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**Lost in Transition?  
Lived experiences of unaccompanied  
Afghan minors in Greece**

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**Doctor of Philosophy  
University of Edinburgh**

**2016**



## **Declaration of Original Work**

I hereby confirm that this thesis is originally composed by me. It is based on my own work, with acknowledgments of other sources and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_.



## **Abstract**

This thesis is a qualitative case study that explores the experiences of unaccompanied Afghan asylum seeking minors in Greece – a largely neglected area empirically, in migration-related social science research – despite the fact that migration has been an issue of mounting concern recently. The study sets out to bridge this gap hence, to provide insights of the paths of young people as individuals in their own right, and of the dynamics and processes of their forced migrations. The research contributes to contemporary debates about migration and childhood.

The thesis takes a broader approach that highlights the connections across borders and covers the multiple facets of unaccompanied minors' experiences and feelings; pre-exile, during journeys, and on arrival in Greece. The future plans and motivations of the young respondents are also discussed. Information in relation to young respondent's experiences, emotions and thoughts was collected in a series of in-depth interviews, focus groups and participatory activities. Data was also gathered by professionals and public figures with the aim to identify how these young people are treated and perceived inside and outside of the reception centres in Greece.

The data indicates that these young respondents are deeply and negatively affected by experiences of loss, separation, discrimination, abuse, and long-lasting hardships to be found throughout their histories of movement. Their accounts are renegotiated tales where notions of belonging and identity are shaped along the way, and the boundaries drawn around childhood and adulthood are often fragile and fluid. The events of young people's movements are reported as having been poignant, rendering them in a continuous, transitional state of existence. This stage 'in between', it is argued to be intricately entangled with the prolonged political insecurity which in some instances, extends to the condition of statelessness.

The analysis of young respondents' experiences revealed an overt gap between entitlements which are theoretically attributed to unaccompanied minors, regarding their social, political and legal rights – irrespective of their legal status – and pragmatic barriers to be found on the ground; on the streets, at borders, in detention, in police stations, and in reception centres, these young people are imperilled to the process of dehumanization. This process is understood to be a product of social and political violence implicated in local and transnational contexts. A combination of structural factors and practices has been found to be compounded by inhuman actions such as; the commodification process, the classification process, poverty, stigmatization, institutional racism and the ambiguity of political status. The findings further indicated that young respondents had mixed and distinct feelings of their experiences and responded to the process of dehumanization in very different ways; some developed robust resilient mechanisms along the way and formed important social networks for their survival and others felt powerless, and incapable mentally to lead their lives.

The data indicated that the type of care and support varied significantly among the reception centres. There was a spectrum of attitudes towards the presence of the young respondents, showing sympathy and welcoming responses but also prejudice, stereotypes and xenophobia. These appeared at professional, government and public levels. Implications are discussed in relation to the punitive policies and practices that demoralise the rights and needs of the young people, hence potential strategies are suggested for reforming aspects of the child welfare/asylum system. The thesis concludes that these young respondents have a uniquely strong claim to social and political rights that will give them back their lost 'ordinariness'.

## **Acknowledgement**

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## **Abbreviations and Acronyms**

AI: Amnesty International

CRC: Convention of the Rights of the Child

EU: European Union

EUMC: European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia

FRA: Fundamental Rights Agency

GCR: Greek Refugee Council

HRW: Human Rights Watch

IOM: International Organization for Migration

IPA: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

MHSS: Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity

NASW: National Association of Social Workers

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

NOAS: Norwegian Helsinki Committee

NYF: National Youth Foundation

SCEP: Separated Children in Europe Program

UASM: Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Minors

UK: United Kingdom

UM: Unaccompanied Minors

UN: United Nations

UNCRC: United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

USA: United States of America

WHO: World Health Organization

## Foreword

When I first started my PhD project in autumn 2010 the idea to look at the experiences of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors who reside in Greece was very much at that time a migration issue that could be called ‘the elephant in the room’, in other words, obvious but also much ignored by academic research in Greece. Children on the move were seen as a minority, still a problem but not of a priority one, in front of the overall increasing numbers of adult asylum seekers. The financial crisis, the increasing poverty and the institutional instabilities that emerged since 2009 in Greece, fuelled xenophobic attitudes, and racism in society that were interwoven with an uncontested anti-migration rhetoric, centred on security issues and border controls. Media reports and political debates tended to view migrants<sup>1</sup> as predominantly dangers for the Greek society, whilst induced discussions about the problematic migration management. In the coming years, new measures were introduced, followed by intensified border controls and actions aiming to preventing human mobility. Nevertheless, even with augmented border surveillance and deterrent practices (i.e. fence construction at the borders) as it proved, Greece just like any other EU state, cannot block off its borders from human mobility.

In April 2015, at the final stage of writing this thesis, there was an immense increase in refugee numbers coming to Europe, across the Mediterranean Sea or Southeast Europe. The clandestine and too risky route by the sea caused the death of more 1.721<sup>2</sup> people who attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea, amongst them children as well (Amnesty International, 2015). International Organizations and media reports repeatedly warned about the sea turning into a graveyard and talked about the highest level of forcibly displaced people and the worst humanitarian crisis since the World War II (UNHCR, 2015; New York Times, 2015; The Guardian, 2015). Such occurrences gave rise to the emergence of the so-called ‘European refugee crisis’ and

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<sup>1</sup> The word ‘migrant’ is used here as an umbrella term that encloses refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants. See the UNHCR viewpoint: ‘Refugee’ or ‘migrant’ – Which is right?": <http://www.unhcr.org/55df0e556.html>.

<sup>2</sup> According to Amnesty International 1,721 children, men and women died or disappeared in the central Mediterranean Sea between 1 January and 26 April this year and during a single week in April, more than 1,200 refugees and migrants died in two major shipwrecks. See the report: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2015/07/3-reasons-mediterranean-death-toll-dropped/>.

fuelled insurmountable contradictions and confusions amongst the EU states in how to deal with the large flow of refugees on the doorstep of Europe.

In summer 2015, a sharp increase, a 750% from 2014 of refugees arriving in the Mediterranean was the result of ceaseless war and conflict in countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (AI, 2015). Greece became the primary point of arrival, overtaking Italy, with more than 68.000 of refugees arriving on the Greek islands, the majority of them being Syrians (57%) and Afghans (22%) (UNHCR, 2015:11). Daily publications depicted exhausted refugees who risked their lives as they travelled in unsafe dinghies and boats, thus provoked sympathy for their plights by the public, but also shed light on the deep shortcomings of the reception system which seemed to fall short in front of the needs of the new arrivals.

Notwithstanding, the ‘refugee drama’ has been engraved on a harrowing image of a dead young child who was washed ashore on a Turkish beach<sup>3</sup> that was published in early September. The picture along with some other images of dead children was circulated around the world and became the tragic symbol of the refugee odysseys (*The Washington Post*, 2015). It thus caused grave international concern and demanded an immediate human-approach to the solution of refugee-problem.

As the emergence of such events amplified the human concern and compassion, so has the pressure on EU countries to share equitably the responsibility of protection and assistance. Although the practices of rescue at sea had improved considerably (UNHCR, 2015), EU’s response to the crisis has yet to be decided on the level of reception, solidarity and identification of the root causes of displacement.

The summer of 2015 was also a time were the Greek media, eager to address that Greece was a transit point for the newcomers, highlighted the chaotic Greek reception conditions and the most dramatic narratives of refugee children. As well as the media attempted to renounce national responsibility or reception on the grounds that the ‘refugee crisis’ could not be handled by a nation in crisis. Nevertheless, it soon

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<sup>3</sup> see Aylan Kurdi:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/11841802/eu-migrant-crisis-refugee-boys-aylan-galip-kurdi.html>

became a popular point of view to highlight children (unaccompanied or with families) in need, in the political agenda and public life of Greece.

While the events are surpassing the pace of this research, speculations that the Greek reception system is unable to meet the needs of the children give new gravity to the findings, regarding the response of the reception system towards unaccompanied minors.



## **SECTION I: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Young people have many reasons to move to other countries including escape from threatening conditions such as political upheaval, war, natural disasters, human violations, persecution and poverty. Reports suggest that displaced children and young people are crossing borders alone without being accompanied by parents, relatives or adults who are responsible for their care by law or by custom, in order to find protection, safety and better living conditions in new environments (Save the Children, 2007, UNHCR, 2008). Young people who cross borders alone and who are in need of international protection, are known in the migrant discourse as ‘unaccompanied minors’ henceforth (UM). UM appear to share a number of characteristics associated with the experiences of displaced people on the move but they also present their own distinctive features (Kohli, 2007). These characteristics are primarily linked to minors’ past experiences which may reflect war and violation, secondly their adaptation to new settings constitutes a major challenge and thirdly when they are looked after by the social services in the countries of asylum, and ‘they have to find their way through a maze of asylum and welfare systems’ (Kohli & Mather, 2003:201) Even though there is an emerging body of research which seeks to understand the experiences, needs and challenges that relate to UM, most pieces of this research is carried out within the domain of psychology, psychiatry and health sciences. This tends to individualise and ‘pathologise’ UM and ignores the wider social, political and cultural context in which their experiences take place. The practice of identifying individuals’ experiences in terms of pathology can be intensely disempowering and stigmatizing (Bracken, 2002). The aim of the present study is to give ‘voice’ to a disadvantaged group of young people by exploring their experiences from a subjective or first-person point of view, in a phenomenological sense (Schutz, 1970; Moustakas, 1994). In short, the study follows the paths of these young people and seeks to understand everything that is lived through or performed such as, emotions, thoughts, actions, desires and intentions.

A review of literature indicates that much of research on moving populations has

until recently been focused on adults and to a lesser degree on children or young people (Dunkerley *et al.* 2006). A growing body of research within social science aims to comprehend the experiences and needs of UM especially in Northern European countries (Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003; Dunkerley *et al.*, 2006; German, 2004; Kohli, 2006; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Mitchell, 2003; Hopkins & Hill, 2010; Engebriksen, 2003). Within this body of research, some studies address issues related to UM through a depoliticised psychosocial framework. There is lack of attention to the ways in which existing policies such as asylum and welfare are a source of risk for children and young people (Boyden & Hart, 2007). Thus, authors often emphasise the psychological barriers these children confront as a result of their past experiences without addressing the impact of the socio-political context on young people's well-being. The present study does not ignore the psychosocial dimensions neither does it underestimate the past experiences and their impact on young people's lives. It aims to explore young people's experiences informed mainly by reflections on social, political and cultural dimensions. A socio-political approach to the study of displaced and war-affected young people positions them within the context of their important relationships such as peer groups, neighbourhoods and community (Boyden, 2001). The study is located in Greece, a country where there is a lack of academic inquiry in the area, except for a few reports conducted by non-governmental, national and international organizations (UNHCR, 2008; NOAS and Aitima 2009; CSS, 2008).

As we will see, constructions of these boys shift according to the stages of their movements and transitions. For example, in Afghanistan they are constructed as war-affected children who are more or less willingly, or forced to, become travellers on their own and potential rescuers for their lives and as expected, for their families as well. As they move on to neighbouring countries where they settle either alone or with their families, their rights become severely restricted, hence, they are constructed as a 'marginalised' group of young labourers or as an 'out-group' who do not deserve citizenship (Bauman, 1991). During their journeys, minors come into contact with various actors and mediators such as 'mafia types', smugglers, militaries, and are now constructed as commodities. In particular, their bodies and

lives are transformed into commodities by those actors who are implicated in transnational processes and local economies that profit from minor's mobility (Vogt, 2013:776). When crossing borders, minors are perceived as irregular migrants who violate the seemingly natural and structured order of nations and citizens (Malkki, 1995: 508). Consequently, they end up being detained quite often in the course of their transnational routes. When encountering Greece, the management of minors is connected to the logic of securitization and control. Although their legal status cannot be judged by the mere sight of them (see Squire, 2009) they tend to be positioned as unlawful migrants (*lathrometanastes*) at first sight, and thus be placed outside of the systems of care and protection. Yet when they come into the purview of the authorities as underage asylum seekers who cross borders on their own, they are constructed as 'unaccompanied minors'. Nevertheless, such a classification conveys 'a double exposure' meaning that UM are constructed on the one hand as children in need of protection, but on the other hand they are also conceived as asylum seekers who may be subject to deportation if their asylum claim is rejected (Stretmo, 2014:26).

The aforementioned constructions, as we will see, play a significant role in how minors are situated in specific transnational and local contexts within which their lives are foregrounded and shaped by. The systems, actors and authorities they encounter along the way, tend to single out them in diverse and ambiguous positions complicating their lives. Minors' accounts provide interesting insights that illustrate how they come to make sense of these constructions.

This qualitative case study uses a participatory approach and aims to explore the experiences of Afghan UM. The scope of the study is threefold. It primarily aims to address those processes, systems and actions that impact on the lives of minors all the way through their transnational movements, it then aims to explore their experiences and needs within the Greek context and finally, it aims to explore the challenges posed to Greek welfare and asylum system in relation to UM. The intersection of childcare and asylum will be examined as there are assumptions that the special needs of children and young people are ignored when the dimension of asylum exists (Mitchell, 2008). Another important dimension that the study seeks to

reflect upon is to identify prevalent Greek attitudes towards UM and explore notions of philoxenia and xenophobia<sup>4</sup>. Knowledge of the global, European and Greek contexts is also important because forced migration issues cannot exist in isolation (Castles, 2003).

The argument is that the existing asylum system as a side effect of transnational developments at a global and European level has a major impact on the construction of the experiences of UM and in particular on shaping their identities and sense of self-belonging in the host country. Overall, the study seeks to contribute empirically to discourses on welfare and asylum policy, to develop an understanding on the well-being of unaccompanied minors and thus make a contribution to the wider social science debate about migration and childhood.

This chapter is divided into three parts. Following rationale of the study and definitions, a theoretical overview on key areas within childhood and asylum is provided. The literature review draws particular attention to global, European and Greek contexts in which the experiences of UM take place. Finally, the concepts of philoxenia and xenophobia are introduced.

### **1.1. Rationale**

My motivation to research the lived experiences of UM has been built throughout the course of my personal and professional development. Firstly, the research builds on my personal interest on migration issues that emerged as a result of family background experiences. My grandparents and parents had lived as migrants in Germany for a great part of their lives. Their stories have had a profound impact on my interest towards dislocation, diversity and cultural issues. Since I was born and raised in a small town next to the Greek and Turkish borders, seeing migrants and asylum seekers walking for miles and passing through my town has raised my curiosity over their whereabouts; where do they come from, where do they head to, and who are they; all these questions have built on my interest over matters of displacement and relocation. My post-graduate experience in Sweden evoked many

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Philoxenia’ is a Greek word which describes friendliness to guests, i.e., hospitality (Demetriou, 2013). Xenophobia describes fear towards foreigners (ibid).

more questions regarding migration and intensified an interest in marginalised groups of people such as asylum seekers and refugees, sex-trafficking victims, war-tortured victims and street children.

The research also builds on my professional interest and past experiences as a social worker in residential units, NGOs that work with refugees and asylum seekers and statutory services provided to displaced children in Greece. In the latter, I experienced poor service provisions, uncaring attitudes of the staff, the complexity and absurdity of the asylum process, and sometimes racist attitudes of the staff and local people towards asylum seeking service users. I witnessed incidents of asylum seeking children being treated poorly and being treated as non-citizens. I have also seen professionals who would treat these children as if they were their own. I saw the emotional distress of asylum seeking parents who had to place their children in residential units because they didn't have the means and support to raise their them; I have witnessed the silent ordeals of war-tortured victims and I saw how disempowered they felt because of the unresponsiveness of the Greek state to safeguard their rights. I have realised that asylum seeking children are mostly undervalued and stigmatised within the Greek society and their voices are not heard. Such experiences have intensified my interest to find out more about the lives of war-affected children and young people who cross borders alone, a largely marginalised group within the Greek society.

A distinct part of my social work practice has been centred on child protection, human rights, social support and empowerment to asylum seeking women and children. Furthermore, my sustained cooperation with a Greek NGO that provides legal and social support to asylum seekers prompted me to explore issues concerning the response and care of UM in Greece and gave me access to key stakeholders who are associated with policy development regarding the reception of UM in Greece.

It is hoped that this study will provide the missing information on UM's views and feelings in relation to the following questions: Who are they? Why do they flee home alone? What are their stories of crossing borders? How do they cope with hardship? How do they feel as residents in a hosting country? How do they spend their time in

Greece? What are their plans for the future? These questions form the core of the thesis and intend to contribute to policy development in Greece and elsewhere.

## 1.2. Terminology and definitions of an 'UM'

The key instrument of asylum policy by which a refugee and asylum seeker is defined is the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol to which all EU countries are signatories. According to the Convention, a *refugee* is someone who makes a successful asylum claim in a chosen country of asylum, who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of origin *'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion...'* (Article 1A.(2)). It is stated in article (33) of the Geneva Convention that *'any asylum claim submitted in a signatory state must be considered under due process irrespective of whether the applicant entered the country legally or not and that must not be forcibly returned to a territory where he or she may be at risk of persecution'* (Hutton, 2005: 4). It follows from this definition that an asylum seeker is someone whose asylum claim is under examination by the host country while s/he has been given temporary permission of residence until a decision of his or her claim is finalised.

However, the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees does not involve any special guidelines for children or young people under the age of eighteen: it refers to all refugees and asylum seekers irrespective of age. The adoption by the United Nations, in 1989, of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) introduced special regulations and guidelines for refugee children and young people below the age of eighteen. The Greek state ratified the Convention on 1992 (Law Library of Congress, 2011). In Greece, concerns of specific protection and care of refugee or asylum seeking children and young people emerged recently<sup>5</sup> as separate issues in the country's legal and welfare system and as a response to interventions and pressures initiated by humanitarian and International Organizations regarding refugees' and children's rights.

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<sup>5</sup> Most receptions centres for the accommodation of asylum seeking minors in Greece were established between 2006 and 2008 (UNCHR, 2008).

According to the definition of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 1994), an UM is a child below eighteen years of age (or under the legal age of majority, according to the legislation of the asylum country) who has been separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for caring for it and seeks to receive refugee protection in the asylum country (UNHCR, 1994:121). Another term used is '*children separated from their families*' employed by the initiative of Separated Children in Europe Program (SCEP) and UNHCR (Ayotte, 1999). This definition refers to minors and children who are cared for, in transit and after arrival, by adults but not by their parents or their legal caregivers (Kohli, 2007:4). This study will use the term 'unaccompanied minors' in the literature review; this is also the term employed in the Greek Legislation<sup>6</sup>. In the empirical chapters another term is extensively used, representative of how the participants of the study would like to be called; 'young people'.

What emerges from the above discussion is the following definition: 'unaccompanied asylum seeking minors (UASM) are young people below the age of eighteen who enter a country without being accompanied by an adult, relative or guardian and they apply for asylum on their own right in the host country'. All the above definitions however, are not systematically used at state level. Diverse definitions are applied by most EU, and different approaches determine the concept of an UM. Yet other states exclude children over the age of 16 (SSAE-Social Assistance Service to Emigrants-France cited in ISS/ISR, 2007).

### **1.3. Theoretical Perspectives on Childhood and Asylum**

The aim of this section is to explore notions of childhood and asylum within a broader context of various geographical and cultural spaces and recognise how social identification takes place within such contexts. Factors that may contribute in the formation of UM identities as young people seeking asylum, may be age, gender,

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<sup>6</sup> Article 1 point (f) of the Presidential Decree 220/2007 defines an unaccompanied minor as 'any third country national and stateless person below the age of eighteen who arrives in the territory of Greece unaccompanied by an adult responsible for him or her and for as long as he or she is not effectively taken into the care of such a person or a minor who was left unaccompanied after having entered Greece'. Source: UNHCR 2008.

religion, culture, racial attitudes and issues related to social exclusion and the state's responses. There is evidence that refugee and asylum-seeking children's identities are multiple and intersecting, beyond just being a refugee' and are conditional to the various sites, relations and cultures in which their lives are foregrounded (Connolly, 1998; Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Valentine *et al.* 2009; Vervliet *et al.* 2013:12).

Sporton *et al.* (2006) argue that more attention should be paid to young asylum seekers as very little is known on how they negotiate their identity. This sparks the perception that gaps in policy and public awareness have rendered them invisible in the public sphere. The dominance of western childhoods is reflected in most studies, thus diversity and multiculturalism within childhoods seem to be ignored (Aitken, 2001; Robson, 2004).

Within migration studies, children and youth are viewed as 'vulnerable' objects that are lacking agency. The main argument in the area of social sciences is that children and young people's identities are shaped by social narratives that are not of their own making (James *et al.* 1998). Childhood appears to be age-limited in most European countries with a transitional point from childhood to adulthood being the age of 18 (Sporton *et al.* 2006). This is not the case in countries with different socio-political and cultural backgrounds (Robson, 2004). For many asylum seeker/refugee children the transition to adulthood takes place a lot earlier. A review of Afghan childhood suggests that adulthood is reached a lot earlier than in western countries since children are involved in adult-related responsibilities from an early age (Boland, 2010). Understandings of childhood depend to a significant extent on how perceptions of childhood and adulthood are defined in different communities, cultures and societies (Jones & Wallace, 1992).

Western ideologies depict childhood as a stage of innocence and happiness, where children are vulnerable and are not involved in the demanding worlds of adults (James, 1993). Such notions are somehow idealised and unable to understand the very particular experiences of the children who are on the move and live outside of their secure zones of childhood (Leifsen, 2013). When young asylum seekers act beyond the limits of the existing western perception of childhood, they become

‘pathologised’ in the sense that their actions and attitudes surpass ‘normal’ societal norms (James, 1993). Thus young asylum seekers, who live in hosting countries, find themselves being positioned in public discourses of asylum.

In recent years there is no lack of publications about the increase of racism towards asylum seekers and refugees (Palmer & Ward, 2007; Parker, 2000). Such attitudes may have an impact on young people’s identity formation and sense of self-belonging (Lynn & Lea, 2003). Dominant public attitudes that raise fear, distrust and prejudice towards asylum seekers have emerged through public perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers as ‘bogus refugees’ and as the ones who are abusing the welfare system of the western countries (Valentine & Mac Donald, 2004). These attitudes have created the perception that asylum seekers do not contribute to the welfare system but instead take advantage of welfare provisions.

Other public attitudes are linked to Islamophobic discourses that have increased in the years following key events such as the September 11 2001 attacks in New York, terrorist attacks in London, in 2005 and more recently in Paris, in 2015. Public opinion has been successfully mobilised against Muslims placing them responsible for the terrorist attacks. As most asylum seekers, for example Afghans, are also Muslims, within the public imagination, there develops a linkage between Muslims and asylum seekers (Stone, 2004). Such attitudes clearly impact on the children and young people who seek asylum. Finally, young people’s identity and understanding of their self are also formed by their distinctive background experiences of forced mobility which entail experiences of loss, persecution, anomie, alienation and disruption (Sporton *et al.* 2006).

What emerges from the above is that existing conceptualisations of childhood, when associated with dominant perceptions of asylum, are likely to impact negatively on young people’s identities who seek asylum in western societies (Van Meeteren, 2012). Young people’s experiences constructed and de-constructed on the move, provide an alternative standpoint relating to their identifications and senses of belonging.



## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature – Setting the context**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Existing in a world highly affected by speedy global transformations driven by globalization has resulted in increasing global social problems such as displacement of a huge numbers of people (Goldin *et.al.* 2013). Forced migration is a phenomenon that cannot be limited to the sphere of narrow national concerns but ought to be approached on a global scale. Such an approach acknowledges the dynamic nature of people's movements in a world which is consolidated more and more socially, economically and culturally. In this chapter, it is suggested that the experiences of UM are shaped by processes, activities and developments taking place on a global level, such as globalization and the economic world order which produce social inequalities, and in turn impact on the formation of policies and legislation on a European and national level. For this reason, I locate the study within a broader framework which conceives key issues occurring in various contexts and I divide the chapter into three parts. The first part of the chapter considers the global context in which phenomena such as forced migration arises and intensifies. The second part of the chapter provides an overview of the European context by discussing key issues of the legal and political activity with regards to migration and asylum regimes. Attention is given to UM and to the reaction of the EU in addressing their needs and rights. The third part of the chapter sets the ground for the welfare and asylum policy and practice in Greece and briefly discusses notions of philoxenia and xenophobia.

### **2.2. The Global context**

Nearly than half of the world's population is made up of young people aged 0-24 years old (2.9 billion of people out of the world's 6.5 billion of people) (Save the Children, 2007). A report UNHCR report (2005) revealed that 11 per cent of the global refugee population lives in Iran and 23 per cent of the global refugee population originates from Afghanistan. The majority of young people worldwide have been reported to originate and live in economically disadvantaged countries, while 600 million young people below the age of 18 worldwide live in absolute poverty (UN, 2001). In Afghanistan the life expectancy is low, and the number of

young people is high (World Bank, 2013; UNDP, 2012) resulting in many children deciding to migrate.

A report of an UN refugee agency provided in 2010 a statistical overview of asylum claims in 44 industrialised countries. According to the report, 358,800 asylum applications were lodged in industrialised countries– down 5 per cent from 2009, and 42 per cent lower than the decade's peak in 2001 when almost 620,000 asylum applications were made (UNHCR, 2011). These figures depict a major decline in asylum applications in industrialised world, with numbers much lower than a decade ago. There are speculations that Western countries have made it more difficult for third world nationals to apply for residence, with stricter legislations and border controls (Castles & Miller, 2009:51). As it becomes more difficult for adults to apply for residence permits in industrialised countries, a strategy may be to send their children. Yet migration is a much more complex phenomenon with various dynamics involved and diverse reasons which motivate or impel people to migrate. Much of the literature has failed or has obscured an understanding of migration's complexity and of explaining who moves away, why, and with what consequences.

At a broader level, both individualistic (and behavioural) models (see model of Todaro 1976 and Borjas, 1989) and migration analyses in the Marxist (or structuralist) tradition, have taken a one-sided point of view of the migration phenomenon (de Haan, 1999, Massey *et.al.* 1993). For example, the individualistic model assumes that migrants act according to a rationality of economic self-interest, whereas the 'push-pull model' of migration developed by Lee (1966) is a development of Todaro's work. This model suggests that migration causes and effects can be explained exclusively through either the sending or the receiving country. On the other hand, Marxist theories tend to focus mostly on the economic and political system which is conceived accountable for people's continuous exploitation.

Unlike the above models that focus on how broader processes of development affect migration, migration systems theory '*draws a two-way, reciprocal and dynamic link between migration and development,*' and hence advances a theoretical framework

which puts migration in a broader development perspective (De Haas, 2007:33). With this rationale, the causes and consequences of migration are approached and analysed as part of the same system and processes. Migration systems theory also builds on the dynamic transitional models of migration-development link which, if taken together, provide an understanding on how migration progresses over time and changes in its nature, scale, destinations, and selectivity (De Haas, 2007).

Forced migration has been conceived as reflecting a phenomenon which is expressed through inequalities and social crises within a system of people's inclusion and exclusion (Castells, 1996; Hoogvelt, 1997). Gibney's (2002) work reveals the strength of the relationship between levels of human rights abuses and the phenomenon of people's displacement. His main argument is that the most violent places in the world where there is political instability, war, conflicts, poverty and human rights violations produce almost all of the world's refugees. Thus, Gibney (2002) refutes the myth made throughout Europe and USA that asylum seekers and refugees abuse the asylum system by arguing that such perceptions are not based on any empirical data. In fact, the data reveals that the majority of refugees and asylum seekers come from the Third World where there are extraordinary violent conditions. As a consequence, people flee to countries that are considered safer with better human rights practices (Gibney, 2002:18).

Similarly, UM most often flee violent or chaotic situations in their countries. In such contexts, many are sent abroad by their parents for their safety and better life and others are separated from their parents or become orphans and seek asylum in a stable country (Ayotte, 2000; ISS/IRC, 2007). Thus safety rather than economic betterment is the dominant driver for asylum-seeking migration.

In this context, current global developments and practices may be responsible for the spread of violations around the world. There have been major changes to forms of migration during the post-world war II. Globalization has had a great impact on the pattern of migration and affected large number of countries while migration flows were generated especially from the South-developing world to move to the North-developed world (Save the Children, 2007). Neoliberal economic and social changes

are responsible for the unequal spread of the benefits of development and growth which have led developing countries to become even poorer (Jeffrey & Mac Dowell, 2004).

As economic structures have been reshaped, new concepts such as economic development, productivity and consumption have been prioritised in the modernised world (Bauman, 2004). Economic restructuring intensified the gaps between the poor and the rich in such a way that the number of people living in absolute poverty has increased (Goldin *et.al.* 2013). Another serious side effect is that in many developing countries, natural resources have been extensively over-used for the sake of productivity and economic development. The rise of social and economic inequalities due to the above reasons, in combination with the socio-political conflicts and instabilities in many countries, have induced people around the globe to seek asylum, protection and better living conditions elsewhere.

Bauman's (2004) theory explains the new challenges of the globalised 'modern' world and places consumerism and productivity as integral components in the assessment of human inclusion and exclusion. Bauman suggests that a comparison can be made between 'waste' (rubbish) and 'human waste' and posits a shift from material consumption to human consumption. He suggests that humans have become the new consumables within the production of the society and as such they become 'insiders' or 'outsiders'. What follows is that 'wasted' humans no longer fit into the society and they become 'redundant' (Bauman, 2004:27). I revisit this notion and develop a greater nuanced approach to categorization of asylum seekers.

Despite Bauman's effort to explain how global process impact on the position of asylum seekers, his theory in relation to the categorization of asylum seekers as 'insiders', 'outsiders' and 'redundant' reflects only a part of the undocumented migrants' experiences especially that in the receiving country. This study is attentive to the processes, experiences and sites arising between local and transnational locations, developments and conditions because it seeks to conceptualise and understand the longer and more complex trajectories of humans' experiences.

Vogt's (2013) ethnographic work is considered influential in this respect as it encapsulates undocumented migrants' experiences across Mexico as being implicated and shaped by processes and structures of violence, exploitation and commodification all the way through their movements. Her study shows how liminal spaces between the departure and receiving countries are crucial in providing a new conceptualisation of migrant's transformation into commodities and sites of profit making within the logics of capitalism (Vogt, 2013). This compelled me to explore further notions of commodification and exploitation and their relevance with young people's experiences across their journeys and I return to this discussion later.

While instability and insecurity increase in many parts of the world as a consequence of the changes in the geopolitical area, migration seems to be the solution for many people in need, including UM. Nonetheless, it has been stated that insecurity has now been transferred to western countries in the way that migration is considered to be a threat for national stability and identity (Sales, 2007; Shuster & Solomos, 2004; Zetter, 2007). This stance perhaps explains current European asylum restrictions and control towards asylum seekers. Unaccompanied minors that are the subject of this study are not exempt from such influences.

## **2.3. European legal and political framework**

### **2.3.1. Demographics**

It is estimated that 626 thousand asylum seekers lodged an application in 2014; this was the highest number of asylum applicants within the EU since the peak in 1992 (672 thousand applications in the EU-15) in part due to a considerably higher number of applicants from Syria, Eritrea, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244/99), Afghanistan and Ukraine (Eurostat, 2015). There have been between 12.000 and 20.000 unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people that have arrived in Europe each year since 1998 (Hopkins & Hill, 2006). Afghans are the largest proportion of unaccompanied children and young people in Europe, followed by Iraqis, Somalis and West Africans coming from war affected and poverty-stricken nations (EMN, 2010 cited in Migration Information Source 2011). In 2008,

Afghanistan topped the list of ‘sending’ countries with nearly 3,399 claims in Europe (ibid). Whilst numbers present an overview of the situation, they do not represent the real situation. Cantwell and Holzscheiter (2008:3) state in their Commentary on Art.20 in CRC that “even when data exists, the indicators used are only rarely comparable across different national contexts, thereby reducing significantly the possibility of making inferences about the broader, ‘global’ dimension of children living outside their family environment”. UM tend to be invisible, living in limbo regarding their status in the host country and often they go underground in order to avoid a potential deportation order when they reach the age of 18 (Odysseus Academic Network, 2009).

### **2.3.2. The European asylum discourse**

Political asylum just might be one of the most debated universal ideas. Separating ‘refugees’ from ‘migrants’ is widespread in contemporary discourses, despite sufficient evidence that these labels blur in practice since people are driven out of their countries of origin by multiple factors (political, social, economic, and environmental).

As discussed earlier, western industrialised states are particularly concerned with securitization issues and border controls that ultimately lead to a plethora of laws and regulations aiming to prevent and regulate people’s movements. Illegal entry for many people has become the only means of entry since most states do not accept visas from people who flee war and conflict-ridden areas (Neumeyer, 2006).

Yet the right to decide over who is granted or rejected asylum is solely reserved to governments (Shuman & Bohmer 2010:6,7). Combatting what is considered as illegal or irregular migration is also associated with a process of sorting out the deserved with the undeserved. Such a clear cut line between migrants and refugees reflects political concerns over the exclusion and inclusion of particular groups and policy intentions (Long, 2013; Zetter, 2007).

Then the construction of the illegitimates versus legitimates is framed upon a discourse with specific political purposes strengthened by media representations

which view migration as rather problematic (Stretmo, 2014). For example, when particular groups of asylum seekers are represented as more deserving than others then the legitimacy of possible refugees is disputed (Fassin, 2001; Watters, 2008). This may produce hostility for the ones who are framed as ‘less deserved’ and sympathy for the ones who are constructed as ‘deserved’ or as ‘real victims’ (O’Connell Davidson & Farrow, 2007).

When considering these constraints of legitimacy, on the case of refugees or migrants in general and unaccompanied children specifically, we can easily recognise a shift in the asylum discourse to what at times is framed as suitable to the official conceptualisation of the asylum issue; it is remarkable how the discussion on refugees may shift to one on ‘asylum seekers’ or to one on ‘undocumented migrants’ and may lead to the pertinent actions and policies (Watters, 2008). Such distinctions are often misleading and should be carefully treated since the realities and circumstances of those people are highly complex (Koser, 2007).

### **2.3.3. Legislation**

The current legislative activity in Europe regarding immigration and asylum laws makes specific provisions for UM, and at a first glance depicts a common baseline among EU member states which follows joint practices and guidelines involving commitment to incorporate human rights policies that will enhance the well-being of UM. However, any European endeavour for a ‘harmonised’ legal system comes into question when considering the great disparities between the various legal regimes that exist among the European member states (Drywood, 2010). The existing divergences reveal a non-coherent strategy rather than a comprehensive approach with regard to the implementation of EU asylum legislation.

Here, my aim is not to discuss in detail what every legal instrument incorporates, neither will I list the numerous human rights legal apparatuses. Rather I will offer an overview of key legal issues that may impact on the lives of UM. One of the most essential legal instruments is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which was the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of rights for a child (EMN, 2010:19). All EU member states are

signatories. Other legal guidelines followed and were adopted by most of the European States. However, 'migration and the promotion of child's rights are areas where actions were only taken within the last decade' (Odysseus Academic Network, 2009:18).

According to legal studies, all decisions made at EU level take precedence over national laws (Drywood, 2010). These decisions ensure that all EU countries follow a common course of action in terms of entitlements and benefits to the children and young people. The justification of the uniform base of immigration and asylum provisions lies in the fact that a common approach to migrating populations would prevent people from moving for a second time within the European territory (Odysseus Academic Network, 2009). The Common European Asylum System (CEAS) endorses laws that take the forms of 'Directives' which introduce special provisions on the reception of asylum seekers. The latter exist in a number of areas, such as the representation of legal guardians who are responsible for representing minors in legal and social issues (OAN, 2009; Save the Children, 2003). Other provisions refer to housing involving foster care and accommodation centres - which eventually provide a basic level of entitlement. Moreover, access to education, health and social care and family-reunification activities are included in the European legislative framework and appear to be essential for the well-being of unaccompanied minors (FRA, 2010).

However, many responsibilities and decision-making powers are retained at national level because the forms and methods each individual member states choose to apply in terms of immigration and asylum measures generate great ambiguities in the way provisions are offered (FRA, 2010; Drywood, 2010). Evidence shows that the above provisions are not offered to UM at the same level by EU countries and even more, measures that should be used as a 'last resort,' such as detention and deportation, are being extensively practiced by EU member states (EMN, 2010; FRA, 2010; OAN, 2009). What can be concluded from the above is that the European legal framework is not lacking in appropriate legal instruments that incorporate special provisions for UM which are in line with their best interest. Nonetheless, EU legal activity leaves enough room to the individual states for derogations within the legislative area and

these often have serious effects on the lives of UM.

#### **2.3.4. The political background**

Over the last two decades the issue of asylum has sparked fierce political debate among scholars regarding the EU strategy for dealing with migration flows. Before discussing the main theoretical perspectives concerning migration and asylum, I will briefly present the main incidents that have occurred during the last two decades in Europe and worldwide. These changes may explain recent developments and shifts within migration and asylum area.

The rising number of claims for asylum in Europe over the last two decades has been associated with numerous incidents that have altered the socio-political context with regard to migration and asylum in Europe. An increase of asylum applications in the early 1990s from Eastern Europe followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall (Hatton, 2005). As well, the number of displaced people increased during the late of 1990s with the break-up of the Yugoslav Republic, the conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, and also in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Horn of Africa (Ayotte, 2000). In particular, between 1998 and 2002 the number of asylum claims lodged by uprooted people in Europe increased in contrast to a general fall in the worldwide refugee population (Zetter, *et al.* 2003).

The EU responded to the rise of inward migration flows and to the uneven distribution of the ‘asylum burden’ across the member states by passing a wide range of regulations which resulted in creating less favourable conditions for asylum seekers in Europe. According to Hutton (2005:5) these regulations include four types of policies: policies that aim to restrict access to borders by potential asylum seekers; reforms to the procedures under which asylum claims are examined; measures relating to the outcome of asylum claims; and reforms to the treatment of asylum seekers while their asylum claims are processed. These policies have been implemented as a response to the perceived ‘crises’ of events that produced a steep rise in numbers of asylum seekers.

These moves have been questioned by scholars who argued that the increase of

asylum claims in Europe has been used as an excuse by those seeking further controls (Joly, 1996; Sales, 2007; Shuster, 2004). The main argument here is that EU migration approach which strives to control has not gone in line with the numbers of asylum claims in Europe. Despite the fact that asylum applications have decreased in the last ten years in relation to the late 1990s, the measures of control and restriction have not been eased but have been added to (Shuster, 2004:2). Gentile (2002) argues that in fact the perception of asylum seekers and refugees flooding the West is a myth. As he indicates, Iran and Pakistan alone host more refugees than all of Europe combined and generally the majority of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide are hosted by poor countries rather than by the wealthy North (Gentile, 2002:44).

The work of Shuster (2004) indicates that certain mechanisms for exclusion of asylum seekers practiced by a number of European countries are for maintaining order and controlling national borders. As presented in her study, deportation, detention and dispersal are the main mechanisms of exclusion. It is argued that these strategies were firstly employed by European members as instruments for confronting the rise in numbers of migrants during the late 1990s. However, from 'exceptional', these instruments have been shifted to 'normal' and are now extensively used by many EU countries in an attempt to prevent and control mobility conceived to be a threat to society by the states (Weiner, 1996). Evidence emerges from various reports of UN agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations that unaccompanied minors seeking asylum have not been excluded from the above practices (UNHCR, 2008; FRA, 2010; EMN, 2010; OAN, 2009; IOM, 2008).

In a general political context, it has been suggested that asylum seekers and refugees represent a threat to society's political regime, cultural identity, national security and socio-economic order (Weiner, 1996). They are positioned as 'modern invaders' who pose risks to the society's cohesion and burden on national economies and welfare systems. Block and Shuster (2002:456) argue that politics and legislation in the 1990s in Europe, due to geopolitical changes, tied asylum to the issue of welfare provision, stimulating the idea of asylum seekers as 'a burden' whilst the notion of 'bogus' asylum seekers abusing the asylum system is used repeatedly to justify restrictions and control (Joly, 2002:6). State policies and practices effectively

manage to criminalise refugees for seeking asylum (Zetter, 2007:183). Furthermore, research on attitudes towards asylum reveals a lack of public understanding on the issue (Crawley, 2005). Such activities and thinking counter the proposition that European countries are liberal in terms of immigration and explain the need for the present study.

## **2.4. The Greek Context**

Asylum is regarded to be one of the most pressing challenges for the Greek state especially in recent years where there is a shift to the country's migration status from a 'sending' to a 'receiving' country. Recently, the Greek response to the arrival of asylum seekers including UM has been questioned by scholars and humanitarian organizations (Skordas & Sitaropoulos, 2004; UNHCR, 2008). The present study aims to address issues related to the treatment and well-being of Afghan UM in Greece and specifically to explore how the current experiences of UM are constructed within the existing asylum and welfare system in Greece. In this respect, a good knowledge of the local context is significant in understanding the processes and practices that create and influence the experiences of UM. In addition, concepts of 'philoxenia' and 'xenophobia' are discussed as part of the objective of this study to inform on Greek attitudes towards UM who seek asylum.

### **2.4.1. Demographics**

As noted in the previous section, statistics should be treated with caution because various countries use different methods for counting and categorizing people. Greece has recently adopted a tough migration strategy in line with the European approach by increasing border controls. This has driven many asylum seekers into undocumented migration and as a consequence numbers and statistics depict just a small part of the reality. A general picture of migration in Greece suggests that more than one million immigrants from non-EU countries are hosted nowadays in Greece. They account for approximately 10% of total population (EMN, 2005: 12). However, only a few thousands of uprooted people are counted to enter the borders of Greece by land or by sea, most of them 'illegally' as they are not able to provide the legal required documents. The asylum issue in Greece may be considered insignificant

when looking at the numbers as there is a relatively small annual representation of refugees and asylum seekers (Papadopoulou, 2002). The most recent figures that were provided to UNHCR by Greek authorities (Ministry of Citizen Protection) for the previous year demonstrate that the total number of asylum pending applications at the end of 2010 was nearly 55.000 of which 10.273 new asylum applications were lodged (UNHCR, 2011). In 2009, 15.928 new asylum claims were lodged in Greece meaning that there has been a decrease in people seeking asylum (ibid). These numbers generally involve all asylum seekers and there are no specific references to UM. The only available figures on unaccompanied minors are provided by the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity which includes information for only those who are hosted in accommodation centres. According to these figures, over the past years most of UM are Afghan nationals (102 out of the 302 for 2004, 102 out of the 158 for 2005, and 74 out of the 165 for 2006) while a typical example of an UM is a male adolescent aged 16-18 (UNHCR, 2008:21). However, a recent report conducted for the European Migration Network (2009:9) indicates that the number of Afghans decreased in 2008, perhaps due to the structural shortcomings of the asylum procedures reflected in the tiny numbers gaining refugee status. As a consequence, UM prefer to lodge asylum claims in countries with more developed asylum systems.

#### **2.4.2. The welfare and asylum system**

The issue of asylum and welfare became crucial in the political arena in recent years when the need to address issues related to asylum seekers' treatment and care emerged. The juncture of immigration and welfare occurs in a number of political and welfare models (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Greece has adopted the Southern model in terms of welfare regime which is similar to those of Italy, Spain and Portugal. The main features of this welfare model are: a) a mixed orientation regarding social coverage, this means having established 'universal national health services' and having established protective pension schemes; b) an underdeveloped safety net of social insurance; c) a decentralised health care system; d) taxation that gradually substitutes social charges for financing health and social services; and e) family and social networks play an essential role in providing welfare (Sitaropoulos, 2002:439).

In such a context, a large part of child care is still provided by families. Those who are lacking in networks such as refugees and asylum seekers, are then in a notoriously disadvantaged position (Block & Shuster, 2002). It is suggested that the turbulent historical background of the Greek state, such as dictatorships, plays a significant role in the existing underdeveloped social protection regime of the country (Petmezidou & Tsoulouvi, 1992). Social agencies other than families and networks that complement the insufficient role of the state with regard to provisions of social protection and care are mainly non-governmental-organizations.

According to Sitaropoulos' study (2002:440), the Greek welfare system has generally been based on allowances, targeting mainly three categories of people: children and their families, elderly people and disabled people. As the Greek welfare system relies mainly on cash benefits and presents a contributory scheme, it is unable to provide for 'non-insurable social risks' such as poverty or social exclusion (ibid). As a consequence, disadvantaged groups of people such as refugees and asylum seekers who are perceived as non-contributors to the welfare system are affected, thus they are positioned at the margins of the society.

A review of the literature confirms the above statement regarding refugee and asylum seekers being one of the most marginalised groups in Greece. Generally, their situation regarding asylum and welfare is precarious (Block & Shuster, 2002). Key areas such as accommodation, legal aid, financial assistance and employment, vital for ensuring people's well-being, are insufficient or absent when it comes to refugees and asylum seekers. In particular, even though Greek law has approved of the establishment of more 'asylum seeker' centres since 1991, the capacity of these centres remains limited and as a consequence, a large number of asylum seekers are homeless (Sitaropoulos, 2002).

In Greece, employment is granted only for those who have refugee status (Pre. Dec: 187/ 1998). Greek law allows asylum seekers to seek employment only temporarily for covering their 'immediate needs of life' (Pre. Dec. 189/1998). This law indirectly encourages asylum seekers' involvement in the informal economy (Block & Shuster, 2002). Financial assistance and legal aid are not provided by the state but only by

non-state agencies that deal with refugees and asylum seekers (such as Greek Council of Refugees and Hellenic Red Cross) and only for a limited number of people (UNHCR, 2008). It appears then that, refugees and asylum seekers are not a priority for the Greek welfare state. Even more, the nature of the existing welfare regime and its response to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees reflects a conceptualisation of this group of people as the outsiders of the Greek society.

### **2.4.3. Policy and practice**

Greece, as a member state of EU, has ratified all the legal instruments and international conventions which were discussed previously. Questions and concerns of specific protection and care for unaccompanied minors emerged recently due to criticisms and interventions of Greek and international non-governmental-organizations (UNHCR & Office of the Ombudsman, 2005). For instance, a report of the German organization, Pro Asyl, published on 2008, accused Greece of inhuman practices towards asylum seekers including UM, such as placing asylum seekers in detention for many months in harsh conditions, practicing illegal deportations and refoulements of people at land and at sea, whilst placing their lives under threat. The European Court of Human Rights decided in 2011 to stop the deportations to Greece because of the country's inability to meet these children's basic rights (*Clandestina*, 2011). The above practices mirror the deficiencies of an asylum policy which fails to protect UM and ultimately the state infringes its own commitments to international humanitarian laws.

It is suggested that Greek deficiencies in the area of asylum reflect a set of broader European practices on migration and asylum which are embraced by most industrialised countries. Strategies of control and restriction of migration flows are being implemented for the sake of security and safety of European citizens (Escalona & Black 1995; Smith 2003). The general Greek policy framework exposes a lack of an asylum strategy that would aim to enhance people's integration and social participation in society, and as such follow a broader European migration approach.

Recent developments in the area of asylum reflect the impact of European migration approaches on the Greek asylum policy and practice. In this context, the latest Dublin

II regulation 343/2003 which came into effect after European pressure has led the Greek authorities to suspend asylum claims (NHC, NOAS & Aitima 2009). This regulation was introduced for ensuring that asylum seekers will have their asylum claims assessed in one-member state of EU. The effect of the Dublin II regulation is to offset the responsibility of a large load of cases to countries that consist of entry points for asylum seekers and in particular more countries in South Europe (Papadimitriou & Papageorgiou, 2005).

In reality, the Dublin regulation requires Greece to handle a disproportionate number of cases due to its geopolitical position in Europe and its proximity to conflict areas. As Greece is located conveniently at the crossroads of Middle East and Africa and many asylum seekers cross Greece to seek asylum elsewhere in Europe yet they end up being returned back to Greece under the Dublin II regulation. As the Greek asylum system is unable to deal with the high number of asylum cases it reaches a point that the suspension of the examination of asylum cases offers a solution. Often 'returnees' under the Dublin II regulation may not have their claims examined (NHC, NOAS & Aitima, 2009).

The vast shortcomings of the Greek asylum system and its inability to cope fairly with migration flows are also related to its structural and institutional framework. System dysfunctions appear in a number of areas such as: all asylum procedure is handled and controlled by the police authority, inadequate trained personnel and staff, there is insufficient technical and logistical support, bureaucracy in the procedures, lack of interpreters during the asylum examination, lack of legal aid and all the concentration of decision-making process being located in a central headquarters in the capital of Greece (UNHCR, 2008).

A major issue appears to be that the main authority responsible for examining the asylum claims of people and decisions regarding their status, detention or deportation is the Ministry of Citizen Protection and in particular the police. Thus on the one hand, the police arrest and deport people who enter Greek borders 'illegally' without presenting the required travelling documents and on the other hand, they are also charged with interviewing asylum seekers and making decisions concerning their

asylum claims (Papadimitriou & Papageorgiou, 2005). This dual role of police often creates confusion for asylum seekers and has a rather negative impact on them (ibid). Asylum procedures are not managed fairly by the police as they are not trained in dealing sensitively with vulnerable people. This observation is underlined in police practices of deportation and detention with deteriorating conditions towards minors (UNHCR, 2008).

A study conducted by the UNHCR (2008) made the observation that Greek society and state is less sensitive to issues related to childcare and this pattern is especially so vis-à-vis foreign minors. In the Greek context there is no empirical evidence as to whether the migration and asylum system takes precedence over the childcare system or the opposite. However, there is evidence that children and young people who seek asylum are often treated as adult migrants and exposed to risks and violations by the Greek authorities (CSS, 2008; NHC, NOAS & Aitima, 2009; Sitaropoulos, 2000). The lack of an effective welfare and asylum policy that enhances the well-being of young asylum seekers prompts the present study to examine the challenges posed to both the Greek welfare and its asylum regime. It is also suggested that due to the weak Greek welfare regime and poor services, local people tend to perceive of migrants as mentioned in 2.3.4. as ‘modern invaders’ to national economies and welfare systems.

This raises the twin concepts of ‘philoxenia’ and ‘xenophobia’, their meanings for Greeks and Greek society and unaccompanied minors in Greece today.

#### **2.4.4. Conceptualising ‘Philoxenia’ and ‘Xenophobia’**

Social researchers in Greece identify a cultural controversy regarding attitudes towards ‘foreigners’ (Demetriou, 2013). The concept of ‘philoxenia’<sup>7</sup> originates from ancient Greece and represents a major cultural value in the Greek society expressed as hospitality to ‘guests’ or ‘foreigners’. According to Greek literature, hospitality has been a component of civil ideology that has its roots in ancient times (Lokk & Martykanova, 2008). Xenophobia is an attitudinal orientation of hostility toward

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<sup>7</sup> The word xenos is Greek for guest, or non-native. Philoxenia is the Greek word for showing friendliness to guests, i.e., hospitality (in Demetriou, 2013)

non-natives in a particular population. The concept originates from two Greek words: *xenos* (meaning foreigner or stranger) and *phobos* (meaning fear) (Demetriou, 2013). In particular, xenophobia describes fear towards other people and especially people we are not familiar with and who present different ethnic, cultural, religious and political characteristics.

According to the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), one in two Europeans has features of xenophobia and one in three is racist. A European Union survey conducted several times and in various forms between 1997 and 2003 revealed a worrying level of racism and xenophobia in member states, with nearly 33% of the participants openly describing themselves as — ‘quite racist’ or even — ‘very racist’ (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2003).

In Greece (and elsewhere) *philoxenia* appears to be in conflict with the xenophobic tendencies toward migrants (Demetriou, 2013:296). According to Spyrou, there has been a shift in the rhetoric of xenophobia and racism being attentive to the role of the state regarding migration while creating conflict between the rights of the natives and those of the non-natives: the mere presence of non-natives creates a type of threat regarding the civil rights of the local population (Spyrou, 2010:32). According to Hall (1996) and others (Derrida, 1981; Foucault, 1971; Said, 1978), it is difference and not similarity that constitutes identity. It is also through its relationship with the others that the self is defined as a unit. Thus immigrants are potentially the others.

Greece has been a multicultural society since 1990s (Markou, 1996) and the concepts of *philoxenia* and *xenophobia* are fundamental. In the past few years there have been incidents that may reveal the replacement of *philoxenia* with *xenophobia* such as the attribution of the upsurge in crime to foreigners or migrants. In April 2011 there was an increase in incidents of violence against migrants and asylum seekers (Humanitarian news, 2011). These incidents combined with deportation and detention practices towards asylum seekers have prompted the present study to explore the meaning of these concepts for Greek society with regard to Afghan UM.

## 2.5. Conclusions

The contextual discussion in the first part of the chapter (Global, European and Greek) locates the study within a particular framework and views children's migration as a dynamic, complex and multidimensional phenomenon occurring and affected by diverse factors, on various levels. The review of literature provides a theoretical background against which I examine my data as being positioned in transnational milieus. Such a context elucidates the motives, causes, paths and conditions of forced migration, and sets the ground for the transnational experiences of young people which are affected by global processes. Additionally, the European legal and political framework highlights the irregularities to be found among member states in the implementation of policies regarding the protection and care of UM and the difficulties that this creates for them, against the backdrop of a common European legislation. The local context lays the ground for engaging with young people's current experiences as residents in Greek reception centres. Moreover, it suggests that the increasing focus on deterrence, asylum restrictions and alienation produced by the implementation of the current policies has important implications for the experiences of UASM and those working with them, in a number of areas: ideas of identity and belonging, rights and duties, needs, political values, perception of the others. These theoretical constructs are the key concepts to be used for the analysis of this study. The narratives of UM regarding the pre-migration – migration – post migration stages are used as landmarks in discussing each of these themes. In this review, I have also introduced and minimally discussed the following themes and notions: childhood, displacement, transition, agency, philoxenia and xenophobia as important theoretical notions that underpin the study. These will be taken up for further discussion in my empirical chapters. Finally, the issues raised in the literature review led to the development and refinement of two principal research questions, on the experiences of childhood and crossing borders, and on the processes that promote or obstruct the well-being of UASM. These questions and the methods that were employed to explore them are discussed in the following chapter.

## **SECTION II: METHODOLOGY**

### **Chapter 3: The Research Design: Qualitative research**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

The design of this study is qualitative and exploratory case study resulting from the character of the issues studied and the research questions addressed. Whereas the previous chapter addressed the conceptual framework of the research, the focus of this chapter is to explain the methodological approach and rationale along with the methods employed in carrying out the research. The epistemological and methodological foundations of the research are highlighted and reflect upon the choice of the research design and nature of the topic to be researched. Researching the area of war-affected and displaced children has a number of important research design implications. It is a highly politicised area, focusing on a marginalised group of young people; therefore, ethical implications and various challenges and limitations arise and are considered at every stage of the research process.

There are four main sections to this chapter: the chapter begins by laying out the study context, addressing the objectives of the study and the research questions and paving the way for the research design as an ongoing process. The second section deliberates why a qualitative approach was considered appropriate for the research questions outlined, and the further choices that were made, such as the selection of Afghan young people as a case study and the methods that were employed. The data collection process is then discussed in depth, looking first at issues relating to researching ‘hard-to-reach’ populations and then to the methods that were used: participatory approach, semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups are considered. The third section considers the approach to the analysis of the data collected. The method of combining different materials is discussed and addresses the challenges of bringing together complex ideas and conceptualisations. What is therefore substantial is the fact that the analysis is led by the primary material and the main idea that underpins the study is to let the data ‘talk’, in this sense, there is sympathy with some of the ideas of grounded theory. The fourth section discusses the ethical implications arising at every stage of the research process, the entailed

sensitivity of the studied subject and finally considers issues of power as being evident and impactful on the conduct of the research.

### **3.2. Purpose of the study**

The overall aim of this case study is to explore the experiences of Afghan UASM in Greece, including their childhoods in their home country, the causes that led them to forced migration, their experiences of crossing borders, their feeling in relations to issues of loss, identity and alienation to be found in transnational contexts including their current experiences as residents in the hosting country of Greece. These are explored within a framework that considers the experiences, needs and practices of young people. Insights are given with regard to the distinction between newcomers, and those who have been residents more than a year in Greece.

The objectives of this micro-level study are as follows:

- 1) To develop an understanding of the views and experiences of Afghan UASM from their own perspectives.
- 2) To develop an understanding towards issues which promote or obstruct the well-being of UASM in transnational and local contexts.
- 3) To develop an understanding of the views of professionals and public figures who are dealing with UASM in Greece inside and outside of the reception centres.
- 4) To identify the existing Greek attitudes towards Afghan UASM.

#### **3.2.1. Research Questions**

Prior to my field work I had a concrete viewpoint regarding what I wanted to explore in this study. My research questions were mostly formulated as a result of the knowledge I had gained through my readings in the field and assumptions in relation to displaced children's experiences of crossing borders. However, the aspects I was looking for were narrowed in perceiving young residents of reception centres as dependent, disadvantaged and passive against the backdrop of the powerful institutional framework that contributed in the dismantling of their identities and lives. Therefore, such a viewpoint was later changed, in the process of my fieldwork

and while I spent time with my young informants. I discovered other aspects that my young informants considered as important that I haven't thought of previously, which then further developed the research design of the study. These aspects were related to their experiences of being in transit, to their political consciousness of the situation in their home country, to their experiences of survival. The refined question thus is to identify and explore the experiences of UASM in reception centres in Greece who have gone through the various stages of fleeing their home countries, border crossing, settling in transit places and finally resettling and exiting residential care settings in Greece. In doing so, several conceptual issues also needed to be addressed. This led to the development of the following research questions:

- 1) What are the experiences of Afghan UASM?
  - What are their notions of childhood?
  - What are their experiences of crossing borders?
  - What are those processes and developments that promote or obstruct the well-being of UASM in transnational and local contexts?
  - How do they perceive their residency in Greece? Do they feel welcomed by the community they live in? Are there any barriers to integration?
- 2) What are the views of Greek professionals and public figures involved in the process of providing care and protection to UASM?
  - How do they perceive the presence of Afghan UASM in Greece?
  - What are the challenges when dealing with UASM inside and outside of the reception centres and how do they respond to these challenges?
  - What are Greek attitudes towards UASM?

### **3.3. The study Context**

#### **3.3.1. The research sites**

The research has been conducted in reception centres where UASM are hosted in different parts of Greece. The current responsible authority for the accommodation of UM is the Greek Ministry of Social Solidarity<sup>8</sup> and the total number of reception centres for UASM in Greece up to now is eight. These centres are all funded by the Greek Ministry of Social Solidarity and/or funds from the European Refugee Fund except for one which is self-financed. Total reception facilities can accommodate 340 UM (EMN, 2009). Due to limitations of time and resources (including travelling fares and accommodation costs) the study has been conducted in five out of eight reception centres in different parts of the country.

