield interviewees nonetheless described feeling ‘safe’ and ‘at home’ in the UK. Across the Somali diaspora there is an image of ‘Britain’ as a place of freedom to be whoever you are (Nielsen 2004). This perception of Britain as a safe place to live was contrasted favourably with the experiences of those who have been migrants in other European countries. Unlike the Danish Somali community, none of the families who participated in the Sheffield research had any explicit plans to leave the city or the UK in the immediate future.

I feel that I live in my country, like in Somalia. Because my cousins, my aunts, my uncles, they live here [in Sheffield]. And it’s so free, I feel so free, I don’t know why. […] [In Denmark] all the time on the television they talked about refugees and Somalis. Oh, it’s difficult to relax then. […] There’s a big difference between Denmark and the UK. If we talk about Sheffield, there are many Somalis. So when we lived in Denmark, my children spoke Danish fluently and only a little

Somali. But now they speak Somali fluently [laughs] because so many Somalis live here, and they play together with them, and the neighbours are Somali, and they go to school with Somalis, so they speak a lot of Somali. […] So when people speak Somali here when you go outside, you think that you’re in Somalia. I’m happy about this. (Mother)

While, some of the Sheffield interviews did describe experiences of racism, these negative events are countered by a broader perception of safety and trust that comes from being part of a strong and stable local Somali Muslim community. It might also reflect the fact that in spite of racism and xenophobia in Britain there has also been another more benevolent history in the UK of hospitality (Nava 2006). Ash Amin has (2003) observed for example, that in the last 30 years mainstream British society has become more cosmopolitan, multi-cultural and tolerant in the UK. He attributes this change in part to a public culture following the Labour party’s election victory in 1997 which has addressed institutional racism, discrimination and racially motivated violence, as well as the importance of the micropolitics of everyday social encounters in overcoming cultural differences. In one sense then Somalis in Sheffield feel that they belong in the UK because they feel secure in their local community without necessarily being included in, or self-identifying with, the nation.

Belonging to a nation is not just about citizenship per se (i.e. rights and responsibilities) it is about ‘the emotions that such memberships evoke’ (Yuval-Davis et al 2005: 526). Specifically, it is about the security that being in ‘place’ provides. The Aarhus Somalis do not feel that they belong in Denmark, even though they enact a Danish
Identity (e.g. through language) they remain ‘strangers’ without a liveable place within the nation. As such their networks and ability to reproduce a community of practice are fragile and precarious, leaving them feeling vulnerable in the face of narrow definitions of Danish nationhood. In contrast, the Sheffield Somalis feel that they belong in the UK — even though they do not identify as British — because at a local level they have defined their own community in terms of shared values, networks and practices, and in doing so have made the place their own. As such they feel secure within their community and have a sense of stake in its future. This stability and emotional sense of being part of a larger whole, which resonates from a sense of having a place enables the Sheffield Somalis a freedom to define their identities beyond narrow prescriptions of Britishness.

This comparison of the experiences of Somalis living in Aarhus and Sheffield has potential UK policy implications in the light of interim, and subsequent final, report by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007). The interim report contained a warning that by promoting respect for difference UK policy may be facilitating separation. It identified a shared national vision of ‘Britishness’ as an important potential unifying force, and argued that an inability to speak English is a critical barrier to the integration of migrant groups and to cohesion. In many respects this emphasis in the interim report on the importance of speaking English and the promotion of ill-defined notions of ‘Britishness’ has echoes of the Danish policy of ‘integration’. However, the danger of such attempts to reduce or stabilise migrants’ identities into narrow categories of belonging is that they may threaten the space to define their own identities which gives migrant groups, such as the Somalis in Sheffield, the security to feel they belong. At the same time, it also risks having the potential effect of legitimising negative attitudes by the majority population towards migrants and their cultures.

**Language and Integration**

Research has shown that refugee children are generally quicker to learn the language of the countries in which they settle than their parents (Anderson 2001). This is because children are immersed in the dominant national language at school, whereas if parents are unemployed they may spend most of their time in community spaces where they have limited exposure to and opportunities to learn the new language. Children are also commonly less fearful of attempting to communicate with local people than their parents, and as such may assume the role of family interpreter at an early age, taking on what can be extremely adult responsibilities in the family.

