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'Neither here nor there': Refugee young people and homelessness in Australia

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1. Introduction

In Australia, one in four young people are from a refugee or migrant background (MYAN, 2016, p. 4). Young people from refugee backgrounds are some of the most vulnerable people in our community (MYAN, 2016) and they might reasonably be expected to have different complex needs compared with other young people. Resettlement in Australia may offer refugee young people the chance to reach their full potential. However, the tasks of resettlement are immense and pose daunting challenges for many and can have as much effect on wellbeing as the pre-migration experience (Correa-Velz et al. 2010, p. 1).

For young people of refugee background accessing safe, affordable and appropriate housing in their new country is one of the biggest challenges they will face and is central to social inclusion and to a young person's ability to settle successfully in Australia (CMY, 2010). Not only is the creation of home vitally important for refugees' sense of belonging (Fozdar and Hartley, 2014), it has also been suggested that 'securing stable housing is often more beneficial and therapeutic than many other western interventions' (Harrell-Bond, cited in Peisker & Tilbury, 2003). Yet despite this, refugee young people are also 'six to ten times more likely to be at risk of homelessness than Australian-born young people' (Coventry et al., 2002, p. 50) with 'insecure housing being noted as 'one of the most significant predictors of mental health problems among refugees' (Harrell-Bond, 1999 in Evans and Gavarotto, 2010 p. 7).

Drawing on data from the first longitudinal study to document the experience of homelessness by refugee young people, this article examines young people's personal narratives of homelessness in their new country. The article uses the concept of 'liminality' to explore their journey as they looked for safe and secure housing in Melbourne, Australia.

1.1. Young, refugee and homeless – a state of liminality

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds make up an important proportion of the youth population in Australia and are a diverse group with varying needs and circumstances. Young people from refugee backgrounds generally arrive in Australia through the Humanitarian Programme, either via the off-shore or on-shore component. 25% of Australia's 3.7 million young people are from a refugee or migrant background and 11% have arrived in Australia as refugees or migrants (MYAN, 2016, P. 9). Between 2010 and 2015, young people made up 20% of all those arriving through the combined Family, Humanitarian and Skilled migration programmes (9) and approximately 30%, of the total intake through the Humanitarian Programme. In the same period, approximately 1650 unaccompanied humanitarian minors were referred to the Unaccompanied Humanitarian Minors Programme.

This group of young people have been forced to flee their country of origin because of war or persecution and may arrive in Australia with or without immediate or extended family. The refugee and asylum seeking experience is characteristically traumatic, with many young people experiencing: a dangerous escape from their country of origin, often traveling long distances; separation from family members or significant others; and protracted periods living in unsafe and insecure environments with limited access to health care, education and safe or secure housing. Many young people live for extended periods in different countries (in camps or in the community); and for significant periods with fear and high levels uncertainty. The traumatic nature of the refugee experience can have a longstanding impact on a young person's physical and mental health and may have implications for the settlement journey. Young refugees who have come to Australia through the on-shore programme (as asylum seekers) will have spent time in Australian detention facilities, in community detention, on temporary visas, or at an off-shore processing centre, while awaiting the outcome of their application for protection. The experience of seeking asylum is highly stressful and one of acute uncertainty, often compounding the effects of pre-arrival trauma and adding to the complexity of the settlement process.

Earlier research into the lives of homeless refugee young people shone light on a group of young people, new to Australia who were constantly moving (Couch, 2011; Ransley and Drummond, 2001). These young people were hidden from view with their homeless experience not matching commonly held beliefs about homeless young people (Couch, 2011; Tually et al., 2012; Forrest and Hermes, 2012). This research showed that young refugees did not always consider themselves

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homeless and this exacerbated their under-utilisation of homelessness agencies (Association for Services to Torture and Trauma Survivors, ASeTTS, 2008; Couch, 2011). This is despite their living conditions, such as overcrowding, couch surfing and living in unsafe and insecure accommodation, meeting definitions of homelessness in Australia (Beer and Foley, 2003).

However, despite the discrepancies between the urgent need for interventions and lack of service utilisation by refugee young people, surprisingly few studies have been undertaken which have examined these young people's experiences of homelessness. To this date, this is the only longitudinal study to document these young people's lives. Accurate information on the extent and nature of homelessness affecting young people from a refugee background remains glaringly absent. As such, homelessness among refugee young people remains a 'profoundly under recognised phenomenon' (Couch, 2011).

In defining homelessness for refugee young people, there is a need to move beyond traditional definitions that have sought to define the experience. Traditionally Australian homeless services have utilised the three tier definition of homelessness defined by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1998). However, for this research the work of Hopper and Baumohl (1996) is also used, which although somewhat dated, takes a more theoretical approach and attempts to explicate not only the physical conditions of homelessness, but also the conceptual difficulties it implies. They point to a key aspect of homelessness being 'an absence of belonging, both to a place and with the people settled there' (3). They also describe homelessness as a liminal state which occurs both physically and cognitively.