The first reception centre (A, from now on), accommodates mostly UM who are in transit, despite the provision of workshops aiming at integration of residents into the local market. This is located in a small town in a mountainous area near the Greek and Albanian borders. The facility is called Centre of Boys' Childcare and hosts up to 80 people. It is not for UM who apply for asylum but also for local children and young people who have protection and care issues. In this reception centre there was a high rate of children meeting the criteria for the study. Furthermore, this study site is deemed important in engaging newly arrived UM and the ones who are in transit.

The second reception centre, (B) is located on an island on the south coast. It is part of a reception program for UM and funded by the National Youth Foundation (NYF), the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity (MHSS) and the European Refugee Fund (ERF). In the last period the centre has operated to full capacity exceeding the 25 UM in total (UNHCR, 2008). Most of them are reported to be Afghan males aged from 15 up to 21 (ibid). This centre is considered to be appropriate for the present study as evidence from local press reveals that the community is hospitable to these children and encourages their social participation

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<sup>8</sup> Over the course of conducting this study, the competent authority for the accommodation of UM in Greece was transposed three times: At the time of fieldwork the competent authority was the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity, then the Ministry of Interior and Administrative reconstruction and since 2014 is the Ministry of Labour (Department of Social Solidarity/E.K.K.A) responsible over reception/accommodation of children and minors.

(Patris, 2005).

The third reception centre (C) is called ‘Shelter for the Care of Minors’ (Association for the Care of Minors). It is funded by the Association’s own sources and by charitable activities and is situated in a big city. The Institution was founded in 1924 and is not only addressed to UM who apply for asylum but generally to minors in need. However, in recent years, in response to the increasing need for care and support to UM, it hosts them systematically from the moment they apply for asylum. The capacity of the centre is 12 people and often this number can be exceeded (UNHCR, 2008). It has been reported that most of minors who are hosted in the centre are Afghans (ibid). This study site has been selected purposely to enhance my understanding of young people’s experiences within an urban context.

The fourth reception centre (D) is located on the rural side of Greece on a mountainous area. It is operated by the Association for the Social Support of Youth and the charitable society ‘Hellenic Care’ since 2006 (UNHCR, 2008). It is funded by the MHSS and the ERF with capacity circa 30 persons. At the time of fieldwork, it housed 32 UM, all male and 7 being of Afghani origin aged 15 to 18. This study site has been selected because one of the centre’s priorities has been the integration of the minors into local employment.

Finally, the fifth reception centre, (E) is located in a coastal municipality close to a regional city and the reception program for accommodating UM is implemented by the NYF since 2008. It is financed by the NYF, the MHSS and the ERF. Its capacity totals 48 young boys and during these last years it operates to full capacity. I deemed it essential to include this site in the study because of its objective and efforts to integrate UM into the public educational system.

### 3.3.2. Unit of study

Broadly, most of reception centres for asylum seekers in Greece used to be managed and funded by the state. From the end of 1990s, non-governmental-organizations started to take action in the domain of asylum reception systems. The state transmitted its main responsibilities of management to NGOs while it kept responsibility for general supervision along with the co-financing of these centres within its sphere of authority (EMN, 2005). According to Article 19 par. 2 of the Presidential Decree 220/2007 on the minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers, the competent authorities are obliged to receive and examine the asylum applications of UM, to take immediate measures that fulfil their accommodation needs (e.g. foster families and accommodation centres with special provisions for minors) (EMN, 2005:14).

Although the Greek authorities claim that unaccompanied children and minors safely reach a care centre after release from detention or after applying for asylum, the reality is different. Despite the fact that UM are not prohibited from law to have access to accommodation and care facilities, in practice, they may be denied access due to limited places and resources or they may stay in detention longer because of lack of placement (HRW, 2008).

A main issue in the domain of asylum reception appears to be funding for all centres. The centres are financed on a yearly basis, a factor which prevents them from planning and organizing actions on a long-term basis, this thus affects their general operation and the quality of their services to minors (HRW, 2008; UNHCR, 2008). At the moment, the situation appears to be rather unstable regarding funds, as Greece is in the throes of a major financial crisis. This creates uncertainty about the future operation of the reception centres.

Against this backdrop, the present study employs a flexible approach following the specific circumstances. In the course of the study, the preliminary choice of research sites had to change due to the poor functioning of two reception centres in combination with inadequate staff and poor management to be found. These were substituted by reception centres which met the basic criteria. Overall the criteria

concerning the research sites selection were based on the access to the studied population along with matters linked to the availability of resources and time.

Finally, the first impression formed by the research sites and their basic features underlines inconsistencies to be found among the reception centres in the operational features, capacity and objectives regarding the social provisions. Such inconsistencies have also been underlined in the report conducted by the UNHCR (2008) and are illustrated in Table 7.1 (see appendix 7) and discussed further in chapter 7.

### **3.4. Research Methodology**

A significant issue that every researcher confronts is to decide what the best way is to answer the research questions. What strategy and methodology is most appropriate and what epistemological and ontological assumptions shape the choices of the researcher? Other significant questions are related to the methods of data collection and analysis and with what rationality. All these matters are also linked to issues of validity, reliability and generalization of the study that a researcher considers when conducting research. Furthermore, ethical considerations should be at the centre of the scope of the study throughout the whole research process and followed by more pragmatic matters such as accessibility, costs and time.

This study considers all these components by examining issues that could be possibly anticipated in the early stage of research. Researching UASM is considered to be a highly political and sensitive study. This makes the study challenging and complex. In this respect, identifying any potential risks and difficulties and their impact on the research is significant. Finding ways to overcome difficulties and reflect on the process and the self of the researcher could decrease the chances of ‘unsuccessful completion of the study’ (Blaikie, 2000). Noticeably, all choices made by the researcher reflect a set of ideological and epistemological perceptions about social world and knowledge.

### **3.4.1. Epistemology and Ontological Position**

According to Punch (1998) the theoretical and methodological framework of a study reflects researchers' ideology and beliefs. Blaikie (2000) has stated that the ideological background of the researcher represents the ontological and epistemological positions about what is reality and how that reality can be known. My ontological position is that social reality is constructive and can be acknowledged through the experiences and interpretations of the social actors who construct it. My epistemological assumption reflects the position that knowledge is subjective rather than objective and depends on the ways individuals interpret that knowledge (Bryman, 2004). As I consider that there is meaning in people's views, understandings, interpretations, experiences and interactions which depict the social reality, I adopt a qualitative research design for my study (Mason, 2002a: 64).

An important component of qualitative methods is to describe and examine phenomena from the participants' perspective (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003: 27). My study is explorative in nature, and not concerned with the quantification of social phenomena (Flyvbjerg, 2006), so much as with distilling young people's constructions of meaning in relation to their life experiences as displaced children. Henceforth, I used a qualitative research strategy to help me obtaining rich and descriptive accounts of young people's views, experiences and emotions. Against the backdrop of my research objectives and questions, my inclination to capture a contemporary phenomenon within a natural real life context, a case study informed by phenomenology was chosen as the most appropriate research method for my study. This would allow me to gain a deeper understanding of young people's constructions of meaning, their relationships, their sense of belonging and their identities that are shaped and reshaped as a result of the interactions within the setting (Yin, 2002; Stake, 1995).

### **3.4.2. Research Strategy: Qualitative Methodology**

The use of a qualitative strategy is deemed here appropriate in generating a social scientific account of young people's lives (Blaikie, 2000). A qualitative research design is most appropriate for answering the research questions due to the

exploratory or contextual nature of my study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Robson, 2002). Contextual research is significant in ‘identifying what exists in social life and the way it manifests itself’ (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003: 27). The present study aims to describe the meaning that Afghan UM attribute to their experiences and explore the perspectives of professionals and public figures who deal with UM inside and outside of the reception centres. The study aims to provide in-depth knowledge and insights about matters related to treatment of Afghan UM as residents in Greece, perspectives on their pre-arrival experiences, journeys and standpoints on asylum, their well-being and the impact of policies on their lives.

Furthermore, a contextual study displays the nature of important components of a phenomenon that could not be addressed by employing a positivist approach (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003:27). This means that quantitative methods are particularly inadequate, and even dangerous, for studying topics related to experiences, emotions and intergroup relations, because they tend to focus too much on psychological dispositions and treat social classification as a neutral aspect of data processing, rather than exploring the ways in which experience is actively involved in the world (Augoustinos & Reynolds, 2001; Hopkins, Reicher & Levine, 1997). On the other hand, qualitative methodology gives weight to context and experience that is vital in understanding the impacts of processes and policies for target groups. In particular, qualitative research tends to emphasise the context and process as well (Bryman, 2004:271). This is of great importance in understanding the responses of interviewees to processes, strategies, dynamics and policies that take place and impact on their past, present and future lives. In this sense, the study and the research environment itself is not static but a lively and fluid process. The literature review highlighted a number of reasons why context is important: globalization, forced migration causes, legislation and political developments on national and transnational levels (with reference to welfare and asylum policies), the quality and type of services all greatly shape young respondents’ experiences and living conditions.

Silverman (2000) has stated that the choice of methodology reflects the purpose and the objectives of the study. The present study treats the studied population as a case

study in a qualitative paradigm, with specific characteristics (Afghan unaccompanied asylum seeking minors) and seeks to explore their experiences. The logic of the scope is *'to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real context and especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident'* (Yin, 2008:18). One of the main weaknesses of case study has been its insufficiency in its representativeness of a larger set of units (Gerring, 2004). I openly acknowledge this limitation but I argue that a good knowledge of the wider social, political and cultural context will increase the representativeness of the study.

Several critiques of case studies also refer to lack of rigor, weak basis for generalization, and that they are too time-consuming (Yin, 1994:10-11). Yin (1994: 32) contests these concerns and argues that the aim of case studies is to develop theories, generalise and understand policy implications on the lives of the studied population. He recommends that one reasoning for a single case approach is when it represents a unique situation (ibid). The reasons for the selection of UM of Afghani origin who reside in Greece as a single case study are very much connected with Yin's suggestion and are thoroughly illustrated in the following section.

### **3.4.3. Sampling and Access**

Since the study involves a moving population, there was no available list of population elements beforehand. Research with asylum seekers on the move faces a number of challenges relating to sampling and access. Although the target group of Afghan UM who reside in reception centres is not considered a population in transit *per se* because of the profile as 'young people in care', official reports and statistics that were published recently suggest that a large number of UM who reside in Greek reception centres run away a few weeks after their referral to the units of residency<sup>9</sup>. This population constantly changes as people arrive and depart, some after just a few days, others after many months. Some are determined to reach the Northern EU states because they have family there or because they know they will be able to have

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<sup>9</sup> According to the National Centre of Health and Social Solidarity in 2014 (the competent authority for the accommodation of asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors) the average stay of young people in the reception facilities has been 51 days.

a better life. This group knows that there is no chance of being recognised as refugees in Greece, and eventually they want to try somewhere else (Shuster, 2011).

The challenge of reaching such a population in constant movement is something I experienced myself at the preliminary stage of accessing my target group. In discussions I had with two gatekeepers over the phone in order to identify the target group, I was particularly surprised when they informed me that it is very difficult to encounter Afghan children and minors during summer (the period of time I intended to carry out fieldwork) in those reception centres due to the high rate of absconding. This had some implications to the preliminary design of the study; I had to turn to other reception facilities that presented evidence of young people's long-term residency.

Therefore, I used judgmental or purposive sampling so the recruitment of the studied population was based on the judgment of which organizations would be most appropriate for the proposed study regarding the identification of the target group (Blaikie, 2000). This was determined by the number of UM who were accommodated in reception centres at the time of research and whether they met the criteria of sampling (age and ethnicity) and whether the professionals and public figures were available for interview. Defining a population in this way may restrict the generalizability of the results, however obtaining in-depth and detailed data on a specific population may enhance generalizations, based on judgments about whether other centres that host the studied population are similar in important respects (Blaikie, 2000).

Initially, the objective of the study was to conduct research with Afghan UASM, aged 16-18, because this stage of life is crucial with respect to the transition to adulthood and independency. However, later on, I decided to broaden my criteria in terms of age in order to involve more people in the study. As such, my final sample was consisted of 30 boys of the age 15 to 18 and involved 19 long term residents who had been in care for more than a year and 11 new comers, a few of whom had arrived a few weeks prior to the interviews. All young informants were recruited through the reception centres they lived in.

The reason I decided to include only young men in my study was because accessing unaccompanied girls proved to be very hard. The Greek accommodation centres host only boys hence, female unaccompanied minors are considered to be limited in number and therefore, there are no facilities for them. However, it would be an interesting possibility for further research to access differing views in terms of gender and culture.

The decision to analyse the case of unaccompanied Afghan minors has been very much connected with two factors: the first one relates to the accessibility of sampling. The second factor relates to the features of this particular group of Afghan UM who reside in Greece as a unique case (Yin, 1994). Being a major group of UM in Greece but also in Europe in the last few years, it is of vital importance to understand the magnitude of their experiences, predicaments, backgrounds, intentions and emotions. Afghan displaced people are representative of forced migration issues; their experiences have been shaped by historical, political and social developments since their home country has been in conflict the last decades. Their routines involve dislocation, mobility and temporary settlements in transit places, hence strong grounds for seeking asylum. It has been suggested that migration and life in exile is not only a response to the political, social and economic circumstances of life but also has become a way of life for some of them (Monsutti, 2007).

There are a number of factors about Greece that makes it both an interesting and significant location for research. These are related to the country's specific characteristics in terms of the challenges of coping with the heavy burden of asylum seekers as a country of first reception, to its management of migration issues, to the protection of asylum seekers including children and minors. Greece's institutional unpreparedness to intensifying immigration movements, lacking of policies or delayed political actions and reforms in the field of asylum, have resulted in alarming predicaments of refugees and asylum seekers in Greece (Amnesty International, 2010; Migreurop 2009). Arrestments of UM on crossing borders, harassment by the police, implementation of deportation orders with forceful push backs back to Turkey are only a few examples of the lived experiences of those young people who

come through Greece and who are left without rights, legal protection and support (Shuster, 2011; Hammarberg, 2009; HRW, 2008). All these along with a growing concern of care management approach in UM's social care has led me to locate the study in Greece.

Before recruiting my sample, I sought consent from the administrative unit of the Greek Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity and I obtained official permission to access and conduct research in five reception centres I had applied for. This process proceeded without any complications. Although, I was legally authorised to carry out the inquiry in private sessions with the studied population (without the presence of the professionals for ethical reasons) within a six-month period, I encountered some obstacles on the way. In particular, when I visited and introduced myself to the gatekeepers (professionals) in two centres, I was informed that I should conduct the interviews in the presence of staff. Initially tensions were created between me and the gatekeepers but these were ultimately relented. What became clear from this was that in order to get in contact with the young people I first had to have won the trust of professionals acting as their gatekeepers. Gatekeepers have an important role in institutional contexts as they can both protect and exclude young people from participating in the study (Masson, 2004).

I finally gained access to conduct research with public figures via snowball sampling. In particular, an organization I used to cooperate with as a social worker provided me access and suggested suitable public figures.

#### **3.4.4. Participatory Approach**

The study seeks to define the conditions of research in such a way that young people obtain a voice as they are often viewed as 'invisible' in the literature. According to France (2004:179), "to see 'giving voice' as a valueless project is to deny the politics of doing research". Conducting research with UM' raises political issues that are related not only to the social and political contexts in which their experiences are constructed but also to the ways knowledge is generated regarding their experiences and lives. Historically, the voices of young people and in particular the voices of young asylum seekers have been marginalised or ignored (France, 2004).

A core principle of the participatory approach is the generation of knowledge from the perspective of the researched (rather than its extraction) by providing people with tools for analysing their life conditions (Veale, 2005). The present study aims to use this knowledge for the benefit of the studied population which will eventually generate positive outcomes for their lives. Such a child-centred approach to research, that empowers young participant's voices and stories could be useful in the development of a child-centred approach to policy and practice, especially in the area of childcare and asylum.

Giving power to a group of UM (but also keeping control of the research project) to participate in a research project and be the subjects of it views them as reliable witnesses to their own experiences and lives and thus, appreciates their competence and agency (James & Prout, 1998). I also acknowledge the fact that 'giving voice' entails an interaction between the researcher and the researched (Silverman, 2001; Clough & Nutbrown, 2003 in France 2004). This also creates the need for the researcher to be involved in 'balancing the role of facilitator with the need to allow for a maximum of participation' while safeguarding the needs and rights of young people (Nieuwenhuys, 2004:212).

Taking into consideration all the above positions, my main objective has been to actively involve UM in the research project and in particular in the stage of designing the main areas of discussion in focus groups and interviews. During fieldwork, I organised an initial one-day consultation event in each centre to familiarise young people with the research process and then I motivated them to discuss and influence areas of exploration necessary to reflect their experiences (Jones, 2004). In discussions I had with the young people about the aims and the design of the study there was enough room left for them, to express their ideas regarding the chosen topics. I employed a relatively flexible design in terms of deciding the main content of the methods (focus groups and in-depth interviews) in cooperation with the young people. The information that emerged, especially from a written activity, was important for them (such as causes of displacement and issues related to relations and attitudes) and fed back into the research design.

In particular, a group-work exercise with 6 to 9 young respondents was conducted in 3 reception centres. Young people were given large sheets of paper and post-it notes to communicate or draw their views and feelings about their home and hosting country. Particularly, they were encouraged to write about what they like and dislike in relation to their country of origin and hosting country. The main areas that emerged included perceptions of the self and the others, sense of belonging, identity issues, feelings about being displaced, and aspirations.

The participatory approach allowed participants to have some control over the discussion during focus groups and interviews (Winton, 2007), and also increase the validity of the findings. Although, some participants didn't want to open up during focus groups, it proved to be easier for them to write down their views and emotions in the group-work exercise. The language barriers were reduced by the involvement of interpreters who spoke Dari, Farsi and Pashtun and in some cases by young people's inclination to speak English and Greek.

Overall, producing knowledge that can be useful to a group of young people through research, entails the involvement of these people since they are the only ones who can attribute real insights about 'what it means to be an UASM'.

### **3.5. Methods of the Study**

According to Blaikie (2000) and Bryman (2004) research methods are the techniques and tools the researcher uses for collecting and handling data. One of the main questions is which tools are the more appropriate and reliable in collecting data for the study. The main source of data was the group-work exercise, focus groups and semi-structured in-depth interviews. In order to design the main areas of the inquiry and contextualise the study from the perspective of the participants I adopted a child-centred approach, thinking that young people are experts in their own lives, capable and aware of the dynamics and processes of the environments in which they live (James, 1999; Qvortrup *et al.* 2009). The use of focus groups with UM was decided because this would generate background information on the issues I aim to explore and, as well, would provide me with the opportunity to observe and understand young people's interactions, situations and stories. One-to-one interviews were

included within the research design for a number of reasons, to stream information that was not available through group-work exercise and focus groups, to explore in greater depth issues and themes that stood out as important at the group activities and to go deeper into sensitive areas.

### **3.5.1. Focus Groups**

My original plan was to conduct one focus group in each reception centre, with 6 to 10, but this proved to be impossible due to the limited number of participants with the given criteria in 2 out of 5 reception centres. In total, I conducted 3 focus groups in 3 selective reception centres. Specifically, 6 young boys participated in the first focus group, 12 in the second one and 8 in the third one. Small groups were more preferable in my study because sensitive issues were at the centre of discussion (Morgan, 1998a).

Young people were briefed on the aims and objectives of my research before recruitment during the consultation event, where they were provided with explicit information about the procedure and had the chance to express any queries. In the beginning of the discussions, I informed my participants once again and set out ground rules about the procedure. A tape-recorder was used and notes were taken during the discussions, with prior permission, and I assured that participants could turn the recorder on and off if they wanted.

Initially, I asked my participants to begin with their interests and with what they like to do in life before moving on to their future plans. Then we talked about the present and of how life was for them as residents of the reception centres. From there, I asked them to move on to their journey experiences and finally they agreed to talk about their pre-departure stories.

What I experienced is that people who have gone through the same experiences are encouraged to become open up than if they were interviewed on an individual basis (Wilkinson, 1999; Farquhar & Das, 1999). I think that young people were willing to participate in focus groups because they had the opportunity to elaborate on the

topics they had defined and construed in previous stage of the participatory group work. Focus groups are deemed an effective method in approaching disadvantaged or disempowered groups of people by giving them voice through an interactive process (Morgan & Krueger, 1993).

Therefore, I acknowledge that cultural and language factors may have prevented some young people from participating in group discussions and that may have reduced the number of participants to take part in the study in general. Often UM are seen as 'unable to express their needs and defend their rights' or as 'vulnerable' and frightened to open-up due to their experiences (Thomas & Byford, 2003:1401). However, this thesis' viewpoint is that these factors shouldn't minimise UM opportunities to participate in research and shouldn't obstruct efforts to allow their voices to be heard.

The group discussions were conducted in English and Afghani and interpreters assisted with the translation when needed. Being aware of the language barriers I employed a professional interpreter who participated in the activities facilitated in two reception centres despite the entailed costs. The presence of an interpreter may either enhance the chances of the studied population participation or obstruct some people's willingness to take part, in case they don't feel good with the presence of an interpreter. This was the case in one of the centres where the interpreter was a young resident with a working permit to provide interpretation services for the reception centre. Some young people openly told me that they didn't like the interpreter and they had the view that he was unreliable and unprofessional. This led me to employ an external interpreter with no involvement with the reception centre.

Other difficulties and limitations of focus groups derived from the interrelation dynamics of the group that generate data. For instance, some participants were very dominant and their views were prevalent over the others, a factor that if not managed sufficiently may produce bias. On the contrary, some other participants felt too intimidated and frightened to share openly their opinion. In this case, questions arose about the ways in which the researcher can work ethically with the group. Different

actions displayed by the researcher may involve encouraging children and young people who feel displaced by their peers to talk, or asking someone who is disrupting the focus group to leave (Tisdall *et al.* 2008). Despite the fact that the facilitator might have less control over the process in focus groups than in interviewing, the management of the whole process depends explicitly on the abilities of facilitator to make the right interventions at the right moments and when there is a need (Morgan, 1988).

### **3.5.2. In-depth Interviews**

During the spring of 2012 until early of autumn 2012, I conducted a series of semi structured in-depth interviews with 30 Afghan unaccompanied minors, 12 professionals who work directly with UM and 9 public figures. The emerging key themes from focus groups and participatory group activities could be best explored in more detail by using one-to-one in-depth semi-structured interviews. In-depth semi-structured interviews allow for openness to changes of sequence and form of the questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the subjects (Kvale, 1996:124). Mason (2002: 63ff) recommends a range of reasons for choosing to use qualitative interviews of which the following are important for this study: an interest in people's views, understandings, interactions and experiences which can only be constructed or reconstructed in interviews; and another dimension and approach questions from a different angle which wouldn't be possible via a structured method. Taking into account these points, the next section discusses the role of interviews in the data collection process with some reflections on the interview process.

#### **Interviewing young people**

I conducted 19 interviews with young people who had long term experiences of residency for more than a year and 11 interviews with newly-arrived young people. The majority of young people who participated in focus groups and group work exercises consented to be interviewed individually. There were only two boys who declined to take part without giving any reason. The young participants were informed about the interview process in the consultation event where they were

provided with explicit information about the process. The main themes derived in cooperation with my participants were then developed into a guided interview with semi-structured and some open ended questions. The topics that were discussed, developed and covered during the consultation event, the group activities and focus groups were the following:

- Background
- Causes of movement
- Journeys
- Arrival and first impressions
- In care life
- Relationships (Here and There)
- Needs
- Interests
- Rights and rules
- Helps/Difficulties
- Aftercare
- Future plans

Those themes consisted the core of the interview guide which was further developed owing to two sources of inspiration: theoretical concepts (in particular, the migration system's theory and that young people's lives need to be understood and situated in the micro, meso and macro context) and existing research on UM pre-migration, migration and post-migration experiences, and secondly from my professional experience of residential care for asylum seekers in Greece. Below the number of interviews that were conducted in each reception centre are specified:

Reception centre	Interviews
A	12
B	7
C	2
D	3
E	6

The interviews began by asking young people about their future plans, then their present lives in Greece and finally about their past in an attempt by working towards to minimise the risk of distress. The interviews concluded by offering participants an

opportunity to raise issues or make comments on anything that had not been raised.

### **Interviewing professionals**

The views of professionals who work with UM were deemed significant in providing an additional perspective as to the nature of young people's reception, protection, and treatment and on those processes that hinder or promote young people's well-being. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 professionals: five social workers, three pedagogues, two lawyers, one sociologist and one psychologist.

The professionals interviewed were working with and for UM in the reception centres. Their recruitment was based on the knowledge and training of the caregivers on specific areas that have to do with the reception, treatment and care of UM and covered the following themes: social support, asylum and legislation, education, mental health and well-being. A few of the professionals held managerial positions (3 out of 12) whereas the majority was ordinary staff. The interviews provided data on a range of issues relating to childcare and asylum policy and process, sources of support. Data provided reflected the roles and position of each respondent and some interviews generated considerably more information than others, as demonstrated further in Chapter 9.

### **Interviewing public figures**

An interesting component of the present study has been to identify prevalent Greek attitudes in relation to UM and how local people react to the presence of UM in Greek communities. The public figures deemed to be relevant for providing this sort of information and proved to be the most difficult to get in contact with because some of them were too busy to find time for an interview. Some key-stakeholders that I did manage to recruit were active in different segments of public service and held different positions there. I interviewed a Mayor serving for a regional municipality, a special team of policemen responsible for the management of asylum seekers in a regional city, a priest who has been active in supporting and running sport events and other activities for the youth in a small town, a public servant who has been the forerunner for running a reception centre in a rural area, a Director of an

NGO who has been engaged in actions and programs concerning the legal support of asylum seekers including UM, two public servants who have been appointed managers of the reception centres. A total of 9 interviews with 5 different public figures were carried out.

### **3.6. Data Collection**

The study employed more than one method of data collection. This practice aimed at heightening the reliability and validity of the research and hence helped me to compare and contrast the findings, minimise potential biases and get reliable outcomes. Data were gathered mainly by tape recording and note taking. Explanations of confidentiality and anonymity were given to all participants and when consent was obtained, a tape recorder was used for capturing all the details of the discussions and interviews. Out of the total 49 interviews I conducted, only 3 public figures did not agree to record the interview. In this case I had to take notes. Although the study was not ethnographic, I made field notes of observations throughout the fieldwork and informal conversations with the participants, which informed the analysis.

When talking to young people most times I had to use interpreters. In some cases, it wasn't required because the young people were fluent in English or Greek. The interpreters were instructed to translate as accurately as possible the content of the young person's account. The process of translation has been described as being rather hard to control in practice by a researcher. The interpreter I cooperated with was contacted through an organization that provides legal and social support to asylum seekers and was a qualified interpreter. It proved to be a costly matter to pay for the expenses of the interpreter since most reception centres were dispersed in different locations in Greece. Subsequently, I arranged with the interpreter to accompany me in two out of the five reception centres, and in the other ones I relied on the interpreters that were provided by the reception centres.

In one of those reception centres the interpreter was qualified and employed as an external one but in another centre the interpreter was a resident himself. This proved to be problematic, as I mentioned earlier, because the relations he had established

with the young people were not professional. Moreover, he conveyed a sense of misery to the other minors and he was perceived as a negative influence by some boys. Therefore, in another reception centre the presence of an interpreter who was a resident himself seemed to work satisfactorily. During the process of the inquiry in some instances, I had to work hard in order to clarify with the interpreter ambiguities and to make sure as much as I could that communication flowed.

The collected data mainly, from Afghani, was interpreted in Greek and the tapes and notes were then transcribed and written into English manually (Bryman 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This process allowed me to be in touch with every piece of data. Transcription is the typical process of transforming the oral language to the written language and subsequently is a process that arranges the findings into written components which can be analysed (Kvale, 1996). Analysing qualitative data is a significant stage of research process where the collected data, with appropriate management by the researcher, produce codes as a result of categorizations that lead to empirically based conclusions. Though, an important question the researcher should answer is ‘in what ways do the codes or concepts accurately reflect the meaning of the retrieved words and phrases, and why?’ (Yin, 2008:128). The answer depends explicitly on the researcher’s analytical skills, strategies and rationale (ibid).

### **3.7. Analysis**

Based on the exploratory nature of my study I adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the most appropriate one for a number of reasons: because it is ‘strongly idiographic’ (Smith, 2004:41), it seeks to ‘explore the participant's view of the world’ and reach as much as possible an insider's perspective (Smith & Osborn, 2007), by acknowledging that a researcher cannot do this directly or completely (Smith *et.al.* 1999:53). The data were handled through a phenomenological approach in that the process involved detailed scrutiny of the participant’s life-world. Such an approach is concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account of a situation or event, and not on the production of an objective statement of an event or a situation (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Moreover, owing to the participatory elements involved in the study I perceived IPA as the most

appropriate because it encourages the research participants to be co-researchers.

This sort of interaction and engagement between the researcher and the researched subjects cultivates an internal and most often a compassionate view of human experience (Stiles, 1993). With regard to the interpretation of data, IPA adopts a double hermeneutic in the sense that participants are trying to make sense of their experiences whereby, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their experience (Packer & Addison, 1989). The analysis of data has been grounded in what young people have said about their experiences that led to the generation of findings through an interpretative account of the views and understandings of the participants.

The main analytic approach I adopted for handling my data was focused on one principle; to understand the young people's stories and experiences from their own perspectives in order to appreciate their standpoints on the meaning they attribute on the lived pre-migration, migration and post-migration storylines. I have put great effort in approaching every stage of my research study with an open thinking, without testing any pre-existing hypotheses (Martin & Turner, 1986). Qualitative researchers should approach their study with an unbiased mind and use the method they think it suits best according to the purpose and data of the study (Van Manen, 1988).

Group-work activities, focus groups and one-to-one in-depth interviews are the methods of data collection of this study. According to Silverman (2004), there is very little literature on how to analyse data from focus groups. It is suggested that data can also be analysed by using the same techniques as when analysing data from one-to-one interviews. In this case, my primal strategy of handling the data from focus groups and in-depth interviews has been to read many times all the gathered evidence and then generate categorizations. This 'inductive' process is considered to be appropriate for analysing in-depth and detailed data from focus groups and interviews (Thomas, 2003:4). Regarding the analysis of the group-work exercise I should clarify that themes and main ideas on the findings emerged at multiple and regular points of our 'reflective praxis' with the young people, rather than being a

standard stage of research (Cahill, 2007:306). The analysis was therefore an integral part of the process of the inquiry and not an external part of it which had to be carried out by the researcher.

This means that the participants participated, reflected and learned from the activity and its outcome. Such a process represents a participatory development of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1994) with the young people building an understanding of themselves as active contributors of the inquiry. I will mention indicatively, that through this activity young participants realised that it was not just the ‘others’ (defined variously as local people, citizens, white, powerful people, racists) who produced discriminatory constructions of the young people, but it was sometimes also themselves that were implicated into reproducing various stereotypes that marginalised them such as underlining the differences among diverse ethnicities, and by being referring to particular ethnic groups as being ‘their enemies back home’.

Regarding the practical aspect of the analysis, I initially chose to use the software package, particularly NVivo being aware of its usefulness in accelerating the process of analysis. I spent time to learning how to use it, to collate, put in order, import the data into the system, store and codify it. The use of computer software removes the difficult task of manual coding and generates connections and identifications of common themes (Silverman, 1993). However, I felt that this whole process would take more time than I thought in the beginning and I also felt too distanced from my data (Bazeley, 2007). I decided then for the classic, manual “cut and paste” method with which I felt more familiar with, although it proved to be time consuming to handle different sources of data and make back and forth movements in and out of the data. Therefore, I was able to be in touch with and use most of the relevant data in producing themes, conceptualising and discussing the lived experiences of my participants and drawing conclusions.

### **3.8. Validity, Reliability and Generalization**

Qualitative research has been criticised by scholars regarding concepts of validity, reliability and generalization. These criticisms derive from different epistemological beliefs about what constitutes acceptable knowledge (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative

researchers are committed to study the social world through the eyes of the people they study and as such measurement seems not to be a major issue for them (ibid). Some scholars have introduced alternative concepts that seem to fit more into the rationale of the qualitative inquiry (Morse, 1994; Robson, 2002). For example, concepts such as credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability have been proposed as replacements to validity and reliability (Lincoln and Cuba, 1985).

My stance is that 'qualitative inquiry appears to be unique because of its flexible nature' (Allan & Skinner, 1991). In my study, issues of validity and reliability are not disregarded; however, I do believe that the strength of relationship between the researcher and the participants can increase validity and reliability rather than the opposite. In this context, the participatory approach of the study followed by a flexible inquiry is not treated here as a problem but as a way to build rapport and trustworthy relations with participants in order to distil and understand different realities from their own perspectives (Marshall & Roseman, 1995). This process enhances validity and reliability.

What I see as a particular problem when employing a flexible inquiry is the input of my own self, my own values and preconceptions in the study. These matters could be best tackled through reflexivity which is a conscious on-going process of reflection on ourselves and the values we hold (Etherington, 2007). Finally, I would like to respond to questions regarding generalization that arise especially when conducting a case study. The reflexive account of the study leaves room for informed conclusions to be made about whether the results are valuable for understanding other cases. As well, the small number of cases of my study will not offer statistical generalization rather, what will emerge, it is hoped, are theoretical insights and generalizations about similar cases.

### **3.9. Ethics**

Research in sensitive areas of social enquiry poses methodological, logical, ethical and practical problems (Alderson, 1995; Lewis, 2004; Morse, 1994). This study is a politically and ethically sensitive area because it raises concerns and issues about conducting research with one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups of

youth. Although, there is no research design that can fully anticipate all the potential risks and dangers, when the researcher considers carefully all the problems and employs strategies in confronting them, then the possibilities of minimizing any potential dangers are increased (Hakim, 1987). The study has been complied with ‘Research Ethics Policy and Procedures’ of the School of Social and Political Studies, University of Edinburgh. The research project has been identified by self-audit as requiring detailed assessment - i.e. level 2 and level 3 projects. In this respect, my study is considered to be challenging and sensitive.

Being mindful of the importance of informed consent (Heath *et al.* 2007), in the early stage of the research, access and consent were negotiated and obtained at two levels – the reception centres (through the gatekeepers) and the individual. Each centre was informed by email about the scope of the study. However, the second level of negotiation for consent needed more effort especially with young people and the staff. This will be discussed below.

Children and young people are often involved in power dynamics with adults, especially in institutionalised contexts where the staff often exert undue influences over them (Mayall, 2000). I acknowledge that Afghan UM may have been subjected to influences by ‘gatekeepers’ or staff for participating or not in the study. This could have had implications on their choice of obtaining truly and voluntarily their consent. Therefore, it is doubtful whether researchers can be fully assured that consent is truly informed (Cree *et al.* 2002). In this study asking consent from gatekeepers and legal guardians was required in order to gain access to the studied population. Most times legal guardians were acting as gatekeepers as well.

According to Butler and Williamson (1994) and Thomas and O’ Kane (1998a), gatekeepers who are involved in children’s care have the tendency to protect children and young people from the effects of research participation as they conceive children as ‘vulnerable’ due to their previous experiences or they tend to control them. This limitation may be also seen as an advantage as ‘gatekeepers’ are aware of every individual case of unaccompanied minors and can decide whose involvement in the study is appropriate (Mitchell, 2008:51). This practice may protect participants from

potential harm. Thus in order to minimise any potential influences of gatekeepers on the decisions of young people to participate, I carefully informed them about the importance of consent and decision-making by the participants.

My primary consideration in my fieldwork was to ensure that my young participants did not feel coerced to participate in the study. This process involved providing information to my participants about the research aims, objectives and their level of involvement, length of time of the research process, the possible benefits, and the information that I would be hoping to get from them and how I would be using it. The choice to opt out at any stage of the research was given (Fine & Sandstorm, 1988). I assured my participants that any decision they made regarding their participation would not affect their immigration status and the services they receive, and that nothing would be held against them in case they refused to participate in the research (Mitchell, 2008).

I asked for their consent by providing them with written and spoken information in simple language so they could understand. All the information materials were written in English and translated into their native language (see Appendix 2). Some informants raised their concerns regarding identification issues and the manipulation of the data. In those cases, detailed and honest clarification was given regarding their concerns. Due to language barriers (some participants didn't speak Greek or English) Afghan interpreters were involved who spoke the participants' dialect.

This process lasted two or three days prior to the commencement of the research in the reception centres where young people reside. Our interactions these very first days helped them to clarify and think through of the research. In the meantime, I asked the young people what they understood about my study, if they had any inclinations or any observations that they would like to share with me. In response to this, most young residents verbally gave their assent and some were particularly keen to tell their stories and participate in every data-gathering activity.

However, my daily interactions with them later made me think about the intricacy of the situation: a few boys did realise and acknowledge my physical presence in the beginning but over time they ignored my researcher identity or they forgot about it.

They saw me as an external professional (i.e. social worker, psychologist) who is there to help them with their predicaments:

*While speaking to Moustafa about the field work and what we will do, he said to me? You are a social worker right? Then you know what you can do about us...you know where to call and what to report about...they (staff) don't give us the phone numbers to complain, to tell about what is happening to us, our problems. But you will do it for us right? (Field notes, Reception Centre C, July 2012).*

It has been hard for me too to constantly fit into the costume of the researcher and remain detached from my respondents' requests and worries. It was hard not to intervene in many of the daily practices of the reception centres due to my professional background and the young people's expectations from me. Nonetheless, I was constantly trying to remind myself of my role as 'researcher' who may sometimes be conceived as a 'friend' to staff and 'supportive adult figure' to young people rather than being a researcher (Fine & Sandstorm, 1988). Therefore, over time rapport was built with my young participants who invested their trust in me and at times they wanted to share something personal and to be kept confidential. In those cases, they were telling me not to record, or write down anything and not to use it as part of the research. I respected their decision and kept their disclosures or conversations outside the purview of my research.

Confronting issues of sensitivity does not only involve practical tasks but it is a process of continual problematization and reflexivity (Tisdall *et al.* 2009). The researcher should be well- prepared and ready to respond to the on-going challenges. This process entails high levels of understanding, listening and empathizing with the participants. Given that my young respondents were a group of people who had experienced high levels of emotional distress due to their previous and/or present experiences, I was aware that some boys could become upset during the research process.

In this case, all possible steps were taken in advance to ensure that participants would not be put in discomfort or feel forced to recount difficult experiences and events (Mitchell, 2008). However, in practice this proved to be difficult. Some boys

experienced emotional distress; they cried and asked me to stop the interview. In such cases, I had to be alert to the signs of discomfort and to respond to the participant's wish to stop (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003: 69). As well, when young people encountered difficulties in talking and sharing their experiences, I deemed it essential not to probe for more information (Mitchell, 2008). Another sensitive area that a researcher should be keep in mind is when participants disclose sensitive information about their selves, other people or staff at risk of serious harm. In this case, breaching confidentiality is an ethical necessity for the protection of people and occurs with the participant's knowledge (Alderson, 1995).

Anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed and participants were given the choice to pick a pseudonym or to use their own names. Publicity may stigmatise young people living in a small community. To this end, I informed all my participants and gatekeepers in the beginning that the anonymity of reception centres and their precise geographical location would be preserved in all publications, including this thesis. Maintaining the anonymity of respondents and concealing the identity of the setting is important (Kayser-Jones & Koenig, 1994). However, the majority of young participants (19 out of 30) requested to be identified in the inquiry. Some of them claimed that it was of great importance to tell their stories with their own names:

*I can give you my photo if you want to put it in the book you will write...I don't want to change my name...no. (Shirzard).*

I respected their decisions and used their names only when they asked me to do so. Identification in such cases perhaps conveys the importance of one's own identity and the need to communicate that to the outside world. In all other cases the young people chose a pseudonym.

Finally, I consider the best way of maintaining trust between the researcher and the researched is to feed back the results of research (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). Even more when the research is about young people who have participated actively in any activity of the research project, they should be involved throughout the research process from the early stages until the dissemination of findings (Ward, 1997:9). However, an important factor that may inhibit participants' involvement in the

dissemination of the findings is that it may be hard to reach them at the final stage of the study, especially when the group of participants presents characteristics of a moving population. Taking into account the limitation of time and resources I will not be able to send a report with the findings to every participant. Instead, a short report will be sent to all reception centres. Upon completion of the study my young informants will be sent an e-mail (the ones who have provided one) with the main research findings.

### **3.10. Reflections on the Methodology**

My interpretations of the information produced during the research process are importantly influenced by my own identity and biography. It is likely that someone with even slightly different experiences from mine would produce different data and findings (Lemke, 1995). The phenomena I explore, describe and interpret here, are all shaped by my life experiences as a middle-class, Greek woman in my early 30s. Also my social work background, along with my limited experience of doing research with young people, played a role especially during the early stages of the interviews. In this respect, I think that I shared more characteristics with some of the professionals I interviewed (e.g. social workers) rather than with the young people. This is something I received quite frequently in my contacts with the professionals. Some professionals showed sympathy to me, right from the beginning, I think because of our common professional background. However, my native identity and people's perception of me as an educated woman created some complications in my contact with the young people. It placed me in a vulnerable situation but also made me look powerful who saw me as coming from a privileged background.

Reflecting further on some methodological and ethical issues that came into play during my fieldwork experiences, particularly the ones to do with the research boundaries and the emerging tensions, I often felt that my sympathy for the young people produced further complications. As mentioned earlier, despite being aware of my role as a researcher, many times I found myself emotionally involved and willing to intervene on a number of occasions, because I felt that I should discontinue the unfairness. The fact that I was pregnant during fieldwork perhaps increased my

sensitivity over displaced children and young people.

From the start, there was a tension in my research between the research questions focusing on lived experiences and sensitive issues such as loss, trauma and abuse and the case study methodology. To some degree, the difficulty of sharing such sensitive information was anticipated, and therefore semi-structured questions were involved in the interview schedule. Despite the participatory approach in the methodology and the involvement of the young people in the design of the interview schedule, it appeared hard for the boys to give an explicit account in an interview setting. Talking personally to me proved to be a tricky task for some boys who tried to address my questions with short answers or they gave descriptive accounts. Perhaps, an extended life story was too much to expect from these boys. In my research notes, I often expressed my anxiety and frustration for not getting enough emotions but events and generic descriptions. Often young people would take a long speech linked to one aspect of their experience, for example about their 'here and now' concerns or complaints, and then wait for the next question to be asked. Young people's reluctance to share experiences in depth may have been a result of the personal and sensitive question being asked towards the beginning of a meeting with a stranger. Other factors that may have contributed to this are possibly related to gender, culture, language and literacy factors to be found between the researcher and the interviewees. Although attempts were made to address such imbalances, it must be acknowledged that they may have been a potential source of bias.

In my findings, I often express doubt about the authenticity of my young people's stories or is it my anxiety to distil 'true' stories? Yet many times it is implied that the young people are responsible for not being honest storytellers. This is because there were a few occasions when I assumed that some boys were not telling the truth, or that they modified their story and told me what they felt I wanted to hear in order to impress me and fulfil my eager to learn about their exciting stories. But I suggest that this is part of the process of doing research with children and young people. Despite the methodological and ethical limitations, the research experience was rich, exciting and worthwhile as it gave me a first-hand experience of doing research with a group of young people who are frequently unable to make their voices heard.

### **3.11. Conclusion**

This chapter has aimed to provide a transparent and reflexive account of the decisions taken with regard to the design of my study and the conduct of the research. I have demonstrated the conditioning process and handling of the data as they were collected and analysed, which further contributed to newer insights. Ethical concerns have been paramount and have been raised in this chapter. I have as well discussed about how I involved these young boys in the research, sought their consent, gave them the choice to influence the studied themes, encouraged them to express their opinions and experiences and gave them the chance to be heard rather than being spoken for. Their voices now follow.

## **SECTION III: EXPERIENCES OF BEING AN AFGHAN UNACCOMPANIED MINOR**

### **Chapter 4: Being an Afghan Boy: “It’s funny that my mother was the best at shooting...she killed many of them.”**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter aims to shed light on the pre-departure experiences of Afghan unaccompanied minors. The background stories are presented, while excerpts of their living conditions in Afghanistan aim to enable the reader to get into the shoes of these young people. Their descriptions provide a picture filled with emotions, events and experiences that have been marked by the consequences of war. A broad nexus of such shared experiences and feelings about pre-departure lives suggest that the respondents had been through similar situations, given the fact that these had been constructed in a war-affected context, notwithstanding this, each personal account is exceptional and often shaped by multiple factors and incidents.

The pre-departure phase merits special attention because during this time several transitions and changes occurred which transformed the life path of these young people. At that time, the respondents were still children who were being looked after by their parents or other adults in a context of conflict and violence that constituted a particular impact on the course of their lives. Then, incidents that precipitated the child’s departure caused rapid changes in their lives and new constructed realities were formed away from family and home. Decisions that had to be made by the children accelerated transition from childhood to adulthood. Other changes involved several disruptions, some subtle and others more devastating such as disruption of culture, of family ties, of relations with relatives and friends, all these occurred in childhood – a highly sensitive stage of life.

There is an ancient proverb of a tribal group in Kenya, - which says: ‘when elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers’, that means when the strong fight, it is the small, the least powerful that suffer most (Bradbury & Walters, 2008). This quote is particularly relevant for children who bear the consequences of war. War-affected children are often viewed as victims, the most vulnerable ones since they are too

young to resist, they are unable to defend themselves and it is difficult for them to make sense of what is going on. But they may also be viewed as agents since they manage to survive, make difficult decisions about themselves and other people, take risks and in the end manage to get through adversity.

To avoid any misconceptions, it is worth clarifying that all of the shared stories in this chapter mirror a stage of young people's childhood. For this reason, the term children and young people is being interchangeably used here. Particularly, the present analysis will focus on the pre-departure experiences of Afghan young boys – before their first move – or before their first transition and as I shall explain later, their journey to Europe is not the first move for these boys. The personal memoirs of these young people cover parts about their foremost struggles of living in a country of conflict, sensitive information about their families and the reasons and circumstances of moving away on an irregular transnational journey. Hence it has been helpful for analytical purposes to distribute the information of the background experiences into two main parts – Life in Afghanistan and Stories of leaving home. The first part provides a generic picture to the background stories which introduces us to the context of living as an Afghan boy. The part of stories to do with leaving home discusses the conditions and motives involved in the move away from home.

Some of the section headings in this chapter are largely based on concepts that are linked to external sources of my research and emerged at the final stage of the analysis. My interviewees did not use these terms in their accounts; however, they shared much in relation to these concepts especially regarding dehumanization and commodification. Finally, I believe that the testimonies of the respondents need to bear witness by linking the 'what was shared' with 'how it was shared'. I felt that young people's stories were so powerful in terms of their meaning that it would be valuable for the reader to know how these stories were shared, thus there are some insights from my field notes.

These field notes, as described earlier in the methodology part, were translated into annotations and memos during the analysis, with the aim to imprint observations about the accounts. Thus, I believe that my reflections on the research process offer additional input to the accounts by suggesting that the encounter between the narrator

and researcher is a dynamic process that gives form to the final story. As Butler contends, when the ‘self’ is giving an account, it is always interrupted and affected by the other and is always driven by social structures, “*the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to the others, are not of our making*” (2005:21).

## **4.2. Sharing a (sensitive) story**

*The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. (Chimamanda Adichie, 2009)*

In the beginning I caught myself being extremely enthusiastic about the idea of interviewing young boys with different cultural background and habits and who had experienced war in Afghanistan (an incomprehensible condition for someone who has grown up and lived in a safe environment). This very idea of talking to young people who had completely different experiences from me, made me feel overwhelmed.

At the end of my second interview and while charting my thoughts into paper, I realised that my position towards these boys, as Afghans was one of being compassionate, kind-hearted and pity. At that time my perception was associated very much with the idea of them coming from a place full of devastation and misery. I thought that what these boys had lived was a tragedy and this made me feel compassionate for their experiences. I thought of Afghanistan as a dangerous place that should be avoided and of children who grew up in this place being deprived of happy childhoods.

In the course of my fieldwork I realised that I had a single story for Afghanistan. I had the story of the disaster and nothing more. However, when the young people’s stories began to develop, a different picture of their lives and experiences took shape; besides disaster they had nice memories too, nostalgic moments for their home country and its people. They had also been surrounded by loving and caring people, they had friends too, and contacts around the world. It took me some time to realise

that my over-simplistic and one-sided perception of young people's realities was too narrow to fit in the diverse and complex set of their stories.

I come to realise that the Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie's ascertainment obtains value here; she believes in the power of stories, and suggests that hearing only one story about a person or nation leads to ignorance and misunderstanding. She says that the truth is revealed by many tales as long as we allow ourselves to hear them. The single stories broaden the gap between people and make power imbalances much more intensified. As a researcher I felt strongly the power imbalance between my position and my respondents' position as war-affected children. These young boys are a lot more than merely children who have lived in a disastrous and violent place.

### **4.3. Young people's profiles**

This section maps out the profiles of the young people and introduces us to their general characteristics. Even though they are viewed as a homogenous group of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors, they all have their distinctive characteristics in terms of; age, ethnic origin, educational level, history of mobility, length of stay in Greece, period spent in the reception centres, and asylum status. Given the extent of young people's views in relation to their family backgrounds along with the need to incorporate their voices, I thought that it would be much more constructive to elaborate and reflect on the accounts of young people's family background in the next part of Life in Afghanistan.

As already mentioned in the previous chapter of Methodology all of my young informants are male. As evident from Table 4.1, the boys reported being at the age of 11 to 18 when they arrived in Greece. At the time of the interview the ages of the boys ranged from 15 to 18. The bulk of the boys, 16 out of 30 were in the 16-year-old group. The majority, 17 out of 30 boys reported to be Hazara in their ethnic origin, then 6 boys identified themselves as Tajik, 4 boys as Pashtun, 1 boy as Uzbek and finally 2 boys did not want to share such information. Perhaps, they may have experienced persecution due to their ethnic origin and they could be worried that they or their families would be traced and be put at risk, if such information was revealed.

**Table 4.1: Age and ethnicity of the young respondents**

Age	On arrival			At the interview		
	Range: 11-18 Mean: 16			Range: 15-18 Mean: 16,5		
Ethnicity	Hazara	Tajik	Pashtun	Uzbek	Unknown	
	17	6	4	1	2	

Regarding education, (as illustrated in Table 4.2), 24 out of the 30 informants had been to public school, extending from four up to ten years. This means that the majority of the boys have had some basic classroom education mostly up to Basic level one, and 9 out of the 24 boys reported that they have attended secondary school. These boys reported that they received private home schooling from 2 up to 4 years and finally 3 boys stated that they had never received any form of education. Not surprisingly, almost one third of the total number of young informants who attended school more than 7 years, reported that they could speak up to three languages, for example, Dari, Urdu and English or Dari, Farsi and English. Linguistic achievements are also associated with the history of mobility of each person indicating that those ones who had lived for a while abroad or who had grown up in neighbouring countries, they had learnt to speak the local language.

**Table 4.2: Education of the young respondents**

Education	Number of respondents
Never attended any form of education	3
Home-schooling (2 up to 4 years)	3
4 years of formal education (primary school)	8
6 years of formal education (primary school)	16
Up to 10 years (secondary school)	9

As it will be discussed in the following chapter, the majority of my informants after fleeing Afghanistan settled in neighbouring countries where they lived for a while before making their next move to the west. Their history of mobility exemplifies experiences in relation to their living conditions and of their migration trajectories.

Specifically, as demonstrated below in Table 4.3, 16 respondents reported that they lived in Iran at least for one years, 4 lived in Pakistan and one had spent some time in Syria. The majority of the respondents, 10 out of the 16, had lived and worked in these places for up to 3 years prior to their journeys to Greece. The rest of the informants shared that immediately after fleeing Afghanistan they embarked on their journeys to the west.

**Table 4.3: History of mobility of the young respondents**

History of Mobility	Number of respondents
Iran	16 *3 of them were born in Iran
Pakistan	4
Syria	1

The majority of the informants had spent time in Greece ranging from a few months up to 3 years trying to find resources and ways to move to Northern European countries some of them via Italy and through Skopje and Serbia. They were moving to key points for continuing their journeys irregularly, such as ports and places near borders where they would settle temporarily, deploy strategies and wait for ‘the right moment’. This is also evident in the reports of a few cases that had been moving back and forth between reception centres, detention facilities and transit hot-spots on their way to their destination.

As for young people's status (illustrated in Table 4.4), 11 cases out of 30 reported that they hadn't applied for asylum in Greece at the time of the interviews, most of them because they would prefer to lodge their asylum applications elsewhere, and a minority because they were disappointed by the slow and complex process of the asylum assessment. A few of them (6 cases), reported that they had applied for asylum and they were waiting for the Pink Card to be issued (a document proving that someone has applied for asylum). Almost one third of my informants (11 cases) stated that they were Pink Card holders waiting for their asylum claim to be decided and finally two respondents had a status under humanitarian grounds. Regarding the boys who applied for asylum, none of them were recognised as refugees at the time of the interviews.

**Table 4.4: The status of the young respondents**

Number of respondents (N=30)	Status
11	Non-applicants
6	Applicants of being recognised as asylum seekers
11	Asylum seekers (Pink Card holders)
2	Status under humanitarian grounds

#### 4.4. Being a child?

While notions of being a child differ across time and place, the most dominant perception in the 'minority world' (Punch, 2007) is that childhood develops in line with chronological age (Aitken, 2001a) and the transition from childhood to adulthood often occurs later in the minority world, when every individual is considered to be ready, developmentally speaking, to take up adult responsibilities. This particular construction of childhood ignores other cultural understandings of the transition to adulthood that most often take place in the 'majority world' (Jeffrey & McDowell, 2004; Robson, 2004).

By drawing on the work of Holloway and Valentine (2005) my intention was to raise questions over where the boundaries can be drawn when we conceptualise childhood, youth and adulthood and to critically acknowledge the fluid character of the categorisation of an individual as a child or as an adult. Holloway and Valentine (2005) argues that we should be cautious with these notions in the sense that their meanings are fragile and open up to transformation thus, we should critically reflect on the categorisation of an individual and how childhood is conceived and experienced differentially in different parts of the world.

The work of Sporton *et al.* (2006) discusses that childhood and adulthood cannot be given at least chronologically, but these stages present differences in various social and cultural contexts. For example, in Somalia girls at nine are considered to be ready to take up responsibility of the household (IRIN, 2003). Likewise, some of the Afghan boys in this study shared that they had taken up responsibilities in the form of working and supporting financially their families or they had to look after their siblings, at the ages of nine and ten. By accomplishing responsibilities and tasks which are usually carried out by adults and most often in the western world, the experiences of Afghan boys challenge for a heterogeneous interpretation of childhood. This is located in particular social, cultural and economic contexts reproduced by diverse axes of identity such as gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality and social class.

One example which exemplifies such differentiation in experiencing childhood might be that in Afghanistan girls are not allowed to travel alone even if their lives are in immediate danger, a perception which is in contrast with the one that considers men as capable to make irregularly transnational journeys in their early years of childhood. For an Afghan boy it is not an odd experience to travel alone and work in harsh circumstances in his childhood but it may be for a boy in another country where childhood is mostly associated with playing and enjoying carefree moments.

Such notions which are culturally and socially shaped should be taken into consideration before making quick assumptions about who is a child and who is an adult. As we shall see in this chapter, the experiences of young people in relation to their childhoods in Afghanistan and their transition experiences in places after

fleeing home reveal a range of struggles and adverse living conditions that do not coincide with what we would expect a child to experience, for example, in Europe.

#### **4.5. Life in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan has been a war-torn country for decades and it has undergone severe political and social transitions. Displacement and mobility for a long time have been a part of the Afghani way of living, practised in various forms; as nomads, as mountain people who move to urban places to find a job, as soldiers and refugees (Monsutti, 2007). Afghan people have had to survive and live in turbulence, oppressive regimes, armed conflict and violence. Coping with ongoing instability and internal warfare is definitely not a new situation for them. Therefore, the Afghan UM who grew up in Afghanistan had not just witnessed the dramatic effects of the war but they had been constructing their experiences in a permanently war-torn context given the fact that their country had been in war much longer than these young people had even been alive.

These experiences in most cases are related to traumatic events that had prevailed in young people's memories. What emerged from the interview transcriptions is that conflict, oppression and violence had been part of young people's everyday lives during their time in Afghanistan. All of them revealed a strong need to have lived a sort of normality with their families, for example, playing with friends, spending time with their parents, going to school, etc. These children wanted and tried to live a 'normal life'. But they knew that all of these everyday activities could unexpectedly be disrupted or ended. This sense of fear of 'losing everything' had been existent in young people's lives as long as they had to live in an unstable context.

Therefore, as mentioned earlier, each of these boys carries a particular background encompassing diverse identities such as those of social class, race, ethnicity and religious affiliation. These interact on multiple levels and have a different impact not only on the construction of the pre-departure stories but also on a person's life experiences onwards. Comments made by the young people regarding their family's possessions, educational achievements and financial privilege in pre-departure life

were used as benchmarks in order to define status, position and power in the country of origin. A minority of young people mentioned that their family life consisted of private education, tutors, big houses, sports activities and parents in respectable professions, demonstrating advantages not usually assumed or associated with the life circumstances of asylum seeking children, or children who have entered into child care. For example, Noor Ali expressed his complaint about the Greek care system which tends to ignore his background whilst the workers behaved to him as if he was coming from the most disadvantaged group of people:

*My whole life changed when I lost my father...Until that day I used to have a good life, I had my classes with teachers at home, my sports, my computer, my big room with everything. My parents wanted us to have a good education and to become something important. That's why I learnt three languages. And I came here and the workers keep telling me that I should be satisfied because I have a bed to sleep and food to eat....*

My field notes provide an additional dimension: 'What impressed me is that although Noor Ali's reality of childhood was completely reversed by the time he lost his father, he seems to be an optimistic person. He expresses his disappointment with straightness and he believes that something positive will come out of his troubling experiences. In the beginning of the interview he stated with sparkling eyes that he has 'a very special story to tell.' Noor Ali's prosperous background had an impact on his expectations of his life in the host country and also led him to be more critical about the quality of the care system in the host country. His account represents a minority whose affluent background provides a glaring contrast between the past and the present.

Kohli's (2007) case study of 34 unaccompanied minors from Africa, Europe and Asia, who sought asylum in UK, revealed through their accounts given to social workers that the vast majority of the minors (22 cases) were coming from affluent family backgrounds with advantages that were not usually associated with children entering local authority care. Interestingly some of these minors used to have servants back home and they carried over their attitudes to their relationship with the public servants of the care centres, causing resentment.