*My Mum if, if she wants to speak to teacher or if, if say…my Aunt’s going to a meeting and I can translate to the people that she’s having a meeting with…I’ve been to the Town Hall. I’ve been to Sheffield University with my Dad and I’ve been to Birmingham with my Dad to a meeting [acting as an interpreter]. (girl, aged 15)*

The complex routes that Somali refugee and asylum seeking families have taken to arrive in the UK mean that different linguistic preferences, as well as different linguistic competencies between children and parents and even between siblings themselves are commonplace. Amongst recent arrivals Somali is the common first language of parents. School age children arriving into the UK via European countries are usually
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fluent in a European language such as Dutch or Danish, having spent several formative years in a European education system. Whereas, younger children who have had little or no formal education prior to arriving in the UK because of their age at the point of migration pick up English very quickly. Many children described different intrafamilial linguistic competencies and preferences.

**Me now with my Mum yeah I talk just normal Somali yeah and with my Dad. [edit]. I speak with my sisters and my little brother speak Dutch...**

**Interviewer: Why do you speak Dutch with them and not Somali or English?**

*I speak like, no I don't speak Somali to them yeah, I just speak Dutch and English. I can't be botherered to speak Somali [laughs]...it just comes out yeah when I'm talking to my sisters, I just talk Dutch. Dutch comes out of my mouth. When I talk with my parents like always Somali cos it goes like respect innit, yeah.*

*(girl, aged 15)*

The issue of language is often a cause of intergenerational or familial tensions. For parents speaking Somali at home is an important way of ensuring their children retain their roots, and develop a Somali identity. For many of the parents the possibility of a ‘return’ to Somaliland figures significantly in their geographical imaginations. As such ensuring their children are fluent in Somali is also preparation for their imagined futures (as well as allowing them to communicate with diasporic families) although this vision is not shared by the majority of the children. Parents often therefore try and enforce the Somali language and culture in the home, whereas children often prefer to speak English and identify with English lifestyles as a result of their experience of schooling. As a result intercultural differences are emerging between the generations. Young people feel their parents do not understand their experiences of trying to integrate in the UK.

**I believe they losing Somali because they speak in English. And if they lose, it’s hard to teach again or also it’s hard to speak to other Somali people if they go back to Somalia or if they meet my parents or if they answer the phone when my Dad or Mum phone me. They [the children’s grandparents] can’t speak English so that’s, I always thinking all that stuff, so I keep you know, to teach them Somali, yeah.**

*(Mother)*

**Education and Integration**

Somali children (who now constitute the third largest minority ethnic grouping in Sheffield) have been consistently at the bottom of achievement tables suggesting potential problems of integration in the education system (ESES 2002).

Many young Somalis arriving in the UK have had limited or no schooling as a result of the Civil War and the associated disruption of mobility. It is estimated that 22% of 10-13 year old boys, and 24% of girls have been engaged in predominantly unwaged labour (UNDP 2003). Many have also
been exposed to ‘adult’ experiences of persecution, conflict and violence in their country of origin or in caring for family members (UN 2003, Naidoo 1997). It is known, for example, that as many as 200,000 children or 5% of Somali children have carried a gun or been involved in militia activities at some stage in their lives (UN 2003). As such many children arrive in the UK with limited schooling, yet years of ‘adult’ experience working to support the household economy. The survey findings, for example, demonstrated that Somali respondents are significantly more likely than other children in Sheffield to: help look after brothers and sisters; help brothers and sisters with their homework; and translate for family members than both white majority children and children from other minority ethnic groups. Perhaps not surprisingly, 68% of Somali children agreed with the statement that ‘I’m treated as an adult at home’ compared to only 48% of the total sample.

I grew up quick because my Mum was ill [her father had been killed in Somali civil war] and like cos like I’m the oldest girl so I had to grow up quickly and like help out with the house and help the family and everything. By the time I was what, by the time I was ten I knew how to cook and clean properly, like literally cook proper food. Most people when they’re 10 they know how to make toast by the time I was 10 I knew how to cook properly so I was cooking, cleaning. By the time I was 12 I’d like know how to pay the phone bill and everything and so I had everything sorted so I grew up quite quickly. And like being an adult’s important because I know what it’s like, the thing is I’m still young yeah but I know what its like to be an adult, I grew up quickly and like it is important to be a child yeah, to have your little childish moments or whatever, but still its’ just like being an adult’s important to me…Cos I need to be an adult anyway cos looking after my Mum is a 24 hour job. (girl aged 17)

Somali children entering the UK education system also have very disparate experiences of formal education and diverse language competencies because of their varied histories of mobility. For many children English may be the second, third or even fourth language that they are learning (after Somali, Arabic, Dutch, Danish and so on).