Liminality is often coined by anthropologists to describe states of passage where people are 'betwixt and between', suspended between the familiar that is left behind and the one they have yet to assume (Malkki, 1995). Because they occupy no fixed status, they are sometimes considered ambiguous, dangerous and often invisible. In fact, the status of occupying a liminal state, as Malkki (1995, p.7) notes, places the individual in 'structural invisibility', making them therefore structurally invisible. People who occupy this liminal space are considered to be 'neither here nor there' (Hynes, 2006: 56). This feeling is described by young people in the research as 'not belonging' and affects young people's ability to restore normalcy to their lives as they have left their country of origin but do not feel accepted in the new country of resettlement. According to Camino and Krulfeld (1994) refugee young people possess a 'double liminal status' (30) because as refugees they are between old and new surroundings (30), yet they are also in the transition between childhood and adulthood. In the case of this research young people may be experiencing an added aspect of liminality – that of being homeless. Young refugees therefore occupy an 'in between' space in regards to belonging, housing, participation and visibility. This liminal space is fluid in nature and is often thought of as a temporary space that one moves through, but as the data shows, it can be long lasting and ambiguous. Young refugees also occupy a marginal space, one that is both on the edge of the mainstream and society's consciousness. It is both a physical and social space that young people entered soon after arriving in Australia, with the experience of continual moving, (Beer and Foley, 2003), unstable housing (Forrest and Hermes, 2012) and incomes lower than the Australian average. As young people continue to move, this space is maintained and driven by government policy that has created a set of exclusions for these young people. Thus, the notion of liminality is essential in understanding how a young person seeks to remake a sense of home and place in their new country, whilst living in a marginal and liminal space.

1.2. Methods – locating young people on the threshold of liminality

The data discussed in this article is drawn from a qualitative study of refugee young people undertaken in 2011–2016. At the core of qualitative inquiry lies the guiding principal that in order to 'capture lived experiences of the social world', the perspectives of those researched must be documented (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005, p. 2). Rather than presenting data from the researcher's sole perspective, qualitative data emphasises the significance of meaning and interpretation. In order to widen understanding of the experiences of homeless young refugees, the researcher must first attempt to understand the context in which young people conduct their daily lives and construct their identity from their own perspectives. This research sought to open up new areas of social enquiry and address the limited research focusing on refugee young people and homelessness. An epistemological framework guided the research, exploring the way knowledge is understood, valued and prioritized.

The research was also underpinned by an intersectional analysis. Intersectionality theory acknowledges the multiple and intersecting inequalities, derived from race, gender, class, and ability (Couch, Durant and Hill, 2014) and directs attention away from a focus on individual stories and experiences, to consideration of larger systemic and structural inequalities. By utilizing this theory, the research not only explored young people's experience of homelessness, but also the way knowledge is constructed about refugee young people (Couch et al., 2014). Young people in general have been absent from research, but the fact that refugee young people have been historically excluded is salient in this theoretical context and therefore it was important that the young people's voices in the research were adequately represented (Couch et al., 2014).

Recruiting participants was a 'highly challenging and time-consuming' (Hillier, Mitchell and Mallet, 2007, p. 118) part of the research. Due to the highly mobile and invisible nature (118) of these young people, the first recruitment strategy was to approach ethnic communities. However, the structural invisibility of refugee young people is not only evident in the mainstream, but also within their particular refugee communities. Whilst ethnic community organisations acknowledged there was indeed a housing crisis in newly arrived families, contacting individual young people was far more challenging.

Young people are also 'the most strenuously protected population when it comes to any research' (Hillier et al., 2007, p. 115), and refugee young people are no exception. Despite other homelessness researchers successfully engaging service providers as a means of recruiting young people (Hillier et al., 2007, p. 119) this was not the case in this research.

When seeking potential participants, the researcher found reluctance on the part of gate keepers to recommend young people to the study. 'Twin and contradictory assumptions' (115) about refugee young people were firmly in place. On one hand young people were referred to as 'resilient' and on the other were referred to as 'vulnerable' or 'traumatized'. This unfortunately, was not unexpected. Community workers working with refugees often refer to them as being 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' (Eades, 2013) and 'as suffering victims' (Zeus, 2011) that have experienced 'grave losses' (Camino and Krulfeld, 1994). This terminology not only emphasises a 'deficient' outlook it also lacks reference to resilience or self-empowerment (Eades, 2013). Thus it assigns people with blanket characteristics that have become a 'refugee narrative' (p. 267). This narrative assigns roles to the refugee as dependent, fragile and traumatized and with no action or agency of their own.

Given the failure of both these avenues of enquiry, the researcher placed posters in ethnic grocery stores, community centres, mosques, and churches and handed out flyers at train stations and shopping centres in areas where there was a large population of new arrivals. She also attended gatherings and community festivals where newly arrived communities would be present. After locating two young people who expressed interest in the research, a process of purposive snowball sampling was used. With this practice, the researcher was able to make contacts with participants via other young people. As it turned out, ultimately, there were many young people who expressed interest in being part of the research, but due to lack of resourcing, research funding and the longevity of the study, the numbers were kept to a small sample.

Although the researcher began the research using semi structured interviews, this soon gave way to a process of informal conversations. These conversations covered a broad range of issues, stories of migration, family conflict, school, drugs and friends with many stories of