In this study, the majority of young people shared that their parents used to be public servants and labourers; they used to run small businesses, be self-employed and offer services as gardeners and domestic workers. Others mentioned that their fathers used to work in the construction field in public works and others were working as coal miners and farmers. These children mentioned that they grew up with relatively good living standards, they had access to education, and their parents were keen to protect them and cover their needs. These children, who lived in rural and urban places, could even deploy financial resources that undoubtedly improved the conditions of their journeys west, as we shall see in a following chapter.

A minority of the respondents, consisting of three accounts, grew up in deprivation and poverty in Afghanistan; again this is based on fragments of information provided by the young people. These children were illiterate, they had never been to school and instead they had to work many hours in order to earn their food. Two of them were orphans who grew up with relatives until the point they left Afghanistan. It seemed to be difficult for them during the interviews to share sufficient information about their family backgrounds; instead they insisted on focusing on present time.

With regard to young people's views of their lives in Afghanistan, there follows a few extracts of general descriptions:

*Tzamil: I don't like war and the fact that I had to live in fear*

*Farid: We didn't have a good life back home*

*Bakir: Afghanistan is a violent place to live...I wouldn't like to be there*

Here negative memories emerged relating to their time in Afghanistan and in all cases these are related to the chaos and violence that is caused by war. The destructive implications of conflict were brought up by the respondents as the main reasons for unpleasant memories. War is life-threatening and causes negative feelings for the ones who experience it. Most young people mentioned that they had experienced feelings of fear, distress and insecurity. For example, Mohammad's account exposes the constant insecurity that war-affected children experience:

*....it was very hard.... when the summer was good, the Taliban were coming to our village and attacking us and they were getting*

*our properties, our cows, our sheep, our food and it was always like that...they burnt our houses.... we had always these problems, we were under stress all the time. That's why we decided to move away.*

Mohammad describes incidents of devastation of his home and village and how stressful it can be to experience such incidents. His life used to be filled with feelings of anxiety that unexpected incidents would change everything while the lack of an everyday predictability deprived him of the sense of living in a sort of 'normality'. Mohammad shared that he had to cope with feelings of fear and anxiety of what will happen in the near future. The following piece of field note provides some additional input about the testimony of this boy: 'He has been through a lot and he appears to be sad and disappointed about what has happened to him and his family, however he looks ahead and he is persistent to learn new things.'

Because Mohammad chose to open up with adverse experiences, I opted to ask if he had ever experienced any calm period of time in Afghanistan so as to possibly provide a more positive glimpse of his pre-departure experiences:

*V.: Have you experienced any calm period of time in Afghanistan?*

*M.: No.... all the time I was in Afghanistan there was war.... this situation has been like that. I don't remember any calm period of time ...*

The above extract explains why in the forefront of Mohammad's' mind he retained negative thoughts of his life in Afghanistan. Similar, negative thoughts were shared by most of the respondents who demonstrated a range of traumatic situations that are related to war, conflict and their experiences of devastation of their villages and communities. For these boys their forced history of displacement has caused a strong 'rootless' identity which left them with a sense of a weak or even 'injured' connection to their homeland (Sporton *et al.* 2006).

Al-Ali (2001) suggests that this sense of disempowerment and ambiguity that often accompanies asylum seekers may lead them to construct different narratives about dislocation or attachments to a place. Some young Afghans presented a sort of attachment to their country and nostalgia about particular things they had missed.

These extracts were developed from the group work activity and reveal these boys' nostalgia for their country:

*Ali: I miss the weather of Afghanistan, mountains and the views, the food...the streets we played in childhood... the fruits.*

*Ramzan: I miss the country, friends, fruits....people, rasmo rewaj (culture)...I miss all thing.*

*Rahman: The water I used to drink...*

*Moustafa: I would like to be in Afghanistan right now, to go to school there and to live there, there is no place better than homeland...*

Likewise, the mixed-method research conducted by Sporton *et al.* (2006) with Somali children, aged 11-18, aiming to explore young refugees' and asylum seekers' senses of identity and belonging, indicated that for some young people who were born and raised in their homeland, their attachment to their country was evident and it was expressed with expressions of nostalgia for their time in Somalia. Such accounts reflect the powerful role the attachment of a place can play in the formation of young people's identities. Some other boys chose to share joyful memories from their childhood and these were linked mostly with their contact with family and friends while demonstrating a sense of attachment to these people:

*I have nice memories from my time with my family and from my time at school with my friends, apart from that.... I don't have anything good to remember from my country. (Hassan)*

This excerpt illustrates the significant role that contact with family plays in the lives of young people. In most situations, the boys seemed to be especially attached to their mothers and also mothers appeared to be the first and most reliable source of support, care and help. For example, during focus groups when the young people were asked to think of what they miss most from their time in Afghanistan, some of them replied that the voice of their mother is what they miss most. This was somewhat expected to emerge from the findings in the sense that parents are the main attachment figures who provide a 'secure and safe nest' for their children during their first years and they represent the main source of emotional support and protection as children grow up (Bowlby, 1988). Parents, among others, appeared to be the link between the past and the present as they are still the most influential

contacts even if they are far away and also they represent the most significant benchmark of their past lives.

#### **4.6. Experiences of loss**

The majority of the boys provided just a few fragments of their shared lives with their families choosing not to unfold sensitive information of their past. Forced movement had compelled all of them to sever physical ties with the most important people in their lives and separation was a sensitive issue to discuss. Some young people were concerned about the impact that such disclosure would have on the lives of those left behind and in any case they wouldn't risk putting their lives in danger by making it easier for their families to be traced, in case their whereabouts were known. Almost one third of the total number had experienced loss of one or both parents and only a few of them shared their grief about that. In some cases, children had suffered as a result of other family members being killed. Some others shared how they lost contact with their parents during their journeys, others that their parents had disappeared and they didn't know whether they were alive or anything regarding their whereabouts:

*First, my mother died...in Afghanistan, and after a few years my dad died....and then I was left completely alone... and then...I decided to leave because I didn't feel comfortable living with my older sister and her new family. (Amid)*

My field notes: 'Amid is quite reticent with his words. He laconically referred to his loss of both parents with his eyes looking down and didn't give any further details about what happened to them. Obviously, he didn't feel comfortable to express more about his loss with someone that he barely knows. He gives short answers especially in relation to his background life.'

The reasons why family members had been killed were complex and most of the boys didn't want to go deeper into that matter. Therefore, the most frequently mentioned causes are associated with war, persecution due to ethnicity or religion and generally tense political conditions. A few boys found it extremely hard to talk about it. Some of them got upset when they heard the word 'family' and burst into tears. In those cases, I decided to stop the discussion for a while, so that they would

feel comfortable to continue. I also felt uneasy for causing emotional distress and even though particular steps were taken in order to avoid any sort of emotional harm, this proved hard.

There were a few cases of young people who had traumatic memories because of losing their family members but were willing to open up with details and later on they shared that they felt better talking about such a personal issue. For example, Roshnan, right after the end of his disclosure, shared that he felt liberated. Roshnan used to have twelve siblings and only five of them are alive. The rest of his siblings had been killed. Roshnan disclosed an incident that happened to three of his siblings who went for shopping into a shopping centre and the place was bombed by a group of people. The result was that fifty people lost their lives among them his brothers, and his sister was seriously injured. Roshnan's parents together with his other siblings were killed by the Taliban while they were having dinner in a restaurant in Afghanistan. Roshnan shared how much he had suffered the loss of his parents and siblings and the countless effect all of these traumatic experiences had on his life.

My field notes comment: 'Very long and sensitive interview. From the beginning of the interview Roshnan was keen to share his story, it is striking that he led the discussion to his past first...he wanted so much to tell me what had happened to him and he was happy that we could talk in English, without an interpreter. In some points I felt that he sought my guidance and my opinion about his concerns especially when he disclosed that he feels responsible for the death of his siblings.'

He expressed a lack of meaning in his life:

*Sometimes I am sitting alone and I am thinking that I don't have anything anymore...I have no parents, no siblings.... most of them are dead....and I am alone here.... why should I live like that?*

Roshnan had an extreme emotional and physical response to the experiences of loss of his family members. He stopped eating for days, he was unable to sleep during the night and he also experienced nightmares. He shared his feelings of guilt for what happened to his siblings in the shopping centre as he had convinced them to return back to Afghanistan from Iran, and a few days after their homecoming, they were killed. He expressed his despair followed by the thought that life was not worth

living without a family. He revealed an empty sense of self as his connection with his family had been a significant part of his life. In Roshnan's case the early experiences of loss while in childhood caused psycho-emotional damage. He may have had a different response to trauma if he had the same experiences as an older man. Such traumatic experiences strike differently to each person because they occur at different times and affect different psychic constructs (Cyrulnik, 2009). When experiences of loss occur during childhood it is quite possible that the identity of a child is permanently distorted (ibid).

Unlike Roshnan, other boys shared the loss of their parents but without expressing any particular emotion or perhaps they avoided getting involved in any emotion-tinged situation that would trigger distress. These boys were quite descriptive and they chose to focus on events, but not on their feelings about what had happened. Other boys mentioned that they were missing one of their parents who disappeared during the journey and they hadn't seen them since that time.

While forced movement entails experiences of loss for those displaced, we cannot *a priori* assume what these mean and how they can best be managed, nor can we assume that family in a war-affected homeland is always the most ideal place to return to. Loss may mean different things to individuals from the same community or ethnic origin and it may be experienced in various ways. Loss brings about change and change may be unwelcomed by those involved, or instead sometimes they may wish to be engaged into a new condition where they can re-negotiate their selves into new contexts (Cyrulnik, 2009).

#### **4.7. Experiences of persecution – Experiences of survival**

Experiences of persecution due to ethnic or religious beliefs were shared during the interviews, focus groups and participatory activities. Such experiences had been life threatening for many of these children or for their family members. A few boys described how they confronted incidents of persecution and how they managed to survive. Some others shared that their parents had to forcefully migrate, for example, Alisher disclosed that his father had to migrate to Australia because he encountered threatening persecution due to his Hazara ethnicity:

*My father used to be a coal miner and every day he had to drive a few kilometres...this was dangerous because other people were following him.... they wanted to kill him....and he had to go away, because he is Hazara... and ... he moved to Australia.*

Other young people shared that they moved away from their homes with their families in order to be protected from persecution:

*The reason we moved from my village to Kabul...was that every day one of us (Hazara) was getting killed. In Afghanistan, the war is political.... everybody knows who are the other people and what ethnicity they are and this creates problems all the time. (Habib)*

Generally, almost one third of the participants referred to their ethnicity or religion as one of the main causes that forced them to leave Afghanistan, because their lives were under threat or their family's lives. The majority of young people who were persecuted due to their ethnic origin were Hazara, the rest were Tajik and one was Pashtun. These boys faced serious threat of being killed because they or their family members belonged to a particular ethnic or religious group. Hakim's account is quite moving as he describes how his little brother's suffering of the vicious consequences of persecution was a warning threat to his own life:

*I have one little brother.... he lost his hand when he was seven years old.... they chopped his hand... they did it because they wanted to threaten us and find me. They forced my father to tell them where I am... they wanted to kill me. And my father told me to run away immediately, otherwise I would be dead. Only my parents know I am alive...for the rest of the people I am dead.*

Hakim shared how ethnic divisions may lead to unprecedented brutalities towards innocent people, in his case his little brother had to suffer a traumatic incident that marked his life emotionally and physically. Hakim's anger towards his persecutors was evident throughout his account especially when he was thinking about his little brother. He also disclosed that his life has been completely overturned by being subjected to ethnic persecution. He was obliged to experience immediate disruption of his family ties in order to save his life and he hasn't communicated with his family since the day he left home, because if he calls them, they will be in danger. It is striking that he is perceived to be dead by everyone except his parents. Such an act of

disguising someone's identity offers clear patterns of survival strategies of children and young people whose lives are at risk.

My field notes from Hakim's account reveal: 'In the beginning Hakim was quite timid to share his persecution experiences and why he was under threat, but in the middle of the interview he felt ready to share it without my prompting. From the one hand he seems to bear with the idea that his displacement saved his family's lives and from the other hand he struggles to cope with the idea that he may never meet his family again, otherwise they will be in a serious threat. He looks very sad and his eyes reflect disappointment and anger about what had happened to him and his family. At the end of the interview he disclosed that this was the first time he shared his story with someone.'

Stories of suffering and survival like Hakim's reflect a male conception of sacrifice which is morally refined and adds meaning to someone's life as he re-negotiates his identity in diverse contexts. A young boy, who runs away from home and succeeds to embark safely to Europe, may be viewed as a hero by his family. However, as an asylum seeker in Greece the story of Hakim risks losing its value since his story is unknown to the others. In this sense, his sacrifice of forcefully disrupting his ties with people he loves, as well as being deprived of his identity in exchange for his family's safety along with other experiences of his past may remain unknown. Hakim stated that no one can understand his situation since nobody really cares about what he has been through.

This view about suffering and its meaning closely echoes the findings of Eastmond's (1996) ethnographic work on the life experiences of refugees who moved from Latin America to Sweden and underlines how their past experiences had different meanings in different contexts. Suffering may add meaning to the life of a woman who lives in El Salvador since her ongoing struggles have resonance, cultural value and also are visible by the local community in her home country. In Sweden, the country of exile, her background story is unknown and her struggles are invisible and the sacrifice that had been experienced through suffering may lose its meaning in her life, and eventually she becomes socially marginalised.

In philosophy, suffering relates to one of the key questions Nietzsche posed: '*Why do I suffer?*' stating that man's problem was not suffering itself but that there was no answer to this question. In other words, when we suffer, our suffering grows even more when we feel that we cannot find a purpose or a meaning for our suffering. So what should our attitude towards suffering be? When conceptualising suffering one might think of something negative, involving pain and eventually of an undesirable human condition. The rational reaction towards suffering would be then trying to avoid anything that cause suffering. This contrasts with Frankl's (1959) view that man has the ability to be ready to suffer even more when he knows that this action will have a meaning.

Reflecting on my informants' accounts, I would agree then with Frankl's view that suffering as an undesirable condition may involve the notion of sacrifice that could add an ethical dimension to someone's existence by attaching meaning to it. Therefore, the analysis of young people's accounts demonstrated variety in their responses towards loss and suffering; some of them ascribed a higher meaning to their struggles and pain and others did not see any value in their suffering.

Another important insight relates to young people's political consciousness of the factors instigating persecution. The majority openly shared their view about the political situation in Afghanistan. As most of the Afghan respondents were born in the late 90s, they grew up firstly with the rule of Taliban, followed by the intervention of the US forces in Afghanistan. A great part of young people's accounts is about their experiences regarding the period of the Taliban being in power.

Specifically, many young people referred to their experiences of oppression and violence enforced by the Taliban because of their or their families' political opinion, ethnic origin and religious affiliation. It has been suggested that prolonged experiences of persecution and violence may cause identity and integration issues for the young people (Closs *et al.* 2001; Fantino & Colak, 2001).

The extremist views and practices of Taliban had imposed harsh fundamentalist laws causing prolonged oppression and violence among Afghan people (Bradbury &

Walters, 2008). Furthermore, they had been condemned by the International community for their inhuman treatment to women, but also for committing massacres against Afghan civilians, burning vast areas of fertile land and destroying thousands of homes during their rule from 1996 to 2001 (Goodson, 2002).

While discussing their experiences regarding the rule of Taliban some young people defined this particular group of people as ‘the thieves’. The main explanation for this is that the Taliban were not only known for their persistence of gaining control over the country but also for their persistence to impose their power by any means. Their practices also involved extensively stealing the assets and belongings of people, destroying properties, abducting girls for brides, raping and murdering people. The quotation below is from an interview with one of the boys who at the time was 13 years old:

*My father was a successful trader and he had a store in Kabul... one day he found his store broken, stones around the area and many things to be missing from the store. After that incident we moved to the village... then one day ‘the thieves’ came and told to my father that they wanted my little sister for a bride... my father refused and then the war started.... every following night ‘the thieves’ were coming outside of our house and they were trying to kill us all and.... we were hiding behind doors and windows shooting them with Kalashnikov...my father had kept these guns from the time of Russians. It’s funny that my mother was the best at shooting...she killed many of them. (Ali)*

In the end, the family was forced to relocate in order to protect themselves from the constant attacks. This describes how his life had been changed by the Taliban’s attacks and their persistence in exerting their power. The above quotation defines the Taliban as a group of people, who are ‘thieves’, dangerous and capable of destroying the lives of people including women and children. It also illustrates the effects of the brutalities caused by the Taliban on the lives of these children. Drawing on my field notes: ‘His keen sense of humour is evident even when he describes the most traumatic and dramatic incidents. The tone of his voice is calm and when he refers to his mother he has a smile on his face.’ Ali explained that the incidents of the attacks and shootings and the efforts of the family to defend themselves lasted for many days and that it had been very frightening for the children of the family to experience this.

Other boys referred to their father's status and political position which often fuelled threats and intrusive attitudes. For example, a Pashtun boy disclosed that his father used to work for the government and he started receiving threatening notes that he and his family would get killed if he didn't quit his job. But he ignored such intimidations and one day while he was driving at his work with his son and his brother, they were all shot to death.

Another boy, Ramzan, talked about the Taliban and the atrocities they are able to exert over the people by referring to the Shia and Sunni relations, the two major denominations of Islam, as being the source of violent attitudes and conflict among different religious groups:

*Sunnis want to kill us. The same problem also exists in Afghanistan.... when the Taliban find out that someone is Hazara or Shia they cut him into pieces.... they also dig the soil and put inside people and they bury them alive.*

My notes during the interview with Ramzan portray my own reflection of how I experienced his personal story: 'Quite rough description of his experiences. However, Ramzan describes these practices without any dramatic or upsetting tone in his voice, as if these were ordinary events.'

Ramzan explained that previously people of various ethnicities and religious beliefs used to live in harmony and then tensions between communities started intensifying due to power struggles initiated by warlords. Since then Sunni-Shia relations have been marked both by collaboration and conflict:

*Pashtun and Tajik are most often safe, but Hazara are never calm.... that's why they move to other places.... we have a ceremony for Hussein every year...he is like Jesus to us....and on 2004 during that ceremony Taliban bombed people and 400 Hazara people were killed. (Ramzan)*

The above reflects the process of 'dehumanization' by which ethnic, religious or other forms of divisions may result in unprecedented brutalities followed by the rejection of the human-ness of others. Particular groups of people are viewed as threats to the interests of the political group in power, they are depicted as less than human and as a result they suffer violence. The process of dehumanization often

occurs when conflict takes place within an intergroup context and is facilitated by status and power (Moller & Deci, 2010). Groups of people and individuals may become susceptible to dehumanization due to an organised principle, e.g. class, ethnicity, religion, gender or some other, and ultimately they become targets of violence and exclusion.

For example, in Hosseini's (2003) fictional novel of the time of Taliban, serious human rights violations take place towards Hazara people. Consequently, those who are or look as if they are Hazara often live at the margins while they suffer harassment, threats and coercion. Incidents of humiliation, rape and violence towards Hazara people are presented throughout the novel whilst demonstrating the existing inequalities of the Afghan society that give rise to repression, oppression, lack of freedom, and fear. In this study, the majority of young people who brought to light incidents of violence related to the Taliban ruling, were Hazara and Tajik. Interestingly, a small minority of Pashtun boys disclosed that they had also being subjected to persecution by the Taliban.

Although a great deal of the young people's responses regarding their experiences in Afghanistan mostly delineates the period of Taliban's ruling, there are also a few references that indicate the post-Taliban period marked by the invasion of the American-led forces. Some respondents shared that when the Taliban were overthrown their displaced families hoped that the situation would be better in Afghanistan. They expected to find stability, safety, justice and get their belongings back. Therefore, when they returned home their perception to find a better situation proved to be unrealistic with often dramatic outcomes:

*...but my father wanted us to go back in Afghanistan, after five years and after the Americans came, we could go back, because we had many things back in Afghanistan.... house, land. And the people were saying that things were better. My father indeed went back to Afghanistan and told us that a few places were safe now, but in reality they were not safe...he went back to Urazgan and one day he was driving the car with my uncle and.... their car was bombed. (Roshnan)*

In the aftermath of the Taliban period around 3.5 million displaced people are estimated to have gone back to Afghanistan, while several hundreds of thousands of

internally displaced people had attempted to go back to their villages (UNHCR, 2006). The above quote reflects the strong need of people to believe that at last they could live as normal people in safety and peace. However, this perception proved to be misplaced, according to the personal stories of a few respondents.

So far the analysis has delineated the life-stories of young people who had experienced upsetting, turbulent and threatening incidents as children in Afghanistan. Every piece of pleasant memory of their childhoods and family life seems to be overshadowed by the ferocious and impetuous forces of war. Now I will shift the attention to those boys who had lived Afghan lives elsewhere.

#### **4.8. Living an Afghan life elsewhere**

It would be misleading to avoid mentioning that there were cases of young people who have never been to Afghanistan in their lives or who moved at a very young age with their families to neighbouring countries and so they didn't have any memory or image of life in Afghanistan. Some of these children were born and grew up in neighbouring countries or they left Afghanistan with their families and were too young to remember anything. The majority of these children (as demonstrated in Table 4.3) grew up in Iran, one boy had lived in Pakistan and another one in Syria. Their stories illustrate their asylum experiences in other places.

According to their accounts their lives had not been untroublesome nevertheless they hadn't directly experienced the consequences of war.

*I don't remember anything good from my life in Iran, there was no war but people were racists with us and this created problem to us. Life in Iran used to be tough. (Amir)*

Likewise, the accounts of the other boys reflect similar views. Most of them disclosed that they had difficulties in their everyday lives stemming from the fact that they were not considered authorised citizens. Lack of legitimacy was mentioned as the main reason of feelings of hostility in these places. These children shared that they didn't have the same opportunities as the indigenous children, a factor that made them feel excluded from the public life. Some of them shared that they were not allowed to go to school and so they had to pay for home schooling. Others mentioned

that although they attended school, they were not provided with any certificate to prove their attendance.

Another boy shared that sometimes he had to hide himself from the policemen in public places so that he wouldn't be noticed and arrested. A minority of these boys who had lived in Iran mentioned that they encountered difficult economic conditions and they were engaged in tailoring in order to support themselves or their families. One boy shared that even though there were many job offers, the fact that he was lacking a legal status prohibited him from working.

Finally, the account of the boy who had lived in Pakistan demonstrates a similar picture. He disclosed that he also felt unwelcomed by the indigenous people and that he didn't have the same opportunities as them. For example, his family had problems to find work, a factor that increased poverty and deprivation in the family.

Additional light will be shed on the accounts of young people regarding their resettlement in neighbouring countries in a following chapter. All the experiences of young people which have been analysed hitherto, feed into the causes of moving away from home and are embodied into these accounts of leaving home.

#### **4.9. Stories of leaving home**

This section identifies and discusses the conditions surrounding the decisions to move away from home. Conforming to the definition of a refugee stated by the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees<sup>10</sup>, the first impression of young people's reasoning of their movement would be anything associated with the political situation in their country that eventually generates forced movement of people outside of the country. The respondents discussed the effects of war on their everyday lives but also referred to other reasons of moving away which do not fit into the definition of the Geneva Convention - or perhaps what defines someone as a refugee is too narrow to fit the complex circumstances that force someone to run away from home (MPI, 2002).

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<sup>10</sup> According to the Geneva Convention, a refugee is someone who makes a successful asylum claim in a chosen country of asylum, who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of origin 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion...' (Article 1a (2)).

While there is a general context for all Afghan unaccompanied minors suggesting that war and internal conflict might be the main trigger of moving away, each boy has a particular background story to tell about the circumstances that forced him to move away. These circumstances are linked with numerous factors, proving that each boy's story is exceptional and is often resulting from multiple factors and incidents (Ayotte, 2000). In some cases, it is even difficult to articulate what exactly had happened before the next 'big move' as this condition is often complex and it may be linked to traumatic events and painful memories.

As described earlier the circumstances young people had experienced before migration were threatening and were related to conditions of insecurity, uncertainty about their lives and their family's lives, experiences of loss, separation, violent incidents and oppression. What unites young people and their motives to escape from home is a sense of running away from harm and finding a new safe home somewhere far away (Kohli & Mather, 2003). Regaining their right to a 'normal life' is one of the main anticipations for a new place.

The majority of Afghan young people referred to their circumstances by giving multiple reasons. The whole sample generated 91 'causes of movement' that elicited the decision to seek settlement in Europe. Only a small minority of 2 boys gave a single cause of movement. In the first case, the reason of moving away from home was to commence studies elsewhere, and in the second case the reason was a medical urgency. The majority of the boys who gave multiple factors had experienced a series of various circumstances that occurred in most cases during their early childhood. This complex mixture of factors was divided into 8 main categories according to the meaning yielded from the responses and is illustrated below.

<b>Table 4.5. Causes of displacement and migration</b>	<i>Number</i>
Multiple factors	28
Separation/Loss of family members (at least one)	28
War	21
Reasons related to living conditions of countries in transit i.e.: Iran, Pakistan, Syria	10
Deprivation at home/Supporting family financially	8
Education	7

Persecution of young person because of ethnicity or religion	7
Orphaned (both parents killed at war)	5
Death or persecution of family members	4
Medical condition that needed treatment	1

The core responses regarding 'the causes of movement' that emerged during the interviews, focus groups and group work exercise are linked mostly with war conditions and internal conflict that had forced young people to move away from their homelands. The most common factors as indicated in table 4.5 were related to war, persecution of young person because of ethnicity or religion, separation or loss of family members, reasons related to living conditions of countries in transit and deprivation at home. At the interviews, the majority of the boys cited the war and political turmoil as one of the main causes that had pushed them away from their home. Likewise, there was a lot of discussion about the war and its impact on the lives of young people at the focus groups and the related activities which took place:

*In Afghanistan there is fighting, war, bomb blast. There was no peace and security.... we had Taliban problems. Many times they attacked to our village. I was fed up with these things...really. (Ali)*

Some of the boys referred to regular attacks from Taliban on their communities and in a few cases the boys had to defend themselves with guns. Such violent incidents triggered their decision to move away:

*Taliban killed my father and then they wanted to kill us all.... all the boys from our family....and we were having war....in the house.... shootings in the night.... we had to wait behind the doors with guns during night. Why? And my mother told me 'You should leave, I will sell our land and possessions' and so I moved to Kabul.... then my father's friend told me I should leave the country because the Taliban could find me very easily. But we didn't have more money and then my brother promised to work in Iran and support me. (Mashal)*

Around the periphery of the circumstances that emerged from war conditions, other causes also emerged. These are associated with violent incidents and threats that are linked with conflicts within or outside the family. Almost one third of the boys referred to their ethnicity or religious affiliation as one of the main reasons that compelled them to leave Afghanistan because their lives were under threat or their family's lives, owing to persecution:

*When I was in Afghanistan my family got into serious trouble with another family of different clan and we were into trouble. The other family threatened my father that in case they meet me in the street, they would kidnap me and kill me....and I was a little boy. My family insisted that I should go away if I wanted to be safe. (Ali)*

Other circumstances that initiated migration were related to experiences of loss and separation from parents and siblings. The majority of the boys had experienced loss, as their family members are dead or they are missing. As discussed in the previous section, the connection with family appeared to be the most significant part of the lives these young boys had back home. For some, the fact of losing parents or siblings removed their meaning of life since family gave meaning to their existence. For others the experiences of loss accelerated their decision to move on with their lives, become responsible in a new context and manage with the new circumstances.

The majority of the boys, as it will be presented in the following chapter, had had migratory experiences already and they shared that they had been through difficult times in neighbouring countries. In a few cases, these experiences prompted their decision to move further after experiencing hard living conditions in transit<sup>11</sup> countries such as Iran, Pakistan and Syria. These living conditions are linked to statelessness, as well as discrimination and social alienation and limited educational and employment opportunities in neighbouring countries. Such experiences had driven them to seek better living conditions elsewhere and will be further analysed in the following chapter.

Another important factor that led young people to move away from home is their obligation as Afghan males to support their families in the form of financial remittances. At the interviews and focus groups, one third of the boys disclosed how important it was for them to help their families back home by supporting them in such a manner. In this case, labour migration turns out to be households' asylum migration, since the main drive of such decision is based broadly on the security of the whole household, rather than on the protection for the individual:

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<sup>11</sup>With the term 'transit countries' I am referring to the 'in between' places of departure and destination (i.e. Afghanistan and Greece) where the respondents settled for a period of time for living and working until being able to put through the next stage of their journey.

*I decided to leave because I had to support my family financially, I had to do something about it.... we have tough times back home....and now I am sending them some money, because they need support. (Alisher)*

A section of field note elucidates: ‘Alisher left his home when he was very young at the age of 12. He is the youngest among his siblings...he feels committed to his family and one of his first priorities is to support them financially. That’s one of the reasons that he found work when he arrived in this area.’

Supporting the family was of great importance for the young people as they shared that they would feel awkward and sad if for any reason they failed to help their families. These boys also disclosed how difficult it is for their families to survive with the present living conditions in Afghanistan or elsewhere which are associated with serious deprivation. A small minority of these young people were thinking to return back home after accomplishing their goal to save money. They considered their migration paths as vehicles which would bring better living conditions to themselves and their families.

Finally, a minority of young people claimed that, among other reasons, they travelled so far with the hope to study, develop themselves and eventually, have a future with more prospects in life. Another one shared that among other reasons he came to Europe with hope to cure his health problem which needed special treatment; otherwise he wouldn’t be able to overcome his health problem in Afghanistan.

The general picture of young people’s reasoning of their movement to the west reflects various causes which are intertwined and verify that war is not the main driver for young people to flee home nor is it individual enrichment, but various circumstances initiated transnational movements.

#### **4.10. Reflections**

Life threatening experiences that are continuously conveyed throughout this chapter are identified as being ‘beyond the normal’ range of human experience because they cause disturbance and upheaval, at an individual, familial and societal level (Ager, 1996; De Vries, 1996). Such experiences make life in a war-affected country like

Afghanistan hardly bearable, and construct young people as refugees who have profound reasons, according to the GCR<sup>12</sup> to flee their homes and seek asylum in a safer place.

Children's accounts portray them as young labourers, fighters, carers, helpers of their family, and politically conscious of the situation in their country. Some boys experienced extreme violent moments, held weapons and witnessed traumatic incidents, such as the loss of their parents. Many of them were also involved in their early childhood in the informal market as carpenters, tailors, and farmers and contributed financially to the maintenance of their households both in Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries (Boyden *et al.* 1998). The children's accounts suggest that children's lived experiences are diverse, hence challenge western discourses that perceive of childhood as being universal and 'normalised' or as a sequential and ubiquitous process of human beings' development (Aitken, 2001a).

Some children attributed positive meaning to their experiences of loss and separation and viewed themselves as being survivors, while others felt empty and that their identities were completely shattered after losing an indispensable link with their past; their families. Different interpretations and expressions of traumatic experiences may grow out of similar life stories affected by, among other things, individual and social characteristics.

For instance, loss and separation from the family and home may have a different meaning for individuals with similar experiences from the same country of origin. Therefore, we should acknowledge that the separation described in children's accounts is not the 'regular' type of separation that has occurred among the migrant families since labour migration has always existed (Menjivar & Chavez, 2010). Here we are talking about long-term separations where there is high probability of children and parents not seeing each other again. These open-ended family disruptions (as we will see in chapter 7) will be further intensified by the children's ambiguous status in the hosting countries. Multiplicity is identified as to the way loss was expressed by

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<sup>12</sup> Geneva Convention on Refugees which is also known as the 1951 Refugee Convention sets out which people qualify as refugees and the responsibilities of nations that grant asylum (United Nations Treaty Series, 2013).

the young respondents; for some boys the experience of loss was a sensitive issue, not to be discussed, while others it appeared to be therapeutic to recall it.

Culture is thus comprehended as having a great impact on the lived experiences of the Afghan boys and to the ways they are expressing their accounts. Becoming silent about the past or looking down when talking to an unknown woman are expressions that may be embodied in cultural and ethnic traditions. The birth order of the child boy within an Afghan family is a determinant factor of his future attainments and migration history. It is typical for the oldest boy of an Afghan family to be perceived as responsible enough to support the family and move away from home, alone even if he is underage (Monsutti, 2007).

Location is conceived an important aspect in terms of defining the living conditions of children; children raised in rural areas had minimal access to education and were usually involved in agricultural tasks, whereas children raised in urban places were relatively more engaged with education and leisure activities. It also emerged (as we will see in chapter 6) that boys who had lived in urban places had developed amplified networks of social contacts in relation to the ones who were raised in rural areas. Overall, the place where each of the boys grew up played an important role in the social construction of their lived experiences which were distinct, diverse and specific to time and place (Holloway & Valentine, 2000b).

While reflections on the background lives of unaccompanied minors might be limited in providing a complete picture of the precise relationships of children to their parents and siblings, there are a few examples which demonstrate bonding with the family. For instance, prior to their departure, some children experienced intact family life and a sort of security based on examples of ‘caring, affectionate and supportive families’ and some others revealed trusted and caring relations with their siblings and friends. Such examples confirm that refugee children may be raised in ways that allow them to develop healthy attachments with their mothers and siblings and build reliable and affectionate relationships (Mann, 2001; Parker *et. al.* 1991).

But childhood is played out and experienced differentially for the Afghan boys and it is suggested that individual and social factors play a dynamic role in shaping their

decisions and responses to trauma, loss, risk and suffering. The analysis also revealed that there are no clear lines between dependency and independency in children's childhoods. Children's transition from vulnerability to greater agency suggests that this is a continuous process that is reconstituted and renegotiated along the course of their childhoods. More attention should be paid to children's capacity to cope with radical discontinuity and survive in such extreme life conditions (Aitken, 2001; Robson, 2004).

The pre-departure stories delineated in this chapter, perhaps will manage to feed into the survival strategies that children later relied upon throughout their journeys and explain their transitions to their new environments. Finally, the concept of dehumanization was introduced in the context of conflict between different ethnic and religious groups. A more nuanced analysis and understanding of the concept will be provided in the final discussion of section III.

#### **4.11. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter has been concerned with the background stories of Afghan boys and their lives in Afghanistan and elsewhere. In the context of conflict, the daily routines of the boys involved struggles to survive from political oppression, violence, fear, uncertainty and deprivation. Although the diverse identities and social qualities suggest that some boys had grown up in relatively good living standards, most of them experienced the distressing consequences of war consisting of separation and loss from family members, and some of them survived from persecution. Such experiences caused abrupt changes and disruptions not only in the social and cultural milieu of children but also in their inner selves because they had to make difficult decisions and active choices beyond their fears. Children's causes of movement have indicated that war is not the main driver but multiple factors may instigate forced migration such as loss of family, conditions that generate abuse and undesirable living conditions both at home and in transit countries.



## **Chapter 5: Modern Odysseys: “a Kurd asked the Iranian police officer if he could buy us and he replied ‘no’...he said: ‘I have sold them already to somebody else, not to you’”**

### **5.1. Introduction**

Following up on the Afghan lives and the circumstances of leaving home, this chapter aims to shed light on and understand young peoples’ experiences on the move. Just as the background stories entailed violent incidents and feelings of fear and uncertainty, so too the transnational migration process entails, on the one hand, hardship and risk, and on the other hand, powerful ways of coping with adversity. Furthermore, it is highlighted how young people experience, shape and make sense of their migration routes which are often complex, diverse but most of all vivid in their memories.

The first section of this chapter introduces us to the findings regarding the main actors and factors that contributed to young people’s decision to leave home. These are associated with the identification of young people’s relations with key people, social networks and availability of resources. The scope of this section is to gain deeper insights on how young people made the decision to leave their country of origin and as well as who made that decision. Here, the active or passive role of young people’s decision making regarding their lives is stressed while the notion of agency develops more substantially.

The second section analyses the young people’s experiences regarding their first move and how ‘staging or transition points’ such as Iran, Pakistan and Syria constituted the first port of call for young boys. According to the findings of the present study, the assumption that all unaccompanied minors jump on a back of a lorry in Afghanistan and head to the west is not accurate. As already mentioned, most young participants had moved to neighbouring countries before their journeys to Europe. They sought refuge and they reconstructed their lives in transit places. Some of them left behind their loved ones for their first time and moved alone and others made their first move with their families or relatives in their effort to escape

from harm. The living conditions along with the several transitions that occurred during young people's settlement in neighbouring countries are outlined.

The final section analyses the journey experiences of Afghan boys by offering a rich description of their circumstances on the move whilst the various migratory dynamics are explored and their impact on young people's lives. This part follows in the footsteps of Afghan boys who leave their homes in their country of origin or transits places through irregular paths with the hope to arrive to European countries that will offer them a future they are anxious for. At this stage, young people embark unaccompanied on an epic route, in the sense that they have to take risks, meet and negotiate with strangers, cope with odd and violent conditions.

## **5.2. The decision of leaving home**

In the previous chapter, the causes that prompted young people's movement were presented and it was suggested that multiple factors often interact that are not merely associated with war and conflict. Even though there is a general context of war, turbulence and violence, there are also individual assets that make it feasible for some people to make the next step and move away from home. These assets are related with particular resources, characteristics and backgrounds each person may acquire that affect, and in some instances determine the decision to move away.

Borrowing the concept of capital, elaborated in Bourdieu's notion of classes, transnational migration requires the possession of amounts of capital in various combinations and forms, e.g. economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital.<sup>13</sup> Economic capital refers to the financial resources and cultural capital is about non-financial social assets such as education, intellect, physical appearance, and finally social capital refers to potential resources which are linked to group membership, networks and relationships. The concept of capital and its classifications are explored because decisions regarding leaving home, choices about where to go and what to do or become there, are regularly bound up with financial and economic resources, or lack of them'

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<sup>13</sup> According to Bourdieu: "*capital is accumulated labour.... which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour.*" (1986: 241).

The general assumption for someone who seeks to migrate across nations is that the decision of moving away will be largely shaped by his or her endowments of economic or social capital or the combination of economic, social and cultural capital (Van Hear, 2006). However, the dominant supposition in the migration area is that economic capital is the most powerful form of capital that induces mobility:

*Those with money can take advantage of time-space compression. Those who are uprooted from their homes and forced to flee their country with few resources experience migration in a very different way (Hyndman, 2000:17).*

This conceptual approach is particularly useful in understanding who makes the move and who doesn't whilst it offers theoretical insights about the relationship between power and forced migration.

In the present study, the majority of Afghan participants (20 cases) shared that it was their own decision to flee home and head to the west. A few of them shared that they decided to leave against the will of their parents. Such an outcome unfolds young people's active role in the decision making process whilst a distinctive realizability of taking control over their lives and create new opportunities for their future emerges:

*Tamim: ...I had to go...it was my own decision.  
Rahman: I made the decision...I was hoping to come to Europe; my plan was to go to Sweden and not to Greece.  
Tzamil: Yes it was completely my own decision; my family didn't want me to leave.  
Kiomarsh: Yes completely...my father never wanted me to leave far away, and I escaped...in a way.  
Suroor: I decided by myself to leave the country...because when I was in Kabul I got very stressed...every day one of us (Hazara) was getting killed.*

*(A series of quotes drawn from individual interviews)*

These quotes demonstrate the desire and capacity of young people to have power over their lives and make decisions under adverse circumstances. Whereas we can never be completely sure of the credibility of someone's account as it is not merely of his own making (Butler, 2005), as there may be other factors involved in the decision-making process, young people's agency to reconstruct their lives is

profound. Such a finding refutes the argument that children and young people are passive victims of adults' decisions, a dominant position within the area of migration. Thus they can, and do play an active role in the decision-making of migration.

A minority of young boys (7 cases) shared that they took the initiative to leave but they were as well as encouraged by other people such as parents, siblings, relatives and neighbours. In those cases, the reinforcement and support of other people contributed on young people's decision of leaving whilst helped them feel confident and secure about their decision:

*Hussein: I also wanted this....to leave and go to a better place.... but I took permission from my family...they wanted me to go somewhere better.*

*Bashir: I wanted to leave ...my neighbours helped me to make such a decision...when I was 11 I moved to Iran.*

Here the realizability of the decision-making process is highly associated with the availability of resources and relationships. Apart from family support, economic capital plays a significant role in instigating transnational migration:

*I wanted to leave and have a better life in Europe, but my family didn't want me to leave at all.... in the end.... they gave me money and so I left. (Tzamil)*

Likewise, some other respondents disclosed that financial endowments provided by their parents or other people had a major impact on their decision to leave and arrangements for their next move. In some cases, parents had to sell their possessions. Suroor shared that the financial support of his mother who sold a piece of land fuelled his decision to migrate. In other cases, parents had to borrow money from other people in order to safeguard their children's well-being and future prospects.

A few boys disclosed that despite the lack of financial resources, they were not dissuaded from leaving. For example, Hussein mentioned that he left Afghanistan in his childhood with no money and moved on foot to Iran by taking high risks especially when crossing the Afghan/Iranian borders. Other boys reported that their relationships with particular people and networks influenced their decision to move.

They stated that contacts with people who had the resources to support them upon their arrival in a neighbouring country, resulted in their first move.

Herman (2006) draws attention to the importance of network theory if we wish to acquire a more comprehensive perspective on the phenomenon of migration. The network theory takes into account non-financial components such as the role of social capital, revealing that migrants are connected through ties of kinship, friendship and ethnicity throughout their journeys.

According to network theory, group memberships may increase the likelihood of movement, whereas the social capital moderates the risks of migration. The findings of this study like in Herman's work highlight the impact of family and friends on instigating transnational movement a factor which illuminates their active role in the decision-making process of young people's mobility. Some boys frequently referred to an uncle or a friend as their helping response to their first port of call or to their journeys:

*My uncle is an agent and he helped me to make the trip. (Alehil)*

Often an uncle or a friend would bring the child in contact either with a smuggling network for organising the journey to the west or with the informal market to work in neighbouring countries. In some cases, parents would make the decision for their children to move to a neighbouring country and work under the guidance of a relative, with the prospect of getting remittances from their earnings:

*...my mother gave me to my uncle when I was seven and we moved to Pakistan...I spent five years there and I learned to make carpets for a living.... I was supporting my mother. (Tzafar)*

Rahman indicates that his decision of leaving was largely shaped by his parents' death and that he had to move in search for work. He lost both parents in war when he was a little child and his contacts with people from his village who had already been resettled in Iran motivated him to make his first move:

*...I was 9 years old when I moved to Iran because I lost both parents in war and I had to go. I lived there for... about 5 years and stayed with some other people from my village.*

Exceptionally, Hassan indicated that his parents made the decision against his will. He was born and grew up in Iran and he didn't want to move further because he felt a kind of security as he had a job and a place to stay, but one day his parents told him *'to get ready and leave to the European countries together with his brother.'*

There were also cases of young people who were in abrupt danger of losing their lives and they were forced by their parents to leave in order to save their lives. Their accounts suggest that these boys had to forcibly escape from persecution and risk:

*Nazim: my parents told me that I should go to some other place, because my life was under threat...from Pashtu people.*

*Ali: when I was a little boy, people from a different clan threatened my father that they would abduct me and kill me...my family insisted that I should go away immediately if I wanted to be safe.*

These boys shared that they were forced to leave for their safety and described the conditions under which they fled; some boys had to flee so hurriedly that they didn't even say good bye to their loved ones. They had to run away immediately for their survival. Some others reported that the only personal thing they kept together on leaving was a piece of paper with a phone number written on it, which would bring them in contact with an agent or a familiar person elsewhere. This person would possibly assist the boy or would come up with a plan to cover his immediate needs. Social capital in the form of social contacts, as stated previously, it is likely to moderate the risks of migration.

Some other accounts revealed that young boys were in the grip of debt when leaving that was passed on at each stage of the journey until it was finally cleared by a relative and after the imposition of a smuggler:

*When I left home I didn't have any money and I found a smuggler and I arranged to get from Iran to Turkey. I was in debt from the beginning of my trip. When we arrived in Turkey, the smuggler told us to call our family and tell them to send us money, if we wanted to continue. (Hussein)*

Coming into contact with the shady world of smugglers has been described as a common strategy undertaken by the ones who wish to leave behind their troublesome lives and move ahead. This strategy was often described as the only option that would

change the path of young people's lives. The decision-making process of leaving Afghanistan has been largely affected by such network connections, a fact that demonstrates that economic capital is only one of a number of dimensions of capital which may initiate movement i.e. social capital, in the form of uncles in other countries.

An important theme emerging from various analytical traditions in the field of migration is why children and young people participate in migration – still a relatively rare event at the population level – and this has led to a theorization of migration as a 'selective process'. Broadly speaking, migration theories have suggested that individuals with better qualifications such as education, skills and work experience are more likely to migrate because of their greater ability to seize its rewards (Waddington & Sabates-Wheeler, 2003).

Lipton's study (1980) conducted in villages in India countered this statement and argued that both the well-off and the poor migrate, but for very different reasons. Other studies indicated that the poorest do not make the decision easily, from the one hand because they cannot afford it, and from the other hand, due to their lower human capital which implies lower expected rewards. The "new economics of migration" suggest further that the poorest lack social capital and as such do not have access to migration opportunities because of their lower capacity for risk-taking.

Although the evidence is limited and mixed, there appears to be acceptance of an 'empirical regularity' that the poorest and richest have lower migration propensities (Waddington & Sabates-Wheeler, 2003). This study suggests that both poor and well-off children make the move for similar reasons but they sustain their journeys with divergent means:

*Why some people move in situation of war and extreme political coercion and others choose to remain or go underground or face political imprisonment, torture or even death. Forced migration or flight is just one option out of many Chatty (2010:15-16).*

Likewise, these children took the option of fleeing instead of remaining in a threatening environment. Therefore, the sample of this study cannot provide adequate

answers as to the capital-associated triggers of children's migration; it is suggested that further research will bridge this gap.

### 5.3. The first move

This section analyses young people's experiences of transition to countries neighbouring their homeland where they tried to rebuild their lives before embarking to their journeys to western countries. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the vast majority of young people had been living in Iran, others for short time and others for longer. A minority of respondents referred to Pakistan and Syria as their first movement places after fleeing Afghanistan. It is worth mentioning that the first move of Afghan minors to neighbouring countries is thought out here in relation to the 'transit migration theory'. The following questions are also addressed here: What does it mean to be 'in transit' for someone, does it occur by choice and if not what are the fundamental factors that shape such condition and necessitate further movement?

The emerging phenomenon of transit migration has been described by some scholars as 'being the stage in between of emigration and final destination' (Papadopoulou, 2005). Transit migrants have been defined as the people who come to a country of destination with the aim of moving and staying to another country (İçduygu, 1995:127). Based on his research about migration in North African countries, de Haas (2007) questioned the validity of the transit migration theory. He considers this concept as misleading; as it takes no notice of empirical evidence which shows that migrants' journeys may take months or years and may occur in stages. The empirical findings of this study have shown that for some boys the first move to neighbouring countries was considered as their primary destination and for some others it is just a stage of their journey. Such evidence suggests that migrants' settlement in 'transit places' may involve intentions of permanent stay, revealing that the concept of 'transit migration' can be quite ambiguous.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the findings, I explore what compels unaccompanied minors to live in transit places and what obstructs them from moving directly to the destination country of asylum. Generally, it has been argued that

transit migration occurs due to the lack of an efficient reception and integration policy towards asylum seekers in the first country of settlement (Papadopoulou, 2004). Collyer (2006) has similarly indicated that increased migration controls have led migrants to delay or call off their departure from transit places. The present case study suggests that what makes a place 'in transit' is linked to an intersected set of factors emerging from individual, cultural, structural and social factors.

It is noteworthy to indicate that ethnicity plays a major role in affecting young people's first move when fleeing Afghanistan. The young respondents explained that Hazara people are predominantly Shi'as and they wouldn't attempt a movement to a country with a Sunni majority. Shi'as mostly settle in Iran, Iraq and Pakistan and this illustrates the preference of Hazara to move to these places. Similarly, boys with Pashtun ethnic origin most frequently move to Pakistan.

Furthermore, the intention of young people to relocate in another country of asylum after settling in the first port of call, in some cases is pre-planned before departure, and in other cases it emerges as a necessity for a better life along the way, affected by the living circumstances and structural factors of the first country of reception. Furthermore, the need of family reunification or the availability of social contacts may also contribute to the decision to live in a transit country or move further. In other words, if there is a potential of joining family or community members further ahead, then asylum seekers will not settle permanently in the first country of reception. Structural factors are also related to the integration policies of the hosting countries; for instance, policies that discourage migrant's integration along with issues of hostility and racism may encumber migrant's intentions of settling permanently.

A few of the respondents described their settlement in transit places as new locales where they had the chance to reorganise their lives so that they could plan and arrange their further migration route. This arrangement could involve finding adequate resources, working at the informal sector, saving money, and facilitating links with important networks so that the plan of moving further could be feasible. For some others, moving to a transit country were made with the aim to obtain asylum and working permit that could provide better living prospects in a safer place

or give them the opportunity to reunite with family and community members who had already been there. Being ‘in transit’ has been described a period of uncertainty that has also been labelled ‘‘permanent temporariness’’ (Bailey *et al.* 2002) or ‘‘liminal legality’’ (Menjívar, 2006).

As indicated in table 4.3, 16 boys had lived in Iran and a small minority of 5 boys had settled for a while in Pakistan and Syria. In some cases, they were left alone in Iran and Pakistan or Syria with a sibling or cousin to work and financially support their family in Afghanistan. By sticking together, it was easier for the boys to find work and to pay back for their trip. This condition of being a member of a community reflects the findings of Punch (2007). Her ethnographic fieldwork about migration of young people in Bolivia revealed the importance of social networks in terms of developing a collective identity while they retained their family ties by contributing financially to their households. Likewise, some my interviewees when moving to neighbouring countries felt like members of a new community consisting mainly of people of the same ethnicity.

Even though all forms of migration are disruptive in some respects, moving to a neighbouring country sometimes encompasses some continuity in terms of cultural norms, religious traditions, political context and climate (Hopkins & Hill, 2008). Since the revolution of 1979 in Iran and the establishment of the Islam Republic, millions of Afghan refugees crossed the borders and settled across Iran in the context of an open-armed policy that allowed them to move and live without any restriction in the country, a policy rooted in the religious values and principles of Islam (Farzin & Jadali, 2013). Afghans were easily integrated given the fact of the common language, culture and religious norms.

However, a change in Iranian policy produced hostile attitudes towards new comers that resulted in a restricted life for them in terms of their rights as foreigners. For instance, until circa 2005, Afghan refugees had the option to enrol in either Iranian schools or in Afghan-run private schools, which admitted undocumented Afghans. This situation changed in 2006, Afghan-run schools were closed and undocumented Afghan children were generally prohibited from enrolling in any school at all (Koepke, 2011). Thus they became unwanted and ‘de-settled’:

*The Iranian government doesn't want the Afghans at all, we are unwelcomed. I have been to school for eight years and they hadn't given me any sort of paper or certification, is like I've never been to school. (Tamim)*

Out of the 16 respondents who had lived in Iran, only a tiny minority of 3 cases had positive experiences to remember. For example, Hassan who was born and raised in Iran recalled happy moments with friends and family and his working life. Hassan was surrounded by people who cared about him, such as parents and friends and he recalled that he felt like home in Iran. Emerging studies on life in exile and transnationality have shown that the concept of 'home' in today's world of mobility does not comply with the traditional type of home (e.g. Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Cohen, 1997; Ong, 1999; Huttunen, 2005). The new de-constructed notion of home has shown that people who are on the move may have many points of reference around the world, thus they are connected with various locations (Huttunen, 2005:180).

Time makes the notion of home fluid in the minds of people who are on the move. The home of the past is not the same as the home of the present. Yet people on the move find themselves in new locations where they have to renegotiate their relationship with the new environment, thus they reconstruct their connections with their past through the lens of the present. Due to his social contacts and relations with people Hassan managed to establish feelings of belonging in Iran.

However, the majority of my informants did not have the same sense of 'belonging' about their first place of settlement. Experiences of hostility and mistreatment vividly surrounded their accounts. Their relationships and interactions with local people shaped their perception about the place and produced feelings of subordination, marginalization and injustice. Some of these boys disclosed that they were mistreated by the local corrupted authorities because they were perceived as illegal migrants. A few boys shared that many times they were caught by the police in the streets who requested money as an exchange for their release:

*I had very hard time living in Iran.... I didn't like it at all....and I wanted to leave....in Iran if you walk in the street and the police stops you.... if you don't give them money, they don't let you go.... they put you in jail. (Mahdi)*

Others disclosed that they had to live in the margins as they faced discrimination for being Afghanis generating feelings of fear and unsafety of moving in public places. Their choices and opportunities in the neighbouring host country were restricted as they were treated as ‘illegal migrants’ and ‘unwanted’. One of my respondents commented about the role of the appearance in instigating discrimination; he recalled that his Hazara-Afghani appearance sometimes prompted hostile behaviour by the local people and institutional harassment regarding citizenship. Conversely, he remarked that Afghan boys with a European look would receive better treatment and a welcomed behaviour. It is not surprising that those who are visibly different are reminded that they do not belong, or they belong to a lesser degree (Yue, 2000).

Amir’s personal account illustrates how hard it can be to be an Afghan boy in Iran trying to make a living:

*Iranians treat us very badly.... they talk to us with bad words....and they don't let us study or work. If you know any sort or craft or something and you want to work.... you have to take permission from the government and you have to give them money.... three times more from the money you earn. Most Afghans who work in Iran, work illegally...the government doesn't know anything about them.*

Another boy spoke of the feeling of fear of being deported back to Afghanistan in case he was arrested by the Iranian police. This condition obliged him to live in the margins and avoid public places where there was a possibility to encounter with the Iranian authorities:

*...because in Iran there is also a refugee problem, for example if the police catch you...they send you back in Afghanistan. You must be careful of the police that they don't see you.*

Some other boys disclosed that when they moved to Iran and Pakistan, they were still children, separated from their parents and they had limited choices of working hard illegally for survival reasons for many hours during the day as tailors, servants, gardeners, etc. However, work provided them with the opportunity to plan and finance their next move:

*I lived in Iran for about five years and I was working as a gardener in a house of rich people, who let me stay in their house...until the moment I decided to come to Europe. (Rahman)*

Another boy shared that he moved alone to Pakistan in order to financially support his family. He settled in Quetta, a city in Pakistan where there is a Hazara community and came into contact with his uncle who found him a job in the carpet industry, as well he re-joined with people from his village. These examples are illustrations of the existing connections between close relatives and people of the same ethnicity. More generally, such migratory flows depict a social separation from the families and at the same time the formation of new links with other adult figures who guide young people through their new path to adulthood.

Overall, young people's experiences regarding their lives in transit places illustrate conditions of temporary settlements, hard-working and living in the margins. For the majority of the boys this period of time signals both an 'external' transition in terms of preparing the ground for their next move, and an 'internal' process through which they learn to adapt with the role of being an adult, meaning to live alone and take up adult responsibilities and decisions. It thus becomes evident that any intention of permanency was hindered by young people's negative experiences and further reinforced their desire to head to the west hoping that they would make a life somewhere they could call home, and feel welcomed.

#### **5.4. Heading to the West**

*As you set out for Ithaca,  
hope the voyage is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.*

C.P. Cavafy  
Ithaca

The moment of embarking to a long and epic journey has come and young people set out for their personal Ithacas. Cavafy's poem, Ithaca, has a symbolic meaning as it

represents the goals people set in their lives and their desire to accomplish them. Likewise, the journey to the west may be thought as, as we shall see from the accounts of young people, a personal quest in their lives to make their dreams come true. In this sense, we can relate Odysseus's quest to reach Ithaca as being the quest of each person who strives to reach the aims set before embarking to her/his personal voyage. The journey in Cavafy's poem is not just a trip that involves pleasant and unpleasant moments but it is a long process of transformation; of rediscovering new aspects of self, even if this means that someone has to go through the most unforeseen and difficult obstacles. Young people's journeys are meant to bring them to their objective which is a new promised land. The journey itself deserves special attention as it is not an ordinary route, neither just another challenging journey; it is a route full of extraordinary experiences for these boys. Heading to the west is a path that directs us to follow these displaced children alone on the road and taking risks whilst it is each boy's inner-self journey that carries hope, fear and uncertainty for the unknown but also strength for the challenges to come.

In contrast to their background stories most of the informants had been keen to provide a detailed account of what happened on their journeys, often challenging my own assumptions of expecting more discreet and timid accounts. Surprisingly, the majority of the journey accounts are long, detailed and full of outstanding incidents that were also expressed as exceptional, in the sense that such events and experiences may push the limits of human endurance in the extremes for adults, never mind children. The participants in the present study are the ones whose lives have been affected by transnational journeys in numerous ways and whose fates have been determined by the character and outcome of such journeys. The majority of them began their journeys alone when they were children and some years after they ended up as adolescents in a reception centre somewhere in Greece.

#### **5.4.1. Choosing destination**

Strikingly, almost all of the respondents, except one boy reported that they were aware of where they were heading to. Most of them knew that they would cross Greece which is the first entry in Europe, with the aim to continue further to other European countries, while some others had arranged to settle in Greece though they

did not know anything about the country itself. Being aware of the destination highlights young people's active role in the decision making process.

Counter to the findings of this inquiry, another qualitative study that focused on the pre-flight experiences of UM has indicated that half of the minors who arrived in Scotland were not aware they were travelling to Scotland and in some cases they were completely disoriented when they arrived as they didn't know where they were (Hopkins & Hill, 2008: 264). More specifically, 20 out of 30 young informants set out with a specific destination in their minds, usually northwest a European country where friends, relatives and family were to be found.

For example, Rahman initially had planned to go to Sweden to meet a friend but on the way he lost his friend's phone number and he changed his plans and set out to Italy. When he arrived in Italy he was arrested for his irregular type of travelling and finally he was deported back to Greece. All of the respondents including those who began their journeys with clear objectives and those who had a more flexible choice of destination, seemed to have a common objective; to reach Europe. Greece has not always been the expected destination:

*I was planning to go to England and that's why I paid so much...to smugglers. I knew that Greece was on the way. When I arrived in Greece my health got worse and I had to make the operation immediately. (Tzamil)*

In the case of Roshnan, things turned out to be a little different. His plan was to go to Switzerland but he was arrested by the police in the Greek airport because he had a forged passport. Some other boys shared that moving to Greece was part of the plan with the thought of being safe, finding an occupation and saving money so that they could make their next move to Northern countries. Only a few boys had a clear objective from the beginning of their journey to arrive and settle in Greece. One of these boys is Mashal who fled Afghanistan and followed the route Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran-Turkey with the aim to reach the Greek borders:

*Yes, I knew I wanted to go to Greece, one year before my trip; I started reading a book about Greece. And I learned about its history.... a few things.... about ancient times... and three friends*

*from my village who are in Greece told me to come here and that it was good to be here.*

Young people often sought the opinion about their destination from relatives and friends, who had already moved to western countries, in some cases they consulted smugglers about what was the best place to go to, in some others they got their parents' advice who told them to go where the smugglers would designate them to go.