Many refugee and asylum seeker children experience disadvantage in the educational system. Notably, the State school system and most services for children and families are neighbourhood based and begin from an assumption that most people are located in one place. Yet, young asylum seekers are frequently moved as part of dispersal initiatives and as we outlined above may be detained in adult centres. As such young people can struggle to settle in UK schools. Children described for example, the way their education has been disrupted because of the different course content, and teaching styles in different schools, as well as the way mobility has undermined their ability to develop relationships with teachers, and the upheaval and isolation they encounter leaving school friends and re-establishing themselves within different peer groups.

Most of the children stated that they had not received any formal assistance from teachers to learn English or settle into the UK education system, despite in many
cases speaking little English when they first arrived in the UK. Rather, most described accounts of being placed in classrooms where they could not understand the lesson being taught and of being expected to pick up English by osmosis. Many children reported that it was fellow pupils (both white majority and Somali peers) who supported their integration by teaching them English, translating lessons for them, or re-explaining key concepts to them. These practices were most evident in schools with ethnically diverse catchments. However, in some cases where children were placed in pre-dominantly white schools they encountered bullying because of their language difficulties. Many of the children were acutely aware of the education disadvantages they faced. Boys in particular, were more likely to respond to the frustrations of their communication and integration difficulties by being disruptive in the classroom, resulting in punishments and exclusions which further perpetuated their sense of marginalisation and reproduced their educational disadvantage.

In Britain, it’s like when I started in year six it’s like I didn’t know much about what’s going on and like what the teachers are saying and like whiteboards, I didn’t know cos I used to know about like blackboards, like using chalk...like the different countries [where she has lived], like they used to teach different stuff. Like Denmark was like, Denmark’s kind of different for me because I don’t find much things hard but like Somalia like you have to learn things or you will get hit, if you don’t do your homework, like you’re going to get punished. (boy, aged 16)

Like in the English exam, the past one they’ll give you a passage and you have to write and it’s for ten marks and you have to explain what that passage is in big details. And they [his fellow Somali pupils] won’t be able to do that but English people will because it’s their language...They’ve been doing it for all their lives when this person hasn’t been doing it for all his life. (boy, aged 14)

Differences between languages spoken at home and used at school may also contribute to the relative underachievement of children from minority ethnic backgrounds. In particular, the language patterns within white middle class families are similar to literacy practices in the classroom thus facilitating the performance of middle class white children at school. For Somali children in Sheffield the emphasis placed on speaking Somali within the home means that their English language skills are not developed within the family and there is also a disjuncture between their literacy practices at school and within their homes. Literacy in Somali is not widespread among Somali speakers in the UK given that an agreed Somali script was only introduced in the 1970s and that the formal education system in Somalia has been severely disrupted by the civil war for several decades. Moreover, because of the Somali children’s parents’ own lack of formal education in either Somali or English and their unfamiliarity with the English education system most are unable to provide effective support for their children with homework in English or with their educational choices. This problem is compounded by high levels of lone parent female headed households within the Somali
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The problem is that the mother is not, doesn’t get that much education, you know, or she doesn’t know even the language, you know, to go after her children, you know, to read even the school report or what or anything, you see, or at least you know, or read even the newspaper or speak to the people and know what’s going on there you see. This is which is the major thing I think they’re [Somali children] missing.

(Somali community worker)

Gender Issues

Most Somali young people start off aspiring to the same things as white majority children: a well-paid job, a house, a car, and other consumption opportunities. In this sense they aspire to integration. Many of them are happy living in the UK and speak English, even though they identify as Muslim and/or Somali rather than British. However, because they experience the educational disadvantages outlined above (in relation to reception in the UK, language, and bullying) they find it difficult to achieve the lifestyle to which they aspire through conventional educational and employment routes. At the same time, they are caught between their desire for a relatively material and individualistic British lifestyle and the differing expectations/identifications emanating from their own communities. As such significant numbers of young Somali men are turning to drugs and anti-social or criminal activities as: alternative sources of material and social status; as an escape from the circumstances in which they find themselves; or as a demonstration of their ‘masculinity’ at a time of identity crisis. The young people interviewed also indicated that levels of alcohol consumption and smoking are on the rise amongst their peers. Such patterns, because they are largely invisible beyond the community, are not yet addressed through health education initiatives, such as the Government’s Alcohol Harm Reduction strategy.
they [Somali young men] want to be cool and to be cool you’ve got to have money. To be cool you have to be doing something dangerous, like if you sell drugs you’re going to go to prison. [They say] ‘I don’t care, I can go to prison’. They speak that way. They just think it’s so cool.