Some boys organised their journeys and paid smugglers for the whole trip from the beginning and some others whose families' means were limited, were moving step by step, paying for each segment as they went along, trying in the meantime to work and earn money on the way, so that they could keep moving on to the next country. An overview of the drawbacks and advantages of the living conditions in transit places was inevitably developed *en route* for the majority of the respondents:

*I didn't know anything about Greece, the only thing I knew.... that it is in Europe...if I knew how the things were here I would have stopped in Turkey and I would have stayed there. (Mahdi)*

Moreover, there were boys whose main objective was to go as much further as they could get by heading to Northern Europe. For these boys Greece was just a transit point on their way. Zabiullah reported that he sought advice from a smuggler and then he decided to go as much further as his money would take him. The work of Van Hear (2006:147) confirms how access to resources and principally money and social networks may affect the migration strategies. He states that the better endowed the asylum seeker is the further s/he can move and the better quality of asylum can obtain. As raised previously, for many of the asylum seekers the choice of a destination is affected by a number of factors, encompassing the availability of economic, social and cultural capital.

#### **5.4.2. Understanding of what lies ahead**

Almost half of those interviewed claimed that they didn't have any idea about what their journey would entail while the rest of minors were somehow aware of what their journeys would be like. Despite the adverse journey conditions young people experienced, they exposed a resilient attitude by sharing that they had experienced

similar situations in other instances. For example, Amza disclosed: *“for me this trip it wasn’t something extraordinary.... I mean I have done it before when I moved to Iran and then to Pakistan.”* Amzas’ previous migration experiences affected his view of what it is conceived hard and difficult by suggesting that such views are relevant to each human’s experience and they should be explored in relation to their social and cultural contexts.

Some of the minors acknowledged all the risky moments of their journeys, by expressing: *“I haven’t regret it...I was in greater risk back in Afghanistan,”* there were boys who clearly stated that they wouldn’t attempt such a journey again; neither would they encourage other Afghans to make a journey to western countries in the same manner as they did. For example, these boys shared: *“I’m not crazy...no I wouldn’t do it again”* or *“I told to my friends in Iran not to try it.”* A few boys referred to the requirements that would make an irregular journey successful or less dangerous: *“if someone has money and lots of luck, then it could be manageable.”*

## 5.5. Journey Experiences

Some general descriptions of young people’s journeys are presented below in the form of abstracts and then provide an overview of their migration paths from East to the West:

*Alehil: Don’t ask...the conditions of my journey were horrible.*

*Hakim: I am lucky that I am still alive.*

*Mahdi: It was difficult...many times I risked my life.*

*Nazim: I don’t remember anything...*

*Omid: to me....it wasn’t very difficult. I think I was lucky...*

*Tzamil: It’s not easy....to make this kind of trip...you risk your life...there is always the danger of something bad to happen.*

*Mashal: I was a little boy.... you know nobody should tell to a little boy to make such a journey....*

*Ramzan: How can I forget this journey? I will never forget it.*

*(Excerpt drawn from a focus group discussion)*

The majority intensely illustrate the adverse conditions and difficulties encountered on their way. In most cases, young people talked about hardship, risk of life and unexpected challenges that occurred *en route*. In a few cases, consisting of 3

accounts, the respondents shared that they had easy journeys, short and not so risky. Some others invoked absence of memory due to the tough circumstances they experienced and they were not in the position or they didn't want to be in the position to recall them. Nevertheless, particular factors related to processes, systems and actors young people encounter on the way have an impact on the outcome of each journey.

### 5.5.1. Mapping the transnational routes

The majority of the participants followed the same route. The departure point of the journey only differs as some of the boys fled Afghanistan and others departed from neighbouring countries. Most boys after fleeing Afghanistan headed southwest to Iran and then through Turkey they arrived to the Greek borders via the North onshore part of the country or over the sea, crossing a little further south. Five boys who departed from Pakistan followed the route Pakistan-Iran-Turkey-Greece and only one boy departed from Syria and reached Greece via Turkey. Some scholars have underlined the importance of the Turkish- Greek route for Central Asian and Middle Eastern migrants—mainly from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iraq, Iran and Palestine—who then travel on to final destinations of western and northern European countries (Içduygu & Toktas, 2002). Young people's pathways to Europe are illustrated in the following map:

**Map 5.1: Young people's pathways**



The length of young people's journeys ranged from a week up to a few months. Indicatively, the shortest trip lasted for a week and the longest one for three months and a half. Out of 30 participants 6 boys stated that they experienced long and exhausting journeys which lasted from one month and a half up to three months and a half. These boys experienced unexpected incidents on the way such as deportation and detention that significantly slowed down the expected travel time. In some cases, young people had to make new arrangements and begin their journeys all over again.

For example, Ramzan and Alisher who travelled together experienced the longest trip which lasted for three months and a half. These boys were deported twice back to Iran after being caught by the Turkish police and were detained two times in Iran and Turkey. The majority of the respondents travelled between a month and two months. In most cases they had to stay for a while in the countries they were passing through for various reasons; for finding ways to organise their next stage of their journey, for sustaining their journeys through work, or because they were detained. There were five (5) cases who reported that their journeys had been quite fast, lasting maximum to 10 days. Amir departed from Iran and within a few days arrived in Istanbul where he spent some days and then he managed to cross safely to the Greek borders:

*When I left my home.... within five days I arrived in Istanbul. We travelled by car and only when we crossed the Iranian and Turkish borders we walked.*

My informants constantly remembered places they had passed by, and these can be identified as nodal points on their route to Europe. They mentioned the city of Urmia near the border of Iran and the cities of Van and Agri in Turkey. According to some accounts, after managing the dangerous border crossing, the smuggled groups would stay for a few days in overcrowded conditions in hidden rooms and shanties waiting for the smugglers to designate to them what to do next. Often the next move would entail transportation from one city to another one by a truck or by a car. Istanbul was mentioned as a significant crossroad between the Middle East and Europe in the migration route for many boys. My informants spent from a few weeks up to a few months in Istanbul before coming to Greece. Some of them found day jobs and stayed in friend's houses until they saved enough cash to finance their crossing to Greece.

### 5.5.2. The business of smuggling

Nearly all the boys in this study instigated and facilitated their journeys through smugglers. Strikingly, only one boy stated that he didn't have any involvement with smuggling network, and that he was accompanied with other adults along the way. The dominant perception within migration studies is that asylum seekers are increasingly led to underground means through the use of smugglers and traffickers. It is believed that the numerous restrictions the European countries have implemented curbed the inflow of asylum seekers (Black, 2003; Van Impe, 2002). The use of illicit smuggling channels seems to have a dynamic role in the proceeding of the mobility of UM and as we shall see, also affects the outcome of their movements.

However, there are no global figures available about the profiles of smuggled people and smugglers. Data on irregular migration are scarce and unreliable particularly due to the illicit nature of the smuggling business and the fact that both smugglers and smuggled migrants need to remain undetected (IOM, 2005: 64). Only some figures revealed by regional research indicate that mostly African and some Asian developing countries that face severe economic and social problems produce a great proportion of young smuggling groups (Doomernik & Kyle, 2004).

Smugglers are 'critical determinants of the destination eventually reached by asylum seekers' (Robinson & Sergott, 2002:19). The accounts of the boys suggest that their arrival in Greece has been affected seriously by the smugglers. In terms of young people's journeys to Greece, it is important to define smuggling as it appears to be a powerful informal circuit which shapes the experiences and lives of the smuggled ones. According to the UN Protocol against the smuggling of migrants:

*Smuggling of migrants shall mean the procurement in order to obtain directly or indirectly, a financial or a material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or personal resident (Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2000, Article 3(1), p.2).*

Smuggling presents the characteristics of an illicit business activity with many intermediaries involved who may not always fit the profile of the conventional

criminal. The young people often referred to smugglers in the interviews by using the name 'mafia', implying a criminal profile of these people. Smugglers may work for tourism industry, or they may be public officials or transport entrepreneurs. No matter what the status of the people who are involved in smuggling, it is a process which involves irregular activities and strategies in exchange for greater profit. These activities most of the times cause risk for the lives of the people who are involved.

Although it is not possible to discuss about smuggling without trafficking (Skeldon, 2000), it is deemed necessary to acknowledge the blurred boundaries between these two concepts. What differs smuggling from trafficking is the voluntary nature of the exchange versus coercion (Morrison & Crosland, 2001). However, we cannot claim much of a choice for someone to move illegally across borders with smugglers when the legal channels of movement are utterly restricted.

Some of the interviewees shared that facilitating their journeys with 'mafia' was the only way to take them out of their troubles. One of my informants, Mohammad disclosed: *".... because the smugglers, they know the way...the ones who don't have money to pay the smugglers stay in their troubles, they don't have many choices."* The short-term relation that exists between the smuggled ones and the smugglers, as long as the journey lasts, it appears to be of great importance for both; for young Afghans who invest their lives in the hands of smugglers and for the smugglers for making profit. *"There is no other way to make such a journey"* was the response of one of the boys. Most of the respondents acknowledged how straightforward it can be to contact the smugglers: Noor Ali shared: *"It is very easy to come in contact with the mafia...from mouth to mouth; they are from different nationalities involved.... Turkish, Iranians, Greeks...everything."*

Indeed, another scholar who has researched the migration experience of Kurdish asylum seekers including their journeys has remarked that the smuggling business is quite widespread and it incorporates people from diverse nationalities (Papadopoulou, 2004). According to the accounts of young people, the smugglers were male and the ones who facilitated the trip from Afghanistan or Iran to Turkey were mostly Afghans, Iranians, Iraqis and Kurds and there were some references to the ones who

organised the journey from Turkey to Greece of being Turkish, Greeks, Kurds and Albanians.

Interestingly, in most cases, smugglers were in some way related to the families, relatives and friends of the participants or had had previous contact with a member of a young person's local community (like the agents who accompanied minors in the case of Scottish migration, in Hopkins and Hill, 2008:264). A few boys also stated that their relatives were involved in this kind of business, one of them Alehil stated: *"my uncle is doing this job and he arranged the trip for me."*

Arranging a journey to Europe appeared to be a costly matter. According to my informants, a journey from Iran or Pakistan to Italy would cost circa 5.000 to 6.000 euros, and a journey to UK would cost 7.000 euros. Travelling to Turkey and then to Greece seemed to be a good deal for many of my informants as the price would range from 1.000 euros to 3.500 euros, the cheapest deal to Europe, depending on the season:

*Now the prices have decreased and it's very cheap to come to Greece. You pay 1200 euros from Iran to Greece, in the past it used to be very expensive. I paid 1000 euro.... because of the contact I had. It has been like a tourism case.... during the winter the prices are going up, and during the summer are going down, because more people make this journey. (Amir)*

Another boy Zabiullah, asked the smuggler how much would cost him to go to a safe and prosperous place in Europe and the smuggler answered: *"7.000 euros to go to UK and 5000 to France...to Greece is 3.500 euros, but if you manage to arrive in Greece then you can get a job and continue the trip by yourself."* Some boys were convinced by the smugglers or they hoped that it would be easy to make a transition from one country to another once they would arrive in Europe. These boys paid for a trip to Turkey or Greece as they couldn't afford to pay larger amounts of money for a further destination:

*...until we arrived in Istanbul...I found a job in Istanbul as a tailor and I stayed there for six months and then with some other guys I met in Istanbul, we gathered and we arranged the rest of the trip by ourselves. (Tamim)*

In many cases families had covered the journey of their children to Europe from the beginning or when they did not raise enough to cover the full journey, an agreement would be reached with the 'agent' to make the payment in instalments. A UNHCR (2010) report which addresses the journey experiences of Afghan unaccompanied minors after conducting qualitative research with them in various European countries, underlines the countless risks that minors confront when travelling with smuggling networks. The report demonstrates that boys' parents, relatives and friends who have arranged the contact with smugglers have no direct contact with them while their children are on the move.

A few boys, who financed only a part of their journeys before their departure, mentioned that the smugglers were constantly asking for the rest of the money on the way while they maintained tight control over the boys. Calling their families and asking for money has been described by these boys a consistent practice they had to follow while being on the move.

Despite the methodological limitations I encountered during the analysis, because some of the boys were not willing to provide details the smuggling networks, a comparison emerged during the analysis in relation to the profiles of some minors with the smuggling methods used. It appeared that the most disadvantaged young people 'bought' the low-cost services which entailed higher rate of failure when crossing borders and a high risk level. On the contrary, the well-off minors could afford to buy an all-inclusive service that provided limited risks in terms of interception and border crossing. In some cases, the means of transport may also reflect the profile of the boy. For example, Amza who was forced to leave his country at the age of 8 recalls:

*I have a relative in Syria who is the owner of a Hotel and he sent me an invitation to go to Syria...and then my family paid 1.000\$ and they arranged for me to travel by plane with this fake invitation and all the needed documents...and we got the air tickets from Kabul to Dubai and then to Syria.*

Amza's means of travelling demonstrates a relative well-off financial condition of his family that permits him to arrange a journey with limited risks. On the contrary, other boys with limited financial and social resources had to rely on low-cost solutions.

This doesn't suggest that children with an affluent background are not engaged in threatening journey conditions. Regardless of their background, refugee children fleeing conflicts and persecutions become vulnerable in the sense that they have to embark on a journey with clandestine means in order to escape from violence and destitution.

Smuggled people may also be physically, psychologically or sexually abused or beaten up because they are unable to pay their debts (Zhang & Chin, 2002). Yet a case of physical and sexual harm has not been reported by the participants of this study but maybe they felt intimidation to talk about it.

One of the boys, Ramzan who travelled with different smugglers and run out of money on the way had to ask money from his family if he wanted to continue his journey:

*R.: Later on we found another smuggler and we had to pay him to guide us.*

*V.: How did you pay him...where did you find money?*

*R.: We followed him and we went on the mountain again.... then.... each of us called to his family and our families sent us money.*

When I asked my informants how their parents sent money to the smugglers, some of them mentioned that this exchange works out through other intermediaries but without sharing further details. For instance, in the report conducted by UNCHR (2010:16) which analyses the journey experiences of Afghan UM, there are references about the 'hawala' system which is an informal value transfer system based on the enactment and honour of a huge network of money brokers, who facilitate the transfer of money, goods and people across countries. My informants didn't clarify how exactly the exchange of money between their families and the smugglers operates and they were not precise about the actual system of transferring money to an illicit network transnationally. Overall the financial dimension lends an additional emphasis to the capital aspect of migration.

In a few accounts smugglers were presented as 'the good guys' who are protective over young people who travel alone and help them to escape from their troublesome lives, while in most cases they were 'the bad guys' who deceive young people and

exploit them into traumatic and risky situations. One example which illustrates the first case is the one shared by Ramzan who is talking about a smuggler with whom he facilitated a stage of his journey:

*...and another guy asked for 200 dollars in order to transfer us from the borders to Ankara...but we didn't have money.... but he was a good guy, he gave us food and cigarettes.*

Such positive references are scarce compared to the negative ones as the majority of the boys spoke with anger and disappointment about the smugglers especially when they referred to incidents of fraud and deception. One boy was cheated about the expected destination he had primarily agreed and even though he had paid the whole amount of his journey from the beginning, he never arrived to the country he had paid for. In such cases, minors disclosed that smugglers may also disappear on the way whilst let their clients exposed to hazards and with no money to carry on with their journeys. By his own account Mohammad explains how smugglers may delude people often in cynical manner:

*I wanted to go to another country.... but like I told you.... the smuggler took my money.... that was a lot of money. Many times smugglers deceive people, because, emm for example if you are in Turkey and you say I want to go to Italy, they say: 'all right' ...and they put you in the boat and then you arrive in a Greek island...and they tell you '...here you are....in Italy.*

This abstract echoes an incident that happened in the Greek island of Zante where 45 Afghan asylum seekers were arrested by the Greek police after being irregularly transported by a high speed craft. In their testimony the Afghan asylum seekers stated that when they were washed upon the Greek shore they were left to believe that they had arrived to Italy (*Imera tsi Zakynthos*, 26 February 2012). Similar incidents have been published from time to time in the Greek newspapers and reflect the relative powerlessness of the smuggled people towards both the means of travelling and the decision of their destination.

Another boy, Shirzard, describes how he received false guidelines by the smuggler. He negotiated with a smuggler to travel from Iran to Greece knowing that as long as he could reach Greece, he could go wherever he would like to:

*...he told us that if we reach Greece then everything is easy, because European countries are like one country...and that we*

*could pay a taxi tell the driver to take us to Sweden or wherever we like. That's what I thought also, that if I arrive in Greece...it would be easy to go wherever in Europe...*

Other boys described incidents where smugglers hide the real dangers from the people, or lied about the means of travelling, and the actual length of their journey. Some boys mentioned that they were left to believe their journey would be short and with less hazards but in reality it turned out to be the opposite; they had to walk long distances on foot. Quite a few accounts reveal the risks young people encountered when they were forced to share a tiny boat with many people crossing the sea or a river or when they had to stay in cramped and difficult conditions for days:

*...it was awful there...we were staying 120 people in a small room...and I wanted to run away, but when you have to deal with mafia, it is very dangerous to run away. This was for 10 days and I couldn't stand it...other people broke their legs and hands...because it was so crowded....and so I escaped.*

Whether such stories reflect actual incidents or are tales shared among refugees for different purposes is impossible to confirm, but clearly the smuggling network has the power to affect the outcome of the migration process of the migrants, while it is obviously a case of exploitation of people for the sake of profit. Authors such as Doornik & Kyle (2004) call for a more nuanced approach to the smuggling business, as the empirical reality includes a mix of people with both altruistic and profit-making goals. For example, smugglers of migrants may be depicted as serving migrants rather than as profit-makers, despite the fees involved. Some other scholars have suggested that the transnational phenomenon of smuggling should be approached as a 'global business' which incorporates a set of individual actors, institutions and agents each of which aims to make a profit (Salt & Stein, 1997). The dominant view is that smuggling has been approached as a 'migration industry' in which the smuggled ones are seen as 'products', whereas the people who guide the smuggled ones are viewed as 'illegal entrepreneurs' (Herman, 2006).

Finally, it is deemed important to acknowledge the power of the 'vulnerable ones', in this case, young people who may be reactive and able to take control over their lives when they come to terms with hardship and inhuman conditions, like in the case of Noor Ali who escaped from a cramped room somewhere near the borders of Turkey.

In other words, it is expected, in the context of forced migration which carries so many risks, that the ones who are in need are more susceptible to the power of unreliable and harmful people. However, their strength to manage such difficult circumstances should not be underestimated.

### 5.5.3. Lives at risk

The most dangerous moments occurred for the majority of young people when moving across the borders; the steep mountains in Iran after leaving Afghanistan, the Iranian-Turkish borders, the boat journey crossing the river of Evros in the northern borders of Greece and finally the seaside crossing to Greece. Often young people had to walk through the Iranian and Turkish borders and they reported that they continued the rest of their trip travelling cramped in a car, a taxi or a truck:

*We came both by car and on foot...but when we were reaching dangerous areas with police or soldiers, the smugglers were taking us to walk through the mountains, and then we were getting in the car and again when it was dangerous we were walking.... like this. (Rahman)*

Minors who were guided by smugglers and went along with many people of the rest of the group had to trek through the mountains long distances in the darkness, so that they couldn't be noticed. This strategy is most often exercised by smugglers in order to avoid checkpoints and border controls. However, it is also related to the deal of payment that has been done between the smugglers and their clients. For example, a few boys reported that they paid some extra money to the smugglers so that they wouldn't have to walk a lot. Other boys mentioned that they were given a horse or a mule for passing through the mountainous area because of health problems:

*I had a health problem and I couldn't walk a lot.... for that I was riding a mule. But the mule was very old and weak. We were more than 1.000 people.... too many people and the Pakistani guys were farther away from me and they noticed the police who were coming on our side.... suddenly everybody started running to my side....and about 1.000 people came towards me and I fell from the mule...and the mule was emm turns over....it was a mess.... (Laughs)....and the people were stepping on me...and there was a moment I thought I would be dead.*

Amir risked his life, but he becomes expressive when he describes his journey experiences in the same manner he would talk about an exciting adventure' (Field notes). Other boys like Mahdi shared related experiences: *"When we were passing through the mountains it was very dangerous because we could fall down and get killed."* On the contrary, one boy Nazim shared that he used to walk quite a lot in rough circumstances back in Afghanistan and so for him it wasn't difficult to walk for days in the mountains.

Several boys who claimed that they risked their lives when crossing the mountains, shared heart-breaking experiences such as the death of other people, or the struggle of old people and little children to keep up with the rest of the group while they spoke about tough circumstances such as spending days on the mountains with severe cold and minimum food. Some of them mentioned that they froze most of the time and they were hungry since they had only bread to eat for days:

*.... the nights were very long and cold...we couldn't feel our hands....and we had very little food during the trip.....some fruits and vegetables....we carried only food with us....we didn't have extra clothes, only the clothes we were wearing.....and it was so much cold and rain...when we were walking we couldn't see what it's out there...we could feel the snow and the cold air...but we couldn't see in front of us. We had to cross a mountain and it was so dangerous to slip down the hill...and we saw dead bodies of people who had tried to make the same trip and dead horses....and there was a guy with us who decided to stay there on the mountain because he had a health problem and he couldn't continue walking.  
(Ramzan)*

Seeing dead bodies of other travellers who were in the same position as my informants and witnessing other people left behind was referred as very distressing and shocking, as they came to terms with the tough reality of the potential outcome such a journey might have. Gambling with their lives was an expression a few of the boys used; specifically, they disclosed that sometimes they wondered how they were still alive and how lucky they were that they didn't slip while walking in those mountains. Other hazardous moments that were shared were linked with meetings with strange people who most of the times were thieves. Many of my informants mentioned that they met, or they were afraid to meet, the Kurdish mafia who were known for blackmailing and stealing people:

*...the Kurdish mafia.... they are very cruel.... they ask for money and if someone doesn't have any.... if they want they may cut his fingers or do whatever.... they kill if they don't get anything.*

Some of my young informants described their encounter with the Kurds as the most dangerous moments they experienced. The Kurds were portrayed as dangerous people who are able to harm and even kill travellers for profit. Some of the boys looked terrified at the thought of meeting the Kurdish mafia. Three boys encountered Kurds on their way sharing that they were blackmailed and left alone only when their families paid for their release.

Strikingly, these boys referred to incidents of 'selling and buying smuggled people' or else an exchange of smuggled people between the police and the Kurdish mafia. They explained that this exchange could happen in case of meeting the 'wrong people' on the way and they referred to incidents where the Kurds were bribing the Iranian or Turkish police in order to acquire people who from that time would be subjugated to the Kurds. Then, the Kurdish mafia, as the accounts illustrate, would lock these people in a room and keep them for days with little food, requiring calling their families and asking money or else their lives would be in danger:

*....and one Kurd asked the police officer if he could buy us and he said 'no' he said: 'I have sold them already to somebody else, not to you. (Rahman)*

Smuggled people are likely to be treated as commodities by the people who are able to exert their power or authority over them, like the Kurdish mafia, corrupted policemen or soldiers and smugglers. It is not easy to identify whether these stories reflect real incidents or are stories shared by the smugglers for keeping the boys under their control but what I received during the interviews is that some boys looked really frightened when they spoke about the Kurdish mafia.

Smugglers could also 'buy their clients back from the police or military' depending on the deal. For example, in the account of Tzafar, smugglers got back their people from the Iranian military after offering them a satisfactory bribe:

*...then we arrived in the Iranian and Turkish borders where we were caught by the Iranian military and we were deported back to Iran....and then the smuggler 'bought' us back from the army.*

Other precarious incidents shared during the interviews are related to imprisonment conditions. A few of them were detained in Iran and Turkey after being halted as undocumented migrants by the police. Five boys mentioned that they were detained at some point before their arrival to Europe; some of them were detained twice in Iran and Turkey such as Alisher and Ramzan. These boys were imprisoned for many days up to a few weeks and they described their imprisoning conditions as appalling; they were cramped in a small area with other people, with little food and no sanitary facilities. Their only way to continue with their journeys was to find money and buy their release. One of the boys, Alehil implied that he had been physically abused while being in the prison. Alehil spent two weeks in an Iranian prison and at the time of his detention he was fifteen years old. He discloses:

*V: How were you treated in jail?*

*A: Don't ask...*

*V: It must have been hard for you.*

*A: Hard? It was a torture...they were violent...prisoners in places such as Pakistan and Iran are really suffering.*

*V: And you were a little child at that time.*

*A: To them everybody is the same. They don't see any difference between a little child and an adult.*

*(Excerpt drawn from an individual interview)*

In Alehil's account it is evident how underage children are treated in some places throughout their transnational paths. Children under the age of 18 and separated by both parents run the risk of being treated as criminals in certain cases like the one described by Alehil.

The final passage from Turkey to Greece has been described as one of the most dangerous and harrowing experience young people witnessed along their journeys. There are two choices to enter in Greece; the first one is across the river Evros, a natural border which divides Turkey and Greece which is considered the gateway to Europe and marks the end of the Eastern territory, and the second one from the sea shore to make the short but dangerous crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands. In this study, the majority, 17 informants, reported that they entered in Greece from the Evros River while the rest of the boys, 11 informants, reported to have reached Greece via the seaside and they arrived at the Greek islands of Samos, Patmos,

Kalymnos, Hios and Lesbos. Two boys chose not to answer this question as they didn't want to discuss their crossing to Greece.

It is estimated that more 50.000 of migrants arrived in Greece on 2012 via the Evros River while a year before 100.000 people were reported to have crossed the river (The Economist, 2012). However, the figures available are very patchy and the information presented here should be treated with caution and only as indicative. By the time I started writing this thesis the situation in terms of the asylum seekers' entrance in Europe has dramatically changed twice, testifying the dynamic nature of smuggling networks and undocumented migration: during fieldwork most of my informants shared that they had crossed the border of Greece via the Evros and after a few months the Ministry of Public Order announced the construction of a 4-metre tall and 12,5 kilometres of length barbed-wire fence along the Evros aiming to block a small stretch of dry land between the countries. This fence didn't actually combat undocumented passages but it did change the routes that migrants would follow in order to enter into the country, therefore maximizing risk.

While the fence, even during its construction, reduced the arrivals of people by land by 95 percent, they have turned in increasing numbers to the sea and the Greek islands of the Aegean according to Medecins Sans Frontieres (SES Türkiye, 01 February 2013). Triandafyllidou relates that 21.000 of Afghans who fled from war crossed the Evros River on 2011, which is a huge number (*Stop Evros Wall*, 17 April 2012).

It may take a few minutes to cross the river but this attempt may be crucial and risky. The river is deep, very cold and fast-flowing especially during the winter and many people have reportedly drowned. Most people struggle across in overloaded inflatables, cheap boats made for a few people. One of the boys, Zabiullah discloses why the crossing of the Evros River had been risky and the most dangerous part of his journey to Europe:

*The first night we arrived in Greece there was a heavy rain and the river in Evros floated.... five people died because the boat turned upside down and I managed to reach the other side. My clothes were soaked from the water and I had 200 hundred euros on me,*

*but everything I carried was completely wet...and my mobile. I slept with wet clothes outdoors the first night.*

A few of my informants stated that it is better to make that crossing during the summer. The ones who attempt to cross it in winter time 'risk their lives' as the river is high, and it is very possible to turn the boat upside down. Even if people know how to swim is possible to suffer from hypothermia. Some boys shared that they witnessed people drowning in their attempt to cross the river and also people falling from overloaded boats:

*A little child was drowned on the way. The boat was very small....it fitted 5 people in total and we were 15. (Tzafar)*

Roshnan described his experiences in relation to his passage to Greece as being the most dangerous part of his journey. He really got worried about his life especially when he got into that boat which was about to turn over and after witnessing people to drown in the river:

*... this was very dangerous...because we had a small plastic boat which spins around when it's in the water...three people died like this....and the bank isn't far away...it is 20 min.... but the water is dangerous we couldn't control the boat, at some point, I fell into the river and I saved a little boy.... his father got drowned into the water....and then I dragged out a girl 15 years old...*

Despite this harrowing experience Roshann conveyed a sense of pride in saving the lives of the people who were in danger. Similar dramatic experiences have marked the lives of other boys, a few of whom shared that they prefer to 'shut down their memories' and try not to remember.

The boat journey from the Turkish coast, often Izmir, to the Greek islands may be short but it is no less dangerous. Every day boats loaded with people cross but are not always effective since many people have lost their lives in this short passage. For example, a recent tragedy occurred near Farmakonisi two months ago on 21 of January 2014, when a boat carrying asylum seekers the majority of whom were Syrians and Afghans capsized in the dark (*Euronews*, 21 January 2014). The result was that 9 children and 3 women drowned. The risky routes on the way to Greece, in combination with the least possible chances of obtaining asylum, have led some of

my young informants to head to other countries. Suroor after listening to his friend's advice who had been in Greece, he decided to head directly to Italy:

*...I decided to continue my journey from Turkey to Italy, trying not to cross Greece. But unfortunately, in the middle of the way....in the sea our ship was broken down and the police arrived.... we spent four days in the middle of the sea, it was a very small ship and we were 52 people. The ship was old and....it was broken down a couple of times.*

The crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands requires extra money and a few minors shared that they tried to make it through without the assistance and guidance of the smugglers. Often these arrangements take place in Istanbul or in the coastal cities of Turkey:

*...we gathered and we arranged the rest of the trip by ourselves, we bought a little boat and through Izmir we crossed the sea.... we got into the boat at 10am in the morning and the sea was quite stormy and the wind was blowing heavily. We arrived in Hios at 13.00pm. It was very dangerous...the water was getting in the boat... we were lucky that we managed to arrive safely. (Tamim)*

Tamim managed to find work in Istanbul where he settled temporary for six months and eventually he had money to finance the rest of his route. He also met some other people in Istanbul who wanted to move further and they decided to organise the rest of their trip together. In his account it is evident that the weather conditions play a significant role for the safety of the people. Another boy shared distressing experiences as he struggled to keep afloat and survive, while seeing his fellow traveller disappear in the middle of the Aegean Sea:

*We crossed the sea from Turkey to Mitilini with this small boat which normally was fitting 8 people....and we were 34 in total. Before reaching the Greek sea coast, the boat was filled with water...and we used our hands to take it out, and there one person disappeared...we couldn't find him, he fell into the sea.... nobody knows, we didn't find his body. (Kiomarsh)*

Several boys who made the crossing either from the Evros river or over the Aegean encountered risky and frightening situations and revealed how relieved they felt to have survived such perilous travelling conditions, so much that they hoped to keep themselves away from similar situations in the future. Such experiences of enduring life threatening situations and witnessing the death of

people raise crucial questions of how these young people make sense of terrifying experiences and the emotional effects of escaping from harm and death.

The effects of surviving such incidents can be long lasting and may upset the survivors' normal sense of safety and stability (Cyrulnik, 2009). Picking up the pieces of a shattered life and finding ways to keep on living a healthy and meaningful life is a major challenge when experiencing such journeys. What emerges from young people's accounts as we will see in the following chapters is that some of them manage to cope with their multiple losses and their distressing experiences by trying to rebuild their lives, while some others have major difficulties in mentally dealing with the consequences of their distressing experiences. The affirmation that some people cope and some others do not cope with distress has led me to explore in chapter 9 the coping mechanisms of surviving physically and mentally, by drawing on the concept of resilience.

## **5.6. Reflections**

Journey experiences recounted here, open up new avenues to our knowledge by informing us about the whole range of children's transnational experiences of movement. As Papadopoulou (2005) has observed case studies tend to examine only the two stage process of forced migration consisting of the situation in the home country and the experiences in relation to the hosting country. This chapter bridges the existing gap between these two ends and provides empirical insights concerning the children's journeys given the fact that there is less information about their whereabouts after leaving the country of origin and before reaching the final destination. Thus it combines children's movements and experiences of settling in transition places. Because of the magnitude of the journey experiences, this chapter could be a study in its own right, nevertheless due to space limitations I will reflect on the most prominent key points that stood out as impactful on the lives of these boys.

The early migratory experiences of settling in neighbouring countries provided insights as to the state of existence of becoming an undocumented migrant in a hosting country. Questions are raised as to the ways Afghan boys experience and

negotiate their transition of being Afghan children to becoming undocumented and independent migrants who appear invisible in the public realm of the neighbouring country. Their accounts suggest that they feel they are marginalised and they enter in a condition of temporariness together with elements of permanency. Furthermore, their first move is into a liminal period which stands as a midpoint between starting a new life in a new place and an ending point, of leaving behind motherland, home and family. This aspect of life has been labelled “permanent temporariness” (Bailey *et al.* 2002) or “liminal legality” and has described the life circumstances of Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Honduran immigrants regarding their endeavours in traveling back home to maintain contact with their family and children (Menjivar, 2006).

Children’s spatial and social separation from their familiar environments may be regarded as Monsutti (2007) has called ‘a rite of passage between childhood and adulthood’. Despite their apparent independency and rapid maturity at this stage, children are not alone in their first move; they create relations mostly with people of the same ethnicity and they maintain links with their past lives. Such relationships are significant in maintaining children’s ties with kinship, culture and homeland. A few accounts illustrate children’s rotation between close relatives regarding migration flows e.g. there is often an older brother or an uncle waiting for the child to arrive in the first country of settlement and provide support and guidance.

The creation of working groups of young Afghans who are supervised by an Afghan adult, resemble the ‘communitas’ defined by Turner (1967), namely a group of peers who are experiencing liminality (or limen to signify ‘threshold’ in Latin) together, compounded by common experiences of hard work while leaving behind the narrow and strict kinship structure of their society of origin. Children’s experiences of dislocation and change are mostly marked by detachment from their familiar structures while they rapidly pass towards a new social and cultural realm that presents a few attributes holding together pieces of the present and the past.

This liminal period can be considered as being ‘neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony’ (Turner, 1969:95). As undocumented children they experience great difficulties in creating new households in exile because they have to prove their capacity to face hardship and earn money for financing their journeys or supporting their families back home. They also cope with a number of obstacles in their daily activities ranging from difficulties in engaging in education and finding employment, to restrictions of being in public places.

The boundaries imposed to these boys as new comers in a hosting country that neighbours their homeland, create significant problems to their living conditions that among other reasons contribute to their decision to move further ahead, thus challenging the ‘mythology’ of migrants’ return. The way children are classified as marginalised or delinquent members or the fact that they become rejected by the legal, political and social structures of the hosting country reflect the position of children in society and the governance of children’s migration. When hosting countries reject asylum seeking children, irregular migration takes place and as we have witnessed, children on the move become subjected to a variety of risks during the course of irregular movement.

The journey experiences provide a rich description of the lived circumstances of Afghan children who are on the move and heading to Western countries, including the several processes that take place from the moment they flee home until their arrival on the doorstep of Europe. These processes entail social, emotional and cultural transformations that have also consequences for their memories, identities and future paths.

As we have seen, forced migration compels children to seek irregular ways of travelling and one could expect that the innumerable risks that these boys take on the way would generate at least sympathy from the people they encounter. On the contrary, what we have witnessed so far is that the journey experiences are a circular process of children’s exploitation with many intermediaries involved; ranging from smugglers, strangers like the Kurdish mafia, authoritative people

like the Iranian military with the children at the time being at the heart of this curving channel of mobility. This type of movement, that seems to be the only way for many of the boys, leads us to conceptualise smuggling as a process that 'commodifies' human life as experienced by the boys, in the sense that human beings are disposed to the exchange of selling and buying.

In chapter 8, I develop the concept of commodification more broadly and I argue that commodification is part of the wider process of dehumanization that these children suffer. A brief consideration of the concept demonstrates a new dimension to the phenomenon of the migration business whilst it provides two distinct concerns: the first one is related to the price which is placed on the smuggled people and the fact that human beings are treated as commodities, or else as being economic goods in the asylum market and the second one relates to the moral consideration of states of failing to allocate protection and security for refugee children.

What has also emerged from the accounts of the boys is that unlike other types of peoples' movements, the unaccompanied young peoples' causes for migrating cannot be found exclusively in either the sending or the receiving country. Their causes of fleeing, and mobility experiences cannot be explained by the push and pull theory which was introduced in the literature review.

The multidimensional nature of children's transnational movements involves processes and structures to be found on micro, meso and macro levels. For example, a range of factors, not located in the sending - nor the receiving country has inclined these boys' journeys to Greece; the informal social networks have been identified as impactful on instigating and sustaining transnational mobilities. The access to smuggling networks along with the restrictions imposed by neighbouring countries regarding Afghans' reception are some of the factors that meticulously explain why these boys 'chose' to follow illegal paths and elucidate how their movements are organised in contemporary migration.

## 5.7. Conclusion

This chapter has made a number of significant contributions to understanding children's role in transnational migration. Firstly, by exploring the background context of the decision-making process of moving away I revealed children's active role in the decision-making process, countering the argument that children are passive victims of adults' decisions in the area of migration. Then the section on the First Move directly led us to the early experiences of children's first settlement away from home, in countries neighbouring Afghanistan. Children's accounts in relation to these first move experiences suggest that incidents of discrimination along with work-exploitation and marginality uncover mostly a period of 'liminality' consisting of circumstances of uncertainty as most children's status is socially and structurally ambiguous. Hence it is a period of preparation and organisation of the journey to the west. Children's experiences regarding their journeys to the west have provided an understanding on how and why irregular paths are decided, organised and controlled in forced migration, by demonstrating a number of obstacles: irregular border crossing, involvement in smuggling networks, risk-taking, and perilous journey conditions. All these have raised concerns as to the various forms of neglect, exploitation and human rights violations children have to bear when being on the move.

## **Chapter 6: Encountering the West – Becoming an asylum seeker: ‘The coastguards gave us water proof clothing and life vests and then they threw us into the sea.... six children’:**

### **6.1. Introduction**

In this chapter we see the apparent end of personal odysseys of young people as they manage to arrive on the doorstep of Europe; Greece as an EU member state is expected to be a new, safe home for them, or just another stage of their journeys. This chapter suggests that the personal odysseys of my informants have not really come to an end. It also sketches out the vicissitudes embedded within the institutional complexities young people go through when they arrive in Greece. They try to make sense of the cumbersome procedures of asylum and the bureaucratic maze they find themselves as undocumented, unaccompanied minors who seek or may not seek asylum in Greece. Confusion and complexity underpins the first days of their arrival along with a sense of alienation that reinforces the quest of moving away to another, more welcoming country.

### **6.2. The first days in Greece**

As noted in chapter 4, some of the boys fled their turbulent homes with the hope of finding safety, security and better opportunities. Their expectations about the hosting countries are often shaped by the information they gather from relatives but also on the way, from other migrants or smugglers. Some of this information is truthful, some is misleading and some is completely wrong. Most boys knew upon arrival in Greece that their objective is to keep on moving further afield. Some others were already feeling exhausted by the long, tiring and dangerous journey and this resulted in their decision to apply for asylum in Greece. For some boys it is more a matter of balancing the advantages and drawbacks of the current location against the option and risk of moving on to another location that may offer better opportunities. Nevertheless, once in Greece, all of them discover that their hopes for longer-term prospects remain enormously uncertain, given the lowest recognition rates of asylum in Europe (Shuster, 2011).

*Yunnan* (meaning Greece) is one of the words that crop up again and again in discussion with the boys as they describe their experiences in relation to their first days in Greece. Once crossing the borders young people follow their agents and co-travellers or split up in search for their relatives and friends who are already settled in Greece. All of them anticipated finding accommodation for the first days. Some boys just take the designated path to Athens and Patra where they spend some time until their next move to other European countries. Some others described sleeping rough in the open as it was the only option at that moment; others described their attempts greet the Greek authorities expecting that they would be offered assistance, support and a place to sleep upon arrival:

*I went to the police in the first Greek town I've been...by myself because I thought that they would help me. The police force in Greece is very bad...if we take in mind the European law [...] because they used violence on us....and they shouldn't do that, because we are minors. (Hakim)*

Hakim expected that once he made it to EU, he would be entitled to assistance and protection as an unaccompanied minor. This is why he decided to contact the Greek police right after he arrived in Greece. On the contrary, he realised that things turned out to be completely different. He ended up in a detention facility for 43 days somewhere near the Greek-Turkish borders where he experienced harassment and violence by the police officers. In a similar vein, a few other accounts demonstrate the expectations of young people to be provided with help and support by the authorities. Tamim recalled his first days in Greece; he arrived on a Greek island where he slept out in a forest, a cold night. The next day he decided to call the police in order to get accommodation and like Hakim he was detained for 20 days. Despite the prison-type restrictions of the detention facility, Tamim expressed his gratefulness for not having to sleep in the open any more.

Some boys seemed to be convinced, or they needed to believe, that all the risks and difficulties they encountered on the way to Greece were worth the effort; once in EU they expected that they would be reimbursed with the prospect of a better life. I will argue that this expectation is of great value for the ones who initiate such journeys full of difficulties and risks, in the sense that it feeds them with strength to resist to their constant struggles and helps them to endure their hardships. The meaning

people attribute to their extraordinary journeys lies in the core of the expected outcome of their journeys. As I will discuss in the last part of this chapter, when the hosting country fails to meet the expectations of refugees then their sense of identities is shattered and they may become nostalgic about the familiar home environment even more. Zabiullah's account reveals his disappointment arising from his early experiences as a new-comer in Greece. His expectations of a better life in Greece faded away after his first period of time in Greece:

*The first day I arrived in Greece I was so happy.... I said....at last.... I am out of hardship...I arrived in an good place and I will be able to study and accomplish my plans. Unfortunately, after a few days, when I witnessed the situation...I realised that here is worse than my country.*

Zabiullah's frustration stemmed from the treatment he received once he encountered the Greek authorities. Upon his arrival, he was intercepted by the police and detained for 18 days. After his release, he was transferred by police officers to a provincial town where he was abandoned by them in the street without money and food. When Zabiullah told them that he needed help to go to the nearest city, the police officers answered: *'the same way you came from Afghanistan to Greece'*. Zabiullah's anger about the behaviour of the police was evident during our interview. His experiences of his first days in Greece composed an image of the host country as being heartless, bleak and desolate. Thus, it has been observed that new-comers may feel completely lost and 'dislodged' within their new environment (Dunkas, 2007:338).

The majority of young people shared that they were expecting a better treatment by the Greek state, given the fact they were underage, war-affected young people who came alone in a new country. As most of them were unaware about the Greek asylum system, initially they thought that the first European host country would safeguard their rights and offer them protection and care – a prerequisite in civil legal jurisdiction. Overall, they shared that they became disenchanted by the behaviour of the Greek authorities because they were treated in an inhuman manner. Evidence of the inhuman response of the Greek state is the detention policy in which children are not treated different than adult migrants. Fekete's (2007) work on detained children in Europe, demonstrates that governments in EU, including Greece, continue to

violate International standards set out by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), by detaining children and young people, in some instances, for months. In her work she stresses that governments do not treat children as children but as if they were extensions of migrant adults or asylum-seeking adults (Fekete, 2007:97).

Strikingly, 26 out of the 30 participants stated they were detained just after they arrived in Greece. Some of them spent only a few days in detention while the majority spent from a few weeks up to a few months. It is worthy of note that some boys were not detained only because they were not detected and intercepted by the police. Only one boy chose not to talk about his experiences in relation to his first days in Greece. This boy was quite reserved and he didn't make any eye contact with me during the interview. Perhaps he was scared that I could misuse the shared information.

As outlined in the theoretical part of the thesis, in Greece there is absence of a sufficient number of reception facilities to accommodate the needs of unaccompanied minors, resulting in their detention which should be, according to the International law, a solution of 'last resort', in the sense that only in exceptional cases detention should be applied to unaccompanied minors (Shuster, 2004). Nevertheless, once UM arrive in Greece, they are detained on a regular basis proving that the Greek state constantly breaches the International and European law. In short, the suspension of law and exceptional mechanisms are becoming permanent solutions. Such evidence is further supported by a number of reports of UN agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations (UNHCR, 2008; FRA, 2010; EMN, 2010; OAN, 2009; IOM, 2008).

Bearing in mind the impact of detention on the formation of unaccompanied minors' experiences and identities upon their arrival in Greece, I will turn to what unaccompanied minors think of the detention conditions in Greece in a following subsection. Before doing so, I examine the procedures unaccompanied minors go through when they arrive in Greece while they are classified as unaccompanied asylum seeking minors.

### 6.3. Greek legislation and asylum procedures

The asylum procedure remains under the orders of the Ministry of Protection of the Citizen – which in practice means under the auspices of the police, the main institution involved in unaccompanied minors' reception. In some instances, the police is the only authority UM encounter upon their arrival, playing a key role in migration control at the borders and representing the political response in the eyes of the asylum seeking minors in this study. For this reason, I will give some additional consideration in relation to the practices and procedures the police are engaged in regarding reception and asylum identification of young people.

Looking closer at the asylum process, following the very first days of minors' entry in the country, what emerges is a vagueness that encircles the institutionalised framework of asylum. This vagueness stems from an unclear and complex set of processes, actions and decisions facilitated by authoritative people who are key actors in approving (or not) asylum. Power oscillates between legality and illegality, and affects various phases of the asylum process ranging from the assessment process to unaccompanied minors' placement and reception.

This process that is usually employed by the police to undocumented migrants, (including unaccompanied minors) is briefly depicted in the following account of Mohammad:

*We walked 18 hours. Then we were caught by the police and we went to a centre it was like a centre...but more like a jail. We spent one night there and then the other day the police made questions, asking why we came here...and other questions and then they took from us our fingerprints and they took money from us...65 euros from each person to buy us travel fares from the borders until Athens. And those who didn't have money they were left like that... to go wherever they wanted.*

This and some other accounts shows that unaccompanied minors, once apprehended by police guards, are transferred to a police station or to a detention facility where they get registered after following an interrogation, then police officers store their personal information and finally they get fingerprinted. The interrogation involves the assessment process where the examination of migrants' motives of entering

illegally into the Greek territory is examined along with efforts at the identification of the individuals. It is a process where the categorisation of the individuals takes place and perhaps it is the first time my young informants are classified as ‘asylum seekers’. I suggest that the classification of individuals in the asylum process is part of the wider process of dehumanization and I will explore this notion more in the final discussion of this section.

Fingerprinting is the next stage of the asylum procedure; it is part of the EU wide data sharing called EURODAC system which was created in 2005 aiming at storing information in digital form about individuals who cross borders illegally. This technocratic form of individual categorisation is part of a larger network that aims to objectify migrants and asylum seekers and it has been termed the EU’s ‘migration apparatus’ (Feldman, 2012).

The following abstract shared by Hassan, a 16-year-old boy, provides additional illustrations in relation to the first stage of screening:

*When we first entered in the Greek borders, we tried to go as far away from the borders as we could because we had the fear... to be arrested and deported. The police arrested us and they said to us that they would deport us back in Turkey but they didn't. We arrived at the police station and the policeman ordered us to sign a few papers.... we didn't understand anything so we didn't sign [...] then he slapped my face and I turned red.*

Here the border authorities evidently expose threats of deportation, and violent attitudes. The power of Greek state to move beyond law is something that becomes observable as the police officer ordered him to sign documents without interpreting or informing him of the nature of these documents. Such an action indicates the difficulty in distinguishing between the offences against the law with implementation of the law. Such is the vagueness encircles the whole asylum system in Greece.

The violent behaviour of the police officer in Hassan’s account implies that actions of violence are regular practices taking place in the border zones where asylum seekers are intercepted. The exercise of violence may be explained if we delve into the dominant perception of modern nations which divides people into two main categories; authorised versus unauthorised. Bacas (2010) speaks of a bias of the

migration management in favour of applicants who had identification documents. Individuals who are not able to obtain any legal identity are not only stripped of social and political rights but they are treated as offenders (criminals) who abuse the national order. Only the prerequisite of a valid passport permits the Greek state's favourable response. The ones who cannot obtain identification are disturbing figures for the state who need to be kept away, or punished for being intruders.

Afghan asylum seekers who arrive in Greece without passports or other authorised identification are classified as 'irregular'. '*Lathrometanastes*' is a word which is most often used in the public domain to describe new-comer migrants in Greece. It is negatively charged and means clandestine or people who are offenders because they don't have documents. The absence of a valid identification places unaccompanied minors, like all the rest of undocumented migrants, outside of the political order. This condition leaves them vulnerable to deportation, arrest, harassment, detention and violence. They can be subjected to unrestrained political state power exerted by state officials.

The weakness of Afghans to defend themselves and seek justice lies at the core of their illegal status. People who are categorised as 'illegal', like my informants, remain unprotected since they are believed to cause disruption of a state order based on fundamental categories for example, birth, nation, and citizenship (Agamben, 1998). Nevertheless, it is the current asylum regime in Europe which turns some of the ones who should claim for asylum into illegal migrants (Shuster, 2011). Glimpses into the Greek asylum procedure and legal structures gleaned through this research have shown that there are gaps, inconsistencies, and unreliability in some stages of the process, for example, the age assessment.

I will now draw on 2 accounts of my informants regarding age assessment – a crucial stage of the screening process – as it classifies individuals and determines their future prospects as potential refugees. It becomes obvious from most accounts that age assessment is based completely on the subjective and often biased judgement of the police officer who makes the first interview with the minor. The age assessment process often leads to anecdotal outcomes regarding the age and the disputed outcome determines the fates of the ones assessed. Mustafa's story reflects the

interrogation which has taken place between the police and the asylum seekers at the assessment process:

*When we arrived, we got arrested and then the police made us some questions, they wanted to know our age. I don't know the language and I don't speak English and when they asked me I said 15 years old and they wrote 40. I was also with two other minors, and for them they wrote down that they were 39 and 36. I was astonished...they don't see our faces?*

This example is indicative recurred in similar accounts of other minors. Despite the fact that minors' stories differ in form, they do not differ so much in meaning. Mustafa's account firstly implies the existence of misapprehensions, a factor stemming from the lack of interpreters at the screening stage. Secondly, given the fact that there is lack of sophisticated technological instruments that could be applied by the Greek authorities in order to determine the age of asylum seekers at the time of fieldwork, a reliable or even an approximate age assessment is not possible as suggested by the age proffered by the officers. Thus the discrepancy between reality and the subjective judgement of the policeman.

Some boys (6 interviewees) were keen to offer explanations about the subjective intention of the police officer to classify them as adults. They explained that it is easier for the police to manage a big load of undocumented adult migrants than to cope with a small number of UM because they have to follow a divergent procedure; more demanding, often complicated and time consuming. Since there is a limited number of reception centres in Greece, the police encounter difficulties in accommodating minors in appropriate places. Consequently, children and underage young people are being accommodated in detention facilities until the time a hosting centre is found. This is the reason why some minors may spend months in detention. This practice further explains the reason that some UM (4 interviewees) deliberately claim they are adults at the assessment process:

*...the other guys told us not to reveal our real age to the policemen, and to say we are 19 or 20, because if I say I am underage, they will keep me in jail for a long time. I claimed I was 19 years old. And that's why I spend only one night at the police station and the next day they let me go. (Tzafar)*

Indeed, what emerged from young people's first days is that the ones who claimed to be adults were released after a couple of days in detention with the so called 'white paper' in their hands. This document issued to the majority of undocumented migrants is only written in the Greek language, and thus remains incomprehensible. It states that the holder of this document is permitted to stay in Greek territory for 30 days. If the holder of the white paper exceeds this period of time, then s/he should leave the country or else s/he will be deported in case of arrest. Some boys shared that they didn't have any idea of the 30-day limitation inscribed in the white paper and others revealed that they were informed about it by other co-travellers. This is another example of systemic vagueness that I discussed previously.

Remarkably, the Greek state assigns a temporarily semi-legal status to undocumented migrants and asylum seekers after their release from detention. This state practice shows a point where the fault line between illegality and legality becomes indistinct. According to the accounts of young people, those who claimed to be adults were not interested in applying for asylum in Greece and they did not care about the semi-legal nature of their status – intending to move on from the outset.

So far, the discussion has focused on practices adopted by the police at land borders in Evros region in the north east. The response of the state towards new-comers who arrive in Greece via the sea presents some different tactics. Even though, there are similar legal structures applied when an undocumented migrant is intercepted at land or at sea, it should be stated that migrants and refugees who enter the country via the sea, run the additional risk of an immediate refoulement. Practices of refoulement are extensively applied in the sea as a strategy of combating undocumented migration. Non-refoulement is a key facet of refugee terminology which derives from the French word 'refouler' (to force back) and concerns the protection of refugees from being returned or pushed back to places where they could be persecuted and their lives could be in danger.

Greece has signed a readmission agreement with Turkey officially in 2002 to return unwanted and undocumented migrants (ProAsyl *et al.* 2012). According to the agreement, third country nationals can be returned back to Turkey after going through fast and simplistic procedures. This practice results in forced returns of people who

haven't had the possibility to present an asylum claim or to access any legal remedies against their forced deportation. Human rights are extensively violated as long as these forced returns take place (Karamanidou & Shuster, 2011).

A few accounts confirm that port police guards have attempted to return or push back migrants and asylum seekers to Turkey immediately after they crossed the Turkish-Greek border. As set forth in Article 33 (1) of the 1951 Convention, the principle of non-refoulement mirrors the commitment of the International community that refugees should not be returned where their lives have been threatened and their rights have been violated (Karamanidou & Shuster, 2011). It is also highlighted that no expulsion measures should be carried out before a decision has been reached on the asylum claim.

However, the interviews and my informal discussions with the young people leave no room for doubts that refoulement and deportation practices take place in the Greek territory even when these 'illegal migrants' are children and young people in need of protection. Ali's account illustrates the aggressive manner of these push-backs and the illegitimacy of the actions of the authorities:

*A few minutes before arriving in Samos we were caught by the port police. All the people in the ship...we were children, underage. The police were wondering...where the hell we found this nice and big boat. Then they asked who is talking English? And we replied nobody because we were scared that they could send us back in Turkey. They said that they were about to throw us in the sea... to go back to Turkey...and we started talking English.... five people from us and we were begging them not to do that. They started making questions about the mafia.... but we were afraid that if we tell them the truth we would be in trouble.... because our smuggler was a big mafia...very powerful. In the end, they gave us proper clothing and a life vest and then they threw us into the sea.... six children...and we were screaming in the middle of the sea, somewhere between Turkey and Greece.*

In the end, a Turkish fisherman saved the children and brought them back to a Turkish shore to safety. According to Ali's story, these kids walked four days back to Istanbul in order to arrange their second endeavour to cross the Turkish-Greek Sea via the same smuggler; they shared a boat with a family, but again they were intercepted in the middle of the sea. This time they were lucky enough not to be

forcefully expelled back to Turkey by the Greek port police. Ali's story reveals a quite bleak picture of the heartless response of the state agents towards undocumented children and raises moral questions of how we treat children who are not regarded as 'our own' children. Apart from the illegitimacy of the Greek refoulement practice in this account, the ineffective character of such a practise is also evident; often those who are expelled back to Turkey, as we observe, may return back to Greece a few days later.

The incident described by Ali gives me the ground to present a recent operation performed by the police aiming to clear the Greek territory and prevent unwanted and undocumented migrants. This operation has been named '*Xenios Zeus*' by the Ministry of Public Order. The background of the name *Xenios Zeus* is instructive. In Ancient Greece hospitality was considered an act of virtuousness. Foreigners were protected by the gods of Zeus and Athena *Xenia*, and also the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux. There was a divine requirement for the care of foreigners and it was perceived a sin to respond poorly to their coming. Hospitality was followed by a ceremony and provided to every stranger, who, irrespectively of the class they belonged to, could stay in a special room in a 'hostel'.

The paradox is that, nowadays, the philosophy reflected in the concept of *Xenios Zeus* is being ironically used by the Greek state for the opposite purpose. The police operation of *Xenios Zeus* aims to get rid of migrants (including asylum seekers) through forced returns, detention and deportation practices. This operation was launched in August 2012 and since then there have been numerous police sweeps and push-back endeavours resulting in high numbers of expulsions and imprisoned migrants, according to the Amnesty International (2010).

Incidents like the one described in Ali's account are just one of a number which mirror the bitter reality of the procedures the Greek state embraces in order to combat the challenging phenomenon of migration. This background gives the foundation on which aspects of the police attitudes and practices can be further explored and discussed. The aspects analysed in the following part of the chapter, as we shall see, have profound social, political and psychological implications for those experiencing such behaviours.

## 6.4. Police Attitudes and Practices

*M.: We walked 18 hours. Then the police caught us and we went to a centre it was like a centre...but more like a jail (detention camp).*

*V.: How did the police treat you?*

*M.: That was very bad.... they beat me...and they smacked me... policemen were very bad with refugees...*

These are the words of Mohammad who was allegedly beaten by the police from the very first moments he arrived in Greece. A lot of distress seems to be contained in his words. In Mohammad's reflections one might get a sense of how it feels to be an Afghan unaccompanied minor who has just arrived in Greece.

Listening to Mohammad's account one might wonder how a young boy may feel when experiencing prolonged violence and hardship. Mohammad's negative experiences of police violence did not come to an end after his release at his first days in Greece. He was beaten by the police almost every day for nine months. Just like many other minors, he moved to Patra (a port city) where he spent nine months, from where he was trying to hide under the lid of the trucks bound for ferries to Bari, Ancona or Venice in Italy. Due to the strict port controls, he was noticed by the police and he had to bear with the aggressive consequences. In a similar vein, Roshnan recalled his unpleasant experiences about police attitudes, but with glimpses of a lighter mood:

*Oh it is so difficult from Patra, the police are coming and they carry this.... I don't know how you call it...something like a big stick and if they see us in hiding in the truck.... they hit us (laughs). Once the policeman hit me very hard on my feet and then I couldn't walk for three days.... (laughs).*

Other boys also disclosed that they were abused by the police during their stay in Greece. For reasons of clarity, I should mention that the shared accounts do not only refer to incidents of violence which occur upon minors' arrival in Greece but are reflections of experiences that occurred at most points of their stay in Greece. Most interviews with young people revealed that Greek police officers present a corrupted face and often they used their power in abusive ways towards migrants.

Some boys disclosed that they experienced harassment and violence for unfounded reasons for example, when they were not able to understand the Greek language in the absence of interpreters. Incidents of humiliation were described as part of the official process of the asylum assessment. According to Hassan “*they use violence and they are commanding so that we will be scared of them and do whatever they say*”. Such police tactics of corporeal and verbal control recalls the general point Foucault made about prisons and the creation of docile society in *Discipline and Punish* (1977).

Suroor a 16-year-old boy disclosed his experiences regarding the attitudes of the police when he was intercepted in the middle of the sea on his way to Italy:

*... I was beaten up.... a lot....by the police. They threatened me that they would beat me to death; they wanted me to say the name of the smuggler who arranged our journey. I was so scared of the police....and I said his name. This was something I had to pay very hard later on...*

Suroor was aware of the harsh situation regarding asylum in Greece. He had been informed by a friend who had been in Greece before him who had also experienced the brutality of the Greek authorities. Suroor’s perception of a hostile Greek situation that rejects and excludes asylum seekers prompted him to avoid crossing Greece when travelling. He embarked from Turkey on a sea trip to Italy but on the way the ship broke down and had to be immobilised for four days in the middle of the sea. Then, Suroor and his co-travellers were arrested by the Greek port guards and they were transferred to a police station in an island for interrogation.

The aggressive form of interrogation involving brutality and threats that was described by Suroor can be regarded as a modern method of torture that aims to establish the truth. It resembles greatly the investigations in pre-modern Europe so aptly described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). The fact that the police officer uses different forms of violence (physical and psychological) in the search for information is a regulated practice which aims to impose power.

Hakim was intercepted by the police once he tried to get secretly into a truck on the way to Italy:

*Only once I tried to go to Italy, because they found me and they hit me so hard that I couldn't stand up for a week. I know that police men often break the bones of the people so they will not be able to move. They are so cruel...they put the refugees into the car.... they blind them .... they put something on their eyes, and they can't see anything and they drive them very far away and then they drop them there, so they have to walk for days to reach a city.*

Another boy, Amir provided an explanation about the police attitudes:

*I think that most of them [the Greeks], for example the ones who have some kind of authority, like the policemen.... they are fascists and they don't want foreigners in the country.*

The words *fascists* and *racists* appeared quite often during the discussion I had with the minors especially at the focus groups as the circumstances of group discussions encompass the expression of such views given the fact of common experiences and procedures. However, some of them opted to give a more tactful opinion about authoritative people (like police officers) by saying that in every country there are both nice and bad people, friendly and unfriendly. The difficulties in accepting refugees in Greece may be linked to various developments such as economic, changes in social structure, and the very recent immigration history of Greece. Whereas none of these factors can justify the constant brutalities and human rights violations which occur in the migration milieu, it should be acknowledged that there were also references to friendly and positive experiences regarding the attitudes of the police. For example, Nazim stated that the police officers were very good and caring to him, he thinks because he was clearly a child at that time. Another boy, Alisher shared that: *“The only authorities I came in contact when we arrived was the police. In Greece the police treated us good”*. Likewise, Mashal referred to decent treatment he received by the police:

*They were very kind and good with me...they told me to go to a reception centre and I asked them why and they said: ‘I was very young and I would be better living in a reception centre’.*

My field note regarding the account of Mashal may explain why he has a good impression of the police: ‘His father used to be a policeman, at some point I asked

him what he would like to do for a living in Greece and he replied that the work he most admires is to be a policeman even though this may never happen.’ Nevertheless, this doesn’t necessarily mean that his background and experiences of the past predisposed him to refer to the nice behaviour of the police.

## 6.5. In Detention

Undocumented migrants are often paralleled with criminals and are blamed for the severity of Greece’s economic problems. One of the priorities of the last appointed government was to respond with restrictions and tight controls in order to combat illegal migration. As a result, very recently new detention centres popped up as mushrooms and were filled up with migrants and asylum seekers, among them children and young people. At the same time, the reception centres who are to accommodate minors are semi-functioning and some of them are about to be shut down. But this situation does not seem to be merely a Greek problem. For comparative purposes I will only mention that in UK, where detention of children seems to be one of the weakest points in policy. In the lack of government statistics, the campaigning umbrella group, ‘No place for a child’ estimates that around 2,000 children are detained each year in UK (*Society Guardian*, 12 July 2006 in Fekete, 2007). This number may not be conceived as high as in other EU countries, however UK has been criticised for detaining fewer children for longer time (Fekete, 2007).

Over the past few years, Greece has been thoroughly observed, critiqued and condemned, by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT), by the United Nations Committee Against Torture (UNCAT), the Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Union (FRA) and by international NGOs (such as ProAsyl, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch). Some reports published by the aforementioned agencies and organisations have repeatedly reported the appalling conditions that exist in the detention centres and an overall dehumanising treatment of asylum seekers in Greece.

The accounts of young people confirm the reported egregious detaining conditions (overcrowded, cold bare cells, no proper sanitary facilities, lack of hygiene, lack of medical care, lack of interpreters), and convey an image which is shocking and

dehumanizing. It is not surprising that all boys who have been detained used the word *prison* or *jail* with reference to their detention. Greek legislation<sup>14</sup> regarding the care and reception of unaccompanied minors requires separation of adults from children when being in detention. However, young people reported that they were placed in mixed cells together with adults. Only one of the four detention centres in the region of Evros provides a separate cell for minors, but due to the overcrowded conditions it rarely accommodates only minors.

In response to the debate on the age assessment of the asylum procedure, some minors were registered incorrectly as adults and they were treated as such, while running the risk of serious exploitation. The Special Rapporteur on torture, (CPT) Manfred Nowak stated in his report of March 2011: [...] «*This vulnerable group is at risk to be exposed to various forms of ill-treatment including sexual abuse when not properly separated from adults*» (p.20f in ProAsyl *et.al.* 2012). Ill-treatment has been reported by the majority of minors who disclosed that they have been treated like any other undocumented adult migrant and experienced physical and psychological abuse; although none of them referred to sexual abuse. Hakim who was detained in Evros region disclosed:

*We were 120 people all in one room and some kids were sleeping in the toilet. During my time in detention I had to see three times the doctor. It was awful.*

Hakim was 15 years old when detained and he was forced to bear with the described conditions for 43 days. As mentioned earlier the detention length of minors varies according to the availability of spare places in a reception centre, the lack of staff and supplies for the transfer, and also the burden put on individual cases by lawyers (Pro Asyl *et.al.* 2012:69).

Hakim's words capture the dehumanising image of detention in Greece. According to his opinion, detention centres in Greece are not made for human beings. He stated that it is not possible to be a human and being treated like that. Another boy, Amir

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<sup>14</sup> Article 13, para 6b PD 114/2010: “They shall avoid detaining minors. Children separated from their families and unaccompanied minors shall be detained for only the necessary time till their safe referral to adequate centres for accommodation of minors”; Presidential Decree 141/1991, <Competencies and internal regulations of the personnel of the Ministry of Public Order>,« art. 67, para. 3» Military personnel, police officers, women and minors shall be detained in special detention places «(unofficial translation) ».

had similar experiences. His account reveals the unacceptable conditions in detention especially when he refers to the congested conditions prevailing in detention that can be hardly tolerated:

*It was worse than a jail.... very.... very bad. We were more than one hundred people in a tiny room...terrible.*

Both Hakim and Amir described incidents of the detainees fighting on a regular basis due to the overcrowded conditions; often fights would breakout as people were getting more and more violent due to the lack of space, food and a place to sleep. Shirzard a 16-year-old boy provided reflections of police abuse and their ineffective response to a health emergency which raises moral issues regarding the alleviation of human suffering and the fostering of human dignity. Police appear to adopt a rather 'punishing' role that is most often applied to offenders in prisons and did not seem to make any distinctions regarding UM:

*When I arrived the police had very bad behaviour, they made me take out my clothes and my belt and everything and they took my money [...] in prison, we didn't have much food. One day we started making noise they [the police] started to beat us with their globs and one guy...broke his hand [...] the police came to see that his hand was broken and they put two pieces of wood around his hand and they tied everything together and after three days his hand got swollen.(Shirzard)*

Often police and border guards forced detainees to take away all their clothes and belongings when incoming detention. A few accounts confirm that detainees are stripped off their belongings including their money, which very seldom are given back. Their bags are taken by the police officers and placed outside in a yard along with the bags of the rest of the people. Often detainees cannot find their belongings upon release. Shirzard, shared that the anger and the abusive behaviour of the police is most often multiplied by detainees' complaints and protests about the food and medical assistance. Some of the boys referred to the quality of the food and its consequences:

*It was very tough. I remember once we had lunch and afterwards everybody had diarrhoea. All the doors were locked, and we were not allowed to move around.... like being in jail. (Mahdi)*

The fact that detainees are provided with food which cause health implications confirms the prevailing dehumanising conditions and the lack of respect for the people who are being detained. Other accounts demonstrate lack of hygiene, the lack of furniture and personal space, clothing and hot water. One boy mentioned that these places are so terrible and intolerable that even animals would have problems. Such descriptions not only underscore the existing inhuman conditions in Greek detention facilities, but also trigger feelings of anger, shame, disappointment and despair.

As already mentioned, most UM in this study entered the Greek borders via the Evros River resulting in their detention in that region. Given the small number of my sample, I should avoid making generalisations about the rest of the detention facilities. Nevertheless, there are more reports and research available about the detention conditions in Evros than any other region in Greece (see ProAsyl *et.al.* 2012).

Such conditions seem to expose the insufficiency of the Greek institutional infrastructure in dealing in an ethical and responsible manner with the issue of migration and asylum. The effects of detention for the ones who experience it have been addressed as severe by a number of studies mainly from the medical and psycho-social domain (Fazel & Silove, 2006; Keller *et al.* 2003; Koopowitz & Abhary, 2004; Pourgourides *et al.* 1996; Salinsky 1997; Steel *et al.* 2006). Such studies suggest that the harmful effects of detention in most cases continue following release. For instance, the short term effects of detention may include stress, nightmares, anxiety, sleeplessness, skin problems, weight of loss and persistent respiratory problems (Fekete 2007:100). Long-term effects include depression, high levels of emotional distress, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, self-harm, behavioural changes and an undermining of the ability to concentrate and learn (*ibid*). Also we shouldn't overlook that UM are a group of people who experience detention in a number of countries on their way to Europe, with a few of them reported to have being detained in Iran, Pakistan and Turkey before their arrival in Greece. When they are locked up again in a new hosting country such as Greece, they run the risk of re-traumatisation as their minds go back to their early experiences (Fekete, 2007). This

condition of re-calling distressing experiences occurred many times in the case of Hassan.

Hassan, a 16-year-old minor looked quite nervous during the interview. At the first phase of our interview he said that he wanted to light a cigarette but he was feeling embarrassed to smoke at my presence. He said to me: *'it's a cultural thing; I will show disrespect because you are a woman.'* After a while and during the course of our discussion, he seemed to be more relaxed and he lit his first cigarette.

Hassan is one of these boys who have spent more time in detention facilities than being out. Once he arrived in Greece, he was detained for a couple of days and after his release, he wanted to continue his journey to North Europe. In Serbia, he was intercepted and as a result he was put in jail. After being for a month in jail, Serbian police deported him back to Skopje where he was detained for a month and then he was deported back to Greece where he spent another month in detention, until he ended up in a reception centre. During the course of his narrative, Hassan looked anxious as he retrieved his experiences from detention. At some point, he paused, he showed me his hands and he said:

*Do you see those scars? Even if I want to forget I can't...I have the scars to remind me of my time in jail. I got crazy there... so much that I started stubbing out cigarettes on me. I hated smoking. I didn't smoke back home...I started in jail.*

Hassan's story is a representative example of the side effects that unaccompanied minors experience when they are detained. Hassan has been treated as a common criminal as he was being transferred from jail to jail. His self-harming actions evidently prove that the harm done to detained children and young people, as documented here, is incalculable. What also stems from Hassan's account, is that detention is not a once and for all phase that occurs upon arrival of undocumented migrants. In fact, UM faced detention depending on individual circumstances and aspirations.

Detention was an 'extremely stressful and frustrating period of time' not only because of the degrading living conditions but also due to the fact that they were unaware of when they would be released. This method of living, being kept in the darkness by

not providing any information regarding their whereabouts is a well-applied method which severely affects the mental state of the people. It can be said that detention not only violates the rights of children but is an act of ‘child abuse’ with serious emotional consequences (Fekete, 2007).

However, some detention experiences presented another image, not so bleak. Specifically, two boys mentioned that they had a good time while being in detention. Their experiences differ from the majority of the shared stories about detention. These boys were detained in the same place and once they arrived in a Greek island they contacted the police. Alisher who was detained together with his uncle (also a minor) narrates:

*[...] we spent 21 days in that centre. It looked like a jail.... but we had a very nice time... after our adventures and what we've been through it was like a nice break. We had a lot of fun all these days, I remember we had good company, we were singing, and dancing....it was a lot of fun. [...] we met a woman there...she was working in the detention centre.... maybe she was a social worker I don't know.... but she was very friendly with us and ... she was very moved by our stories and what we had been through that she started crying [...] They [the police officers] were very good with us and especially with the young people.... we had a sort of freedom...and that's why we had fun.*

Alisher's account provides an optimistic perspective about detention which can be rarely found in the stories of people who have been detained. He makes two significant points regarding his positive experiences; the first one is about the welcoming and friendly attitudes of the staff and the second one is about the sense of freedom that was evident in such a closed facility. The attitudes of the police and the rest of the people who work in detention facilities are of great importance and affect very much the perception of newcomers regarding the hosting country and their decision of settling or moving further.

It is not surprising that young people who experienced violence by the police during their first days in Greece, decided to move elsewhere. Furthermore, the restrictions and control which are imposed to detained people serve a concrete objective; to make them feel unwelcomed and unwanted. For example, Martin (2011) demonstrates how children get stuck in detention centres and become witnesses to an apparatus which

not only deprives them from their sense of freedom but also from their political agency. On the other hand, when the attitudes of the staff in detention facilities are positive, like in the description of Alisher, then people are likely to construct a positive image of their future prospects in the hosting country.

Another boy who was also detained in the same place shared his positive memories. This boy referred to the positive living conditions of the detention facility whilst he conveyed a sense of an ample and spacious living that managed to dissipate the feeling of being in a closed and restrained place like jail:

*Then they moved me and placed me in a centre which was not an open one but it was very good, because I had much space for playing football and basketball. We had a TV, nice food, washing machines, it was clean and everything...it was very nice there, it was a detention camp.*

The very few accounts of positive experiences in detention may offer the ground of considering the impact of the divergent response towards the reception of UM. Overall, the findings in relation to detention raise concerns about the implementation of detention as a regular method with regards to the reception of UASM. In most cases the conditions in detention have been described as appalling and threatening for the physical and mental health of the minors.

## **6.6. After release**

Once released from detention, UM who have been registered as underage are transferred directly to reception centres that accommodate unaccompanied male minors, and the ones who have been registered as adults are released without any further support and guidance. Both groups are issued a paper which, as mentioned earlier, is a deportation order and it is valid for 30 days (the same as adults). The ones, who have been registered as adults and those who managed to avoid detention and the attention of the police, often head directly to Patra and Athens, main points of concentration for asylum seekers or to provincial places where seasonal work can be found, such as Argos, Sparta and Thiva. Their only aim is to organise their next move. Athens is preferred for the high number of refugees, for the authorities, smuggling networks, NGOs and the opportunity to stay in friend's places or in

informal hotels. Patra is one of a choice for the opportunity to reach Italy by stowing away in trucks connecting to Italy. Some minors reported time between Athens and Patra before ending up in a hosting centre. Tamim's story clearly illustrates his back and forth movements:

*I spent four months in Athens and then I went to Patra and stayed there for six months and then I returned back to Athens for six months and then again I went back to Patra and I stayed a year. After...I came back to Athens for a few months and finally I came here to the reception centre.*

These resettlements between Patra and Athens are quite typical for the minors who are persistent in their wish to leave Greece. After being exhausted from their repeated efforts of sneaking into a truck in Patra, usually minors move to Athens with the prospect of staying temporarily in order to regain their strength. What we observe here is constant movements in search of ways to sustain their endeavours of moving elsewhere. Hussein's account further explains how his initial intentions of settling in Greece changed during his first period of time in Greece:

*Before coming in Greece I was hoping things were good here...and that I could live here. When I entered the Greek borders I witnessed terrible behaviour by the police....and I didn't expect that the police here to talk like that and treat people like that. They treated me very bad [...] I didn't want to stay here...I went to Patra for seven months trying to go to Italy.*

While some minors like Hussein referred to the inappropriate response of the police as being the main factor that shaped their decision of moving out from Greece, some others referred to the inefficiency of the Greek asylum system to legalise asylum seekers. The abstract of Amir's account is quite representative in the sense that minors are being pushed away from Greece:

*It's not worthy to apply for asylum here.... since we know they will give us a negative answer. I will try to go to Norway, if I find the money.*

Young people's desire of obtaining a legal status perhaps explains why their endeavours of moving away from Greece are persistent despite the risks, and hardship they meet along their way. It may also be the fact that upon release from detention minors find out that some co-travellers manage to make it to the other side (to Italy) but most often they are ignorant about the entailed difficulties and risks. For

example, Hakim after being released from detention was transferred to a reception centre where he stayed for a while and then he moved to Patra in order to go to Italy. At that point Hakim was completely unaware of the difficulties in such an attempt:

*When I came in the reception centre I didn't like it and I wanted to try to continue to other countries via the port in Patra. But when I witnessed the situation I got very scared, I thought that life is very sweet and I wanted to live so I came back in the camp. I was beaten by the police [...] and I became so tanned like the guys from Africa (laughing).... I was out all day and night. We were drinking water from the sea.... because we had a water facility but they broke it down. There is a lot of racism in Patra.*

The word 'poor' fails to describe sufficiently the living conditions of young Afghans in Patra. All minors who have been in Patra reported to have slept in the open or in abandoned factories and makeshift shanties for quite a long time (in some instances for six months) together with other adult and young asylum seekers. They shared that they didn't have food for days; they were searching rubbish bins for food and didn't have water to make a shower. Except for the high probability of being detected when sneaking into a truck and receiving police violence, minors who avoid police controls and manage to get into a truck, meet further incalculable risks; indicatively, I will mention that very recently an Afghani minor was found dead by the police inside of a lorry headed to Italy from the port of Igoumenitsa. The minor, had suffocated to death (*Thepressproject.gr*, 22 of May 2014).

Such incidents remind us of the risks minors have to encounter as undocumented migrants who try to reclaim their lives. The only reason that makes someone to endure such conditions is the hope "to escape under the lid of a truck that will take him to a better place." This hope appears to be quite powerful as it makes young people withstanding the most perilous conditions:

*In Patra I had a very tough time....I didn't have a place to stay, I was staying out in a park with other Afghans and we were eating from the rubbish bins. So it was really tough, but the only reason I was there was to cross the sea and go to Italy, but I didn't manage. (Tamim)*

None of the boys who participated in this study managed to surpass the strict controls in the ports and make it to Italy. They all acknowledged the tremendous difficulties that are entailed in such an attempt, including the violent response of the police when

they notice minors hiding into the trucks. Only two boys shared that they managed to arrive to Italy but not via Patra's port; these boys had paid a lot of money to travel by boat with a smuggler to Italy. But when they arrived to Italy they were returned back to Greece:

*It is very risky...and very difficult to make it to Italy. We had very tough time, the engine of our boat had a problem and we were left in the sea.... only waiting and we didn't have any food.... we had some water and this was for four days. Finally, we arrived to Italy [...] ...I stayed 13 days in Italy.... people there were very nice.... they were smiling...they helped us...then they told us that we should return to Greece...because Greek authorities wanted us back. But I liked it a lot .... I would like to go back to this place. (Rahman)*

Rahman disclosed that he arranged to move to Italy after being accommodated in reception centre in Greece. Since he was registered as an unaccompanied asylum seeker minor, the Greek authorities requested his return. Therefore, the fact that Italian authorities return unaccompanied migrant children to Greece occurs in violation of international standards. Italian and international law explicitly prohibits the summary expulsion or removal of unaccompanied migrant children (HRW, 2013). Overall, the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration in all actions concerning children and young people, including those undertaken by administrative authorities or police, and containing in the immigration context (UNCRC)<sup>15</sup>.

Nevertheless, this condition of waiting to move onwards and navigating between places temporarily in order to find ways of moving further can be perceived as a transitional period of time which can be quite stressful and uncertain. Permanent settlement is also uncertain as it is subject to the outcome of minor's efforts to move elsewhere. Often minors, at this stage, remain illegal since their 'white paper' is already expired and they run the risk of deportation. They think that it is worthy to move to a 'more promising' country in terms of asylum even though most of them

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<sup>15</sup> Consolidated Immigration Act, article 19.2; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.6, UN Doc. CRC/GC/2005/6 (2005), paras. 84 (prohibiting return of a child to country of origin only if it is in the best interests of the child), 26 (prohibiting refoulement of a child to any country "where there are substantial grounds for believing there is a real risk of irreparable harm to the child"), and 19-22 (detailing steps to be taken to determine the best interests of the child, including at para. 20, "allowing the child access to the territory [as] a prerequisite to this initial assessment process").

have been fingerprinted in Greece and they know it is likely that they will be deported back once they make it to another country.

In a similar vein Papadopoulou (2004) has described the transition conditions of Kurd asylum seekers in Greece and addressed the processes of temporary and permanent settlement. In her work, Greece is conceived a transit place for the Kurds as it is 'the waiting room', the place to settle temporarily until their next move. Nevertheless, there is a vast difference in the study of Papadopoulou; once in Greece, Kurds apply for asylum and wait for the outcome of their claim. In this study, the majority of the minors do not want to apply for asylum in Greece but they hope to move further afield. What seems to be apparent along the way is that applying for asylum in Greece is a solution of 'last resort'.

Some boys like Tamim reported that the financial support of their parents sustained the transit stage of waiting until the next move and made it more enjoyable:

*My time in Athens was good...we were staying five people together we were renting a flat, we found ways to get money so we could eat, for example we were calling our parents and they were sending us money sometimes or my friends were getting money from other friends and we could sustain ourselves like this for months.*

Tamim's account offers reflections on his temporary settlement in Athens. He was back and forth between Athens and Patra until he got exhausted and decided to go to a reception centre. His account describes ways of living and surviving the very first period of time in Greece thus, receiving support by friends seems to be vital at this stage. Generally, minors who had money reported staying temporarily in shared flats in Athens with other people often of the same ethnicity. Some others didn't have the luxury of staying in a shared flat and they had to put up with the street conditions.

Street experiences reflect an inevitable condition of settling temporarily with other co-travellers while there is the opportunity of being informed about what lies ahead. There are certain parks, squares and streets in Athens where Afghanis and people of other ethnicities gather, contact smugglers, sleep, discuss, seek jobs and wander for some time. Some boys mentioned having spent months sleeping in parks and streets:

*We stayed out in the park (Pedion tou Areos) for long time and we were getting some food from the church. After a while I found some money and I return to Patra, to give it another try.*

Another boy, Hassan mentioned that when he arrived in Greece he had a lot of money (7.500 euros) and he was living in decent conditions as he could afford paying the rent and buy food for a few months until he was deceived by his smuggler and lost 3.500 euros. Hassan's case of deception is one of a number suggesting that hope and vulnerability makes people more prone to fraud.

It seems that the exchange with smugglers is an on-going process that may affect various areas and stages of people's movements. It clearly affects not only the preordained routes, and the journeys about also the living conditions of minors in transit places and destinations. Mahdi is one of the very few boys who applied for asylum during his first days in Greece:

*In Athens I tried to apply for asylum through GCR...and I got a pink card. So I spent one month in Athens.... I didn't know any people.... I couldn't find any job....I just paid a little money and I stayed with other Afghans in one room.*

In Mahdi's account we can observe a sense of insecurity arising from the uncertain legal status and the unstable living conditions during his first period of time in Greece. The difficulty to find work along with the difficulty to make contacts with the local people (based on the different language and culture) brings a sense of alienation and a strong need to maintain links with people of the same ethnicity who may also be conceived as friends of lifeline as they are the main source of support at this stage.

Only three accounts reveal intentions of settling in Greece upon release. A representative example of these is the case of Mashal who was decisive to settle in Greece from the moment he fled home. Right from his first hours in Greece, Mashal was most interested in the opportunity of earning money and help his family and make a living in Greece. As a matter of fact, from his second day in Greece he headed to places where he could get a job:

*I spend a few hours in Athens and then I went to Thiva straight away to start working there. I found an agricultural job....and I was working.... And then I went to Argos and I stayed there for six*

*months. I was working to a seasonal job.... I was picking up the oranges. Then I went again back to Thiva. I stayed for six more months there I was working for someone who had many vegetables...cucumbers...tomatoes, aubergines, and many things. I was getting 600 euros per month....and then some people told me this island is a very nice place with nice people....so I tried to come here.*

Mashal had been moving between places where seasonal jobs with agricultural tasks could be found. This period of time indicates an adjustment period at which the newcomer becomes familiar with the local culture, while being integrated into the informal labour market. It's a stage where the prospect of earning money sets the ground for further endeavours of settlement and integration. It should be noted that Mashal made efforts for settling in Greece and this is evident in his description of moving from one place to the other in order to find work, even with the minimum wages and the most unfavourable working conditions.

My field notes illustrate: 'Mashal managed to make all the rest of the people giggling and laughing at his story during focus groups due to his ability to convert his pitfalls and bizarre incidents into funny tales.' Another characteristic which derives from Mashal's account is his sense of dignity and determination to get ahead. Such characteristics alongside with other forms of resilience and strength will be further addressed and analysed in section 8.4.

Despite some degree of evidence of intentions for permanent staying in Greece the majority of young people expected and tried to move elsewhere. What I received from my young informants at this stage of their early experiences in Greece is they live in a state of 'liminality' once again and they constituted a group of people who are invisible in the public realm. They do not have any rights and any obligations. They are just shadows for the Greek people. In reality, young people at this stage seem to be more tied up with their own homeland and other destination countries than with the current place they are staying. Most of them maintain bonds with people in other European countries and also with people of the same ethnicity whilst they try to keep contacts with their homeland. Furthermore, the majority of young people demonstrated that they received assistance and support by people of the same ethnicity, sometimes in the form of money and settlement.

So far what has emerged is that the first period upon arrival in Greece is conceived again by the young informants as a transition until the next stage of their journey. The myriad problems experienced, including the management of asylum seekers and the implementation of strict policies have pushed Greece to the fore as a transit country for Afghans heading to Europe rather than a destination. The study has ascertained that the restricted measures implemented in the border zones (i.e.: detention, refoulement), the conditions in detention along with the aggressive attitudes of the Greek authorities and the obscure likelihood for a refugee recognition are the main drivers fuelling the decision of minors to seek asylum into other regions within EU.

## 6.7. Reflections

Crossing borders freely because of citizenship and national belonging is a reality for many people “*an expression of (post) modern mobility in a globalised world*”, but for my young respondents this becomes a struggle for survival and a distant dream (Jönsson, 2014:136). From the moment they set their feet in Western territory their position in relation to the institutional power they encounter, suggest that there is a profound asymmetry of power which leans against them. Upon arrival they are classified as ‘undocumented’ and ‘illegal’ since they lack a lawful status (De Genova, 2002) and as such they emerge as a political problem for a developed nation such as Greece (ibid). They are seen as offenders and outcasts who present intentions of staying in the hosting country and consequently living at the expense of the locals in terms of abusing the welfare resources.

Such perceptions have led the Greek state, according to the stories of the young respondents, to adopt harsh inflow preventive measures at land and at sea (i.e. construction of fence at the borders, rigorous controls by Frontex, police and port forces) and punitive methods that are commonly applied to criminals, i.e. detention. The states’ response to the presence of displaced unaccompanied young people who should be granted asylum is in conflict firstly with the International and European legislation (see chapter 2) and secondly with the anticipation of the young respondents to find protection and care after having risked their lives under inhuman conditions.

Nevertheless, the first encounter between the boys and the Greek state representatives revealed how the Greek state with its systems, personnel and apparatus dehumanised them (Feldman, 2012). Without a legitimate place in the political order (as undocumented) most of the boys were subjected to unrestrained state power. The rest who followed their own independent paths and who were not spotted by the authorities remained invisible until the moment they wanted to be seen.

Being outside of the political order implies that they can be arrested, detained, deported, harassed and attacked by the police or xenophobic and racist citizens. Without a legitimate position in the society these young people lack the power to protect themselves from violent practices perpetrated either by state officials or Greek citizens, and they cannot claim justice.

Rose (1999:240) notes that the exercise of freedom in contemporary societies is grounded on the proof of a legitimate identity. Individuals who are not able to obtain proof such as undocumented migrants, asylum seekers and potential refugees cannot exercise freedom and eventually they are lacking in political rights and liberties which are predicated to citizenship. The present study revealed that this lack of freedom is particularly evident in cases of young people who have been classified as ‘unaccompanied asylum seeking minors’.

Glimpses into the first period of young people’s residency in Greece raise many concerns in relation to the treatment of minors and their protection. Most young people resented this period of confusion, uncertainty, powerlessness and enforced idleness while being implicated within a vicious circle of institutional power. Actions such as refoulement and detention and unacceptable living conditions highlight the absurd situation of a system which implement unlawful practices in the context of a legitimate framework that has been established to care and protect young people.

Such actions indicate the difficulty in clearly distinguishing the law-breaking with the implementation of the law. Agamben (1998) highlights the very core of state’s sovereign power is to suspend law in order to produce law according to its interests. Sovereign power permits states to move beyond their legal authority while police officers become temporarily representatives of the state sovereignty and it’s up to

their ethical sense to commit or not commit human rights violations (Agamben, 1998).

These young people tend to reject the potential of settling in this country because they are treated as aliens and unwelcomed (Dunkas, 2007). Their state of existence continues to be increasingly transitional filled with ambiguity and with one clear idea - to continue their path hoping to be accepted as human beings somewhere. However, their 'here and now' experiences suggest that this hope should be put on hold once again and that becoming an asylum seeker is not an easy task.

## **6.8. Conclusion**

This chapter has provided evidence in relation to the experiences of young people's arrival in Greece. Their first moments in Greece were recorded strongly in their memories as being filled with disappointment, animosity and resentment. Their contact with the authorities is mostly marked by experiences of confusion, neglect and abuse, owing largely to their classification as being 'lathrometanastes' (in the Greek term), (unauthorised migrants) right after they cross the borders. Once confronted with the asylum procedure at the screening stage, young people - the ones who are deemed underage by the state agents - are declared as unaccompanied minors, through a biased process which is lacking in expertise, sensitivity and clarity. Evident in young people's stories are human rights violations, inconsistencies and complexities derived from a vague, bureaucratic institutional framework that underpins the Greek asylum system in a number of areas, such as: border controls, asylum procedure, placement on detention facilities and refoulement practices at sea. All these suggest that young people's needs and rights as underage refugees are ignored upon arrival in Greece; childcare policies are entirely halted and replaced by migration management.

## SECTION IV THE HERE AND NOW LIFE IN GREECE

### Chapter 7: Everyday existence: “They don’t listen to our voices...I feel that I have no value”

#### 7.1. Introduction

Here we meet the children on their doorsteps as residents of hosting centres. Their present lives come to the fore for the first time. In this section we leave behind the ‘what has happened’ and we focus on the ‘here and now’, which contains less painful thoughts and feelings than talking about the past. Nevertheless, indications of unpleasant emotions also emerge from the present circumstances of the participants.

In this chapter, young people share their views of being residents of reception centres, disclose their feelings about their present circumstances, discuss their needs (most of them when they arrived in Greece were children and over time had become young adults) and finally they provide some glimpses of whether they believe that they have managed to make their past endeavours and sacrifices worth it. All these insights are part of the individual testimonies of young people which are also encapsulated in the three components analysed by Bihi (1999 in Kohli, 2007:48) as being vital to the recovery of stability of refugees generally, namely:

- The restoration of livelihoods and health
- The maintenance of habits and customs
- The transformation of prospects through making the best opportunities for advancement offered within their new environment

In considering the first component, the analysis focuses on the practicalities of daily life of minors, in other words it sketches out how young people spend their time, and how they feel about their settlement in their new environment. The second component discusses the needs of minors and whether these are met mostly in relation to the continuation of habits and rituals from the past. Finally, the last one focuses on the future aspirations based on the opportunities offered by the new environment.

The scope of the present analysis does not aim to evaluate the existing services and practices provided by the reception centres, even though glimpses of the quality of services emerge throughout the accounts. It rather aims to maintain the narration of the stories by enlightening aspects of young people's 'here and now' lives.

### 7.1.1. Location

As outlined in chapter 3 (Methodology) the respondents were recruited through five reception centres which are dispersed in different parts in Greece. The reception centres, except for the one which is in a big city, are located in remote rural areas most often on an island or in a mountainous area. Location plays an important role in allowing or obstructing young people's adaptation, and integration. Young people's comments on their daily activities are highly associated with the environment of the reception centre.

Being aware of the moral aspects which underpin the present study, the names of the reception centres and locations are not referred to in this text in order to avoid participants' identification (see chapter 3). What arose via the formal (interviews, focus groups, group work exercise) and informal (every day chats) discussions with the respondents is that there are large discrepancies among the various reception centres in terms of the provided services, activities, treatment and opportunities. This is something that emerged both from the accounts of the boys and the accounts of professionals and public figures as we shall see later on.

There were diverse views about the location and its impact on minors' adaptation. Roshan, who was hosted in a reception centre in a village stated:

*In small communities is harder for people to open up, in cities is different...here they look strange.... they are not used to meet different people.*

Some other boys who were hosted in a reception centre located in a mountainous remote area of an island, shared that recollections and memories of their 'home' in Afghanistan popped up again due to similarities they found in that place with their previous environment. Whereas some boys preferred living in an urban place because it offers opportunities of 'getting lost out in the crowd' and 'be whoever you

*want to be.*' These were expressions used by a few minors who believed that small communities obstruct people from being themselves in contrast to an urban environment.

## 7.2. Living Conditions

As an introduction to young people's views a section is first given of what the young people perceive as negative and positive regarding their staying in Greece. During the group activity young people referred to what they like about living in Greece and what they do not like.

Many of young peoples' negative aspects are associated with the anxiety and lack of opportunities stemming from the uncertainty of their legal status, the attitudes of local people, staff and authorities, racism and inequality towards foreigners, and finally the social service provisions which are deemed insufficient to fulfil their needs. Young people's negative opinion of living in Greece is also being reflected in their desire to move and seek refuge in other countries, as demonstrated below:

*Greece is a country in crisis right now; no job, no money, no justice and many problems, and I don't like to be here as I am a refugee...either the people of Greece don't like me to be here and... because they don't give us identity card...and I want to go somewhere else. (Ali)*

Most boys in the written group exercise wrote down firstly their disappointment of the minimum chances of being granted asylum in Greece. These boys expressed in the discussion we had later on how much they needed to be in a steady legal position and make plans for their future. Perhaps, one of the most stressful experiences of UM in Greece has been their concern and nervousness about the long-wait of the asylum procedure and its potential negative outcome. The majority of the boys wrote that it is highly unlikely to be granted asylum in Greece and this is something that brings high levels of stress and worry. Some boys also expressed their attentiveness to the strict Greek asylum policy and they hoped this would change in future.

Second in the list was young peoples' opinion about the behaviour of representatives of authorities, local people and staff of the centres. Some comments were centred

mostly on the police and politicians. These boys wrote down a few words of dissatisfaction in relation to the overall treatment they had received by some people:

*The attitudes of policemen towards me. (Amid)*

*Greece is not about what we read in the books...the politicians and police should not have so much power in this country. (Suroor)*

*I don't like the Greek state and the police. (Ramzan)*

The majority of the boys had experienced racism and discrimination. Specifically, some boys wrote that there are different rules applied to foreigners and dissimilar treatment between indigenous young people and UASM. One boy wrote that Greeks think of Afghan asylum seekers as being “wild” and “uncivilised”. Another one mentioned that the attitudes of local people towards minors had been awful. A few of them referred to the attitudes of the professionals and staff mostly indicating their unreliable behaviour. For example, one boy said that the director of the reception centre has been repeatedly lying to him. Another boy said that the attitudes of local people and staff made him feel “very, very bad”.

Alongside these wide-ranging concerns regarding the uncertainty of legal status, the attitudes of local people, staff and authorities and the emerging challenge of whether or not they are allowed to be here, the boys also provided a broad range of negative comments about services. Mostly, they referred to education, health, food and clothing. For example, Zabiullah referred to his non-attendance of school as being one of the things he doesn't like about being in Greece:

*Greece is a beautiful country, but I am not happy to be here... I am not going to school.*

A few boys wrote that they didn't like the food they were given and expressed how much they had missed the food of their own country. They referred to the low quality of food and said that they should have been given the chance to cook their own food. Another boy wrote that he was disappointed by the health care system. In fact, he mentioned at the end of the group activity that he had experienced racist behaviour from one of the doctors he had visited for medical assistance.

Finally, negative aspects of young people's lives in Greece were also focused on the limited provisions of material things including clothing. For instance, one boy demonstrated his frustration with the staff because he hasn't been provided with adequate clothing. Another boy mentioned that he doesn't like the fact of not being given practical things such as extra soap, sugar, and a phone card.

Yet the young people were encouraged to draw on their positive aspects of living in Greece or the things that they liked about being residents in Greece. However not all boys expressed positive aspects of their lives in Greece; three boys preferred not to write anything positive. The majority of the boys referred to the beauty of the natural settings in Greece, such as the islands and the mountains while they expressed their particular preference for the Greek weather. A few of them also referred to the history and culture of Greece as being some of the things they mostly like:

*Greece is a good place, the weather, sea for swimming, the nature. It has good islands. It's good for rich people and it has old places to visit like Akropoli. (Ali)*  
*I like a few touristic places, the Greek history, the civilisation and some Greeks are really nice. (Kiomarsh)*

Five boys, almost one third of the respondents who took part in the group activity referred to the new habits they adopted in Greece as new sources of enjoyment or as a balm to their problems. One of these boys mentioned that he started smoking and drinking coffee and alcohol while being in Greece. Another boy mentioned that what he likes most of his life in Greece is the moments he is spending at the nearest "kafenio" (coffee place) at the seaside. These boys expressed that smoking and drinking helps them to feel better:

*I like drinking coffee, smoking and sometimes drinking alcohol. Alcohol is not bad because it helps me forget my problems and because here we are separated from our parents it helps us to cope with our problems. (Moustafa)*

Although the use of alcohol and smoking used to be forbidden habits a few boys disclosed that they had become more flexible with these matters along the course of their journeys. Another boy just laughed when I asked him if he was drinking and smoking when he was back in Afghanistan. He told me that here he could do

whatever he liked without being criticised and that he had learnt that being fanatic about religion can only bring conflict to people.

Overall the majority of the boys' positive attributes were described in relation to the natural settings of Greece, the weather and their new habits followed by a sense of freedom. The negative experiences were mostly stemming from a general discontent of young people towards their pending status as asylum seekers, the treatment they received and the poor services they were being granted as UASM.

### 7.2.1. Education and Asylum

There are clusters of concerns in relation to educational provisions along with the issue of refugee recognition that emerge in the accounts of the boys as primary difficulties in their lives. In fact, these two matters are intersected: the asylum status and the insecurity associated with it impacts greatly on their motivation to attend school and learn a new language. At the time of the interviews, the majority of the boys were not accessing any form of education at all. A few minors shared they were feeling unmotivated to attend school and worried about the asylum outcome:

*I cannot continue school under these circumstances.... I know that when we will be 18 years old...we must leave the centre and if I want to continue school, who is going to support me financially?*  
(Rahman)

Rahman who was 16 years old at the time of the inquiry, expressed his disenchantment about the future and his concern in relation to his aftercare life. In fact, other studies also have reported that '*this threshold to adulthood may be something to fear more than to celebrate*' for minors like Rahman whose legal status has yet to be decided (Dennis, 2002:15).

Rahman's anxiety about the future emerges from the lack of support from the reception centres to the ones who reach the age of 18 and who, according to the law, must leave the centre. This means that when an UM becomes 18 he is completely on his own. Therefore, there were a few references regarding initiatives of support by two specific reception centres. For example, one boy shared that he was in the middle of his studies when he turned 18 and the directorate of the reception centre decided to host him longer until he completes his studies. Rahman's gloominess

about school attendance is also reinforced by the fact that he has never been to school before and as a result there is an extra difficulty for him to be involved in the learning process, compounded by his insecurity over the outcome of the asylum issue.

These demonstrate the stress and nervousness created by the asylum system. The negative experiences of the participants in relation to their involvement in education, greatly affects their social participation in the Greek society. Indicatively, some boys disclosed that they had difficulties in coming into contact with local people due to language barriers, and some others expressed that they did not have equal access to the job market with other young people who had a basic knowledge of the Greek language.

The majority of young people expressed a greater interest in learning English than learning Greek since they wanted to move elsewhere. These boys stated that they would have tried to learn Greek and go to school if they knew that there were more possibilities of obtaining a legal status. They stated *'it is a waste of time'* to learn Greek since there are no prospects of obtaining legal status and make a living in Greece. They also stressed the value of learning English:

*I want to learn English and not Greek because I want to go to another place and learning English is very important for me.  
(Alehil)*

Speaking English appears to be of great importance for the ones who are determined to migrate to another place. It is considered a ticket to a new life. Some boys revealed that even if they do not reach their expectations of moving to the country of their desire, they still think it is useful to learn English rather than Greek. A few boys mentioned that they were attending Greek school only because they were bored at doing nothing the whole day.

Therefore, the issue of minors' integration in the process of education does not seem to merely stem from their individual circumstances and aspirations. School attendance and the provision of language classes are largely instigated and promoted in the range of the provided services and opportunities endorsed by the reception centres. For example, three out of the five reception centres I visited seemed to have

well-established structures for endorsing education and learning, in contrast with two other reception centres. In many cases, as with Stanley's work, there was inadequate language support and encouragement in a context where the minors were perceived as unwanted strangers whose experiences and contributions were peripheral to the well-being of the school (Stanley, 2001).

None of the respondents accommodated in reception centres where education was not a priority were attending school as there were no established connections with the educational system. Most of these boys stated that they wanted to go to school but they couldn't. One of the two reception centres hosted twelve (12) minors, a substantial number of my respondents. Surprisingly, out of the thirty (30) participants, twenty-two (22) of them were not going to school at the time of the inquiry, and fifteen (15) of them were not able to attend school even if they were willing to.

The reasons for young people's exclusion from the educational system, at least concerning the two aforementioned reception centres, seem to be associated with the complex procedure of joining childcare and migration institutions with educational institutions and the poor efforts of the reception centres to sensitise the local community about the needs of young people. This claim reflects my own interpretation from the discussions and contacts with the young people, professionals and public figures. There is differing explanation for this according to who is speaking. The view of young people on the matter echoes the poor response of the professionals of the reception centres to their needs. As the voices of young people are at the core of the thesis, I will not include the perspectives of professionals and public at the moment. Light will be shed on their views on a separate chapter.

One of the reception centres did not adhere to the legal and organisational procedure guaranteeing the right of young people to attend public education. This was because local schools were seen to add to existing complications in the form of complex bureaucratic procedures. One of the boys who had been living for four years in a reception centre expressed his disappointment and shared that he has never been to school all these year:

*V: Have you ever asked the staff why you are not going to school?  
Ali: Yes, we did. They were saying that we are not allowed.... we can't go to school is not permitted [...] and now that we are leaving they say they arranged it and school will accept us on September... now is too late.*

When Ali became a resident of a hosting centre he was 14 years old and he stayed four years in the reception centre, with no school attendance; he only attended Greek classes provided by the reception centre. At the day of my interview with him he had just received notice from the director that he had to leave the centre within a day together with some other boys of the same age. He expressed disappointment about the lack of opportunity to attend school. The paradox is that the reception centre provides Greek classes in the form of a preparatory class for young people to attend public school when at the same time they are not allowed to attend school.

In another reception centre a few boys shared that while they were attending school, there was low attendance of students and the teacher told them that it wasn't possible to keep on giving lessons to a few students. As a result, minors had to drop school and wait until another class to be formed. Eventually, in some instances, when they were able to attain a school place, they experienced low attendance of students or delays in beginning a program of study. Hussein's narrative describes being the only student in a class for a while due to low attendance:

*I used to go.... but this was for getting ready for the normal class.  
We were only three people in the class and after some days the others left school and I was left alone....and it was very boring, but I liked the class very much.*

In a similar vein, some boys shared that although they wanted to go to, and they attended at some point the preparatory class provided by the reception centres or by the schools, there was no interest from the other students and so there was no possibility for the class to carry on given the low numbers. In one of the reception centres, in spite of the evident interest of the majority of minors to attend the class, the teacher of the preparatory class suddenly stopped giving lessons in Greek language because she was required by the directorate to carry out non-teaching bureaucratic duties elsewhere.

One of the boys reported: *‘Every time we want to go.... the teacher is absent...she is doing other stuff’*. In this case, there is no information on whether the students of the class were informed about the replacement of the teacher or about the time of teacher’s absence from the class. This demonstrated a sense of indifference and unresponsiveness on behalf of the professionals regarding minor’s learning needs. Several boys also complained about the low quality of the preparatory classes in two of the reception centres, e.g. they expected more hours for learning Greek and an interest on behalf of the teacher. However, in three reception centres, the majority of young people who were hosted, expressed gratification about the provided classes and learning activities.

Some others shared that they were tired and bored from learning the alphabet for weeks, so that they preferred to do something else:

*Yes, she (the teacher) taught us 12 letters of the Greek alphabet and that was all.... she said we have to wait now for the new teacher to come. At the moment, there are no Greek lessons. (Amid)*

Some others expressed a strong desire of learning and gaining experiences and they looked for unofficial ways of learning in the form of exchanging courses with long-term residents who spoke Greek. The exchange of knowledge among young people has been referred to a few times during the interviews as a method of learning and demonstrates an intercultural awareness. For example, the ones who spoke French or English would try to help other boys who were interested in learning these languages. I was amazed by the fluent accent of some boys who had learnt the Greek and English language without attending any class. The help of their friends and in some instances the assistance of language programs in the computer had major effect on their progress.

What I observed regarding young peoples’ negative views in relation to school attendance is that a few boys were not motivated to stay in Greece from the outset. These boys demonstrated a strong desire of knowledge and personal development; they are keen to learn and study so that they can acquire better opportunities in life, however only in a country that will offer them the appropriate circumstances.

Yet, there were persistent expressions of high expectations of themselves by a few boys. They expressed strong interests in following demanding studies that would offer them a higher and respectable status, however, only again, in another place where they could obtain asylum. Overall for the majority of the boys what was crucial was an answer soon regarding their asylum claim so that they would plan their future.

However, most of them were aware, based on the experiences of long term residents that this process may carry on for many years. The long wait obstructs UASM from planning and moving on with their lives at present time. This condition severely hinders young people from becoming integrated in the learning process, and as we shall see later, it also impedes them from establishing connections with their new context and become active participants. The uncertainty regarding asylum in some instances leads young people to engage in more immediate solutions such as in searching for work.

### **7.2.2. Work**

A few boys expressed their interest in finding a job instead of going to school. Though, at the time of field work only a tiny number of young people were involved into some sort of paid occupation. At times, three out of five reception centres provided job opportunities to unaccompanied minors in the local community, depending on the season and the needs of the local market. One of the reception centres had established connections with the market and promoted young people's participation in the local economy.

The ones who were hosted in the latter, reported to have worked in public constructions, in agricultural tasks, such as farming and gardening. What I experienced while on fieldwork was that during summer season, weddings were taking place quite frequently in this place. Young people often were encouraged by the director of the reception centre to help out with wedding preparations which lasted for days due to their traditional type. Once I was invited to a wedding party, I noticed that most of the boys had an active role and were keen to help out with the

preparations. They were not just waiters but they were also invited to the dinner and dancing.

Some of these boys mentioned: *'it's a good opportunity to get some extra money, come in contact with other people and have fun'*. Despite minors' positive attitudes towards employment, casual labour appears to primarily promote the interests of the local community, as the employed children work without insurance and for less money than indigenous workers (*Interview with F.T. social worker, 12/06/2012*).

### **7.2.3. Poverty**

The effect of poverty on the health needs of young people is evident in their accounts as a number of them have been experienced poverty prior to exile, at their journeys and upon arrival in Greece. Poverty is related to malnutrition, sickness due to hardship and inappropriate conditions of housing. I shall remind the reader that in chapter 5 and 6, a number of young people have shared that they had been slept out in streets, in the woods, in abandoned factories and shanties. They had also been eaten from the rubbish or whatever they could find. All these raise concerns as to the effect of poverty on the health and emotional condition of young people upon arrival in the reception centres.

While being in care, a few of them reported that they didn't have adequate clothing or basic items for daily use even now that they are into care and some others expressed complaints regarding the lack of pocket money:

*They are not giving us basic things. For example, when we ask for more sugar they tell us the sugar is for two weeks and they don't give us more. The same happens with other things, they tell us this shampoo should last for two months, which is not possible. (Ali)*

Some of these boys shared that they didn't have money to buy something to eat and they complained about the quality of food in the reception centres. The following account is quite revealing suggesting that lack of money and poor nutrition may lead to health problems for young people.

*I usually have one meal per day and then it comes the evening I get hungry. How can I buy something to eat without money? [...] they give us all the three meals for the day in the morning, and most*

*times are the same...we have pasta for breakfast, pasta for lunch and pasta for dinner. (Amid)*

#### **7.2.4. Some positive attributes**

It is worth mentioning cases of respondents who focused on the positive aspects of their present lives such as education, everyday activities and the contacts they established in their new environment. These boys were in most cases long-term residents, well-adapted in their environment and pleased with their current circumstances, regardless of their pending asylum issue. My interpretation of their stance towards life indicates that they are people with determination, resilience and positive-thinking nature. One of these boys is Tzamil, whose account echoes a more blissful and contented perspective of the living circumstances of residency of an unaccompanied minor:

*We learn languages, English or French, we go to school [...] we are learning many things, without education is difficult to move on in your life. It's important to go to school...we have a room to stay, food, and they help us here with our papers and asylum, we also have social workers who are standing for us when we need something we have medical care...*

There are similar accounts confirming that, regardless of the minors' continuous struggles and hardships that were described in the previous chapters, their persistence in moving on with their lives and their desire of developing themselves created new possibilities and opened up new ways of living in their new environment. Such accounts could provide additional glimpses on the strength of young people to overcome their difficulties and their ability to recreate their future in the best possible way:

*In the beginning it was strange to me living in this place... later on I started enjoying it and now I like it [...] It's important to have a job and spend my time like this. I like being a shepherd.... I used to do this kind of job when I was back in Afghanistan. I like working with the animals. I also like to go to the playground and play football.... another thing is the money we get....is a good 'help' we can do something with this money. (Alisher)*

When Alisher first crossed the Greek borders he was a 12-year-old child. At the time of the interview he was 16 years old full of hope and dreams for his future. He

disclosed that in his childhood he used to be a good student at school and passionate about learning, until the moment he was forced to drop school because of survival reasons, having to work in the carpet industry to support his family. Since then, he avoids discussions about school, in particular he said: *'I don't like hearing about school'*. At the time of the interview he shared that he was quite happy with his current circumstances; he had a place to live, an enjoyable job and evening sport activities.

He felt being connected to the rural place he was living in at the moment and he shared that one of his dreams was to build a wooden house somewhere in the village. Alisher's story reflects an adapted person in a new context in which, as Kohli calls in his work (2007:142), 'resettlement appears to be successful when a person manages to balance the 'outer' and 'inner' worlds'. In this sense, Alisher deemed to have reconstituted a new life and a home he feels pleased with and at the same time he is able to look ahead in the future with a positive eye, not holding back and restricted by the struggles of his previous life.

### **7.3. Health and emotional well-being**

Regarding health, while most of the young boys were noted as being physically healthy, a few accounts confirmed the presence of emotional complications while suggesting that even if minors have had an apparent healthy profile, there may be a persistent underground emotional vulnerability. Some studies underscored the 'vulnerability' of this group of people (Stone, 2000; Eide & Hjern, 2013) while other scholars suggested that even if there may not be apparent manifestations of sorrow, these children may suffer in silence (Kohli, 2007). This study cannot present any specific evidence in relation to the condition of physical and emotional health of each boy, other than presenting a few accounts which may provide hints of their physical and psychological condition.

One of these accounts reflects the emotional turbulence experienced by Mohammad:

*.... I had a problem and I went to the hospital....I had a health problem...in my mind....not in my body, I couldn't eat and I couldn't drink for three days....I was sad that's why this happened... I feel better now I am getting some pills but I don't have any problem in my body. (Mohammad)*

The above is one of the very few affirming that the emotional health of the respondent needed to be restored through medical assistance. However, in most cases young people shared that they cope with their problems by themselves such as trying to keep themselves busy in order to avoid thinking:

*I am not feeling well.... too much thinking...that's why I am helping out in the kitchen for free. Otherwise I would go mad, if I didn't have anything to do.*

The strategy of distraction has been reported by other studies as well (e.g. McMullin & Loughry, 2000; Chase *et al.* 2008; Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010). For example, the qualitative study of Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010:231) has shown that distraction may also be a form of resilience. In their study, UM were intentionally in the company of others and trying to keep busy by focusing on schooling or other activities. In this way they managed to suppress their emotions and have less available time for thinking of their past experiences, current difficulties and future worries (*ibid.*).

The majority of the boys avoided discussing their feelings, or their emotional struggles. Perhaps such disclosure presupposes safe and trusted relationships that need time to be established. Some boys disclosed that they were doing a lot of thinking and they were discussing their worries and anxieties with their friends. Surprisingly, none of the participants were involved in counselling or in therapeutic sessions with psychologists at the time of the research. It is worth of note that only two out of the five reception centres provided psychological support.

Such evidence suggests that minors who may continue to suffer may act out their pain and grief in inappropriate ways (Ayotte & Williamson, 2001) or they may be unused to self-expression and feel shame discussing their problems with professionals because of cultural reservations about sharing emotions.

#### **7.4. Belongings, Appearance and Behaviour**

The importance of possessions has been evident in a number of cases as young people presented their need to have something to hold on to. Bearing in mind that these boys

had left behind their possessions and had crossed borders with very few belongings (i.e. some clothes, a mobile phone, a family photo) their need to collect things they could call their own becomes apparent. In particular, the ones who were provided by the centre with a monthly allowance could make savings and gather possessions that became valuable to them. These belongings which in some instances could be little things, like a wristwatch, or a hat reflected the attempts of young people to reorganise their new lives and redefine their selves in new contexts.

For example, a few boys appeared to be fashion-conscious trying to create a more ‘westernised’ look which would probably define them as youth who live in Europe. I can recall a few images of young people wearing loose pants, trainers and stylish hats and bandanas. Some other boys preferred to spend their allowances on more expensive things they could use, such as laptops, tablets and smartphones. It was more a matter of keeping in touch with family, friends and other people and being constantly informed about the situation in Afghanistan and hosting countries. These boys would save their monthly allowances by sacrificing their daily little pleasures, like having a coffee, a drink or a sandwich so that they could afford a laptop. However only two out of the five reception centres provided a monthly allowance to minors.

Consequently, the majority of young people did not have the opportunity to buy new clothes or other things. This was evident from their outfit; most boys had a simple outfit wearing jeans and T-shirts supplied by the reception centres. The appearance of a few boys revealed from the outset the circumstances that they have gone through, up to now. They were wearing patched clothes with faded colours that seemed to be used many times and in some instances were too large or small. Some of them were still wearing the clothes they brought with them which possibly evoked memories that were very hard to bear. I remember one of the boys telling me how much he wanted to get rid of his destroyed shoes as they reminded him of painful moments. But he had to wait some time until he gets a new pair of shoes. Nazim expressed his embarrassment of going out with his only one outfit and without shoes:

*When I arrived here, I didn't have any clothes or shoes and I was waiting for a month to get basic things and I couldn't go out [...] three days ago we didn't have shoes and the guys went to the river*

*with the sandals...and I was feeling embarrassed to go out without shoes. Things for us are very difficult here.*

Some of these boys mentioned that they were not given adequate clothing on their arrival and so they had to wear the only outfit of their own or they had to borrow clothes from other minors who had extra clothing. The dishevelled appearance of these boys mirrored the disorder surrounding their present lives and designated their turbulent past.

Akin to the general patterns of young peoples' behaviour and if I may draw on their attitudes from what I have witnessed and from what they shared about their selves and their lives, despite a demanding attitude towards asking things for themselves, most of them appeared to be courteous, shy, humble, patient, friendly, easy-going, ambitious and hopeful. They were willing to share their experiences and generally they appeared to stay out of trouble or they did not present any delinquent or dangerous behaviour, at least during of their stay at the reception centres. In fact, only three minors reported being in trouble in their effort to halt a fight which erupted between other minors. All the rest reported that they had never being involved in any sort of fight. Moreover, the majority reported being friends with most of the rest of the residents. For example, some of them mentioned that their friendship with other boys has been a balm for their problems and worries. When they were in need, they often would turn to their friends who often would give them support, encouragement and most of all good company. However, a minority of five boys mentioned that they did not trust anyone else except their selves and they avoided sharing personal things with the other people in the centre:

*I don't trust the other guys and I prefer being by myself.... I just talk to them but I don't talk to them about my own things [personal things].*

This group of boys presented a reticent attitude, perhaps stemming from their engagement with untrusted relationships and life-threatening experiences. Some others were quite open right from the beginning of our meetings and willing to share their thoughts. There were also elements of being cheerful, curious, positive-thinking, bright, proud, self-sufficient, resilient, charming, creative, and caring. Finally, they

demonstrated interest for other people and new things. These clusters of fond attributes, as we will see later, are not totally embraced by all professionals.

## **7.5. Social Alienation; Community and networks**

Young people's relationship to local people mainly exposes an existing gap between the inside world of the reception centres and the outside world of the communities. More than half of the respondents conveyed a sense of disconnection and withdrawal from their social milieu. They reported that there is a mutual lack of knowledge about life, events and experiences between themselves and the communities. Discussions with the young respondents of this study about their emotions and experiences as residents of reception centres, tended to dwell on experiences of isolation, loneliness, and anxiety over what they had left behind and what lies ahead.

Out of the 30 respondents, 21 reported no contact with their neighbours, local people and young people at school and so on. Almost 10 minors out of the 21 who stated no contact with the community were new-comers who had arrived in the centres a few months before the beginning of this study and who were still in the adjustment process. As already reported in similar studies the early experiences of unaccompanied minors upon arrival often entail feelings of loneliness and isolation followed by feelings of relief and safety (Hopkins & Hill, 2006:42). Half of my respondents had negative attributes about local people and many of these were experienced alongside the challenges of language, new culture, racism and social alienation.

In order to develop this aspect of analysis, I will firstly present excerpts from interviews shared by young people who were hosted in a reception centre located at the borders in a mountainous area, named A from now on. Young people hosted in reception centre A provided the most negative attributes about local people and the community. Since they constitute one third (10 respondents) of my sample I will begin with their accounts and I will gradually unfold the most dominant perceptions of young people in each of the centres. Some references emerged about racist attitudes by the professionals within the reception centres but this is a discussion that I will return to later.