(girl aged 17)

Boy: My friend got shot three times. He’s been to prison and everything like that. They [parents] don’t understand. They just think we’re bad because we want to be bad. ‘Why don’t you get a job?’ They don’t understand [Edit]. Nobody is going to hire you so you’ve got to make your own way in this world.

Interviewer: So it’s difficult for young people?

Boy: Yeah. Some people think it’s easy but you put yourself in someone else’s shoes and you see how hard it is. Only because of the lack of education (boy aged 17).

Indeed, there is a crisis of masculinity within the Somali community. While girls are closely controlled in order to protect their own, and their families’, honour, boys are given more independence. Many Somali teenage boys have grown up in the UK in single parent, female headed households or in households where the father plays a minor role. There are high levels of unemployment amongst Somali men and some described losing the respect of their wives and children, as it increasingly women who are the public face of families, taking responsible for organising housing and welfare issues (e.g. dealing with benefit, local authority, schools etc.). It is argued, by community representatives, that this general crisis of masculinity and lack of male mentors is contributing to the high incidence of youth offending.

In our country we don’t control boys, we don’t control them at all. As soon as he is 11 years, 12 years, he is the man of the family and he can decide for himself...[In UK] they failing at education because father is not helping them, mother’s uneducated, father is undereducated... (Mother)

It’s the fathers who lost their responsibilities because of chewing khat...That’s the problem because father he think he’s not responsible for anything. He don’t go to work, he don’t educate himself, all he do is go somewhere and socialise with other same men. That’s what’s going wrong...When you were in Somalia the men was working, they had responsibility, they were working, bringing income to the house...Man was a king in this house, in that world, but when he came here he don’t have work he don’t speak the language. He still got that African mentality that he is still the king in this place, so everything’s lost from him. And he lose his responsibility, the woman see him, lose her now, because he
For young women there are emerging significant tensions in relation to balancing their sense of duty and responsibility towards their parents and the wider Somali Muslim community and their desire to have their freedom to make their own choices about clothing, dating, and their futures. This was most clearly expressed in relation to the wearing of the hijab. Many of the young women, particularly those who had lived in the Netherlands or Scandanavian countries where Somali communities adopt a more liberal approach to their faith, were ambivalent about wearing the hijab. Some of these women managed their identities differently in different spaces according to the people they were with, or whom they may be seen by. The interviewees also described an emerging — but hidden — culture of smoking amongst young Somali women as well as young men. Such patterns have implications for health education programmes.

Recommendations

This research has explored the complex, intersecting influences on young Somali refugee and asylum seekers’ identity formations. The findings demonstrate the importance of place or context in shaping how individuals develop and perform their own identities; and in terms of how their identities are read and acknowledged or denied by others.

The evidence of the comparative work, exploring the experiences of Somali refugee and asylum seekers in Sheffield, UK and Aarhus, Denmark respectively, demonstrates that a sense of ‘belonging’ in a country develops where a community has a sense of security and space to define its own identity beyond or alongside narrow prescriptions of national identity. As such, policies that are implemented to support Somali young people to integrate into the UK must enable them to retain and develop a strong sense of their own cultural identity and heritage, while also supporting them to access education, services and similar life opportunities to the rest of the population.

Specifically, we recommend that there is a need to:

- develop more effective processes of preparation and reception to support refugee and asylum seeker children’s entry into UK schools.
- provide funding to develop the educational support that Somali community homework clubs provide for Somali young people; to link this more strongly with the British school curriculum; and to enable these community organisations to help Somali parents to understand, trust and engage with their children’s schools.
- beware of stressing the importance of a shared national identity in policy initiatives because this can have the potential effect of legitimising negative attitudes by the majority white population towards migrants and their cultures.
- address the persistence of the association of Britishness with whiteness – which is implicit, if not intended, in new systems for developing British citizenship.
- promote ‘meaningful contact’ between Somali communities and white majority communities.
- support and develop community space and capacity building for Somali organisations, because this gives these groups the
security to feel they belong to the nation.

- support community projects to address differences emerging between the genders and generations within the Somali community.

- train more Somali men as mentors to work with young men in their community through both national programmes, such as Connexions, and community-based initiatives.

- develop appropriate community specific local health promotion initiatives to tackle an emerging — but hidden — culture of smoking and drinking amongst some Somali young people.

More Information

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