When I asked young people about their opinion of the place they were living, the vast majority acknowledged the beauty of the landscape but they did not talk with the same enthusiasm about local people:

*The landscape is perfect and the people haven't disturbed me so far...they are indifferent [...] I think that they have a sort of fear of the foreigners. (Hassan)*

A long-term resident who had lived more than three years in the same hosting centre as Hassan recalled:

*M: The town.... is really beautiful but the local people are racists.  
V: Have you met any people other than the ones from the reception centre?  
M: No.... not really...only a few children.  
V: Have you tried to approach any local people?  
M: Yes, but they don't care about us.... they don't pay any attention.*

This interview excerpt demonstrates the belief that the local people were not interested and caring towards UM. Another boy explained that both parties are responsible for the lack of interaction between minors and local people, in the sense that if someone doesn't put any effort to meet people then s/he cannot expect to be welcomed with open arms. Some boys shared that when they entered into care they were already exhausted by their previous experiences and the only thing they needed at that point was the safety of their new residency. They did not want and they did not try to make contacts with people other than the ones from the reception centre, at least during the first period of time of their residency.

Although there may not be apparent efforts of minors to create bonds with the community, some remarks indicate unwelcomed and unfriendly attitudes on behalf of local people. A few boys talked with resentment and bitterness:

*Very negative. There is no connection with the local community. I feel a burden. They don't treat me as a human being. (Hakim)*

Nazim who has been living for two years in the reception centre A disclosed how puzzled he feels when he goes out in the village:

*I can't understand how these people even after two years they look at me with the same face.... they haven't changed at all. I had contact with some local boys but after a while they stopped talking*

*to me because they were receiving bullying at school because they talked to us.*

A few boys described similar incidents and expressed their disappointment about the beliefs and attitudes of local young people. They recalled incidents of being seriously offended because of their ethnicity whilst they were verbally abused. Then a complex picture emerged whereby the labels 'asylum seeker' and 'lathrometanastis' were associated with racist remarks. Similarly, this has also been observed in the inquiry of Dunkerley *et al.* (2006:497) which researched the social contacts of UM when they arrived in Wales. A great part of minors' views shared in Dunkerley's *et al.* (2006) study was centred on local peoples' perceptions of asylum seekers.

The majority of minors who were hosted in centre A referred to physical abuse and described incidents of discrimination and harassment. Nevertheless, two cases I was told about could be described as cases of physical threatening. The first case is about a minor who was attacked in the evening during the night, while he was returning from a walk to the centre. Somebody jumped on him and harassed him with racist words. Shirzard aged 16 had a similar experience:

*One day I went to the 'sowlaki' place to buy chicken with pita to eat and the owner was holding a big knife and he started coming after me by saying: 'go away from here, get lost' and things like that...*

Such attitudes have generated feelings of fear, resentment and insecurity of residents in this particular community. As a result, a few minors reported that they were completely withdrawn from their social life and they did not want to go out in public places since they were feeling unwanted, and in some instances threatened by the local people. In Macaskill's (2002) qualitative study just over a third of young refugees she spoke to attended formal out of school activities, and a major reason for young people not going out being the racial harassment and abuse they faced in their local area. In my study, young boys, on top of having to deal with a new environment, language and culture as well as the emotional implications of being detached from their families and friends in their countries of origin, face suspicion, disrespect and hostility.

They also expressed complaints over not being treated as ordinary young people but as a group of people who carry the negative charged label of ‘asylum seeker’. It is not the first time these young people received such treatment. As we have witnessed in Chapters 5 and 6 the minors had already experienced discrimination in transit places on their way to Greece. The recurrence of such experiences may fuel extreme psychological trauma and distress as a result of pre-migratory and post-migratory experiences (Fanning & Veale, 2004: 211).

Additionally, the sense of being neglected in a new environment may affect the construction of a person’s perception towards all citizens of the new hosting country. For example, some minors mentioned that their experiences of discrimination in the community had formed their general perception of all Greeks as racists. Nevertheless, long-term residents who had also had spent time in other places in Greece before entering into care were able to acknowledge that not all people are racists. Nevertheless, there were also some examples of positive treatment and caring attitudes to which I will refer shortly.

In a discussion I had in focus groups some boys shared their frustration about local people’s behaviour pointing at the unequal treatment they may receive in relation to indigenous children of their age. They directed their attention specially to places that children and young people used, or wanted to use, for leisure and recreational activities. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Children, Article 31, every child has the right ‘to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities’. One incident based on the assumption that every young person has the right of access to public places was referred to:

*A hot afternoon we went to this place... is a kind of hotel with swimming pool and a cafe, most guys of the village usually gather and have fun. And so we wanted to relax for a while and we went to drink something and we sat on a table. We didn't think of swimming because we usually do that in the river and we wanted to drink a coffee. At that time some local guys were in the pool making a fuss, and then the waiter came to our side and he told us with this kind of attitude of authority: 'Don't you even think of getting into the swimming pool...you can order something but you are not allowed to swim' and this was sooooo offensive and we said to him: 'No thanks a lot, we are leaving' [...] we felt so humiliated.*

This incident is an example of the unequal treatment young people receive in the hosting place in comparison with local children of their age. Alongside such incidents, minors demonstrated that local people ought to be aware, informed and sensitised towards unaccompanied minors' circumstances. Some boys observed how much of a distorted view the community holds about their lives and realities. In particular, one resident of reception centre A, who had experienced a wide range of discriminatory incidents, underscored that a lack of education is responsible for the construction of racist attitudes and beliefs. He also mentioned that some people may make assumptions about minor's backgrounds:

*V: Why do you think people in this village behave like that?*

*N: They are uneducated.... that's why. Once I've been to a fast food place in .... and three men, maybe around 32.... they approached me and said to me: 'why did you come here.... how many people have you killed in Afghanistan?'...they don't know anything about our lives. What I realise is that people in this area are worse than Taliban. We are lucky that they don't hold a gun...if they had guns they would kill us...for sure. In other places in Greece people are not like that.*

Such accusations may have a detrimental impact on the emotional world of young people and severely undermine any of their efforts at adjustment and integration in the new environment. Along with the lack of education, some boys thought that the media and the rise of the Golden Dawn (Greek far right party) had fuelled even more perceptions of asylum seekers as dangerous, criminals and thieves. There was also the notion that the media give a misleading account to the public of asylum seekers as illegal people who come to Greece by choice and who intend to stay permanently.

A few more accounts describe experiences of harassment and accusations and portray people from the community as being suspicious, disrespectful and ignorant about the lives and circumstances of unaccompanied minors. I acknowledge the importance of treating such accounts carefully-i.e. whether they represent the actual experiences of the study population or whether they are monomeric and overstated interpretations of the young people. Therefore, I deemed it necessary to share my personal view about this particular community. It may help the reader form a more comprehensive perspective. The following abstract is from my field notes and I hope it will illuminate additional aspects:

‘Day five in reception centre a: It’s evening and I went to the central square...local people told me that it’s the main public space where most people pass by in the evenings and chat. I’ve seen some boys (unaccompanied minors) and I talked to them, they were sitting on a remote bench and just watched the people. Sometimes their eyes fell on a tv screen which was loomed from a café place. Their image conveyed a sense of sympathy. The rest of the people were chatting and walking around, children were playing and young people were drinking beer and having fun. None of them approached the minors. These kids were invisible in the eyes of the people but so noticeable at the same time.’

Young people’s accounts in relation to their contacts and social networks in the new environment so far suggest how difficult it can be to live within the boundaries of a closed community and feel unwelcomed and unwanted by its members. Some boys described that apart from the unwelcomed attitudes, they were treated as ‘scapegoats’ from time to time. When prohibited actions were occurring in the community and there was lack of evidence, young people seemed to be an available target for blame:

*One day we went to the local gym [...] there were two girls who lost their mobile phones.... they accused us for stealing their mobile phones. They called the police and told them that we are thieves and I said: ‘you can kill me but you cannot say I am a thief’. I felt very insulted. The police of course didn’t find anything on us...but still the local community think that we are stealing things. Since then, we are not going to the gym because every time somebody from the centre goes there, the girls tell to the people to take care of their things.*

Racism has been reported as a distressing issue facing by UM. For example, the work of Hopkins and Hill has researched the lives and experiences of unaccompanied minors in Scotland and found racist attitudes towards minors taking place most often at schools based on their colour of skin (2006:45). Another mixed method study conducted in Wales revealed that despite the welcoming and hospitable attitudes of the Welsh people, over one third of the respondents (unaccompanied minors) who were interviewed, had experienced racism and harassment by the local people (Dunkerley *et al.* 2006).

As we will see, in other locations local people were prejudiced towards minors because of their colour of skin. Nevertheless, in reception centre A there were generalised prejudices towards foreigners and in particular asylum seekers regardless

of their colour of skin. According to Bauman the use of the word asylum to the extent that it now triggers electors' prejudices, appears to rest upon the reclassification of the term from one that once produced human compassion and aid, to the one that now consists of *'a dreadful concoction of shameful naivety and criminal irresponsibility'* (Bauman, 2004: 57).

In reception centre named B which is located in a small town on an island, the majority of respondents shared positive attributes in relation to their social life and the place they are staying. All seven respondents in this centre stated that they liked the surrounding environment. In particular, two boys compared it with their place of origin and they underscored some similarities that helped them to adapt easier. For example, they stated that the scenery, the culture and the everyday habits of local people resembled their background lives. The majority of the boys in this centre expressed a positive view of local people:

*It is a good place, I like people who live here; they are nice and friendly.... generally speaking, because not everybody is good [...] every day I meet people, we say hello to each other and we have a small chat, especially when I go to the gym I meet young people of my age who live in the village and we may chat for a while.  
(Tamim)*

None of the respondents hosted in centre B had experienced racism and discrimination. However, some boys mentioned racist attitudes towards minors of other ethnicities. They shared that boys from Africa had received racist attitudes from local people quite frequently due to their colour of skin and they were excluded from the local job market.

Two out of the seven respondents of centre B, shared their difficulties with contacting with people from the community. They shared that local people sometimes were *'weird, they were getting on their nerves and they were not very open'* with the foreigners. Therefore, they acknowledged that they could probably only live in the hosting community under certain circumstances. Roshnan disclosed that he had met some guys at school and they were chatting for some time but when he met with them out in town the guys avoided talking to him.

None of the respondents of centre B reported any serious incidents of racist abuse or physical assault. Perhaps one factor that has contributed to unaccompanied minors' interaction with young people is their school attendance, in contrast with minors of centre A, whose marginal position in the community can partly stem from their non-attendance from school. Moreover, the majority of young people's descriptions of centre B suggest that they are actively engaged in the social life of the community. For example, they reported that they go out frequently, they interact with other young people and adults in coffee places, they go to the gym and they often play football with other boys from the village. They also shared being regularly invited in local festivities and social events, such as weddings, sport events, concerts and dance festivals.

Two of the respondents who are hosted in reception centre C located in an urban context, were concerned about the rise of the right-wing party and the fascist attacks that regularly were reported towards foreigners and asylum seekers. One of these boys shared that he avoided going to the city centre and that he had restricted his movements in the neighbourhood due to possible racist attack. Nevertheless, he mentioned positive experiences in relation to welcoming and friendly attitudes he had received from neighbours and local people. The other minor who had just arrived in the centre stated that he didn't like the new environment and that he only maintains contact with the Afghan people.

Similarly, in reception centre D which is located in a seaside community near a city, there were references to racist attacks towards foreigners and an unprecedented increase of the right wing party in that area. Some places in that area were referred to as 'racist zones' meaning that the vast majority of local people held negative prejudices about foreigners. None of the six respondents of reception centre D reported positive experiences in relation to the behaviour of local people. A few of them reported that local people were not very open with foreigners. The following excerpts reveal young people's perception of the attitudes of local people:

*When we go out...in the city or around here in the village...they look at us oddly. When someone is doing something wrong.... they put the blame on him because he is a foreigner. (Hussein)*

*We don't have any contacts with local people. We don't go to the city centre because we are afraid of fascist attacks. (Moustafa)*

The rest of the respondents of reception centre D had not created any sort of network with anyone from the community or they didn't express any interest in going out of the centre and meeting up with people. For example, one of the minors stated that he only cared about the place of centre and not about the outside world. Such attitudes may reflect a refusal to replace the feeling of home they had left behind. As much as the growth of social networks seems to be a complicated task, so too the motivation of children to create new bonds and re-establish their lives appears to be, in some instances, poor.

Finally, in the same area I visited another reception centre named E located up in the mountains. Three minors hosted in the centre E participated in the study and looked with a positive eye on their new place of settlement. They used words such as 'paradise, beautiful place, perfect scenery' to describe the place. Two boys expressed a positive view about local people even though they hadn't really come in contact with them. None of them reported any particular problems or difficulties in their interaction with people. Therefore, it was deemed too early to create a network with local people or to have a complete image of the social life as they had just arrived in the place a few weeks before the inquiry.

Overall these experiences of young people regarding their contacts with local people have some hints of positive features of interaction with the community, but mostly mirror negative aspects of alienation, loneliness and a reserved stance towards social life. Such negative aspects were tempered by worries about racism and the outcome of asylum claims.

It is suggested that the non-attendance of minors from local schools, the very few opportunities of interaction with the mainstream population and finally the rise of xenophobia among local people, have impacted greatly on the social isolation of young people. Although this is a controversial claim without researching the views of local communities or verifying the respondents' accounts, there is perhaps some support to be found in the accounts of the public figures (representatives of local

communities in some respects) which will shed additional light on the issue. These accounts will be explored in relation to the concepts of ‘philoxenia’ and ‘xenophobia’ in chapter 10.

## **7.6. Needs**

This section sheds light on the perceptions of young people of their needs. Although up to now their experiences have informed their needs or have allowed for a first impression of what they want and what makes them feel better, some issues are considered in more depth than others. Specifically, young boys were asked about what they think they found helpful or unhelpful in service provision, what they found difficult to cope with in their new residency and what would aid their settlement at this stage. Many of the boys felt puzzled by their new experiences in addition to the incomprehensible language and culture, weather, strange food, habits and different way of living. Young people’s voices of their needs come against a background of being young, far away from family and home and without their familiar social and cultural context.

A number of studies have identified that asylum seeking children and young people are not treated as children first but as refugees (Marriott, 2001; Richman, 1998a; Stanley, 2001; Stone, 2000). These studies have pointed out that refugee children face exactly the same issues as many other children but there are also some extra and specific issues that should be taken into consideration related to their specific life histories, backgrounds and cultural affiliations. The distinct patterns of minor’s needs have been reported by a few studies whilst suggesting that the diversity of their risks, experiences and difficulties demands for a distinct type of treatment (Abunimah & Blower, 2010).

In considering these issues, it must always be remembered that unaccompanied minors are not a homogenous group of young people but have a range of diverse and complex needs, experiences and expectations. There is the tendency to think of young refugees as a homogenous group of people with common needs thus we often create ‘*a simple universal idea*’ of who they are (Loizos, 2002: 42). Such a perception may lead to misconceptions of their actual needs and consequently establish stereotypes.

Papadopoulos has suggested that “*the loss of home is the only common condition that refugees share*” as their past and present circumstances are wide-ranging and multiple. This view is continuously echoed in the views of minors of this study.

### **7.6.1. Looking for meaning in everyday existence**

Although ‘finding meaning in life’ is a concept that it may entail the fulfilment of multiple forms of needs, I distinguished it as a key area as it was coming over and over again in the words of young boys during the interviews. Actually, the needs which are explored below are grounded under the umbrella of ‘meaningful in everyday existence’. While minors shared their feelings and views in relation to their everyday existences quite frequently they implied that their present lives were not perceived as ‘meaningful’ to them. When I asked them to describe what they meant by the word meaningful, a few of them shared: “*being active, being busy, productive, learn, develop oneself, see and do new things, having opportunities, being able to follow our dreams.*” These concepts are explored in relation to the other ‘helps’ young people mentioned as being vital for their settlement in their new environment.

When young people were asked about what they usually do in their spare time I became astonished as most of them had spent the most of time in the reception centres rather than going out of the centre to pursue activities, meet people, or see friends. A great number of my respondents shared that they couldn’t find meaning in their daily routines as they didn’t have opportunities to participate in any sort of educational, recreational or social activities. Taking into account the first piece regarding education, as already stressed more than half of the respondents did not attend school and only a few had fully participation in education. Then it becomes even more important to meet with people and do things since they have plenty of time. In addition, recreational and social activities were partially present in two out of the five reception centres.

The majority of young boys conveyed a sense of doing nothing in their spare time as they were not attending school, some of them were not joining the Greek classes in the centres and there was a lack of structure in their daily routines. This meant that most of them had a great amount of free time however they didn’t know what to do

with it. Complaints about being bored as ‘looked after unaccompanied minors’ emerged early in our discussion regarding the way they were spending their time and the overall difficulties they meet in the context of care. A few respondents demonstrated a quite bleak picture of their everyday lives, giving voice to their primary need for a meaningful time:

*Is like living in hell, the day is the same with the night, nothing is happening. The only moments that are worth living here is when we go to the river for swimming. (Shirzard)*

*I am not having a good time. I am not doing anything really, I am just spending my time here and I am waiting for the moment to leave...I don't have any interests outside of the centre, I haven't met anybody. (Bashir)*

These abstracts represent the views of young people hosted by two different reception centres. Their words convey inactivity, a monotonous routine with evident feelings of desolation with repetitive actions of covering basic needs being the main activities of minors’ daily practices. The perception of time becomes a subjective experience as young people are in a sort of inertia; time may pass slower or faster depending on the unfolding of the events during the day and the length of sleep. For example, one boy shared that times goes by very slowly because he wakes up early and he is inactive during the day. Some minors stated they had become tired and unmotivated over not finding any meaning in their routines. They pointed out that covering their basic needs (i.e.: eating and sleeping) is not something they should be satisfied for; and so as they do not have productive days, they feel that they just waste their time.

### **7.6.2. Recognised as young people first**

Unaccompanied asylum seeking minors’ status as young people was emphasised by a number of boys who suggested that fulfilling their needs as being young people first was paramount:

*I feel I have my feet and my hands tight with chains. I wake up at 10 am, and then we are hanging around in the camp and we are talking to each other, and we play cards. I am not learning anything. If I don't learn something now when am I going to learn? Now I am young. (Kiomarsh)*

Similar accounts also designate youth as a stage of life with particular cognitive needs that have to be fulfilled such as the need for learning. Roshnan points out that the stage of youth is equated with the learning process:

*Yes...yes.... we must.... because we are young and we want to learn, we need to learn. Now it's the moment, we are free and we have time for learning.... if we become old there is no point.*

A few boys remarked that often they do not get the recognition they deserve as young people as result of assumptions made by some service providers regarding their age. A few accounts demonstrated that some service providers treated young people as adults and they often implied that they had lied about their age. Such claims will be also discussed in detail in chapter 9 which will present the perspectives of the service providers. A few accounts of young people confirm the unequal treatment they receive in relation to the indigenous young people and they imply that their need to be recognised like any other teen of their age is being undermined:

*They treat better Greek children...because they are Greeks and we are treated as foreigners...we are strangers to them. For example, if an Afghan is caught drinking alcohol he will be kicked out of here immediately, if the same happens to a Greek guy, he will continue staying in the centre. (Suroor)*

Similar examples demonstrate the unfair treatment young people receive as they are seen as foreigners first. Once, an Afghan boy mentioned that his Greek peers who were also hosted as looked after children in the same reception centre, were encouraged to participate in the workshops running by the centre but not young refugees indicating different and unequal treatment between indigenous and foreign young people. Differences were also pointed in relation to the opportunities unaccompanied minors were offered compared to indigenous young people:

*...we had a team for going to football but they didn't let us continue.... why? This would be very good to us. Before we were going to the friendly matches and our team was always the winner... but they didn't let us register for joining the team like the Greeks of our age. They said something was not working with our papers, because we have pink cards. (Roshnan)*

This and a few other analogous accounts demonstrate that often the asylum status of minors supersede the qualities of unaccompanied minors as young people and

impedes their plans for the future. As the treatment between young refugees and their Greek peers becomes obviously dissimilar, the need of the boys to be recognised and treated as young people first becomes even stronger. To summarise, the young boys showed awareness of their position as asylum seekers and they asserted their right to be treated as any other individual of their age. Stanley's study (2001) puts forward the need of young refugees to be recognised as children first and foremost in policy and practice if we are to ensure that young refugees have access to the services they really need.

### **7.6.3. The importance of learning**

In the interviews the boys talked about the process of learning as something very important to them, for several reasons. They viewed education as an investment for the future in the sense that, for them, education means knowledge, developing capabilities and an opportunity to build a better future. Education is seen as extremely important by the young people interviewed in various studies (Hek & Sales, 2002; John *et al.*, 2002; Kidane, 2001b; Marriott, 2001; Macaskill, 2002). Education and learning promote the social and emotional well-being of children and finally may speed up the process of settlement and inclusion in the local community.

The boys of this study mentioned that learning does not only entail schooling but it also involves other activities such as educational excursions, trips and visits to cultural and historic places. Some boys considered important to know more about the culture and history of the hosting country, the habits of the local people, the language and customs. Some others referred to sport activities such as football and martial arts, and also painting and gardening, as activities that could enhance their knowledge and add meaning in their daily routines.

Since I have already discussed the experiences and views of minors in relation to education in the subsection 7.2.1., in order to avoid repetition, I will not expand in this area more. Connected to the importance of having meaningful everyday existences and being treated as young people first, unaccompanied minors underscored that a very important need for them is to learn new things and be educated. As Argent (1996:25) has stated 'education is a basic right for every child,

and it is one of the ways children can reclaim their normal childhoods' (cited in Hopkins & Hill, 2010). It is clear therefore that learning not only magnifies the horizons of knowledge but it may also provide some sort of structure and routine in the turbulent everyday existences of young people.

#### 7.6.4. Legal representation

Young boys strongly expressed their need to understand how the Greek asylum system works in Greece, to be regularly informed by legal representatives on their asylum matters and overall to be able to rely upon someone who will navigate them through the complexities of the migration system. What was mostly reflected in the accounts was an upsetting experience which gave rise to an immediate need for legal assistance as it comes in line with their need for certainty regarding the future:

*I need to know what is going on with my asylum issue so that I wouldn't be forced to live in fear and uncertainty. (Amir)*

For many young people, living with a great deal of uncertainty is stressful and anxiety provoking. A few new-comers who had been less than a few months in the reception centres demonstrated their frustration with the lack of legal assistance. In particular, there were cases of minors who reported that they hadn't received any information about the asylum procedure:

*I am in this centre for a month now and nobody has ever asked me what I want...if I want something, for example to apply for asylum. (Suroor)*

The extract below is part of the Separated Children in Europe Program and stresses the need of legal assistance and recommends:

*At all stages of the asylum process, including any appeals or reviews, separated children should have a legal representative who will assist the child to make his or her claim for asylum. Legal representatives should be available at no cost to the child and, in addition to possessing expertise on the asylum process; they should be skilled in representing children ...' (Save the Children, 2003: 24).*

Almost half of the respondents reported contact with their legal advocates who in most cases were lawyers and more rarely social workers. The other half reported no contact at all with legal representatives. It should be mentioned that most boys who

haven't met their legal advisers were new-comers and perhaps it was too early to establish contact with them. Interestingly, a few accounts revealed that the minors that were represented legally by their social worker were far more satisfied with the quality of their relationship than being represented by a lawyer. Tzamil explains how helpful he finds his relationship with his social worker who is also representative of his legal matters:

*I am very glad I have met him (social worker) he has been helping me a lot [...] he is taking care of my legal matters and papers he tells me when we should do something, when I should present myself for an interview to the Committee and things like that.*

Perhaps it is important to mention that some lawyers in Greece are contracted as external professionals who meet young people in set up meetings. Some boys reported meeting their legal advisers once a week, others once a month and a few of them 'every now and then' depending on the availability of the lawyer. Only in one reception centre was the lawyer contracted as a full time professional with everyday duties, while in the other centres they were working as external experts. Consequently, the regular contacts with the social workers allowed for better connection and trusted relations.

A few boys expressed disappointment about the behaviour of their legal advisers and felt that there was little communication and support available. Legal advisers were often viewed as unreliable and people that cannot be trusted. When I asked Ramzan to whom he is talking about his legal matters he answered:

*The lawyer.....I call her liar and not lawyer. Because lawyers promise things that never happen. Since I came here I have met many lawyers who are coming here from the program to inform us about the laws and our legal matters.... they keep talking and talking...and nothing ever has happened. That's why...I don't talk to her at all. It's a waste of time.*

Lack of trust seems to be an important issue which adds additional barriers in the relationship between the minor and the legal advisor. Complaints about the relationship between unaccompanied minors and legal advisers were also reported in Ayotte's study (1998) who remarked that the quality of legal representatives dealing with young people's asylum claims was generally not good; young people felt that some legal advisers did not understand their situation and as well they were

experienced as unfriendly and as not being aware of how to approach the children in an appropriate way. In this study the lack of connection between the legal advisers and the young boys is reflected clearly in some accounts. For example, Hussein revealed that he is discussing his legal matters with his friends:

*I talk to my friends.... for sure.... whatever I know about these kind of matters, they also know, we help each other, if someone finds out something he keeps us updated.*

Both the European Union directives as well as the Separated Children in Europe Programme have stressed that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children ought to have an independent guardian or advisor, partly to provide information and legal assistance (EU Directive (2003) Article 19(1) in Hopkins & Hill, 2006):

*Member States shall as soon as possible take measure to ensure the necessary representation of unaccompanied minors by legal guardianship or, where necessary, representation by an organisation which is responsible for the care and well-being of minors, or by any other appropriate representation.*

Strikingly, none of the young people in this study were aware of their right to have a legal guardian who would take their legal matters one step forward and represent them in any issue that needs the consent of an adult. They didn't know who their legal guardian was even if they had been appointed one, and in some cases they didn't know what a legal guardian represents. It is even more astonishing if we consider that minors who have been hosted for years in reception centres didn't have any idea on this matter. Only one boy hosted in a reception centre located in an urban context mentioned that his legal guardian was his social worker who was responsible among others for his legal matters. All the rest were not informed about legal guardianship and a few of them made guesses by saying that their legal guardian could be the lawyer of the reception centre.

The need of legal guardianship appears to be an urgent issue for the lives of minors as it affects every policy that has been designed to assist their situation in the hosting country (UNHCR, 2008). This issue has been extensively discussed with the service providers as well, and will be explored further in chapter 9. What I would like to raise here is that legal guardianship in the Greek asylum policy exists only in papers; due to limitation of space I will not refer here to the reasons that legal guardianship is not being performed in practice

but I will indicate that the absence of a guardian creates tremendous complexities in the everyday lives of minors, and stresses the need of a guardian in practical and social terms.

If we think that the daily actions which require the consent of a parent or a guardian are numerous and affect almost every aspect of the minor's existence in the hosting country – from school registration, and health issues, to the issuance of a tax registration number and sports activities – then the need of real representation of minors by guardians is significant.

### **7.6.5. Emotional Needs**

A general concern arises as to whether the emotional needs of unaccompanied minors are being met. Here the need for emotional support appears to be significant given the life circumstances of unaccompanied minors; these involve varying levels of exposure to war, violence, risk, loss and disruption from their social and cultural contexts. Many of the respondents expressed the need of emotional support as they shared feelings of loneliness, isolation and provided a profile of low-esteem. Some boys strongly voiced their need of being heard and being respected:

*In the beginning I used to go and talk to her (social worker) and share my problems, but she didn't give me support, courage or any help but instead she had that strict attitude that...emm. I was getting discouraged from talking to her....and I regretted it. Since then I am going to my friends and I talk to them.... ok they can't really support or help me all the times because they also have their worries. (Tamim)*

Tamim's account so aptly echoes his need for emotional support. This and a few other relevant accounts indicate young people's need of being heard, offered encouragement and having their confidence built by constructing healthy and trusted relationships with the professionals. This view does not only imply the necessity to develop normal relations and networks but it may also suggest that some boys may need particular support in terms of dealing with their emotions, such as counselling (Hollins *et.al.* 2007).

Another example which reveals the need for emotional support and is also centred on the attitudes of the staff, indicates how vital is for young people to feel that their voices are being heard. Hakim discloses feelings of distress in relation to the lack of

support but mostly he underlines the need to be respected and treated as a human being:

*My biggest problem here...is that I am afraid to talk to the staff and ask things or share my worries. They don't listen to our voices. I think...I feel I am like a dog...I feel that I don't have a value as a human. They are very suspicious to us...if we hold something...for example a mobile; they tell us...where from did you steal that?*

His account suggests that when young people are treated with disregard, mistrust and lack of respect, they run the risk of being isolated and building distrust for those around them; significant factors that highly affect their emotional well-being. Such circumstances may stimulate young people's exclusion and cause distress especially when they are not able to understand or speak to those around them along with the fact that they do not know what is going to happen next. All these may cause serious emotional implications. A few respondents of this study shared that they chose to talk to their friends when they needed to talk to someone about their problems whilst implying the absence of emotional support on behalf of the professionals.

The majority of young people's accounts suggested that, in their daily routines, they often chose to remain silent about their difficulties, concerns and worries especially to the adults of the reception centres. Perhaps part of their silence may have stemmed from different cultural norms of emotional expression and sensitive disclosure. Suppressing emotions may be viewed as a condition that gives rise to further emotional disorders for the young boys who prefer to remain in silence in the long run (Goodman, 2004). However, it has also been viewed as a strategy of resilience for unaccompanied minors and a beneficial way of responding to their current difficulties (Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010).

#### **7.6.6. Social Needs**

It appeared from the beginning that it was important for the young people to be involved into a range of social activities, such as participating in local youth clubs, leisure and sports activities that would make them feel better, become active and make friendships. These activities were referred as means of encouraging young people's participation into the community. In this sense, social activities would halt

feelings of loneliness and boredom, and would help young people to develop social networks, promote their social contribution and build up their self-esteem.

The following account very well illustrates the need of young people to be involved into activities and learn new things:

*I would like ... in my free time to have the chance to learn martial arts and also to go to a music school where you learn music.... I think that most of us want to do one hundred things but unfortunately we can't do anything. (Amir)*

As well as keeping themselves busy in the form of taking part in various sports, creative and leisure activities appeared to dispel negative thoughts. The need of being engaged in social activities emerged rapidly during the interviews as a strategy of keeping the boys away from their problems; *'it is the only way to help us from going mad'* one of the boys said. Amid underlines the importance of disrupting his negative thoughts by being active:

*The sense of doing nothing is my major difficulty, because every day I do a lot of thinking. But when I have something to do...or when I meet people, I ...don't do a lot of thinking.*

The interviews with service providers in the qualitative study by Hopkins & Hill (2006) revealed that it was more important for unaccompanied minors to get involved into social activities than receiving counselling and therapy. This claim is supported by a number of scholars (Summerfield, 1998; Bolloten & Spafford, 1998; Richman, 1998b) who have doubted the effect of the western 'medicalization' approach as being inappropriate for young people and have suggested a different response to their multiple difficulties as their needs may be practical, educational, and social and so on.

From this point of view, it is more helpful for the young boys to be engaged into social activities than talking to a therapist openly about their emotions. A few other boys shared that sometimes they arrange activities on their own, for example, they take a walk on the mountains or they organise a basketball or football match with their peers, and some of them reported to go out in the evening in local coffee places. Finally, the respondents of a specific reception centre shared their need to come in contact with the residents of another reception centre which is located in the same area:

*We live only 20 min. from here and we have never met...they should take us there for a visit. It will be nice to talk to these guys...we surely have things in common. (Ali)*

Additionally, the need to have social support emerged as a key factor which was placed high in the hierarchy of their social needs. Young people often pointed out that the people who are most important for them are firstly their families back home, secondly their friends and thirdly the staff. A few cases indicated strong relationships with some staff as illustrated in the following extract:

*When I have any kind of worry I talk to my friend and I also talk to F. (social worker) he is like my friend too. He has been helping and supporting me a lot. (Tzamil)*

Relevant accounts confirmed that young people need to have supportive and caring adults around them especially in difficult times. In a few instances young people appeared to seek the encouragement of the staff in order to interact socially and know more about the new country.

However, the vast majority of the respondents reported no contact with any adult from the reception centre and expressed their need of having someone to talk to apart from their friends. Overall they shared that they need reliable and trusted adult figures that would organise social activities for them and would promote their social participation in the community. Amza's account reveals that there is need for the young people for structure and social activities that would be organised by caring and supportive adults; this somehow would ease the patterns of their everyday existence:

*The main problem we have here is that there is nothing organised for us.... we don't have any particular program to follow or any kind of activity, we just have a bed and food...nothing else. I don't think they (staff) care about us.*

Along with the need of social support young boys expressed a desire of having access to the internet and in particular to the social media. This appeared to be of great importance especially for the ones who did not have internet access. Two out of the five reception centres provided computing facilities and internet access. This means that twenty-one minors did not have access to the internet. In particular, sixteen boys referred to the social media such as *Facebook*, as an important mean of

communication with their friends, their family and relatives, especially with the ones who live abroad.

Another boy who bought a laptop with his pocket money demonstrated the importance of having computing access for his social life. He mentioned that almost every day he is chatting through the social media with his friends, he follows the news and that he is informed about what is going on in the world. He also mentioned that internet access allows him to be up-to-date regarding the situation in his home country and keep in touch with friends who are hosted in reception centres elsewhere.

### **7.7. Future Plans and Aspirations**

The notion of future is of highly importance for the young people as it designates hope for what lies ahead, it creates strategies to cope with the present difficulties, or it may be extremely difficult to even think about it. In the narrow westernised acuity, to make plans for the future is a regular process for people who are able to look ahead and think of how they would like to be or what they would like to do. In the light of the specific context in which Afghan boys move, live and construct their experiences, it is extremely hard to provide a plausible account of their future plans given the uncertainty by which their lives as asylum seekers is encircled.

Although they all shared some sort of information about their aspirations, what mostly is conveyed by their accounts regarding their future is a misty area of uncertainty and hope. Their future depends explicitly on the decision of their asylum claim and on their transitions to other countries. Then the notion of the future becomes difficult or even “frozen” due to their experiences of exile, of the asylum situation in the hosting country and the sense of not knowing what will happen (Rahimi, 2001). A few accounts indicate that young people along with their asylum status they have also put their future “on hold”:

*I used to have plans but not anymore. My future has finished...what  
I used to think and plan, I think.... it's over. (Rahman)*

Rahman has been waiting for four years for a decision over his asylum claim and at the time of the interview he was already 18 years old. His frustration regarding his future was evident in his words exposing bitterness for the time he had lost in

waiting, and soon had to leave the reception centre. In the light of uncertainty, taking decisions or making plans about one's future seems to be an extremely difficult situation. As young boys are unaware of the time they will receive an answer about their asylum claims, it becomes even harder to set a plan for accomplishing their aspirations. The following example clarifies that it becomes unbearable to think of the future under the pressure of uncertainty:

*I used to think of becoming a doctor...I wanted to study. You see I like reading a lot...but here is not possible to make any plans, it's impossible...there is not point thinking of the future...when you don't know what will happen. (Zabiullah)*

Although most young people displayed difficulty to project their aspirations as to whether these would ever be accomplished, they did provide some information in terms of how they would like to imagine themselves in a few years. Consequently, most of the shared thoughts, feelings and aspirations regarding the future cannot be treated as pragmatic aspects of life but more as relatively imaginary. The future imaginings along with the imaginings of places and social relationships left behind are integral parts of their present identity (Moskal, 2011). What was mostly reflected in the future imaginings of young boys was their need of having a life like any other ordinary individual. In the context of his future plans Rahman shared that he needed to become "ordinary":

*I would like to be like ordinary people, I just want to have as much as I need like ordinary people and to live with dignity. I don't mind to stay here, the only thing it matters is to get asylum in any country.*

Here Rahman shares that living as an ordinary person is what he wishes for, dignity, independency, freedom and a sort of normalcy. The major disruptions these young boys had faced as a result of the forced migration places them in a 'needy' condition that they noticeably wish to escape from. Being an ordinary person – perhaps a taken for granted condition in the western world – becomes integral part of this boy's aspirations.

This and other relevant accounts highlight the effects of the lack of a secure legal status; one of the salient features of refugee young people's lives is the state of continuous uncertainty as regards the future and life planning (Anderson, 2001:187).

Uncertainty is also one of the most serious issues facing the respondents, in particular the ones who spend long time in Greece. There is a further psychological aspect to this lack of security regarding the future. The effects of such a condition may be reflected in the rising levels of psychological stress inherent in life stories already characterised by up-rootedness, loss, social and cultural disruptions (ibid). The following extracts confirm that living in uncertainty may cause emotional strain:

*I am very worried about the future...I don't want to think about it, I just can't, it gives me a bad feeling. (Ali)*

*I can't sleep and eat when I think... what I am going to do, because I can't do much...just wait. (Mohammad)*

Anxiety is a constant feature of the young boy's lives especially for the ones who are about to become 18 years old as they have to deal with an additional emotional burden, that of being removed from the reception centre. Some boys reported to become fearful, restrained and unmotivated to keep on trying to accomplish their future plans. For example, Mahdi, the only boy who had obtained temporary residence permit for humanitarian reasons<sup>16</sup> shared:

*I have a status under 'humanitarian ground'. To tell you the truth, I would like to study but I don't think I can make it...because in a while I should leave the centre and I don't have other option but work.*

Mahdi's account reveals that even under the relative certainty a temporary residence permit may provide for the near future, it is still hard for a young refugee to accomplish future plans. The absence of social and economic support when being out of care may lead someone to give up his/her aspirations for survival reasons. Other accounts have also provided similar concerns as to the opportunities minors are offered to move on with their plans particularly when they have to cope with limitations of time of being looked after children. For example, a few boys expressed the desire to continue studying after leaving the centre, but as they are aware of the fact that they are not entitled to any kind of support as adult-asylum seekers, soon they left aside their dreams.

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<sup>16</sup> According to article 25.4 of Law 1975/1991, as amended by Law 2452/1996 in conjunction with article 8 of Presidential Decree 61/1999, the Minister of Public Order 'in exceptional cases, particularly for humanitarian reasons, may approve the temporary residence of an alien whose refugee status application has been rejected, until his departure from (Greece) becomes possible' (Skordas and Sitaropoulos, 2004:35).

Concerning their dreams for the future there were particular references in relation to the studies or employment interests that minors would like to acquire if they would have given the opportunity to do so. Yet, there were a few expressions of high expectations by a few minors. They expressed strong interests in following demanding studies that would offer them a higher and respectable status. Ten out of thirty respondents shared their hopes to study to the University, mentioning professions like chemical, doctor, geologist, computer scientist. Here are two representative examples of young boys sharing their dreams:

*First priority to me is to learn the Greek language and to study in the University here in Greece [...] I would like to know more about the earth and study...emmm... I think it is called geologist. At the moment I am doing Greek lessons and English lessons by myself.  
(Amir)*

It sounded a bit unrealistic to me to hold on to such dreams given the fact that a 16-year-old boy, without the required level of language would succeed entry in a university and follow a demanding program. As expressed by a teacher, in the Stanley's (2001:82) study, it is likely that minors have been guided by their parents before leaving their home country to study hard and succeed in highly regarded professions such as medicine and engineering.

A few other accounts revealed young people's anticipation for getting involved into more renowned professions; three boys mentioned that they would like to play football on a professional level, and four other boys wished to become singers and actors. The rest of the respondents expressed their desire to work in more applied professions such as tailoring, hairdressing and mechanics. It is worth mentioning that all minors acknowledged the difficulty in achieving their goals and underscored the necessity of becoming refugees first as a prerequisite of accomplishing their goals.

Actually, it becomes extremely hard for an unaccompanied minor to accomplish any sort of learning process before reaching the age of 18, if we think that most of them arrive in the hosting country in their early youth with no knowledge of the language and in some instances with lack of previous educational experience. This means that within a few years they have to adapt in their new environment, to participate in preparatory classes of Greek language, to attend intercultural education schools or be

integrated in the orthodox educational system. Then it becomes apparent that young boys may never catch up as they are likely to be at a substantial social, cultural and linguistic disadvantage compared to their indigenous peers. Most of the respondents were aware of such barriers stemming from their limited time as residents of reception centres and the lack of extra provisions of support for unaccompanied minors at schools.

These factors in some instances have led young boys to give up their dreams for completing education in Greece and in some cases strengthened their desire of continuing education in other European countries. Overall more than half of the respondents expressed their need of knowledge and personal development however in a more promising country in terms of social provisions, support and higher rates of asylum recognition.

## **7.8. Young people's experiences of services**

This section seeks to identify how well current services are responding to their needs and explore the impact of services on their daily routines. Research that is mainly drawn from UM's experiences of services in UK has shown that they are not provided with care, support and protection appropriate to their needs (Kidane, 2001b; Mitchell, 2003; Stanley, 2001) although such indications should not be treated as representative of all unaccompanied children. Some reports conducted by International Humanitarian Organisations in Greece expressed similar concerns as to whether the services for unaccompanied minors in Greece are sufficient to meet their needs (UNHCR 2008, EMN, 2009).

Following from this, one of the aims of this study was to find out more about what the respondents think of the services they receive, their views of their current living arrangements, and what has the most direct influence on their everyday lives. This section will look at the evidence with regards to the interviewees' responses focusing on the following themes:

- 1) Their general perceptions of the reception centres

- 2) The main 'helps' they were provided with during their stay and the value of these helps
- 3) Whether services needed improvement and if so in which areas

The information presented here is mainly derived from the interviews, although in some instances I will be referring to what young people told me at the focus groups. There were cases where the interviewees' responses about the services overlapped with their views of the needs presented earlier suggesting that minors' needs are strictly tied to their existing living conditions and the services they are offered. Since these two areas are quite near in the sense that the welfare services are designed to meet the needs of the looked after young people, there were relevant responses in both areas.

The general views regarding the accommodating facilities suggest that most interviewees had little contact with service providers outside the reception centres, and so their comments largely relate to services provided within the centres, which operated as predominantly closed institutions. Moreover, large inconsistencies exist as to the operation's conditions, and the quality of the services. There were references indicating different scopes and regulations among the centres. Some centres present a temporary type of accommodation and resemble hotels as there are regular comes and goes with short staying while other centres present a 'long term' type of accommodation in evident efforts of integration.

As shown in Table 7.1. variations of services among the centres are related to the following features: the type of placement, the location of placement, the ratio between capacity and staff and the operating time of the centre which bears witness to the expertise in providing services to UM. Some of these features are observed as being prominent in the shared views of young people in relation to their experiences of services, for instance the geographical location caused isolation and obstructed the access of young people to particular services (Humphries & Mynott 2001; Stanley 2001).

**Table 7.1: Characteristics of the reception centres**

	Location	Operating since	Capacity	Funded by	Services
R. Centre A	Town (rural)	2009	80	N.G.O. and M.H.S.S. <sup>17</sup> , E.R. F <sup>18</sup> .	SW, legal services, medical care, pocket money.
R. Centre B	Town (rural)	2000	25	National Agency, M.H.S.S.	SW, Medical Care, Greek-English class, pocket money, sport activities.
R. Centre C	City (urban)	(1924 underage children) 2000 <sup>19</sup>	15	National Agency, M.H.S.S., E.R.F.	SW, Medical Care, external psychologist and legal adviser, art activities (photography, painting), sport activities.
R. Centre D	Village (rural)	2006	30	N.G.O., M.H.S.S., E.R.F.	SW, Medical care, legal services, psychologist, Greek class.
R. Centre E	Town (rural)	2006	48	National Agency, M.H.S.S.	SW, Medical Care, external psychologist and legal adviser, Greek and English.

### 7.8.1. Perceptions of services

Although there were mixed views about the provisions, the study identified mostly negative experiences with a few positive experiences. The young people reported differences in the quantity and quality of services and consequently the degree to

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity

<sup>18</sup> European Refugee Fund

<sup>19</sup> Since 2000 the reception centre explicitly hosts unaccompanied minors

which their residency covered their needs. Twenty out of the thirty respondents expressed frustration and discontent about the provision of services. Their accounts suggest that the reception centres are only appropriate to cater for the very basic needs of minors. The following quotes illustrate with the gloomiest words what young boys think of the hosting centres:

*The only good thing is that you don't sleep in the rain. (Kiomarsh)*

*Just a place for sleeping and eating. (Amza)*

*A place where the animals live, a horse stable. (Amid)*

*It's a place for people who are in a real need of a place to sleep and nothing else. (Nazim)*

*This place is not made for us...it is for the people who work and sleep and eat. (Habib)*

*(A series of quotes drawn from individual interviews)*

These are the hosting centres as described as from the perspective of the young boys; these centres are seen as last-resort welfare institutions providing modest services and accommodation. This view is reflected in Nazim's quotation who shares that only people in a real need are hosted in such reception centres. It is also implied that young people who ended up in these places have no other solution other than becoming residents of these centres.

What firstly emerge from the boys' accounts are the identities they construct for these centres. Constructing an identity is an action by which particular categories are ascribed to people and places. As Sacks (1992:40) has pointed our perception of a society is shaped by the categories we assign to it as members of the society, in other words we construct our understanding of ourselves, the others and the society by the associated characteristics we provide to a specific category.

The descriptions young boys ascribed to their accommodating places are inherently charged with negative characteristics through various categorizations. Words such as 'horse stable', 'place for eating and sleeping' and 'place for people who are in real need' convey descriptions of places where living is hard and negatively linked with institutionalisation in the sense that people who live in institutions are the ones who spend their everyday lives within closed boundaries. The context of the interview in a way offers the ground to produce answers that display their knowledge of the

construction of institutionalisation as a concept, since young people were selected to talk about their lives as individuals that form a minority and belong to a specific group of people, called residents of welfare institutions, or else, service users.

My interpretation of the young boys' general descriptions is that their words are linked with very negative acuties of the places they live. Thus these words are attached to a stigmatised identity. A stigmatised identity can be defined as a '*culturally dominant categorization, which is mainly linked to negative characterizations*' (Goffman, 1990/1963). The description of the experience of living in a reception centre presumes that its residents do not belong to the mainstream population instead they are the ones who don't have a choice of living in their homes. In Greece the residents of shelters or any kind of institutions are often marginalised and excluded from social life, thus they carry a stigma, a social identity that '*makes the public reduce the ones who carry the stigma from a whole and usual person to tainted, discounted one*' (Goffman, 1963:12).

Therefore, it is important to note that Habib's comment reveals that young boys do not necessarily identify their selves with the stigmatised identity of the reception centre. By saying '*this place is not made for us*', he distinguishes the stigmatised identity of the centre with the qualities of himself and his peers. Frequently it is presumed by the public that the ones who live in reception centres are people with problems, who are unable to lead their lives. Such characterisations were inevitably felt by some of the boys who associated their selves with the negative characterisations of the reception centres.

Habib's remark about his sense of the place provides an additional explanation about the inappropriateness of the accommodation centre. He claims that the primary scope of the centre should be to care, support and assist minors and underage children to stand up on their own. Therefore, in practice it hosts people who are or look like adults and work most of the day in the community. These residents do not seem to care about the service provisions other than food and accommodation which comes in contrast with the actual needs and expectations of young people like Habib who want to live productively.

A few more accounts confirm this claim with descriptions delineating reception centres as places where only the minimum needs of minors are covered and some basic provision of language courses. Their frustration as to the quality of the services is also reflected in efforts to change placement and move to another centre:

*Since the first day I arrived here...I didn't like living here at all.... I requested by the responsible of the centre to leave and go to another centre...and she said: 'we have given you a room to stay, and you can't change that'. (Moustafa)*

The poor services in relation to the difficulties unaccompanied minors face upon arrival in Greece have led a number of them to leave the reception centres. For example, a few respondents mentioned that the living conditions in the reception centres did not correspond to their expectations and did not match with the information they received before entering this form of care. A number of young people were referred to the accommodation centres through NGOs or other organizations where they were consulted about the process of being accommodated and the living conditions. Amza explains regarding the information he received by the GCR when he arrived in Greece:

*Before coming here, I came into contact with GCR and I asked them...are there any classes...because I want to go to school and learn the language...and they told me: 'yes', and then I asked them again...Is there any gym? And they replied: 'yes'.....Are there computers? I want to learn how to use them....and they replied: 'yes' and when I arrived here I realised that none of this information is real.*

Five boys confirmed Amza's description of being misled by statutory agencies and NGOs about the expected services of the reception centres. Some other boys, the ones who had contacts with minors living abroad, compared the services of other European countries with the Greek services. Such comparisons underscored the vast differences that are evident among the countries and revealed serious shortcomings existing in the Greek welfare and asylum continuum. The account of Amir is representative of how other young people spend their time in reception centres abroad:

*My friends who are living in reception centres in Northern countries... when we talk in the phone they tell me they learn music. It's obligatory to learn the language of the host country and they also go on holidays and many other things. Here we don't even have a Greek teacher. At least the basic thing they should give*

*to us here is to bring a Greek teacher and learn the language, and then we could find a job and also do other things in the future. But also it is important that the Greek state will give us the permission to stay here legally.*

Amir gives a clear illustration of the improved services which are offered abroad in contrast to the limited services that are provided in Greece. Amir implies that services do not meet the key standards one would expect to find in such places and this is evident from his comment concerning the lack of Greek lessons. He also conveys feelings of discontent for being accommodated by a Greek reception centre and underlines the significance of education as being a prerequisite of integration and participation in the labour market. There the main issue largely remains the legalisation of a minor's status again affirming for another time the extreme tension and apprehension created by the asylum system.

What also emerged from the group discussions is a tendency of the young people to complain about the lack of little things when they were asked about their views in relation to services, and later on to consider some of the bigger issues such as education and social participation. In two out of the three focus groups there were constant references to the lack of everyday essentials that may be taken for granted in the outside world, such as sugar, shampoo, washing powder, and clothing. The boys who took part in the groups consider it highly important to be provided with these little things first:

*They are not giving us things important for everyday use...we don't even have the basic stuff. If I want to wash my clothes I get a very small amount of washing powder and I wash my clothes by hand. There is serious shortage in basic products. (Ali)*

As outlined in Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, 'basic' needs have to be met before 'higher' needs, thus it becomes simpler to explain why young people insisted in talking about minor things first. The constant thoughts around these minor privileges are perhaps the most important features in the residents' culture (Goffman, 1961:52). Yet these concerns cannot be easily understood or felt by an outsider.

Withholding of these privileges also served as means of reward or ensuring obedience by the staff. For example, if a boy behaved in an inappropriate manner according to the regulations of the centre, the staff could decide to remove these little things from

a minor's routine for a certain period of time. Goffman's work very well illustrates the stark contrast of meaning these little privileges hold for the inside and outside world:

*On the outside, for example, the inmate probably could unthinkingly decide how he wanted his coffee, whether to light a cigarette, or when to talk; on the inside such rights may become problematic' (1961:51).*

Alongside these negative experiences of service provisions there are a few descriptions of services that were assessed as 'quite good' in terms of their quality by a few minors. The latter, shared that their needs are largely covered by the existing services and they offered some recommendations for improvement. In total five boys out of thirty had a positive view of the services and although they seemed to be happy with the current circumstances, they did underline that the main area that needs improvement is a guarantee of opportunities for the future, an issue which is highly linked to their uncertainty of their asylum status. It should be noted that two out of the five boys were new-comers, meaning that their views may be treated cautiously since their accounts may provide premature perspectives. Mashal who had been living for a month in the centre at the time of research shared his positive experiences:

*Fine.... very good...I like learning emm to write Greek and talk Greek... I think it's a good place we have food, a room to stay, clothes, classes...Greek and English, pocket money. What I want to have more is to go for excursions.... not very often...at least once a month.... just to see what is going on around.*

The five boys who reported contentment with the services were hosted by reception centres which provide relatively more services than the rest of the three centres, such as more hours of classes, classes of English language, sports and leisure activities and financial aid which seemed to be greatly appreciated by the young people. Such differences indicate that general service provision varies greatly among the reception centres. Some of the available services appeared to have much experience in working with these children especially the ones located near urban places in contrast to the services of reception centres that were remote in rural areas and were reported as insufficient earlier.

Although there were some positive remarks about the available resources, all of them observed that none of the services were excellent, meaning that there is always the need of improvement, suggesting, for example, more excursions and out-going activities. Finally, what also seemed to have an impact on young people's positive valuation of the services was related to the good establishment of their relationships with the staff. Professionals' behaviour is now considered because it was expressed as the main source of satisfaction/dissatisfaction of the services by the young people.

### **7.8.2. Professionals' behaviour**

Complaints and concerns about professionals' behaviour were frequently cited as important reasons for dissatisfaction about the services while other factors tended to be ignored or minimised. Some boys' responses regarding services were directly centred on the behaviour of staff and their qualities as professionals, on the grounds that services could only be of better quality if the attitudes of staff become more reliable and responsive to the needs of the minors. When asked about what they would improve in the reception centres if they could, eight minors reported that they would replace the staff. They explained that the quality of services would only be improved if other people took over:

*If we ask for help, nobody help us here. I think people who work here should go home and new people should come and work. Only this would change the situation.... these people are not appropriate for working here. (Zabiullah)*

The behaviour of the staff was perceived as inappropriate. Feelings of powerlessness and loneliness are evident as young people feel that no one is in the position of helping them. Connection and communication with the adults is non-existent and the young people seem to be alone in coping with their difficulties. Most of the references that were about the staff attitudes were focused on issues of reliability and trust. Professionals did not come across as trusted figures that could be relied upon and share problems with. One of the boys remarked that: '*services would only be improved if we had honest professionals*'. A few more examples demonstrate poor communication between the staff and the boys, and explain why minors do not trust their caregivers:

*Someone stole my mobile and for two months now I can't communicate with my parents. And I asked for five euros from the Director in order to make a phone call. She said to me to go to the office the next day and the next day she told me to go the other day and this... goes on. They are playing with us. One day I asked five euros from the sociologist and he told me to go to his office after lunch. I finished my lunch quickly and I run to his office and he had already gone with his motorbike. I run and I managed to catch up with him and he said: 'come tomorrow' and I went the other day and again the same. This continued for a few days and in the end he told me that they don't have money.*

Here the professionals choose certain ways to distance themselves from the 'troublesome' realities of the young boy. Firstly, they misguide the boy by saying 'come tomorrow' leaving him enough space for developing false hopes. Secondly, they avoid taking responsibility for providing solutions to the concerning issue. These attitudes clearly produce feelings of frustration and disrespect on behalf of the minors. A few other boys who live in the same centre as Shirzard shared similar experiences when they were asked about services:

*They (staff) don't have good behaviour, when I arrived I went to the office to ask for clothes and shoes...they lied to me, they told me to go another time and ask and again and again the same thing...they were telling me come tomorrow and this went on for a long time and in the end I haven't got anything. (Alehil)*

Again professionals' responses to the request of Alehil reveal a repeated practice of a prolonged wait for his request to be accomplished which is evident in the words 'come tomorrow'. The anguish of the boy is also prolonged and the time goes by without any outcome. This kind of practice that could be also called '*an action of systematic avoidance*' obstructs the establishment of warm, healthy and trusted relations between the staff and the boys. It is clear that young people want to be treated with respect, and this includes being told honestly what is happening.

Any other positive features of services were obscured by negative professional attitudes. Most boys shared that the services were poor and limited and that their main concern was the fact that the professionals did not listen to and did not respond to their needs. They also referred to the 'bad behaviour' of some of the workers demonstrating impolite, disrespectful and in some instances aggressive attitudes.

Amid's account reveals the lack of respect which creates major cracks in human beings' contacts:

*You see.... now we have this new director here, Mrs...For this woman I don't worth as a human...she treats me as if I am a dog [...] since I came here, the only adults I have contact with are the cleaning ladies who are coming in the mornings to our rooms to clean and I tell them 'Hello' and they reply 'Hello, how are you?'. I don't have other contacts.*

In this extract the unequal relations between the ones who are placed at the higher level of power relations are exposed, such as the case of the director and the ones who are positioned at the bottom level of power relations, the children. This distinction makes it clear that the authority is leaning towards the most powerful. The more pronounced the detachment between the relations of the two different parties, the weaker it makes those at the bottom of the hierarchy of power. This detachment between powerful and powerless generates problems for the coexistence of both but mostly for the ones who feel powerless since the lack of understanding and communication increases their isolation and their sense of vulnerability.

The descriptions of the boys relating to their residencies present features of Goffman's analysis in his significant work *Asylums* (1961). In *Asylums* Goffman describes the interactions between the residents of institutions, the so called inmates, and the small supervisory group, the staff. He brings up attitudes of both sides, while recognising a split between these two groups which are characterised by social distance and specific stereotypes i.e. Staff tend to feel superior and righteous with clear advantages since they are socially integrated into the outside world and inmates tend, in some ways at least, to feel weak, inferior, dependent and guilty (Goffman, 1961:18). In such contexts the social interaction between the inmates and staff is restricted and facilitated within closed boundaries. Goffman also observes that even talk may be conducted in certain ways in these institutions. This observation is very well illustrated in Suroor's account below:

*What I don't like about them (the staff) is that they are shouting at us loudly. They think that we will fear of their shouts and we will do whatever they want us to do.... but we are not five years old...to be afraid of them. They don't talk to us in an appropriate way, we would like them to tell us in a calm manner that...emm... for example, we can't give you what you are asking for (i.e.: pills,*

*clothes) and we would understand, but they don't explain to us what is going on.*

There, the staff act in a way as if the residents are unable to hear anything that is not shouted. They raise their voices in a manner of making the residents conform to their appeals. Such an attitude gives them the basis of control over the young people and creates distance from them. A similar scene is described in the work of Goffman which takes place in a mental hospital (1961:19). The nurses raise their voices to the patients as if the patients are unable to hear them. Such a performance serves, among other reasons, the purpose of reminding the residents who has the power and control over their lives. What is also demonstrated in Suroor's account is that channels of shared information between the two parties are restricted. Staff do not seem to share information relevant to the requests of the boys but instead they avoid explaining to them the difficulties of realizing their wishes.

According to Goffman (1961) these boundaries of contact that were presented above help to maintain or even expand the existing split between the two different worlds of staff and residents, and also help to preserve the stereotypes that feed these attitudes. It seems that these two different social and cultural worlds develop in a parallel line but at the same time develop far away from each other, at least, as far as their interests are concerned and they present some points of contact, mostly official, but very little reciprocal connection (ibid).

More worryingly there were some references by young people which centred on racist and violent attitudes. In particular, one boy mentioned incidents indicating hostile and xenophobic behaviour by a social worker and another boy referred to an incident where he was about to be physically abused by a worker. The extract below indicates that these young people may feel that they live in an environment that does not guarantee their emotional and physical integrity:

*S.: No one here has appropriate behaviour. One time someone from the staff was about to give me a punch.... He was drunk one night and he became violent...he is something like a night guard.*

*V.: Did you refer this incident to the Director?*

*S.: No, because she is not listening to us, she will think that we caused the problem.*

Despite the fact that exerting violence towards the residents of a reception centre is not legally accepted, such actions raise ethical concerns in relation to the treatment and protection unaccompanied minors received by the ones who are expected to provide help and support. According to Goffman in institutionalised contexts there is always the danger that the staff will appear inhuman and emotionally distant. This is part of the process of mutual dehumanization that grows in institutions and contains features of an unthinking and impersonal care towards the residents. Shirzard's descriptions resembles Goffman's claim that dehumanization is part of the daily routines in total institutions (1961).

Dehumanization, while 'it makes it easier' for workers to handle residents in inappropriate and unprofessional ways, also it makes it easier for the institution itself to comply with the denial of human rights to its residents.

## **7.9. Reflections**

This chapter has revealed the young people's views of current life in Greece. The findings suggest that most of them do not feel good during the pending situation of being asylum seekers in reception centres. Only a few cases, mostly the long-term residents, indicate contentment and gratefulness attesting that despite hardship some boys have managed to overcome the complexities, be resilient and positive about their lives. The majority of the boys appeared disenfranchised as they saw themselves powerless in the asylum and welfare trajectory with limited choices. Concerns were expressed over waiting for decisions, the racism and harassment experienced, the delays in providing school places and the absence of specialist services and staff impinged particularly on the young people's social and emotional world.

Young people are ensured by the Greek regulations and with reference to the Article 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child diverse rights significant for their well-being as underage and unaccompanied, such as housing, schooling, social contacts and other social rights. However, the findings of this chapter provided a stark contrast between what the International Convention foresees for these young boys and what they experience in reality. A number of deficits have been identified

by the young respondents in the area of welfare and asylum and these were reported as major violations of their rights that affect greatly the quality of their living.

Although I cannot defend this claim overtly from my findings, I am of the view, supported by other studies (Monaghan & Broad, 2003; Hollins & Heydari, 2005; Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012), that lack of support exacerbates stress and hardship levels, and deteriorates the mental wellbeing of refugee children in care. The inadequate and patchy provision of social and health services reported by young people suggests major challenges both for the care providers and care receivers. Those shelters were depicted as last-resort welfare institutions providing modest accommodation and services for people excluded from mainstream life and who perhaps are not capable to take enough responsibility for their own lives (Juhila, 2004). Subsequently the living experiences in those places – as these were articulated by the young respondents – revealed a large well of powerlessness evident in an institutionalised context.

However, there is no evidence of the worst scenarios of children going hungry or being deported back to their country against their will (Dunkerley *et al.* 2005). So the centres appear offer standardised baseline of care and protection that allows access to information and resources for these young people regardless their problems and limitations. This leads us to acknowledge the jeopardised position of those ones who do not manage to access these centres and remain outside of the welfare system without any protection.

Despite the advantageous position of the young respondents in relation to children who are never brought into the attention of the institutional welfare mechanisms, the study demonstrates that when asylum seeking young people enter care regimes in western host-society contexts they can become devitalised due to migratory and post-migratory experiences of reliance and feelings of not being an ordinary person (Spicer, 2008, Entorf & Lauk, 2008; Marques *et al.* 2007; Szilassy & Arendas, 2007).

The unequal encounters between service users and service providers exacerbated the sense of ‘other-ness’. Creating connectedness was considered as an important factor by most young people for finding meaning in daily living and building a social life. If

connectedness in society evokes positive emotions and a sense of belonging in the host country (Tereshchenko & Araujo, 2011), then only a few respondents seemed to be emotionally 'connected' with their new place of residency. The study also confirmed the importance of various sites of belonging linked to young people's encounters in everyday life such as schools, communities and public spaces (Valentine *et.al.* 2009; Ní Laoire *et al.* 2010).

Despite the daunting challenges young people face as residents in Greek reception centres, there were indications of political consciousness in some boys' views regarding their rights and their understanding of the reception system. For example, they seemed to acknowledge that the irregularities of the asylum system deprived them from liberties and rights that they should be entitled to as 'children being in care'. In fact, they conceived it as a system characterised by the idea of mercy and not being grounded on a rights-based perspective. This idea has been also confirmed by the study of Lundberg and Dahlquist (2012) which explored young people's living conditions in Swedish reception centres – a relatively developed and well-structured context compared to the Greek one. The long term effects of a reception system based on mercy may be very problematic for young people's well-being and development.

According to Dona (2006:3) the migration-welfare nexus greatly affect the lives of those who are involved; therefore, we should acknowledge that some cases are particularly at risk. Those cases involve the predicaments of young people who have already received a negative answer for their asylum claim, of young people whose ages are disputed, of young people whose family reunification process has been unsuccessful. Those individuals are often unheard and incorporated under the homogenous category of the unaccompanied minor in care because they are not yet recognised as individuals with distinctive needs. Thus their cases are treated first and foremost in light of their asylum condition and not according to the 'best interest of the child'. The findings of the present study emphasise the need to reconsider the nexus between asylum and welfare and suggest another approach which would safeguard those young people who are confined to live in risk.

This can only be done through a durable solution plan – both in assessment and intervention – which is absent right now – that would place at the centre of an action plan young people’s voices and would give attention to long-term wellbeing rather than prioritizing short term migration management issues (Dona, 2006). Only if the best interest of the child which is based on individual assessment takes precedence over migration management concerns can there be an equal provision of care towards young people.

## **7.10. Conclusion**

In this chapter the many different aspects of young people’s existences in Greece were brought into light. In many ways young people seemed to be overly disadvantaged as their needs were ignored and the services that were meant to meet their needs were to a large extent, poorly developed. Their everyday existences while trying to settle in Greece were marked by constant uncertainty as their status was still unclear, untrusted relations with their main carers and a care system which was not what they had expected. In these circumstances their stories were woven with despair and heightened emotions, but also contained some indications of humour, courtesy and affection for their peers and some of the workers. For the majority the future was unclear and the present was manifested by struggles to handle their tensions as to who they would call a ‘family’ and where they would refer to as a ‘home’.

## **Chapter 8: “What I want is to be like ordinary people, I don’t want to open my hand for help”: Discussion**

### **8.1. Introduction**

In response to gaps in the literature and a lack of connection between theories of children being on the move and their lived experiences, the thesis has followed in the footsteps of young Afghan migrants’ trajectories from their experiences in their home country until their stay in Greece. This chapter draws on the emergent key themes by focusing on the question of what the young people’s personal odysseys and my findings may tell us about childhood and migration. The emergence of ‘young people on the move’ is situated here in two ways: Firstly, by addressing and reflecting on the processes and conceptions that have stood out as being the most prominent within which young people’s experiences have been constituted. These are understood as being part of the wider process of dehumanization that involves: the process of commodification, young people’s classification, and the institutional marginalization followed by the construction of the respondents’ political, social and economic identity.

Here I will also discuss young people’s contributions and development through and within these processes and how they too are agents of change with reference to the theory of resilience. Secondly, special attention is given to the significance of local and global contexts with respect to the experiences, identities and power relations relating to children that are developed, built and reworked through. Whereas local processes largely affect and shape the experiences of the respondents, such an attention limited to local processes, identities, and units of analysis, would yield incomplete understanding of the local and would ignore the global dimension within which movement and displacement take place.

In contrast to empirical studies that are concerned solely on the ‘receiving end’ of migration, I have adopted a broad approach to shed light on the different phases and facets of the unaccompanied minor’s migration. Thus, the areas that I include in the analysis are the migration processes (pre-departure, initiation, transit, arrival, and adaptation/integration in Greece), the institutions (police, officialdom, the reception

centres) and the transnational dimension of mobility. The literature relating to this multidimensional approach involves:

- International agreements and Conventions that express concerns with regards to asylum-seeking minors and their needs.
- National political documents with specific requirements regarding asylum-seeking minors.
- Local authorities' interpretation of the international and national agreements and the implementation of rules for justifying their own decisions as in meeting the needs of the asylum-seeking minors.
- Young people's own experiences of the asylum process, including the reception and care they received in the host country.

Such an approach opens up a new theoretical terrain in opposition to the majority of studies that localise the experiences of migrant children (Boyle *et al.* 2007) and suggests that young people's migratory, in transit and settlement experiences should be regarded as occurring on several levels: 'macro' (e.g. institutional factors, politics, media), 'micro' (e.g. social networks, migrants' beliefs and practices), and 'meso' (e.g. intermediate actors and structures such as immigration officials and smugglers) (Castles & Miller, 2003). This overall framework therefore functions as a guide to locate the discussion of the key themes and illustrate a variety of ways in which young people develop themselves and construct their experiences as they become actors and competent mediators of change, even in situations of exploitation.

Before discussing the dehumanization process, I think it is important to be reminded of the main results.

## **8.2. Summary of main results**

The histories of the respondents indicated that in their country of origin their lives became untenable for reasons of hardship, followed by a threatening crisis that overtook them and forcibly led them to leave behind their homelands, families and habits. Their childhoods in their homeland were diverse and subjected to structural factors such as location, family attitudes, ethnic origin, social class and political

convictions of family, and social networks. Despite an apparent shared cultural and social background of all young people, each of the boys indicated a distinct view of how their childhoods were played out and experienced in relation to the aforementioned factors.

Sudden threatening incidents and losses led to the decision to migrate that enabled safety and belonging to be eroded over months or even years. Decisions had to be taken immediately, their families were in danger, their communities were looted and destroyed, children or/and family members were prosecuted, others were killed, and arrangements with smugglers were put into effect so that these boys could head towards western industrialised countries.

Their experiences on the move and as unauthorised migrants in neighbouring countries signalled a period of ‘liminality’ (Turner, 1967), a stage ‘in between’ where they struggled to cope with an ambiguous status and conditions of work-exploitation, marginality, discrimination and uncertainty. In the context of forced migration, these young migrants became involved in ‘services’ aiming to facilitate the various stages of the migration in clandestine ways. During their journeys they entered a circular process of exploitation with many intermediaries involved; relatives, smugglers, agents, thieves, the Kurdish mafia, the Iranian military, policemen and strangers. In their migration stories, human life was depicted as trivial and their irregular passage to the west involved great risks. Despite the entailed risks involved in the smuggling business, these young people endured extreme conditions in their own distinctive way, in order to make their plans and aspirations come true.

Once they encountered the Greek authorities at the borders, they were classified as ‘lathrometanastes’ (meaning unauthorised migrant) and entered the vague, complex and incomprehensible procedure of the institutional framework of migration management. Various inconsistencies and violations took place, in particular in the following areas: border controls, asylum and identification process, age assessment, detention, and refoulement practises at sea. Most of them were detained and others spent time on the streets in search of their next chance to move on further.

At some point they were referred to or sought to be hosted in reception centres where they became service recipients and the attention shifted from their encounters with the immigration policy and control to care arrangements as unaccompanied asylum seeking minors. Variations appeared in terms of each boy's perception of care; long term residents provided a more positive outlook of their present and future conditions and seemed to be adapted, with established and trusted relations and reconstituted lives in their new settings - in contrast to the confused and disoriented new-comers.

Overall, the majority of them experienced feelings of not belonging that were related to the ambiguous status that ensured hardly any rights to them, their positioning in schools, incidents of racism and hostility from the local community and finally the unresponsive attitudes of the centre-located professionals to address and comfort their needs. One of the commonalities across the chapters of section III is the continuous struggle of the respondents to survive and cope with difficult and often extreme situations in ways that exploit them in violent and dehumanising processes throughout their migratory experiences. Young people's stories of migrations raised concerns as to the various forms of neglect, exploitation, human rights violations and abuse they are forced to bear when being on the move and unaccompanied by an adult who could take care of them.

### **8.3. The Dehumanization process**

With reference to the above, I refer here to the concept of dehumanization as a result of an overall process. This process entails violent acts and practises of exploitation and oppression that obstruct the respondents' ability to function at the highest human potential and occurs at various stages throughout their migration experience (as seen in Sections III and IV). The identified concepts that emerged from the findings considered below constitute imperative parts of the whole dehumanization process.

As already indicated in chapter 6, young people experienced a set of dehumanizing actions upon their arrival in Greece especially in relation to their imprisonment as detainees. They experienced the mystification of a new environment with closed boundaries, mistreatment and violent acts exercised by the police officers and they felt emotional isolation. I perceived the accumulation of such effects resulting in the

dehumanization of the respondents. Likewise, in chapter 7, based on Goffman's typology of institutions (1961) I described young people's experiences as service users in relation to the social and emotional distance created by the unequal relations between the staff and the service users and I conceived the dehumanization process as an effect of the boundaries produced by the stigmatization, oppression and exploitation of the respondents within an institutionalizing context.

However, as will be shown, these are only a few indicators of the overall process of dehumanization. Dehumanization is conceived here as a broader process produced by social and political violence in local and global economies that profit from undocumented migration. The systematization of exploitation, profit-making from smuggling, mistreatment and violence underpins the undocumented migration experiences of young people wherein the degeneration of the human existence into a 'product' is the central mechanism by which powerlessness is produced. I pay particular attention to dehumanizing state, social and legal processes that speak to the complex, makeshift, and often ambiguous lived experiences of migration such as the process of commodification, the categorization of the respondents and the institutional marginalization.

### **8.3.1. Commodification**

Within this backdrop, I suggest that the acts of violence and exploitation must be understood as arising at the intersection of local, national and transnational economies that profit from human mobility. Young people's migration experiences are treated here as key sites in the process of 'commodification' within which structural forms of exploitation and violence are reproduced. Marx (1967 quoted in Vogt, 2013:765) defines commodities as objects of utility and dispossession of value and argues that value is attained through social and historical processes, namely, exchange. I decided to use the concept of 'commodification' in the analysis of young people's migration experiences because it captures aptly the objectification of young boys in the processes of exchange in which they are involved, and describes how their experiences become sites of profit-making.

The concept of the ‘commodity identity’ was first posed by Jorge Bustamante in his critique of the scholarly and political treatment of Mexican undocumented immigrants in the 1970s. Bustamante used the term to capture and analyse the reduction of migrants to the price of their labour and their calculable contribution to the U.S. economy. Velez-Ibanez (1996) further developed the idea of the ‘commodity identity’ for Mexicans in the United States. He recommended important ways in which the stigmatization of undocumented Mexicans — as people reducible to the disposability of their labour for a price — became central to the racialization of all Mexicans/Chicanos and other Latinos (regardless of immigration status or even U.S. citizenship).

Generally, the relation of migration and labour and its production of surplus has been pointed out as central to the accumulation of capital (Marx, 1867:632). Migrant labour often constitutes the material basis by which surplus value is derived from a global labour force of producers, consumers, and remittance-senders (Vogt, 2013:770). Ester Hernandez and Susan Coutin (2006:201) argue that money in the form of remittances has become the ‘ideal neoliberal currency’ for states that benefit from the ‘pure profit’ which is produced once entering the informal economy. Afghanistan is one of those countries that has historically based its economy on the remittances accumulated by migrant workers (Monsutti, 2007).

This perspective is partly reflected in the accounts of young people who have been valued by their families and communities as able to sell their labour power in the informal economy and as a significant source of financial support during their stay in transit countries. If we perceive young people as remittance-senders and their labour power as a source of exploitation because of the labour conditions in relation to the profit earned by the workers and the profit earned by the states, then we see that labour migration is transformed into a process which exports people and recruits remittances (Gammage, 2006). Thus the value derived from migrant workers is split, and distributed, albeit highly unevenly, between the global and local economy (Binford, 2013:250). Harvey (2005) has considered this process with the conditions of capitalism and has demonstrated that migrants’ labour has been ‘like any other commodity’ (p.171).

Yet migrants' labour power can be regarded as one side of the coin of commodification. Critical scholarship has indicated that commodification, apart from the economic implications has profound social and human consequences that have tended to be ignored (Polanyi, 2001; Vogt, 2013). These implications are often related to the internal dynamics of the social networks and the migrant's experiences developed within those networks.

My interpretation of young people's accounts in relation to their involvement in processes of exploitation and commodification is that such experiences are located and shaped by the wider structures of politics and law that reinforce these processes at the local and transnational level. For example, young people while being *en route* are confronted by policies and laws that tend to illegalise and exclude them from the public realm while these are often based on the various ways young people are perceived and constructed within the domain of migration.

In particular, these constructions may have close ties to the ways in which undocumented migrants and asylum seekers are perceived by the state, the various actors involved in the migration business and the local people of the transnational communities and whether they see themselves as being able to benefit from the presence of the young people. Young people have often been portrayed as 'criminals' and 'unwanted' and have been racialized in local spaces because of their Afghan and illegal identity and, as indicated in some of their narratives, as less than human (see also Mountz, 2010). I argue that such constructions have been reinforced and build upon the wider grid of social, political and legal structures that tend to commodify human beings in a large transnational marketplace of profit.

Forced migration encompasses several services that are bought and sold to facilitate the activities involved at different stages in migration; these services can be either formal/informal or legal/illegal (Cordero Lamas, 2009). Undocumented children and young people who reside at the border or in transit places are often involved in illegal services and are often victims of structural inequalities; they are, therefore, left to take part in the migration industry as a form of survival. A few cases demonstrated how young people were arrested and repatriated several times during their journeys

to the west to their country of origin from where they started all over again their risky journeys.

Such a circular process of mobility enhances young people's vulnerability and the possibilities to become victims of commodification processes and dehumanizing actions. Regardless of being repatriated or not and whether they had dealt with the negative repercussions of their irregular journeys, the majority of the respondents' experiences suggest that they had lived at the margins throughout their migration trajectories and they were often placed at the very bottom rung of social stratification (Cordero Lamas, 2009). Indeed, several boys talked about their involvement in commodification and dehumanising processes and described their selves as being participants in an exploitative migration market (Vogt, 2013).

I argue that such portrayals of young people show how their positioning within transnational mobility may transform them into useful or redundant objects of exploitation and exchange. Various examples support this argument; the interviews revealed that some boys departed with no money at all, others with the savings of their family and loans from relatives or with their revenues earned under adverse conditions in the black market of transit countries where they sold their labour in exchange for money. In the course of their journeys, smugglers forced them to pay more than what was agreed, stole their money, blackmailed them and threatened their families or abandoned them. Such accounts expose the relative power of smugglers over their clients and suggest that they are able to impose their will by any means (Robinson & Sergott, 2002:19).

The boys were, then, forced to prolong their stay in transit points where they had to find ways to finance the next stage of their journey and bear the consequences of their illegality along with cases of arrest, illness, poverty and risks they had to take in order to survive. Some accounts documented more vividly the transformation of young people into 'products' or 'commodities' in the asylum market with their value being estimated according to the needs of the local market and the desires of the intermediaries involved.

For example, they were often part of an exchange of ‘selling and buying smuggled people’ that occurred between the police and the Kurdish mafia and they reported the bribing process of the Iranian and Turkish police by the Kurds in order to acquire smuggled people who from that time would be subjugated to them. Such descriptions clearly demonstrate that young people are traded as commodities in the migration industry and they become useful or redundant objects of exploitation and exchange according to the needs and interests of the market and the traders involved.

According to Bhabha (2006:56), there is a widely held view that smuggling of migrants consists of a “*transnational highly structured and tightly controlled multi-million dollars, mafia-like criminal network, transporting in addition to humans, weapons, organs and drugs*”. Children and young people on the move may become prey to such lucrative and illegitimate networks of human smuggle. Even though there was not any reference to other types of trade (e.g. drugs, weapons) the findings suggest that young people are highly susceptible to becoming targets of other types of criminal and illegal activities.

Finally, it is interesting to shed some light on how young people made sense of their involvement in the described process of commodification and exploitation. Some boys’ involvement in smuggling networks has been an inevitable consequence of setting out to the west. These boys talked about their experiences of exploitation with an apparent acceptance of the inferences followed by this option whereas some others were critical towards smuggling networks with reference to the misuse of power at the expense of the needy and powerless asylum seekers. Nevertheless, there was a lack of distinct awareness of their unprecedented circulation within dehumanizing social, legal and state practices that were entangled in transnational networks.

On occasions they felt they were ‘the lucky ones’ who had the opportunity to start a new life elsewhere. This is illustrated in the words of Mohammad: “*the ones who don’t have the money to pay the smugglers stay in their troubles, they don’t have choices.*” In this sense, their involvement in smuggling networks and their coercion in processes of exploitation was seen as a ‘normalised’ perception and thus it was conveyed as an opportunity.

Some others though, acknowledged that they had completely changed their view of their migratory experiences upon arrival and that they were exhausted from living with a constant fear of their lives. Their experiences were mostly depicted as being part of their everyday realities and not as detached incidents that may happen once in a life time. As seen, some of them conceptualised violence as a continuous process of most of their lives as they struggled to survive in their home country, on their way to the host country and upon arrival.

Overall young people's migratory experiences demonstrated how they are implicated in and negotiated by processes of commodification and dehumanization and how these become an embodied lived experience for them. These processes have been approached here as part of the wider grid of structures such as laws, policies, economic demands, and social constructions that exist in time and space between Afghanistan and Greece. The effects of young people's dislocation become particularly evident in the interworking of exploitation and violence whereas, as will be discussed, the social construction of the respondents based on the categories they are attached to, constitutes another angle of the dehumanization process.

### **8.3.2. Classification in the construction of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors**

To classify is human, an integral part of our daily lives (Bowker & Star, 1999) and there is no doubt about the value of classification for the functionality of our daily routine. It occurs everywhere, without it we would be unable to orientate to one another in different situations and to coordinate joint action. We continuously place ourselves and others into categories, with which we link certain characteristics, features and activities. The categorization of people has two aspects; on the one hand, it preserves social and moral order and enables orientation to and encounters with people in different situations and settings, on the other hand it may produce 'identity prisons' charged with negative characteristics (Baker, 2004).

Bowker and Star (1999) have made a compelling analysis of the South African case of classification based on race under Apartheid, an extreme case that provides invaluable insights when thinking about the ethics of the classifying systems and

about those “*quieter, less visible aspects of the politics of classification*” (p.196). The advantage of the classification systems lies with the ones who are advantaged by being classified and placed within the powerful and socially acceptable order, from where they can act naturally and construct their identities and relations smoothly based on the category to which they have been accredited (p.225). But for the ones whose classification comes in stark antithesis with their human, social and cultural qualities and exceeds their moral boundaries, the classification process then “*...takes a terrible toll. To act naturally, they have to reclassify and be reclassified socially*” (ibid).

In this sense the act of categorization is a powerful act that affects the positioning of human beings in a powerful or powerless condition depending on the attributed category. As Bourdieu (1991: 223) underlines: “*the act of categorization, when it manages to achieve recognition or when it is exercised by a recognised authority, exercises by itself a certain power.*” According to this view, power is held by those who are able to produce and use, or ‘trade’, these categories (Goodman & Speer, 2007:166). This view leads me to support the claim that categorizing is far from a neutral act that serves to describe tangibly a particular situation, but is rather a powerful process.

Categorizing is most often driven by certain beliefs and points to particular actions, for example, categorizing “*normally [...] orient to practical action*” (Leudar *et al.* 2004: 244). This means that the categories we use in order to define particular groups of people are driven by the social action that is being accomplished and more specifically when we talk about asylum seekers, we produce a political rhetoric with associated political implications for the ways in which asylum seekers are viewed and treated. If that is the case, then an asylum seeker’s classification as illegal and unwanted justify the implementation of restrictive policies and laws and the harsh treatment of all asylum seekers. Therefore, it should be highlighted that the construction of young people’s ‘illegality’ which creates and perpetuates their identities and dis (entitlements) is not a localised reality occurring solely in the hosting country but a product of transnational legal and political macrostructures which are filtered into the young people’s daily lives.

More specifically, UM cross borders and find themselves at different geographical scales – the local, national or transnational communities – with which they engage both physically and emotionally. Their migration trajectories have shown how their identities are constructed and transformed in various places according to the categories that are attached to them by the public and state representatives. These processes construct them as wanted or unwanted as deserving protection or as bogus or genuine. When classified as ‘undocumented’ and ‘illegal’ their qualities of being war-affected children and young people are ignored and they are located at the intersection of their experiences of discrimination and hostility.

Young people’s accounts suggest that they have multiple and intersecting identities that are conditional to the various sites, relations and cultures in which their lives are foregrounded. Such a realisation can also be found in other studies that have explored children and young people’s migratory experiences (Connolly, 1998; Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Valentine *et al.* 2009; Vervliet *et al.* 2013:12).

These boys are not only asylum seekers, refugees, illegal migrants and unaccompanied minors. They are sons, brothers, friends, breadwinners, men, teenagers, survivors, students. I have often come to realise that the complexity and intersectionality of these boy’s identities is too intense and produces important insights as to the ways that shape young people’s experiences.

Despite the fact that I acknowledge my respondent’s multiplicity of identities, here I take into consideration two particular elements of their identities to read against each other. In my case I consider and shed more light on their identity as migrants (undocumented) and their identity as children because these involve crucial and often dissimilar components of their experiences. My decision to focus on these two sets of identities is not meant to imply that there are no other important aspects of their identities (e.g. sexuality and age) however it is not possible to explore the entire range.

Insufficient attention is often paid both to the fact that many people are still forced to live through the identities ascribed to them by others, rather than through the identities they might choose for themselves (Morley, 2001). In this sense, and based

on the observation made by Bowker and Star (1999), these boys have to reclassify or be reclassified in order to fit their given identities. In addressing the issue of how the respondents understand the various transformations of their selves and the construction of various classifications brought about by changes given the transnational nature of their movements, I will now draw on a few examples of young people's stories.

In terms of place-identity (Durrheim & Dixon, 2005), several of the accounts in the first empirical chapter justify the young people's act of fleeing home through specific references to the war-affected context and the dangers present in the country of origin. Such portrayals of the threatening conditions in Afghanistan which forced young people into exile confirm the descriptions of the socio-political context about Afghanistan presented in the review of literature, and thus construct the perception of young people as being 'genuine' asylum seekers and in need of refuge and protection. These results confirm the findings of previous studies that found arguments supporting asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors are required to portray their countries as being dangerous (e.g., Ayotte, 2000; Huttunen, 2005; Every & Augoustinos, 2008b). Thus by this means, young people are constructed as asylum seekers.

While living in exile and in reference to their experiences in transit countries, they are perceived mostly as 'outsiders' despite their common cultural and religious background with the citizens of the neighbouring countries and they are constructed as 'illegal migrants' or 'undocumented' due to their lack of citizenship. As such they are treated accordingly, as invaders in a place where they shouldn't be at all, and they are compelled to behave, act and live in certain ways in order to fit with their given identity.

Descriptions of their experiences in Iran document the above claim. Their engagements in the informal sector for work, the fact that they had to hide themselves in public places and to accept that public education is not permitted for them are proof. Within this context and in parallel with experiences of discrimination and marginalisation, for the first time they are constructed as 'illegal migrants'. In the course of their journeys, this particular identity becomes even more strengthened

by the correlation of cross-bordering, legal prohibitions on their physical presence, and the media's role.

Upon arrival in Greece, young people are classified as "*lathrometanastes*" who are devoid of a lawful and acceptable profile. Irrespective of their young age and their particular circumstances, they find themselves within the mishmash of migration and are mixed up with other categories of non-citizens of the host country such as economic migrants. As revealed in some of the boys' accounts, when migrants are inappropriately assessed, public confusion is likely to be generated. This eventually feeds the anti-immigrant sentiment which exists in many host countries today.

Moreover, there is the tendency in the media and the public discourse to depict migrants' experiences as personal, individual, and inherent without explaining the context in which these experiences were shaped: '*[Im]migrants are caught in structures that force them to make choices. ... [I]t is not their characters that lead them*' to certain choices, behaviours and decisions (Coutin & Chock, 1995).

I suggest that such constructions are inextricably tangled with young people's political identities and only if we consider the intertwined legal and political forces do we have an accurate and empowering framing of the insights of young people's lives. I will give further consideration to this claim in the following section that discusses the constructing and imposing role of young people's political identity in the context of their institutional marginalisation.

Coutin (2013) suggests that spatial identities such as the nation, the border and the place are tied intimately to other type of social and political identities (adult, adolescent, student and child). Some of these categories as seen are imposed from the outside without young people's consent by various institutional bodies, authorities and people they meet on their way. In fact, the category of 'unaccompanied minors' is a construction of governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations for the purpose of classifying divisions of the asylum seeking population deemed to have particular needs as a result of their young age and separation from their parent(s) or primary caregiver(s) (Vervliet *et al.* 2014).

This often creates problems but also challenges and possibilities (Shields, 2008). For example, an abrupt and hasty conception of them as undocumented migrants may generate reservations about their identities in particular with regard to their age and ethnicity and questions about if and where they belong. On the other hand, being treated as unaccompanied minors may contain elements of compassion and support. Thus it seems that the term of the ‘unaccompanied minor’ has analytical usefulness not as a label for a special, generalizable ‘type’ of person or situation, but only as a broad legal or descriptive header that includes within it numerous socioeconomic statuses, personal histories, and psychological or spiritual situations (Malkki, 1995).

Finally, it is interesting to acknowledge the dynamic and ongoing role of the interaction between the various social categories and the changing impact it might have on the person over time. For example, the social category of the service users, in this case UM who are hosted in reception centres, when based on fixed social structures, can be stigmatizing since it comes from the direction of dominant discourses that rarely allow for a change (Fook, 2001:72). Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the ability of the young people to rework and reconstitute their given identities. As an example I will mention young people’s inclination to deconstruct the identity of the service user by documenting serious deficits in the welfare provisions, i.e. in some accounts the reception centre is described as a place with serious shortages of services. It is claimed that this place is not made for the young people who are keen to learn new things and be involved actively in the education process but it is made for other asylum seekers (implying adults) who fit with this place.

Similarly, Sinervo’s ethnographic study with Peruvian children who work as informal vendors in Cuzco has shown that children are creative negotiators, co-shapers and reformers of the categorisations that are attached to performances and experiences of poverty and that their identities are reconstituted in relation to the meanings the children give to stereotyped and stigmatised notions of poverty and childhood (2013). In this respect we should not disregard the ability of children and young people on the move to work within, and sometimes outright, reject adult analytical models of their identities, well-being and relative power (ibid).

Yet to understand how young people approach these classifications and contradictions, we need to go further into how they might conceive of each of their given identities. I think the following quotation is quite enlightening in closing this section of categorisation:

*Children can never simply stand for themselves as individuals in the here and now of the observational present. Inevitably, they wear upon their bodies and in dispositions the genders, ethnicities, abilities and non-abilities, as well as the colours, sizes, and shapes of their social worlds. These not only situate young people as kinds of children, they also mark them—rightly or wrongly, for better or worse—as carriers of these worlds. In the present case, it is for the worse. (Cook, 2015:4)*

More light will be shed now on understanding how young people perceive their political identities and the ways they are positioned in the society in relation to the notions of legality/illegality.

### **8.3.3. Institutional marginalization**

If I could draw safely some key questions from my interviews, it is the extent to which these children conceived their ‘legality/illegality’ as powerful in their lives and, whether they were aware of being undocumented and how their status placed them in a perilous location in the wider society. When looking back to their accounts, I can easily discern the sensitivity with which they referred to their lack of political identity and to the ways their trans-national movements and their involvement with the society was therefore bounded. The boys were very aware of their migration statuses and its consequences on their daily lives since the moment they crossed the borders of their homeland.

Nevertheless, it is insufficient to examine the ‘illegality’ of undocumented migration only in the light of its consequences, which as described in the Afghan case study, yielded uncertainty and restlessness in the daily realities of the respondents. Illegalisation is a product of those socio-political and legal processes which in effect set in motion lawful or unlawful actions (De Genova, 2002). I will now focus on these processes, in order to examine the relation of young people’s experiences and the concept of ‘illegality’ without undermining the importance of its effect on the lives of my respondents.

As discussed previously, the identity formulation of young people has been largely related and shaped by their legal status throughout the path of their experiences. Legal status shapes different spheres of young people's lives extended from who they are, how they relate to others, how they continue to relate with their homeland how they make sense of their present experiences and the relations they make along the way. To some extent a legal reality is superimposed on those boy's daily lives (Coutin, 2000:40). In this respect 'illegality' (much like citizenship) signposts a social relation with the state; illegality is a pre-eminently political identity (De Genova, 2002:422).

To return to my previous point, several boys were aware of their illegal statuses. They described their trans-national movements as crossing borders illegally and articulated their experiences of marginalisation in transit countries in relation to their lack of citizenship. Feelings of fear, insecurity and anxiety were shared in relation to their experiences as undocumented migrants. Their social and legal position in society transformed their trans-national places into places of powerlessness and vulnerability in its own right (Mendelson, 2013:184). Their illegal status positioned them in a place of complex marginalisation which was particularly evident in their experiences of crossing borders and settling in transit places in the course of their journeys and upon arrival in Greece.

For example, when living in Iran, Pakistan and Syria they were dealing with the challenge of bearing the limited economic and educational options as well as the constrained possibilities of making an exodus from this situation. The boys' experiences in transit places rendered them particularly powerless as they were constrained not only by race experiences and institutional illiteracy but also by the exploitation they were subjected to, particularly in the 'child labour force' and because, as most of them reported, working many hours and being lonely.

Being undocumented and alone often translates into being confined to conditions that exacerbate alienation, exploitation, marginalization and a sense of not belonging (Mendelsson, 2013). These observations have important consequences for the argument advanced by the boys that their experiences in transit places (whether these places have been regarded as transit or not) in relation to their political identity led to

their daily struggles and hardship to exist in the public domain thus increasing their will to migrate again. To this end, young people's voices revealed that their political identity has been intricately intertwined with their experiences of marginalization and the personal, social and political dimensions of exclusion which were at play in their lives.

The ethnographic study of Menjivar (2006) that explored the experiences of Salvadoran Guatemalan immigrants underscored the effects of legal status and highlighted the impact of the long-term uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in the subjects' legal status. Similarly, the unstable nature of young people's political identity in this study has been followed by uncertainty and anxiety throughout their migration stories. Often the lack of status has rendered young people powerless and exploited in risky situations. Their political identity is not only revealed in the marginal position in the transit places they had lived, but also in the risks they had to take and the many different ways of exploitation they had to bear through their journeys and in particular their involvement in the smuggling groups.

For example, the boy's fear of their 'illegal presence' in the public sphere did not go unrecognised by the smugglers who often used this as a tool for manipulation and control. Some of the smugglers were depicted as being able to harm young people, should they complicate the prospect of smugglers' plans and profit. A minority of smugglers were presented as trusted and caring figures who were engaged in this business for profit but without any intentions of harming the smuggled ones. A few cases, some of the young people's uncles, who were referred as being 'good people', illustrate this claim.

Either way, there was always a distinct power differential between the boys and the adults who were in charge of their movements. It is important to recognise that this asymmetrical power relation and the insecurity of young people's illegality mutually inform one another in determining the boy's decision to continue their journeys despite the entailed risks. In these boys' cases, it was not just the fear of being abused by the smugglers that inhibited them from leading their own ways. Instead, it was often the multiple and complex effects of their migration status on their prospects and emotions that constrained them.

Several of the boys explained that they were too afraid of being intercepted on the way and deported back to Afghanistan and Iran or imprisoned in transit countries, or being abused by the smugglers. Indeed, some boys who decided to detach from their smuggling group were caught by the police or the border guards, were imprisoned, and were returned back to the point they started their transnational movements. For most of the boys however, the fear of being abused by the smugglers accounted partly for their decision to stay in the group and their exploitation. Being undocumented is in no way peripheral to these boy's journey experiences. On the contrary, the boys viewed their experiences of enduring extreme conditions and surviving hardship in the context of being undocumented and the way in which that constrained and affected their journey options and possibilities.

Another angle of the correlation between young people's political identity and the dehumanization process is provided by the descriptions of their routines as residents of reception centres. These give us both confirmations and contradictions to the established discourses about the reception and treatment of UM in the host countries. As already addressed in other studies, the tortuous and prolonged legal proceedings leave young people with an inconclusive status, with no sense of security and being in a "*limbo of illegal impermanence*" (Bhabha, 2004: 239). This is also viewed as an important finding which has underlined the tremendous gap between legislation developed to protect children and the reality of the predicament of asylum policy and practice which is particularly harmful for these children.

Citizenship appears to be fundamental to welfare entitlement (Dawyer, 2010) and it is citizenship that is at stake for asylum-seekers. Asylum seeking minors often see their rights to be restricted because they lack of citizenship (e.g. experiencing delays in school attendance, prohibited from participating in local sport clubs, prohibited from being engaged into workshops running by the reception centre). Without citizenship, they become disempowered and dependent and on those who distribute resources to them and their claims as service users are often marginalised.

If I could safely draw one conclusion from the findings it is that safety and security are fundamental for the well-being of the young people interviewed. They talked about incidents that rendered them unsafe and insecure and they used the words: 'we

want to be ordinary' in ways that conceptualise their ordinariness and safety as a state of stability stemming from a secure legal and political identity. Their call to be ordinary has been intricately tied to the social, legal and political structures, thereby adding important dimensions to the discourse surrounding notions of safety and ordinariness in both asylum seekers and children fleeing war. The concept of ordinariness is tied with the notion of safety, importantly, with regards to their need to engage with the wider society without existing at its margins and risking their lives.

The governance of law in migration has repeatedly shown how migrants are divided in two categories; the authorised and unauthorised migrants with the first category being in the privileged position of enjoying rights and the latter being deprived of those rights due to the temporary nature of their status (Freeman, 2004). Young people as unauthorised travellers were restricted to following certain routes and in certain ways. Although the illegality effect of protracted and enduring vulnerability is easier discernible in border crossing, it should not be equated solely with the journey process of the migratory experience. The 'illegalities' of everyday life are often, literally, documented by several practices of the daily life that sanction one's place within or outside the censures of the law (Cintron, 1997, Coutin, 2000, Hagan *et.al.* 2008).

The majority of the respondents experienced uncertainty and anxiety since it is almost impossible for potential refugees to obtain legalisation of their status, and many of them, especially the ones who were detained, were recycled in a political system that traversed them between semi-legality and illegality. A few cases confirmed the repeated and cyclical endeavours of potential refugees to exist within a Kafkaesque and superfluous system of processes and bureaucratic acts that "*render tenable the political tasks of state formation, governance, and the exertion of power*" (Sharma & Akhil, 2006:11).

The following example demonstrates how young people are jeopardised by an accumulation of problems and inconsistencies that are hard to comprehend and make sense of: The Greek state assigns to all potential refugees after their release from detention a temporarily semi-legal status. Soon the document of the temporary stay is

expired within thirty days and the person falls back into illegality. Yet after this short acquittal, since it is extremely difficult to leave the country, young people like all the other asylum seekers can be arrested and detained and can be subjected to violence and extreme forms of state power. Once they are exhausted by existing on the margins, young people seek residency and safety in the reception centres.

As the waiting period of the decision regarding their asylum status is quite prolonged, young people feel that it is highly impossible to reclaim a legal status. As a result, many of them decide once again to move elsewhere despite the risk of being rearrested again. A few cases confirmed that this cyclical process of arrest – detention – release – reception – arrest, etc. may occur several times. Some boys had been detained and hosted by the reception centres two and three times over the course of their stay in Greece. These examples explain why almost all young people conceived their situation as being highly dependent on the status of their asylum application.

Although such a paradoxical procedure of manoeuvring between legality and illegality seems pointless and absurd on the surface, it is nevertheless a bureaucratic act. At a deeper level, it can be argued that this procedure is “*a legal and political one, and it takes place at the intersection of the often contradictory practices of [...] bureaucrats, lawyers, judges, asylum seekers, interpreters, experts and other third parties*” (Tobias & Dembour, 2007:2). Due to numerous limitations (e.g. lacking social, political or financial assets), the power position from where asylum seekers manoeuvre, is a great deal weaker than that of the hosting state. The case of the Afghan boys confirms the enduring power of the sovereign state in deciding who is excluded and who belongs as an effect of the practical materiality of the law.

This study has shown that it is almost impossible for potential refugees to attain a legalisation of their status as they are recycled by a political and juridical system that traverses them between semi-legality and illegality. Moreover, the respondents’ experiences of hostility, violence, detention and marginalisation gleaned through their stories when they arrived in Greece showed that there is a very thin line between their evaluation as adult-illegal-migrants and children who are in need of

protection and care. This condition of institutional marginality runs throughout these boy's experiences.

With this rationality, I will use Agamben's (2005) statement that the sovereign power of the state is the main actor that decides on the exception. The sovereign power is manifested through unlawful and violent practises which may involve, as seen in the accounts of young people, routinized practises of offensive interrogations, violent attitudes causing physical and mental pain for the purpose of gathering information and bullying tactics. Such practices demonstrate how the state applies excessive sovereign power over young asylum seekers and also justifies my initial claim that the state's unlawful actions are legitimately performed on what has been previously affirmed as intruder and criminal. In other words, the suspension of the law and exceptional practises become normalised.

This is nowhere more evident than in the case of asylum seekers lives where laws have quite literally 'shaped the possibilities' of their subjects (Mendelson, 2013). That process by which legal distinctions are drawn and manifested in asylum seekers' daily realities is what De Genova calls the 'legal production of migrant's illegality' (2002). In its effort to secure the borders and its population, the state moves beyond the law and asylum seekers are criminalised as unlawful non-citizens who are a threat to the country's security.

The aforementioned legal and political processes do not comprise the full range of forces that shape these boy's experiences and identities of course, but do offer significant glimpses into the construction of the undocumented identity and its myriad effects on the young people themselves that also feed into the insights as to the existing institutional marginality. Understanding the construction of young people's 'illegality' paves the way for more accurate interpretations of young people's realities and attests to the fact that their experiences are mostly characterised by the outcomes of socially and legally imposed (dis)entitlements, political segregations and social attitudes.

Despite an apparent acknowledgement of the contextual realities of the respondents and seeking to avoid individualising their social problems and circumstances, to do

justice to their experiences also demands efforts to distinguish their power as actors in their own lives.

#### **8.4. Resilience**

So far the discussion has centred on the commonalities that tie my respondents' exceptional stories with the same thread and in particular on those external processes and structures that significantly constrained their agency and rendered them powerless. Despite the power asymmetry that has been manifested between the respondents and the various actors they encountered (e.g. transnational networks, authorities, professionals), the young people did certainly exhibit some agency within these structures and processes. It is deemed necessary then to recognise both the way in which the realm of available actions and possibilities is constrained, but also young people's agency as actors in their own lives (Mendelson, 2013).

While migration inevitably brings feelings of displacement, longing and belonging, forced migrations are particularly distressing due to the seeming impossibility of return to one's home country (Swank, 2011:51). The narratives of the respondents suggest that they have faced multiple challenges related to their pre-departure experiences, their journeys and their lives in exile. As discussed earlier, most of them have been implicated in processes of dehumanization and have shared incidents of loss, dislocation, exploitation, and hardship.

Whereas it is clear that unaccompanied minors have faced a range of stressful circumstances that constitute a risk to their well-being, not all of them necessarily experience adverse outcomes (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010:226). The work of Rutter (2003) suggests that most unaccompanied minors manage to cope well with the multiple stresses they experience. The present study has a few accounts to present as examples of positive responses to adversity or as land markers of doing well in their lives in the future.

If we consider young people's integration in the welfare system as an achievement or 'happy ending' compared to other minors who are still on the move or live on the streets, then we could draw the conclusion that all of them in this study constitute a

selective minority of a number of children who managed not only to survive extreme situations but have found a way to enter the institutional care system of the hosting country. Given the limited number of the available places in the Greek reception centres - compared to the number of UM who are in need of care - this is somehow a major indicative factor of the strength and capacity of these boys to manoeuvre and survive the arbitrary and often incomprehensible processes of the asylum and welfare systems.

Specifically, some boys demonstrated remarkable strength, agency and determination in dealing with the hurdles of their lives and exposed high levels of adaptation in their new environments. They also managed to prove that the ‘shadows of the past’ may not always have harmful effects but might as well be turned into valuable pieces of their present world and help them feel less disoriented in the host culture. Young people’s patterns of ‘*positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity*’ can be best described in relation to the concept of resilience (Masten & Powell, 2003:4).

While definitions vary, there is a shared understanding of what resilience means. Rutter’s definition is perhaps most representative in describing the concept of resilience: ‘*essentially, resilience is an interactive concept that is concerned with the combination of serious risk experiences and a relatively positive psychological outcome despite those experiences*’ (2006: 2). Various authors have commented on the resilience of forced migrants, including UM (e.g. Muecke, 1992; Ahearn, 2000; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Kohli, 2006; Chase *et al.* 2008). They underscore the ability of forced migrants to endure extreme conditions and move on with their lives despite the hurdles.

Indeed, the interviews delineated various ways of reacting towards hardship. We’ve seen from the accounts that some boys regained their confidence after suffering real hardships whereas some others did not regain their confidence after a layoff. The question to be asked then is why do some people sink while others swim? What exactly is that quality of resilience that carries people through life? Although it may be difficult to fully understand what’s exactly happening as resilience is one of the great puzzles of human nature (Cyrułnik, 2009), I will attempt to go some way

towards addressing these questions and understand why people differ from one to the other and respond differently in the face of adversity.

As already remarked the concept of resilience refers to the capacity of resistance to environmental risk experiences (Rutter, 2006) and conveys a sense of strength and power for the ones who manage to turn their misfortunes into something positive. However, resilient people don't often describe themselves that way and this is more than evident in the accounts in this study. They shrug off their survival stories and very often assign them to luck. Indeed, it was luck that some of the boys survived, it was luck that their boat was not overloaded and the Evros River didn't rise to alarming levels when they crossed the border or they were lucky that they hadn't been swallowed up by the waves while crossing the Mediterranean Sea in a rubber boat.

Obviously, luck does have a lot to do with surviving. But being lucky is not the same as being resilient. Resilience refers to particular ways that makes people 'triumph' over their difficulties, obstacles and hurdles. Resilient people are the ones who confront the tough reality with staunchness and modesty, and rarely conceive themselves as heroes (Cyrulnik, 2009). It is not until much later that they can relate their past experiences with a positive meaning of suffering. This study's findings suggest that the meaning young people attribute to their suffering is one of the core coping strategies they have used in order to deal with their circumstances and I will give more credence to this view below.

Young people's stories suggest that they cope in a variety of ways by adopting a variety of mechanisms depending on what they perceive as most appropriate to their own specific circumstances (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). But what most prominently stands out is related to the ones whose sufferings enable them to undergo a metamorphosis that will support them to lead their lives for the better and to the ones whose sufferings seem to have catastrophic consequences in psycho-emotional and social terms.

In the literature two words govern the conceptualisation of the way we observe and understand those who manage to swim despite the ordeal of their earliest years and

those who have sunk emotionally. These words are resilience *versus* vulnerability. However, such a dichotomy that sees minors as resilient or vulnerable (swimmers/sinkers) is too simplistic (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). Instead, both signs of resilience and vulnerability may be evident at the same time and symptoms of suffering may exist side by side with coping (ibid). As Hauser *et al.* (2006, p. 5) argue, ‘*no one can be classified as resilient in a static, forever way.*’ It may be lost in some circumstances and then regained, sometimes long after an adversity has occurred (Shepherd, *et al.* 2010).

The study acknowledges this fluid type of resilience and gives much value in understanding how resilience is shown in the experiences of UM since it provides us the opportunity to view these boys from another standpoint; we tend to view them as ‘needy’ and ‘helpless’, labels that are often attached to asylum seeker’s categorization but through the lens of the resilience concept we can see them as capable and independent actors of their own lives.

It is often claimed that resilience is an inner process of individual qualities having the central role in determining the levels of resistance to adversity. I think it is important to be more attentive to the fact that resilience does not derive solely from individual characteristics. The way this study views the concept of resilience is very much connected to a more relational approach suggesting that the outer world is equally important in affecting someone’s capacity to overcome adversity (Ungar, 2008). People may be resilient at one-time period in their lives and not at others and this suggests that context may be also crucial (Rutter, 2006) and resilience should be perhaps situated in person-environment interactions.

I do not seek to explore in depth the individual qualities that render some people more resilient than others since this would entail a different methodological approach but rather to problematize the capabilities of some boys to cope with and overcome their hurdles while some others continue to struggle with the past ordeals. In other words, my intention is to approach as much as possible the answer to the question: ‘Why do some people swim and others sink?’

Studies of children exposed to a wide range of risk factors have acknowledged protective factors connected with resilience that fall into three categories: (1) individual characteristics, (2) relationships with significant ‘others’ and (3) resources and opportunities (Masten & Powell, 2003). Cultural factors including religion may also play an important role in how youths cope with stressors such as separations from parents (Mann, 2001).

The analysis of this study’s interviews revealed the construction of meaning as the most conspicuous factor responsible for enabling young people to use their strengths and capabilities in creative and productive ways.

#### **8.4.1. Constructing meaning from suffering and past traumas**

Suffering is quite rightly seen as undesirable however when a misfortune strikes us, we can overcome it either by removing its cause or else by changing the effect it has on our feelings, that is, by reinterpreting the misfortune as a good, whose benefit may only later become clear (Cyrulnik, 2009). In his most salient work on ethics and politics ‘On the Genealogy of Morals’, Nietzsche writes that man’s problem, “*was not suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, ‘why do I suffer?’ [...] the meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind so far*” (Nietzsche, 1967: III 28). That is why human beings are ready to suffer. On the condition, that their sufferings have a meaning.

Lack of such meaning creates a suffocating void, opening the door to suicidal nihilism (ibid). Suicidal nihilism reflects the idea that because there is no meaning to one’s suffering—and thus no reason or purpose for a central aspect of any life—death is seen as an option. In Chapter 4, Roshnan shared his emotions in relation to the loss of his parents and siblings and he conveyed an emotional emptiness in relation to the lack of meaning surrounding his life after the death of his family. Finding no meaning in life led Roshnan to view suicide as a possible outcome for his suffering. Roshnan’s account reveals that children exposed to high levels of trauma are at risk of experiencing significant mental health issues (Bronstein *et.al.* 2012). Youth like Roshnan who have difficulties in finding any meaning in their suffering

are prone to develop emotional problems and subsequently not be able to manage daily life without support.

In contrast there are four examples demonstrating that some boys have managed to change the negative effect of their suffering into something positive by reinterpreting their hurdles into a necessary process through which they could only develop their lives for the better. These boys viewed themselves as survivors and often remembered the ones who were still suffering in Afghanistan and felt a responsibility to succeed and make a better life for themselves and for those who had left behind (Luster *et.al.* 2010:203).

They built bridges between the ordeals of their past and their present-day ordeal to a fuller, better future. Those bridges made the present manageable, by removing the sense that the present was overwhelming. Austrian psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Victor Frankl realised that to survive the camp, he had to find some purpose (Cyrulnik, 2009). He did so by imagining himself giving a lecture after the war on the psychology of the concentration camp to help outsiders understand what he had been through (*ibid*). By creating concrete goals for himself, he rose above the sufferings of the moment. In this study, one of the boys shared that he sometimes would sit down and think how his life story struggles could be transformed into a learning device for the others, thus he envisioned helping others with similar experiences in the near future. Similarly, some boys shared their plans to become interpreters in the future, in order to help other minors with similar problems.

Indeed, the boys who identified a purpose in their suffering appeared to have clear goals for themselves despite the uncertainty surrounding their present daily lives. They stayed focused on education and eager to learn new things that would help them navigate through their present ordeals to a successful future. Although there were individual differences in the mental health of these youths with regards to past trauma, the stress of adapting to a new culture or pressure to help those left behind, they seemed to be more optimistic and sociable.

These boys referred to their relations with peers and in some instances with professionals as being of great importance in helping them being focused on their

future goals. Sharing their daily worries and future plans with someone they could trust was viewed as therapeutic in the sense that they could receive emotional support when needed. Nevertheless, the boys (6 interviewees) who were more sociable and friendly showed an optimistic outlook about their future. In contrast, more than 10 boys who faced mental health issues described themselves as feeling lonely, isolated and with lack of trusted and supported relations. Being optimistic and sociable has been identified as an important characteristic of resilient boys who managed to create meaning out of their adverse life circumstances.

## **8.5. Conclusion**

This section ends then, with the following observation. In recognition of the exceptional account of each of the boys, the diversified nature of their experiences and despite the distinctive voices that were conveyed in this study, I decided to tell the story of the common ground that tie their individual stories with the same thread. In my attempt to focus on the respondents' commonalities rather than their differences I tried not to overlook their powerful and resilient personalities, their remarkable agency as actors in their own lives and the uniqueness of their backgrounds, journeys and present circumstances. Nevertheless, I felt that the most important way in doing justice to their experiences would be to stand back and shed more light on those processes and structures that constrain significantly their agency and render them powerless. In many ways, this section sought to challenge dominant conceptualisations of 'the children' and 'the asylum seekers' of the minority world (as developed in section 1.3), by viewing their paths, actions, decisions, relations and feelings in the light of the social, political and legal contexts that affected their opportunities and created restrictions. These young people's stories have demonstrated in myriad ways how their daily experiences have been, and continue to be, shaped by structures of migration politics, laws and social discourses of asylum that transcend state power and exist in trans-national contexts. The next section analyses the views of professionals and public figures regarding the reception conditions, protection and treatment of young people within the community they live. An additional perspective is provided in relation to the public attitudes towards the presence of young people.



## **Chapter 9: Professionals: Between Prejudice and Sympathy**

### **9.1. Introduction**

The key aim of this study was primarily to explore the views and experiences of Afghan unaccompanied minors concerning their lives from the moment they flee home until their experiences as residents of Greek reception centres. An additional scope was to explore the challenges posed to the Greek welfare and asylum system in relation to the reception of unaccompanied minors and as well as to identify prevalent attitudes of the local people towards young people. It was deemed necessary to obtain the perspectives of professionals who work directly with unaccompanied minors and public figures who are involved with issues in relation to asylum and welfare to gain their insights as to the nature of young people's reception, protection, and treatment. Their views helped me to better understand better the young people's experiences and provided a second supplementary perspective which adds value to the study.

At the first part of this chapter I will consider professionals' views about the lives and circumstances of young people and I will share problematizations highlighted by people active in the reception system regarding social services and asylum procedures. I think it is important to obtain a thorough picture of processes around the areas of welfare and asylum and to examine which of these promote or obstruct the well-being of this group of young people. Finally, at the second part I will discuss the main perceptions regarding the presence of unaccompanied minors in Greek local communities by exploring the views of public figures in relation to local attitudes towards UM. Evident in the manner in which the different actors recount their tasks and duties are also ideas of how unaccompanied minors are positioned and what constitute their needs and requirements.

### **9.2. Professionals' profiles**

The group of professionals who are interviewed in this study is consisted of five social workers, three teachers of Greek language, two lawyers, one sociologist and one psychologist. The purpose was to conduct interviews with professionals who

were in direct involvement with issues concerning unaccompanied minors and represented various professional strands at the time of research. Although the majority of professionals are social workers, the involvement of other professionals was deemed significant because they too touch the lives of the young people.

The majority of professionals interviewed were women (9/12). Generally, gender and its impact on the lives of the young people did not appear to be linked to practice, apart from one participant who saw a ‘father figure’ role as helpful and meaningful. The female professionals were too young to represent a mothering role for young boys. Most professionals were in their late twenties and early thirties and only one social worker was over forty-five years old. All of them were white, Greek in origin and spoke Greek as the main language. Some of them had sufficient grasp of European languages such as English and French to communicate in a basic fashion with young boys who had learnt these languages in their home country. A few professionals who were not fluent in English needed interpreters.

Half of the professionals were relatively newly qualified – within the three or four years preceding the interview, about one-third had been qualified for five or more years and only two can be regarded as veterans with eight to fifteen years of experience but not in the field of migration. Almost two-thirds of the respondents reported no other working experience other than their current position; working with unaccompanied minors has been their first qualified employment. Overall, the majority of them shared that they did not have experiences in other aspects of refugee or asylum related work.

It should be reminded that the majority of the reception centres have been established only recently in Greece and as such, work with UM can be regarded as a relatively new area of practice. Yet this was often seen as an advantage by some professionals as they thought that the proximity of their age to the ages of UM increased the likelihood of building earlier rapport and trust with the young people. A few professionals shared they felt closer to the needs and concerns of the young boys because of their own age and they presented as keen to work and bring positive change in practice with the young people.

In relation to professional characteristics there was some evidence to suggest that professionals brought some general experience in working with children and they used this knowledge as a foundation of specialist knowledge on asylum issues. However, the latter was based mostly on casework experience rather on any given *'technical knowledge'* obtained through research and theory (Kohli, 2007:99). This was evident from the outset since most workers shared that they had attended only a few days of courses, seminars and conferences per year in relation to their work with UM. Most of them reported that the breadth of this kind of training was sufficient while giving an image of not having a clear idea of what training should focus on and how it may improve practice.

### **9.3. Professionals' understanding of young people's experiences**

This section relates the stories told by the young boys with the views of the professionals of the young boy's stories. Here the lives and circumstances of young people are laid out again in the following way: firstly, the professionals share what they know about young boys' lives before departure and underline what they believe are the main causes of their movement. Secondly, they share what they know about the journeys and the challenges young boys encountered on their way to the west. Thirdly, the professionals briefly provide what they know about minors' experiences upon arrival, including the various processes they are involved in (i.e. asylum assessment, referral to social services, reception as UASM). Finally, the professionals sketch the major issues arising from their everyday interaction with the young boys in residential care and the emerging challenges which affect the boys' well-being.

#### **9.3.1. Pre-migration and migration stories**

Young boys were reported by the professionals to live in problematic conditions, difficult enough to prompt their decision of leaving home. A few professionals confirmed what the young boys have shared about their histories e.g. that most of them hadn't lived an Afghan life since they had grown up in neighbouring countries. The ones who lived in Afghanistan were presented as living in adverse conditions

primarily due to poverty. A few professionals implied that for ethical reasons they hadn't insisted on distilling information about young people's pre-departure stories. Such 'sensitive' information was left to the discretion of the boys and many of them were not ready to share.

Most professionals claimed that the reasons of movement were not linked with war conditions and turbulent. Poverty and the prospect of a better life were referred to as the main causes of mobility by the majority of the professionals who asserted that a number of boys were not being threatened by the war itself but mostly by the hardship generated by the war. Comments made by some professionals left implicit doubts i.e. the young people were economic migrants and not asylum seekers:

*Why do they leave? For a better life, not all of them face threats for their lives, that's why we believe some of them are not genuine asylum seekers, they don't have other choice of remaining in their country and this is a major issue in the area of asylum. (Psychologist of reception centre C)*

This passage suggests concerns about the authenticity of the Afghan boys' statuses and hints that some boys had not witnessed threatening events that would force them to seek sanctuary elsewhere. In other words, economic reasons are mostly responsible for the young boys' mobility and not persecution. The general impression left by the views of professional was that the catastrophic effects of the war had ceased and poverty had taken over to destroy the lives of the Afghans. Only two professionals shared that political and persecution reasons due to differences in ethnicity forced young people to leave Afghanistan:

*They are war-affected children and this is what we tend to forget. The war is continued....one kid told me that his father had cooperated with the Americans in the past and during the turnover of the Taliban his family was destroyed completely...everyone was killed...of course these stories are according to their own statement...but even if these...emm stories contain elements of exaggeration...you believe them.... we shouldn't doubt about their backgrounds, if we do that, we force them to modify their stories and make these stories sound more sensitive. (Sociologist of reception centre A)*

Here this interviewee makes a significant point in relation to the nature of the accounts shared by the boys. As mentioned earlier some professionals often react suspiciously over the authenticity of some 'sensitive' accounts and as a result they behave with reservation in the light of asylum seekers' statuses. Here the interviewee claims that sometimes it is the behaviour of professionals that provokes young peoples' inclination to modify their stories and give credible accounts in front of unconvinced listeners.

As underscored in the salient work of Butler (2005) there is no 'I' who is originally formed and interacts as such with the social world, but rather the 'I' is subjective and always reconstituted by the responses of and to others who condition and can blind one's self-identity. The extract above illustrates that even if the accounts of young boys do not always reflect their reality, since there is no possibility of a complete account of oneself, we ought to treat them with humbleness and move away from the perception of expecting proof about what the other one is saying.

Generally, the professionals' discussions were centred on the motivations of young boys to leave their homes and not so much on aspects of their ordinary Afghan lives. Only fragments of their background stories were known to the professionals. Perhaps this was partly due to what Kohli (2007) has pronounced as an organising feature of young people's silences about their past or maybe the workers did not want to explore background lives.

Regarding the journey experiences of young people, again most professionals provided some awareness of the entailed risks and threats that are often associated with irregular and transnational movements and all of them acknowledged the hardship and threatening conditions young people face when they are on the move. Three social workers gave descriptive accounts and shared that frequently young people have to stop in dangerous places on their way and find ways and resources for moving on.

The majority of professionals knew something of the business of smuggling and they asserted that children and young people are particularly vulnerable as they have no other choice other than relying upon smuggling groups. One of the social workers

stated that smuggling is widespread, and occurs in the shade of the state's governance:

*It is incredibly easy to come in contact with smugglers.... I could even call now and find out what if there is a boat departing from Igumenitsa to Italy, at what time it departs and how much it costs. In the same manner our kids can arrange very easily their trips via smugglers, as long as they have some money. [...] Smugglers are involved and operate to the alleged ignorance of the state. (Social worker of reception centre B)*

Some other professionals acknowledged the unprecedented dangers young people encounter on their way and they also reported that apart from being susceptible to smuggling groups some of them were also victims of trafficking. However, such references were very tiny in number, perhaps because victims of trafficking find it extremely hard to share such information or because they do not want to reveal aspects about traffickers. Overall what was conveyed by the professionals was some awareness in relation to the journey experiences of a struggle to survive in extreme conditions of hardship, exploitation and abuse.

### **9.3.2. Challenges upon arrival**

Although there were some divergent responses about the major issues young people encounter upon their arrival in Greece, there was a mutual understanding of the circumstances of these boys, some common features emerged:

- Border crossing and risk of life
- Difficulties linked to accommodation (sleeping in the streets)
- Disorientation about what to do and where to go
- Risk of arrest and detention
- Risk of abuse and exploitation
- Difficulty in communication

The social workers noted that for some young people, arriving in Greece was a notion tied with the expectation of being safe. Therefore, their experiences upon arrival were exactly the opposite. Border crossing was described as one of the most life

threatening actions that one has to be subjected to. Then the majority of professionals shared awareness of ‘where to sleep’ as one of the very first challenges the boys have to deal with. One teacher provided an example of boys who slept in the streets for nine months before being accommodated in a reception centre:

*One of the very first difficulties they face is connected with sleep and what to eat. I know for example boys who are hosted here now, they were staying for nine months in the streets, in parks and they had to sleep outside. I am sure there are other greater risks...never reach our ears and these are related to incidents of abuse, exploitation and blackmails. They have certain obligations towards the smugglers and they are somehow bounded to follow their smuggler's orders. (Teacher of reception centre D)*

Two professionals understood the challenge of finding accommodation in Greece no one being available to represent or to inform unaccompanied minors about what to do upon arrival. A psychologist described how the lack of information and assistance upon arrival may be the source of many problems and dangers young people may face:

*They suffer a cultural shock...some of them don't know where they are...we ask them how you arrived from where did you enter the borders and they don't know what to answer. Then, most of the times, they are being detained. I have heard terrible and shocking things like...emm...to remain in detention for over six months in appalling conditions and then they are given a document which orders their expulsion. There is no guidance and there is no information about their rights. (Psychologist of reception centre E)*

A major problem that was also referred by the professionals is connected with the lack of communication between the representatives of the authorities and the young people. For example, as stated by some professionals, the existing structures of the police and coast guard units in the border areas do not provide for the permanent presence of interpreters who can facilitate communication. As a result, many mistakes and misunderstandings may occur.

Four social workers explained that UM can be wrongly registered as «adults», since there is no proper age assessment, or the opposite, adults may be registered as unaccompanied minors, they may be registered as citizens of a country that is not their own or they may be registered as accompanied by other adults, who may be in

the best case familiar people, or friends or just co-travellers. A social worker described this tremendously complicated situation from her own point of view:

*Children upon entry are not properly assessed and it is not only that...all the data of these children are modified as these have to be reassigned by different authorities...so for example, we may see the same name of a child but differently written. We don't have any word about that. Children are not assessed when they arrive in the centre, they just hold a document with their data as this was given by the police. And these complexities produce other problems like bullying, threats to younger children, criminal and violent attitudes etc. (Social worker of reception centre D)*

It is interesting to note that these complexities were thought of as ramifications of the structural shortcomings of the asylum procedure in Greece by most of the professionals but for some others they were viewed as complexities stemming from the very specific circumstances of UM. For example, a social worker explained that often children upon arrival destroy or throw away their documents and declare false data to the authorities.

What I observed is that the age assessment issue greatly affects the way professionals responded to young refugees. The question of age may often become the first issue for professionals involved in the delivery of support services instead of the assessment of a young person's needs (Hek, 2005: 18). This has also been referred to as “*the existence ...of a culture of suspicion*” (Humphries & Mynott, 2001:26). The professionals' concerns in relation to age sometimes impacted on their attitudes especially to young people who looked like adults.

The social workers described incidents exemplifying inappropriate and aggressive behaviours by young people who were perceived as adults and expressed their frustration for not having any legal support to deal with such incidents. The fact that social workers do not have any say in the age assessment process made them feel ineffective and powerless.

Professional's views of young people's early experiences in Greece were centred on the lack of communication as a significant factor that generates further complications:

*There are cases who have serious reasons to be granted a humanitarian status and others have all the requirements for a family reunion. However, all these particularities are not coming to the attention of the police since they cannot understand a word of what the children are saying and as a result a considerable amount of time is lost. (Lawyer of reception centre C)*

The lack of interpretation and legal services was referred by the legal advisers who took part in the study as one of the greatest pitfalls in Greek asylum policy. Two lawyers stated that young people are often interviewed in a language they do not understand and without being counselled on their rights during the asylum process. In some instances, they were advised to sign documents but were not sure whether these documents would safeguard their rights.

Regardless of the communication problems that were centred on the screening process, some professionals referred to the general difficulties young people encounter when they arrive in Greece due to language restrictions. In particular, the social workers said that these boys find the task of having to negotiate their new ways through a set of limitations. They were aware that young people found themselves in a completely strange environment upon arrival and met people who kept asking questions that are not easy to be answered.

### **9.3.3. The Asylum Process**

Professionals' views of the position of UM in the asylum system provide a further angle from where the relation between the Greek state and its asylum seeking young people can be explored. In particular, it is shed light on the treatment and struggles UM face within the bureaucratic and legal structures of the Greek state as these were conveyed by the professionals.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter young people may come to the attention of the social services by themselves or via the police. This means that some of them have not been arrested, they have not been fingerprinted and they have not lodged an asylum application. One of the lawyers indicated that the prerequisite of being hosted in a reception centre is to require a healthy profile and to apply for asylum. This is somewhat contradictory to the experiences of the young people as a

few of them reported that they hadn't applied for asylum months after their reception. Perhaps this is related to the overall shortcomings of the operation of the centres, i.e.: lack of legal advisers. It has been observed by the same lawyer that most of the times young people apply for asylum at the time of their reception.

Since the conditions of access to the asylum at points of entry are unclear and differ over the time and according to the specific point of entry, I will be focusing on professional's experiences in relation to young people's access to asylum from the moment they referred to the reception centres. The analysis of their views demonstrates how administrative barriers and institutional structures make it extremely difficult for young people to wait for a decision of asylum and settle in Greece.

The most important areas of the asylum process which were described by the professionals as having a major impact on the everyday lives of young people are the following:

- 1) Identification of refugee status
- 2) The waiting period
- 3) Removal before the final decision

Before considering each of these components I will firstly provide a description of the asylum process shared by the lawyer of reception centre D.:

*You make the application; you go to the police where the application is delivered, then a short interview takes place and is carried out by a police officer who focuses mostly on the circumstances of movement, like in which countries the boy has been and the reason he seeks asylum. No one is obliged to provide the reasons at this stage; he has the right to answer at the official interview. After the delivery of the application, the pink card is issued. According to recent improvements in some areas of the asylum law, within two months the applicant's claim should be examined at an official interview. In reality, it takes longer due to work burden. In the meantime, the pink card is renewed and at some point the asylum seeker has his first instance interview. If the decision is negative, you may proceed to the second instance interview which basically...gives someone the right to appeal for the review of asylum. Then you have to wait again for the second interview and if a negative decision is given again...then you make*

*an application for annulment before the Council of State....is a lengthy procedure. (Lawyer of reception centre D)*

The asylum procedure was generally described as an overly slow process with many complications involved. Given the fact that lawyers are experts into legal matters they provided a detailed account of the asylum process. However, I would like to draw the attention on how this process is experienced by the young people according to the views of the professionals. What was understood is that for most boys this process is a distressing, frustrating and even traumatic experience in some instances. As a social worker observed ‘*these boys feel fear, insecurity and anxiety for the process and its outcome*’. A social worker and a lawyer portrayed the asylum process as a system which forces young people to remain in a place against their will.

The first area of the asylum process which seems to be highly problematic is the identification of the refugee status or else the assessment of credibility in the asylum process. The lawyers, in cooperation with the asylum applicants (minors), have to provide written documents to corroborate their claims with more “objective” evidence. This process was described by the lawyers as difficult and ambiguous in their outcomes, especially with regards to the Afghan asylum applicants. The lawyers shared that this group of people has additional difficulties in terms of finding credible documentation. Afghanistan is a war-torn country which does not issue documents in the same scale as other countries usually do.

Then, legal representatives mostly rely upon the information they elicit from the young people. But this process seems to entail other complications. According to the account of a lawyer ‘*young people often have problems in clearly remembering dates or when they do these do not quite match with the events*’. In other words there is always some sort of lack of clarity that can be a disadvantage in the asylum process. Some of the professionals pointed to the difficulty of young people in obtaining information that could fit, according to the western conceptualisation, as a ‘valid testimony’ because of cultural issues i.e. definition of separation.

Taken into account the requirements of the asylum procedure it seems that the cultural issue is completely ignored and thus the Greek authorities involved seem to

set the standards of evidence far beyond of the applicant's reach. On these grounds the role of the lawyers is vital in presenting evidence that will be assessed as credible.

The difficulty in communication between the minors and their legal advisers was also considered as an impeding factor in the asylum process. Since the Afghan boys speak Dari, Farsi and Urdu and Pashtun, the encounters between them and their lawyers were described as particularly challenging. For proceeding with the applications it is deemed necessary to use interpreters so the communication can be carried out efficiently. However, according to the accounts of the lawyers, professional interpreters are lacking and most of the times unskilled interpreters must do the job. Interpreting in the asylum process is critical because the future of the applicant is at stake and relies upon the interpreter who is responsible to understand, interpret and convey in a consistent way what s/he has heard. According to Good, "*Asylum applicants are utterly dependent on the skills of interpreters*" (2007:153).

Another aspect which was associated with the identification of refugee status and was presented as being likely to have negative impacts on the result of a case, is connected with the history of mobility of the applicant. According to a lawyer the most frequent questions are whether the applicant has lived in transit countries and for how long. Living in transit for years (see chapter 5) can be used as an evidence for not being granted protection.

The second area of the asylum process which was described as having a major effect on young people's lives is the period of waiting until one is sure about his status. As described above the asylum procedure entails different stages, all of which take a considerable amount of time. This means that the applicant is normally required to wait for a prolonged period until he receives an answer about his claim. However young people do not always have the patience to wait until they receive an answer and they quit the process:

*I know many kids who deliberately quitted the procedure and tried to go back to their countries or moved to other European countries. They were tired from waiting and waiting. (Social worker of reception centre B)*

These are some of the effects, acknowledged by professionals, of the lengthy asylum procedure which are deemed to be emotionally gruelling for any human being entangled in such a condition (Bohmer & Shuman, 2007: 624). Actually, the pending period of asylum was demonstrated as the main source of young people's denial to apply for asylum and the main reason for moving elsewhere since they profoundly mistrust the system and have often had negative experiences with the Greek authorities. As well, young people were constantly informed by the lawyers and the rest of the professionals that their chances of being granted a refugee status were minimal. One of the social workers and Director of the reception centre B demonstrates that it is virtually impossible for these young people to be granted a refugee status:

*Over the last few years, I have worked with more than 250 kids. None of these kids had ever being granted asylum and many of them .... they really deserved it!*

A few other professionals also referred to similar incidents of young people who had lived many years in the reception centres and had never received an answer concerning their asylum. Such incidents show how young people's dreams for a better life drift away in "a lengthy asylum procedure [that] [...] hardly [gives] evidence for fulfilling a humanitarian obligation" (Koser, 2007: 240). Much of the literature in relation to young refugees and asylum seekers has pointed out that asylum status and awaiting the outcome of asylum claims for young refugees is an issue that pervades all other aspects of their lives (Humphries & Mynott, 2001:24; Stanley, 2001).

Commenting on the situation in the UK, authors observe that many young people have to wait considerable lengths of time for their claims to be processed, on average around 11 months (Ayotte, 2000; Humphries & Mynott, 2001; Stanley, 2001). Nevertheless, there are examples demonstrating that in some countries the principle of 'the best interest of the child' is a priority and is being upheld in practice, for example, in Finland where the child is granted residency and a full-right status whenever a final decision on the asylum application has not been taken within three months (Irish Refugee Council, 2001 cited in Christie, 2002:194).

But this is not the case in Greece. The struggle of young asylum seekers to obtain residency by the Greek state resembles the struggle of Jason and the Argonauts of the Greek mythology to make it through the Symplegades (clashing rocks) on their way to the Golden Fleece. Though the stories I have heard confirm that none of these boys have emerged out of this battle as the heroic winners who have crossed the Symplegades. Regardless of the outcome of the asylum procedure young asylum seekers seek a fair examination of their circumstances and a clear answer over the asylum outcome in a short term. The magnitude of this was most grasped by the professionals with whom I spoke.

Finally, another difficulty that professionals identified as restrictive in relation to the options of working effectively with the young people has been the decision based on the legislation and its procedures that an unaccompanied minor should be evicted at the age of 18 regardless of the outcome of his asylum claim. Some professionals were of the view that the interpretation of the legislation together with the processes arising from this legislation is actually opposed to the principles of their professional practice (i.e. Social work).

This means, of course, that the asylum system in Greece was seen as creating not only serious obstacles in the lives of those involved in the asylum process, but also for the professionals who constantly face professional dilemmas when having to bring forward UM's issues (Dunkerley *et al.* 2005: 644). In particular, tensions were expressed by some social workers regarding the eviction of minors from the reception centre at the age of 18. According to the frontline staff's views there is an increasing divide between child protection policy and the reality of the immigration policy and practice.

The inevitable tensions the professionals face regarding the eviction of the minors have been described in some instances as overtaking their humanistic and ethical values. Some of them openly shared that they did not always adhere to the immigration law especially when they felt that the legislation operates against 'the best interest' of the minors. The lawyer of reception centre E did not implement immigration policy:

*We've been accused by prosecutors of exceeding the legal boundaries because we didn't remove minors when they turned 18. You see the boys are in the middle of an educational process....I cannot just kick them out. There is a huge gap between the asylum and the child protection policy. Unfortunately, these young boys are treated as asylum seekers by the state and not as underage young people who are in need of support.*

This example demonstrates an active response and resistance towards the implementation of the asylum law that is deemed to compete against professional values and the best interest of the young people, and reveals that some professionals take risks to act against it.

On the other hand, the qualitative study of Dunkerley *et. al.* (2005:646) with professionals who work with unaccompanied children, underlined the quite powerless position both of children who became evicted and professionals who had limited choices to act against the asylum decisions. The professionals of the study said that they wouldn't take the risk to act against it (there seemed little room for sustaining a challenge to the UK National Asylum Support Service) (ibid).

In this study, most professionals referred to the absence of structures and social support services in Greece for the ones who turn 18. One of the social workers commented that male unaccompanied minors who seek asylum and turn 18 are one of the most disadvantaged groups of people because of the lack of services and the fact that they do not have any options other than relying completely on individualised efforts and means.

It has been overwhelming to hear that, according to the professionals, young people who do not feel ready to lead an independent life at the age 18 often feel fearful and distressed about what is going to happen. The lawyer and Director of reception centre D claimed that most often minors have their removal announced without obtaining an answer on the 1<sup>st</sup> instance decision of asylum<sup>20</sup>. In other words, the young asylum seekers who are leaving care face total uncertainty, and experience 'exceptional amounts of stress', regarding whether after the examination of their application for

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<sup>20</sup> This means that when they receive their 1st instance asylum decision they will no longer be classified as minors and so their chances of having their application rejected are increased.

refugee status, they will or will not be allowed to remain permanently in the country after the 18 years of age (Broad & Robbins, 2005:275).

## **9.4. Professionals' perceptions of young people's needs**

In Chapter 7, I reflected on young people's needs and what became clear from their accounts was that they have diverse and wide-ranging needs but also these are very specific to their circumstances as displaced and war-affected young people. The aim of this section is firstly to reflect on the views of the service providers about young people's 'normative needs' (defined by the professionals, Hill & Tisdall, 1997:55) and secondly to identify how well the provided services are responding to the needs of the young people.

### **9.4.1. Basic needs**

By referring to basic needs most professionals explained that these involved accommodation, nutrition, and provision of everyday necessities. Most professionals acknowledged the importance of the basic needs by confirming Maslow's approach (1970) that the needs which are at the very bottom of the hierarchy have to be met first otherwise there is great difficulty in dedicating energies to higher needs (Hill & Tisdall, 1997:41).

Based on this perspective some professionals emphasised that it is substantial for this group of young people, especially right after what they have been through in the course of their journeys, to have a place to stay, food to eat, and be able to meet their physiological needs, before being ready to engage themselves with other necessities and wishes. Some others acknowledged the need for safety, tranquillity and security as having the same gravity as basic needs:

*These kids are coming from extremely problematic situations and when they arrive here, what they need first is tranquillity and safety...you see only then we help them meet the rest of their needs.  
(Social worker of reception centre E)*

Most respondents considered that provision of accommodation and nutrition was adequate and only a few of them thought that young people's basic needs were not

being met. These professionals referred to insufficient resources, funding issues and staff availability as major factors mainly arising from the cuts.

A number of professionals, who acknowledged the difficulties in meeting the basic needs of the young people, attributed the poor service provision to mismanagement and delays of funding and expressed their difficulty in coping with the attitudes and reactions of the young people who constantly put the blame on the professionals for the quality and deficiency of service provisions. One of them perceived such reactions as accepted and normal because, as he explained, professionals are often seen by the young people as the representatives of the ministry, the prosecutor, the police and the state. I will return to this issue regarding the professional's perceptions on service provision, in a following chapter.

#### **9.4.2. Young people's distinctive needs**

Surprisingly, only two professionals discussed the importance of recognising young people's exceptional backgrounds and identities. They stated that there is a divergence between the way these children are perceived and treated in their country of origin and the way they are treated in the hosting country. One of them, a social worker of reception centre E reflected on this issue by saying that in Afghanistan these boys are active members of the society who can fully contribute in the household and the community. On the contrary, in Greece they find themselves in a situation of dependency as service users.

The sociologist of reception centre B stressed that it is important for professionals to distinguish and acknowledge the exceptional needs and circumstances of the young people. He mentioned that it is very common for professionals to make assumptions regarding the backgrounds of the boys. Theoretically they are assessed on the grounds of their different needs but in practice, they are all classified and often treated as a homogeneous group of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors (Hopkins & Hill, 2006). For example, the sociologist indicated that the professionals often assume that all Afghans can be placed together and be friends to each other, and overlook the fact that boys of different ethnicities may be in conflict to each other.

Finally, most professionals recognised that only when young peoples' basic needs are being met first, can they show excitement for other things that help them feel more grounded in their new environment, such as employment, education and socialization. These will be now considered in turn.

### **9.4.3. Employment**

Regarding the need for employment, four professionals indicated that quite often young people are enforced by their parents to work in the host country in order to improve the living standards of their families back home. In particular, a social worker stated that some parents, over the phone, put pressure on the boys to leave school and find a job. The professionals shared that family pressure creates a lot of tension and stress on the young people who on the one hand, feel bounded to their families' principles and expectations and from the other find themselves in a European country with an unambiguous legal status and with unemployment rates being tremendously high. This situation impacts greatly on the motivation of the boys to be engaged in the educational process.

### **9.4.4. Education**

Educational needs were identified as being particularly important to young people by the majority of the professionals. This view has been also shared by the young people in section 7.2.1. who considered education as key for their personal, professional and social development and provide some form of normality in their daily lives. It is interesting to see though, the views of the respondents in the teaching profession. Quite conflicting ideas were revealed as to the intentions and capacities of the Afghan boys to be educated and involved in the learning process.

One of the teachers stated that most young people demonstrated a distinctive interest in education and eagerness for learning in places where they would have increased chances of being granted a refugee status. He shared that most of his students got very quickly disappointed by the uncertainty of their status and the delays of the asylum process which made them think that they didn't have a future in Greece:

*...some boys...you can tell...they have a thirst for knowledge, you can see the sparkle in their eyes. They may attend classes but they get very easily disappointed because of the entire situation, what they want is to move to another country and follow their dreams. (Teacher of Greek language of reception centre C)*

The teacher shared that one of the greatest challenges of his work was to maintain minors' class attendance and encourage them to learn. Here the intentions of the minors to move to another country are confirmed, according to the view of the respondent, by their determination to learn English instead of Greek. The teacher stressed that it is often assumed that these boys arrive in the country without any education history (Chester, 2001:166) but this is not true because many of them are very intelligent and skilled. He stated that the average educational background of an Afghan boy is 2 to 5 years of attendance in formal education.

In the report of Hopkins and Hill (2006:66) it is suggested that service providers should be very careful when making assumptions about the previous educational attainments and qualities of refugee children neither should they speculate that all of them have similar experiences. This view was supported by the teacher of the reception centre E, who shared that there were vast differences among the young people in terms of their education histories. The teacher underlined that service providers should distinguish between these differences and take them into consideration when make assessments of minors' needs.

The teacher of the reception centre B had another view of the educational background of the young people. She thought that their education histories did not vary strongly. She reported that the Afghan boys had the lowest level of educational attainments comparing to young people of other ethnicities and that most of them were illiterate:

*The Afghans are not interested in learning ... maybe they don't have the capacity; they have the lowest educational background... I don't know why.*

What the statement of the teacher seems to suggest is that the Afghan young people are not capable enough to be engaged in the education. Interestingly, the reception centre B, as referred in an earlier chapter, is the only reception centre which provides

preparatory Greek classes but has not provided young people yet with the opportunity to attend public school.

As the teacher of the reception centre B explained, according to Greek legislation<sup>21</sup>, all children below the age of 16, whether they are asylum-seekers or have full refugee status are entitled to education in Greece. The reception centre B has been condemned by the Greek Ombudsman for not providing access at public schools to the young people and for not meeting the educational needs of the young people and this was confirmed by the professionals of the reception centre.

According to Richman (1998a) educational progress and emotional well-being are mutually reliant to one another. He stated that when children are prevented from being integrated in the educational process it is likely that they feel insecure and isolated thus they develop difficulties in settling into a new life. Following from this, young people's lack of interest in attending a preparatory class which does not guarantee any chances for future development and active participation in the society, seems to explain why their low interest in learning.

#### **9.4.5. Socialization**

Besides the need for education, the professionals reported that UM arrive in Greece with no parents or other family members and whatever their situation, social relations are obviously of great importance. Socialization has been identified by the majority of the professionals as significant for helping young people to create links with the local community and adapt to their new environment. Some professionals who worked in reception centres that were located in remote areas shared that socialization could not be promoted, in some instances, due to the geographical position of the centres.

However, there is an example which challenges the claim that the location of a centre impacts on the socialization of the minors. The young people of centre E, which is situated in a remote area, were reported as maintaining good relations with the people of the village and having an active role in the local community. The professionals of

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<sup>21</sup> [N. 24(I)/1993, N. 220(I)/2004]

this centre deemed it necessary to work with the local community in order to safeguard the best interest of the children:

*Since most of these minors stay in the village for more than 4 years, it's our obligation to work in different directions for promoting their integration in the local community [...] we work both with the local people and the residents of the centre... especially the Afghans had established relations with the local people and feel very well living in this place. (Social worker of reception centre E)*

The professionals of reception centre B shared a different view of the role of socialization. Two of them, a teacher and a social worker referred to the existing distance between the local community and the young people and mentioned that the attitudes of the young people did not really encourage the development of any kind of contact:

*I don't think they have the need to create the links with the local people. This place is just another transitional place for them. (Teacher of Reception Centre B)*

The social worker of the same reception centre more or less said the same:

*These children don't seek to be in contact with people from the community, they prefer to be with people of the same ethnicity.*

In this social worker's view, the fact that the young people socialise mostly with peers of the same ethnicity indicates that they are clearly responsible for not developing any contacts with other people. However, this standpoint says more about the role of the professionals and reproduces dominant discourses about the reception centre and its' accountability to work with communities and local people to ensure the well-being of refugee children (Williamson, 1998). Literature in relation to this area points to the importance of policies that create the right conditions of inclusion and respect in order to help young people feel safe and confident in their new environment and combat feelings of isolation (Kidane, 2001b; Richman, 1998a; Stanley, 2001; Hopkins and Hill, 2006).

#### **9.4.6. Family contact**

The need of young people to trace and contact their families was not regarded as situated in the upper tier in the hierarchy of their overall needs. However, the

professionals recognised the exceptional situation of young people as displaced and separated from their families. While they didn't refer to any details, they did mention that some of these boys had experienced long separations, including the death of their parents at their home country or during their journeys. Some of them shared that a few boys had lost the whereabouts of their families and they didn't know whether they were alive or dead. For these boys, tracking their families or maintaining contact was acknowledged as been supremely important:

*...they are children who are missing their mum and dad.....for example [...] you see children to say that I cannot handle this anymore.... I want to see my parents now.....and we also have cases where the children say they want to go back to Afghanistan with their own will to see their parents.....via IOM.(In reception centre C)*

Thus it was deemed necessary to help the boys make phone calls back home or give them the chance to have regular internet sessions with their families and relatives. But, only two out of the five reception centres seemed to have the means to meet young people's need to contact their families. Most professionals identified and referred to a number of difficulties that prohibited their intentions to help young people be in contact with their families:

*...even the ones who don't have parents they have a strong need to be in contact with relatives they left behind. Unfortunately, we cannot help them... they (young people) can't buy phone cards... there is no internet connection. We have many operational problems and funding issues. You will hear them complaining a lot about that. (Sociologist of reception centre A)*

The professionals who worked in reception centre A and E provided a more positive image concerning the need for family contact:

*The majority of these kids have bought laptops with the pocket money and they have regular contacts with their families through skype, the rest of them make phone calls, I can tell...most of them talk regularly with their family. Yes, I think their need for family contact is covered.*

Concerning the need for family reunion, and contact a few professionals, social workers and lawyers shared that there have been some serious efforts for reunification in cooperation with the young people. In some cases, they managed to

have successful outcomes whereas they pointed out that it was significant to ensure that they had taken all the possible steps in order to reunite a separated family. The social worker of reception C shared that one of their first priorities was to identify and bring forward cases that have potential of family reunification. He mentioned that *'this is the most desirable outcome we can have therefore not an easy one'*. One of the lawyers explained that the most common difficulties they meet are related to the lack of evidence, the difficulty in tracing the families of the children, and relatives' illegal statuses in hosting countries.

#### **9.4.7. Interpretation services**

Although the use of sufficient interpretation services was not regarded as one of the priorities by the young people, it was mentioned as important by the professionals. Generally, all of them stated that they provided the very basic form of interpretation to young people. Most often one interpreter was appointed in each centre usually serving the needs of the majority of minors of the same ethnicity. Regarding Afghans, the professionals shared that they were in an advantaged position compared to the rest of the residents since they could use interpreters routinely, and in the absence of an officially employed interpreter, they were using their friends. Literature (across disciplines) suggests that the use of family or friends to interpret is not a good idea (Hek, 2005) because it is regarded unprofessional and unethical. Generally, the majority of professionals pointed to the need for professional interpreters.

In reception centre B the professionals complained about the unprofessional behaviour of the Afghan interpreter. In particular, they explained that the interpreter was an Afghan asylum seeker, resident of the centre like all the other minors, with the only difference that he was officially employed to provide interpretation services. I have also discussed thoroughly my experience concerning interpretation during my fieldwork in Chapter 3 of Methodology, and I shared the various complications that may arise when cooperating with an interpreter who belongs to the target group of the study. The teacher of reception centre B commented on this issue:

*The interpretation services are not sufficient...our Afghan interpreter has a negative influence on the boys; he tells them it's a waste of time to attend the classes and that they should try to leave*

*the centre. He projects his own problems on the boys and the most worse is that the Afghan boys listen to him.*

In this case, interpretation services were presented as biased by the personal and professional beliefs of the interpreter. According to the report of Hopkins and Hill (2006) the use of interpretation services is crucial for the communication and trust establishment between the young people and the professionals. It requires an accurate and trustworthy interpreter who shouldn't only speak the language but who should be reliable and able to represent both sides in an accurate manner.

### **9.5. Promoting social protection and care: a multi-faceted process**

This section illustrates what the professionals said about the provided services, whether these respond to the needs of the young people and what they think about the strengths and weaknesses of the service provision. A particular consideration is given to the responses of social workers in relation to the social services.

In the review of literature, it was indicated that the form of care of the current welfare system to UM in Greece, is mainly residential. This means that there are no structures of foster care neither are there any arrangements to support placements with extended family, as it occurs in UK (Williamson, 1998). Although there are some efforts for reforming the wider residential care sector in Greece, most residential units implement an institutionalised model of care. In the direct provision system, asylum seekers including UM are not exempt from this model who are provided with welfare provisions lower than that available to citizens or other residents; and who are cared for with the objective to be disciplined and controlled. Yet the responses of the professionals in this area question the appropriate care model and highlight a further need to explore and evaluate the quality of residential care for the well-being of these young people.

As indicated in Chapter 7, what has been clear from the beginning of my fieldwork was that the provision of services, along with the scope and the regulatory framework, varied greatly among the reception centres. In Chapter 7, I provided a

descriptive outline of the main reasons<sup>22</sup> that make these institutions dissimilar in terms of the promotion of care and support. Such dissimilarity in services partly justifies the conflicting accounts of the professionals about the current social welfare structures and the rationality of how those structures would be best delivered according to the needs of the young people. As a result, some reception centres offer a wide range of services while others provide few services, barely meeting the basic needs of the young people.

### 9.5.1. Integration or reception?

Interestingly, the professionals provided dissimilar responses as to the role of the institution they represented at the time of the research. Although all accommodation facilities operate under the same legal framework and share a similar philosophy in terms of their aim and values,<sup>23</sup> the professionals' responses revealed differentiation in their overall objective regarding the operating conditions:

*Reception centres should operate on the grounds of a common regulative framework. There is no homogeneity, each accommodation facility serves different objectives and provides divergent services. (Lawyer of reception centre D)*

The majority of the professionals (8/12) thought that the role of the reception centre, in the level of service provision, was to provide reception and protection to the young people. The available services included mostly practices aiming to cover their short-term needs, for example, accommodation, medical support, pocket money (in some instances), legal advisers and leisure activities and some basic form of education. Those professionals explained that they were simply following the guidelines of the legislative framework of the centres which did not include or made any reference to the implementation of integration policies<sup>24</sup>. However, according to the legislation,

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<sup>22</sup>These are related among others to the following features: the type of placement, the location of placement, the ratio between capacity and staff and the operating time of the centre which bears witness of the expertise in providing services to unaccompanied minors.

<sup>23</sup> According to Directive 9/2003/EC on minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers, as well as its consequent integration into the Greek legal system, through the P.D. 220/110, and later 4172/2013, the Greek state in its effort to abide to its international and national obligations should provide interim care and protection for these children provided by the reception centres.

<sup>24</sup> According to P.D. 220/2007 (article 1, point 4) the reception and accommodation of all asylum seekers, and thus of unaccompanied minors too, is a competence of 'the services of the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity which are responsible for the implementation of a full set of measures for

the reception centres are responsible for providing protection and care in the form of accommodation and reception services (UNHCR, 2008).

This reveals a conceptual debate and policy controversy surrounding integration (Ager, *et.al.* 2002) but the most prevalent analysis of integration reiterates it as a two-way process which is considered as occurring in stages, as long-term integration is seriously affected by experiences during the reception phase (*ibid.*). Integration is nevertheless a policy goal that involves functional aspects such as housing, education and employment, and about, social relations and participation (Korac, 2003). Ager and Strang's (2004b) qualitative research which was conducted in London and Glasgow produced a framework for Indicators of Integration (IoI), suggesting ten domains for integration: employment, housing, education, health, social bridges, social bonds, social links, language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability, and rights and citizenship.

In this study, the professionals of three reception centres (A, C and D) shared that they did not implement integration practices other than housing, health care and a basic form of education. Therefore, what has been evident from the accounts of the young people was that the number of those who attended school at the time of the research was extremely low. As presented in Chapter 7, there were several reasons that explained the low level of young people's enrolment in schools.<sup>25</sup> What the responses of the professionals indicate is that some reception centres obliged and strongly supported the participation of young people in the educational system while others did not. This difference essentially arises out of the lack of clarity in the policy documents, or the credence each of the centres gives to the importance of integration.

The social worker of the reception centre C indicated that although the role of the centre he works for is not to integrate minors *per se*, the staff had found alternative

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*the reception and accommodation of applicants''.*

<sup>25</sup> Bureaucratic reasons, ambiguities in the legal framework that create problems in the enrolment of the minors at schools, lack of legal guardianship, the hesitation of the school directors to tackle the ambiguities and the bureaucratic barriers, such as the incomplete documentation of the young people and the lack of preparatory structures that would assist young people's enrolment. In Greece there are very few intercultural schools and most schools lack introductory classes and tutoring courses. (UNCHR, 2008).

ways in engaging young people in activities that promote integration and social participation.

*Although the priority of this centre is to provide reception and protection to these children we cooperate with other agencies and NGOs aiming at the promotion of integration for young asylum seekers. All the activities I mentioned like theatre, graffiti, sports etc. are provided by other Organisations we cooperate with.*

Interestingly, as the social worker demonstrates, the efforts to integrate young people and to offer them the conditions to gradually becoming self-sustained are usually undertaken in collaboration with other agencies and NGOs that officially promote young asylum seekers' integration. Regardless of what is foreseen by the official regulation under which each centre operates, there are clear individualised initiatives undertaken by the staff in order to provide young people with opportunities for a successful resettlement (Kohli, 2007) and autonomy in the long run. Such initiatives were seen as necessary by the few professionals who openly empathised with the young people's positions, this group perceived integration as an obligation of the staff, regardless of the official regulation:

*It's hypocrisy to deny integration when children spend four and five years in these centres. (Social worker of reception centre B)*

Professionals of reception centres B and E shared that they did implement integration practices directly or indirectly (through other organisations of the community) and as indicated above, the social integration practices they promoted and delivered were mostly based on their own individualised efforts and not on any officially organised structures. All the rest said that they adhered to the official guidelines for the reception and protection of the minors. Therefore, the general rationale is that these places are made for catering for the basic needs of young people who are in transition. This view is illustrated in the following words of the social worker of reception centre A:

*It's a good place, comparing it with detention...this place is open, children are free, they can come and go, there is food, a room to sleep, I mean their basic needs are covered [...] these children are not interested in staying here they want to go to other countries.*

The words of the social worker convey a sense of the ephemeral as regards to the role of the centre and its prospects in relation to its target group. The comparison made between the detention facility and the reception centre, directly places the centre in a much higher position in terms of its operation and services. Comparing the reception centre with something much worse converts it into something ‘good’ and its positive qualities are upheld. Therefore, the place as described in the above passage resembles a ‘hotel’ which provides the basics and people can come and go. It is thus implied that since its residents are not interested in staying and being integrated, they should be satisfied with the services they receive.

This rationale creates a vicious circle, where the lack of integration practices encourages young asylum seekers to move elsewhere, and to see their present residency as transitional, which in turn leads the officials of the reception centres to confirm that since they work with a population in transition, there is no need to implement integration policy.

Finally, the heterogeneity of the model of care among the reception centres produces serious problems both for the service users and the service providers and thus raises a number of policy and practice issues of concern that will be discussed in the final chapter of the thesis. A major challenge professionals face is connected with the lack of fairness in terms of the treatment and support towards minors. Of course, according to the views of some professionals, young people very soon become aware of the dissimilar objectives and responses in care of the reception centres and as a result they develop a competing, and more demanding behaviour towards the staff:

*It's perfectly reasonable their request to be placed to other centres which are considered better providers. This makes our job more difficult...these boys become reactionary and very difficult to cooperate with. (Social worker of reception centre E)*

A number of similar examples were shared as to the emerging difficulties in cooperating with young people who were determined to leave the centre and move to another centre that would provide better quality of services. The professionals explained that some boys had friends who were hosted in other reception centres so they were aware of the similarities and differences in services. Such information

produced a sense of inequality relating to the distribution of benefits and thus indicated that the provision of services was of great importance to the young people, regardless of their future aspirations.

This example of heterogeneity in the distribution of services among the reception centres in Greece offers a selective snapshot that represents the wider picture of the European context which was presented in the literature review in chapter 2. As highlighted here, in spite of a common legislative and policy framework about the protection and care of unaccompanied minors across EU member states, there were large incongruities to be found among the countries revealing a non-coherent strategy rather than a comprehensive approach with regard to the implementation of EU migration and child welfare policies. The non-harmonised approach towards the response to the needs of unaccompanied minors both in European and local level affects seriously their lives (EMN 2010; FRA 2010).

### **9.5.2. Services**

The focus of this section has been the strengths and weaknesses as expressed by the service providers and the main issues that have direct influence on the young people themselves (see appendix 7).

The professionals indicated that there are structural differences among the centres due to location. For example, the centres situated in urban areas have easier access to services and rights due to the proximity to specialised structures (UNHCR, 2008). In Greece, there is centralization of services in urban places and the majority of organisations and NGOs working with unaccompanied minors and asylum seekers in general, are based in big cities. As such, the proximity of the reception centres to the cities influences the access and connection with a network of services experienced in working with UM. Some professionals (4/12) mentioned obstacles in accessing particular services due to the location of the centre as a deficiency in the service provision.

Most professionals acknowledged inadequacy in service provision, in the operation conditions as well as the quality of these services provided by each centre. They

stressed that things have been much worse since the beginning of the financial recession of 2010 followed by cuts in the welfare provision along with the increased restrictions in the asylum policy. However, they provided some strong points of their work and the services that were offered to the minors.

## **Strengths**

Some of the professionals thought that the service provision was ‘very good’ while indicating that there were some gaps that needed improvement. The teacher of the reception centre A stated:

*These services are a big help for these children...gives them safety, accommodation, food etc. Of course there are some gaps for example, the interpretation services could be improved, and more work should be done in the socialization part and the employment opportunities*

A similar view has been shared by the social worker of the reception centre C who thought that despite the gaps and deficiencies in the welfare provisions, these children could be considered as ‘fortunate’ because they were offered a sort of normality after experiencing turbulent situations in their home countries, transitions and journeys. The social worker emphasised that safety was very important for these children along with the services that provided a routine and a sense of order in their ‘messy’ lives such as accommodation, food, leisure activities, education and support by the professionals.

A few professionals commented on the social services, the legal support, the teaching classes and the interpretation services as meeting a large part of young people’s needs. The majority (9/12) commented on the medical services by saying that these were delivered in an efficient and structured manner and that the children were quite satisfied with the medical assistance they received.

Two professionals, one teacher and one social worker, compared the services of the centre they worked for with the services of other reception centres in Greece and thought that they were in an advantageous position since they delivered more services than the average reception centre. For example, they mentioned that they provided more hours of Greek class, leisure and sports activities and opportunities for

integration through employment and education. They also felt that the services were really good, which might show a lack of reflexivity (Hopkins & Hill, 2006).

Alongside these strengths a few professionals commented on the dedication and commitment of their staff to addressing and meeting the needs of the children. Very few examples demonstrated evidence of professionals who treated these children as if they were their own. These professionals conveyed communication and collaboration both with the young people and the staff, provided support, assistance and guidelines to others who worked in the reception centre but most of all they showed increased levels of sympathy and understanding to the realities of the young people they worked for.

The lawyer of the reception centre B offered such an example and referred to the director of the reception centre she worked with:

*...there are professionals who exceptionally treat these children as if they were their own children...they become emotionally involved into their lives and problems. (Lawyer of reception centre B)*

These professionals (2) appeared from the outset to be interested in the young people not just as refugees (asylum seekers), but as displaced children who had been flung far from danger and familiarity and come to reconstruct their lives in deeply unfamiliar and uncertain circumstances (Kohli, 2007: 190). They were also able to move away from a simple understanding of the stories they had heard, and towards an empathetic approach to the emotions of the story teller:

*Some of these kids experienced situations that we cannot even imagine. They can't remember what happened to them, they don't even know their age. Some professionals demand the real story and insist on asking them...but they ignore the emotional aspect and the distress they are causing to them with their questions. (Sociologist of reception centre A)*

These professionals were described as the 'Confederates' in the interviews conducted with professionals in the study of Kohli (2007:194) and a key element of their practice was their willingness to reach out to the young people, rather than just reacting to the practical demands of their work. Similarly, the 'Confederates' in this study would maintain enduring relations with the young people and would have

become the parent *in situ* that would bear the consequences of loss after the removal of the minor from the reception centre or would maintain the relationship with the minor.

For example, the director of the reception centre B, shared, that she kept offering her support and companionship to some young people after their removal from the centre because she felt that she was the only trusted figure for these boys who needed someone to turn to in times of trouble. Generally, the accounts of these professionals were displayed in a way that quietly demonstrated affection, hard work and commitment and a capacity to protect young people from the ambiguities created by the institutional pressures of the asylum and migration authorities.

## **Weaknesses**

All the professionals shared that the main problem in their work with young people was directly connected to the financing of the Program<sup>26</sup>. The financial recession in Greece imposed cuts on service provisions and long delays in the disbursement of funds by the responsible authorities. The professionals stated that the delays in funding caused serious problems to the orderly operation of the centre as several months of delay deprived minors of their pocket money and other services (i.e. excursions, leisure activities) and staff of their payments.

As already indicated in Chapter 7, the reception centres are financed on a yearly basis and this prevents the staff from making long-term programming, thus they are obstructed from looking ahead in terms of their own professional goals and in relation to the target group they work for (UNHCR, 2008). Problems of fluidity affect every aspect of the operation of the program, including the understaffing of the centre. As seen in Appendix 6, some of the centres have only two or three employed professionals on a full time basis to care for the needs of a large number of minors. This has a great impact on the morale of the staff and their effectiveness in responding to the needs of the young people.

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<sup>26</sup> Program refers to the overall activities and services offered by the reception centres operating under the European Refugee Fund.

Many of them expressed their frustration over the poor response to the needs of young people, thus they shared that often the numbers of young people they cared for were pushing them to the edges of their capacity to care. The sociologist at reception centre A offered an indicative example of the problems he has to bear in his everyday work due to the limited number of staff compared with the capacity of the reception centre:

*We set priorities...but even like this many kids are neglected because we have a big load of minors to care for. There is no individualised care and reception...when we receive a bus with 50 minors in a day we cannot respond to their individualised needs...we give a speech to all of them about their rights and obligations...we are only 3 professionals here.*

Similar views were shared by three others who considered the funding issue in relation to understaffing as seriously affecting many aspects of their work. They referred to the tension they confronted in safeguarding the interests and needs of the young people or fulfilling the interests and expectations of the authorities. This smudged the issue of how they themselves perceived the primary mandate of navigating through the care and protection system. In particular, they referred to the various obligations they had to carry out to their clients, as well as to their agencies and wider communities in an ethically approved manner. They presented their work as being ‘complex’, ‘messy’ but missing essential components of their professional practice and expressed a concern about not doing well enough in light of young people’s perceived emotional needs. A few expressed their frustration at not having enough time to engage emotionally with their clients.

These professionals could be described as ‘the humanitarians’ who are defined in the work of Kohli (2007) as the workers who focus on the ‘here and now’ and the practicalities of providing mostly material assistance to their clients such as, shelter, clothes, money, arrangements with schooling, medical support, welfare advice. Thus some of the professionals stressed that the current circumstances of the funding issues forced them to be distant with their clients and care only for their basic and practical matters.

Generally, all professionals acknowledged that the inadequacies and insecurities in funding structures along with the long delays in the disbursement of funds resulted in the lack of trained staff, shortage of available time to work productively, accessibility to particular services and finally led to the catering of only minors' basic needs and patchy solutions to their problems. Funding issues along with the weaknesses identified in the asylum process were pointed as the most serious gaps in the service provision. The latter will now be discussed further.

Asylum was identified as an area of an immense gap in service provision greatly affecting young people's lives. It was mentioned as one of the utmost obstacles in the work of professionals who conceived its procedure as unsolved, particularly problematic and greatly devious regarding their practice with the young people. Most of them (9/12) described the asylum system as disappointing, frustrating and unfair.

They underlined the deficiencies of the asylum procedure by referring mostly to the following areas: the long delays in decisions and the time-consuming nature of the asylum process, insufficient personnel and lack of knowledge of those who are involved in the examination of the asylum claims, the unfair assessment process and the ambiguous criteria by which decisions are made.

Some accounts further pointed to the effects of the asylum procedure on the lives of the young people and argued that these procedures are not any different from those followed for adults:

*The asylum system in Greece is structured in such a way that keeps these children by force for some years in the country and... the same system doesn't want these children to be members of this society. Here, very rarely someone gets asylum...but it's not only that...it's the fact that nobody explains to these children why they have to wait so long, why they receive a negative decision, and why they are kept in detention upon arrival. Exactly, the same happens with adult asylum seekers. (Social worker of reception centre B)*

This was also confirmed by two lawyers who explained that they had not come across any 'exceptional' or faster treatment of minor's applications. On the contrary, they observed that the Greek state purposefully delays minors' processing of asylum application until they reach adulthood. As one of the lawyers stated, 'when minors

turn 18, they lose the advantage of being underage''. The chances of a negative decision increase after the age of 18.

In connection with the observation that minors receive the same treatment as adults do, these professionals further stressed that young people who seek asylum are considered as migrants first before they are considered as children – this inevitably deteriorates the standards of care and protection they receive – and thus hinders their well-being. The sociologist of reception centre A, underlined:

*The asylum system is disappointing...young people's status of asylum seekers renders them invisible and makes them less deserved of benefits. They are not perceived as children who are in need but as asylum seekers.*

Based on these insights and research findings, I argue that this form of governance in the field of asylum and childcare is an assault on minor's rights by the Greek state. It reveals how the Greek state defaults on its legal obligations towards UM via a flawed administration and a system of exclusion of minors in need of international protection. It thus demonstrates that the interface between the childcare and asylum policy is particularly vague and problematic and allows the Greek state to abrogate or minimise its international responsibilities towards UASM.

Another aspect that I think it must be stressed is the fact that the Greek state renders minors to a state of ignorance, regarding the asylum process and their rights. Some respondents stated that one of the greatest deficiencies of the asylum system is the lack of communication and information between the authorities and the asylum seekers. When asylum seekers are excluded from essential forms of knowledge, they are turned into powerless objects that can be more easily manipulated and controlled, because knowledge is power (Foucault, 1980). Based on this claim, the lawyer of reception centre B offered an indicative example of how the authorities may undermine the best interest of the child:

*An Afghan boy, around 15, had relatives, two uncles with permanent residency in Athens. It is foreseen by the law, when the child has family or relatives in the host country he can be hosted by his relatives if he acquires the legal criteria. So we completed the process and we gathered all the authorised documents necessary for the process, because you see.... we were trying to avoid*

*detention...and despite the fact that the child had met all the legal criteria, he was placed in detention without being explained how such a decision was taken...it is such a paradox...the whole thing. Police officers do take serious decisions and do not seem to be very sensitive around child protection issues.*

This example demonstrates the deliberate intentions of the authorities to keep the Afghan boy in a state of ignorance about his rights. It reflects how he is caught in a relation of non-transparency and imbalanced power with the Greek authorities in his struggle to make use of the power of law. Generally speaking, most respondents saw the implementation of the asylum policy as constraining, acting against the interests of the young people and suggested that the asylum issue caused emotional and psychological problems to them:

*These kids most often wait for four and five years and the longer they wait, the more they get disappointed. And then you see them quit, lose interest in everything, they are afraid of being deported....and we don't know how to cope with it. (Social worker of reception centre B)*

Similar accounts indicated that the asylum issue generates fear, increasing levels of uncertainty and stress to the boys. It is clear that some professionals were conscious of the fact that young people had negative experiences because of the uncertainty surrounding their present and future lives and they felt committed to help them overcome their difficulties.

There were seldom any accounts showing social workers and psychologists assisting young people in 'therapeutic care', defined by Papadopoulos (2002) as, "the wider application of psychotherapeutic principles to any form of assistance to refugees" or clear indications of what they do to help young people communicate their feelings and experiences (Kohli, 2007).

Interestingly, two professionals (a social worker and a teacher) viewed the asylum issue and its effects from another standpoint:

*I see these children are very demanding they think that we should cover them in terms of their legal status... for example, they think that because some of them learn the Greek language...that they should be granted asylum. (Social worker of reception centre A)*

Young people were seen as demanding in the sense that their request to be granted asylum was not sensible. The social worker implied that service providers do not necessarily have the obligation to stand for the legal rights of the young people and she suggested that most of them are not genuine refugee cases and so they did not deserve to be granted asylum. Perhaps it would be useful to underline that these divergent standpoints critically influence the nature of service provision and suggest that some of the professionals may require support and training.

Alongside the underlined problems linked to the asylum procedure, as well as the feeling of fear and insecurity and its hindering effect on any efforts young people undertake for integration, the professionals commented on guardianship as one of the weakest points in service provision. As already demonstrated in young people's accounts in Chapter 7, the problems arising from the absence of an effective and permanent guardian are serious and wide-ranging. The reaction of the majority of professionals to my invitation to share their opinion about guardianship was the following: *"You shouldn't ask this question. Legal guardianship doesn't exist."*

Unsurprisingly professionals shared that there is no legal guardianship for minors in Greece although the legislation does not exclude unaccompanied minors from the requirement of a guardian (P.D.: 220/2007; UNHCR, 2008:53). Some professionals even considered it an urgent issue that needs to be tackled immediately since it affects both their work with minors and almost every part of a minor's life. The following abstract shows the magnitude of the problem:

*Officially, the former director is the legal guardian of our children. It's a joke... He represents 1000 children, and doesn't even know the children he represents. (Sociologist of reception centre A)*

For obvious reasons, therefore, the majority of professionals emphasised that every minor is in need of an independent legal guardian. The need for a guardian to be appointed for every UM is fundamental and has also been noted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its Concluding Observations to European governments<sup>27</sup>. The appointment of a professional independent legal guardian would not only ensure that the child's voice is heard in all matters affecting the child, but would also lead to

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<sup>27</sup>Norway 2007: CRC/C/OPAC/NOR/CO/1; Sweden 2005: C/C/15/Add.248.

a more child-friendly and accountable system in line with international obligations (Bruun & Kanics, 2010:59).

Given these considerations we can see that the weaknesses identified by the professionals in the service provision revealed some tensions and professional dilemmas growing against the backdrop of the complexities of a system that suspends their clients' youthful lives and leaves hardly any room for professionals' growth and ethical practice. The professionals, although politically oriented, felt quite powerless to revoke political decisions regarding asylum, despite some limited efforts to resist asylum law and funding problems from within the system (e.g. postponement of a minor's eviction proving that it does seem possible to use discretion under certain circumstances so as to undermine the system (Dunkerley *et al.* 2005:648).

These individualised acts of resistance seem of little value in the face of policies that overtly infringe the rights of the young people. This undoubtedly touches upon one of Humphries's (2004) arguments about social workers and the asylum system. She thought that individualised views about anti-oppression were rather meaningless in the face of policies that were so racist that social workers themselves contributed to their implementation. This is not to undermine the efforts of professionals to exert pressure on the current asylum system by advocating the rights of their clients, rather it is to suggest that 'policy' is not only shaped by the decisions of the governments but also by the actions of the frontline professionals (Lipsky, 1980).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the powerlessness felt by the professionals was conveyed as a shared feeling with the young people of being unable to manoeuvre within the faultiness of a current system which doesn't seem to be mainstreamed with childcare policy.

## **9.6. Reflexive comments on the foregoing interviews**

This chapter has provided a second perspective from professionals who have given multi-layered accounts of their professional practice as they reflected on the stories of the young people. The portrayal of the young people in this study offered the chance to see them as a 'complex' group of young migrants who were required to live with

uncertainty in their present and future lives. The impressions of service provision provided by the professionals were largely the ones given by the young people themselves.

The professionals confirmed the existence of a Kafkaesque welfare and asylum system that aims to provide reception and care for the minors. A spectrum of attitudes was presented within a system that doesn't work, both for the minors and the professionals. All the obligations posed by the International and national resolutions and legislations were very rarely met whereas the problematic daily practice of the professionals mirrored the ongoing struggle of the minors to cope within the rough and ambiguous system that didn't seem to offer much to them.

The stories therefore contained elements of sympathy and prejudice, of integration and disintegration, for good and bad. There were professionals who would try to provide a positive picture whilst being unable to recognise the complexity or lack of effectiveness in their practice. These professionals would render the minors responsible for their complex and problematic lives and would be mindful to the fact that both (service-providers and service users) were affected by the challenging structures by using phrases such as 'we are all struggling' or would be oblivious to the fact that their attitudes could cause harm. In these accounts prejudicial attitudes are apparent as also reported by Ayotte and Williamson (2001), or the racism reported in the study of Stanley (2001). The professionals refuted the view that minors were unjustly treated compared to the Greek co-residents despite the apparent dissimilarity in service provision.

Some of their accounts revealed hints of constituting asylum seeking minors as 'economic' migrants and in some instances as faking their ages on purpose, perceptions that were not articulated forthrightly but were implicit in their depictions. These perceptions were accredited to the 'bad behaviour' of the minors in the sense that when someone who is war-affected and in need does not appreciate the provided services of the hosting country, then this casts into doubt the reasons for seeking asylum. I think that such perceptions were internalised by the professionals who worked within a system that undermines the rights of specific groups and benefits

others. On the surface, they made use of particular terminology (i.e. equality, justice) but in daily practice they contributed to the reproduction of the existing inequalities.

A few accounts reflected clear indications of preferences for particular groups over others by saying for example, ‘the Afghans cause problems, are demanding and stubborn’ whereas other groups of minors were defined as more cooperative, educated and civilised. Based on the NASW report (2007) on institutional racism, I will refer to a subtle type of racism I identified throughout my contact with the professionals. Symbolic racism was expressed by some professionals (director of reception centre, teacher of Greek language) who although their prejudicial attitudes were not depicted in their conduct, justified their negative judgment of others by affirming that the others do not abide by values and structures of the dominant group (NASW, 2007:9). For example, Afghans were portrayed as not having the ability to understand and reflect on the learning process, such as other groups of minors or they were portrayed as being lazy and not caring about anything. Such representations intensify the existing disparities among minors. An apparent incident of a social workers’ prejudicial attitude was revealed when right after our interview she gave me a book to read. When I left the reception centre I realised that the content and the focus of the book was ethnocentrism with some vicious ideas about asylum seekers as being dangerous, criminals and disease transmitters.

Nevertheless, most professionals who participated in the study strongly rejected negative one-sided constructs of asylum seeking minors projected in the dominant anti-asylum seeking discourses. Instead, they provided alternative constructs, which cast minors in a positive light. Some of these professionals appeared to be optimistic, resilient and concerned about the many vicissitudes young people face and some of them would go an extra mile to resist the absurd and complex system of asylum in order to help young people lead ordered lives.

Their accounts reflected positive feelings and awareness of young people’s realities. Although they were unwilling representatives of a system that was fraught with practical, bureaucratic and political obstacles they did not approve of, their sympathy for these kids would compelled them to soften the blow. They would talk with pride about their kids the ones who had managed to find happy endings elsewhere and

would express a kind of reward for these boys' achievements. In many respects, these professionals demonstrated a sense of 'not being good enough' or a sense of 'could be even better'. The fact that a number of professionals seemed sympathetic towards the young people is at odds with the predominant view of young people themselves towards professionals' behaviour. What might explain this, e.g. sampling restrictions, group processes taking place in residential units or the fact that limited resources make it more difficult for the professionals to put into practice positive attitudes towards their clients.

## **9.7. Conclusion**

This chapter has described the experiences and views of a range of professionals who work closely with UM. Limitations and obstacles were shown on the freedom of staff to promote the welfare of the minors stemming from the structural deficiencies of a multi-layered bureaucratic system that has problems in merging asylum with the welfare of the minors. There were contrasting views as to the roles and ethical challenges professionals experienced in their work with the minors. Some of them challenged the ethics of their profession and did not passively accept their roles, while others sat comfortably and delivered welfare in its very basic form, in a context of profound inequality and prejudice. There was some congruence in what professionals reported about the living realities of the minors inside of the reception centres with what the boys had shared. The last piece of the story is concerned with what is happening outside the reception centres.



## **Chapter 10: Outside the reception centre: Between philoxenia and xenophobia**

### **10.1. Introduction**

The attitudes of local people tell us a lot about aspects of hindering or promoting the well-being of the young people, such as social participation, discrimination, hostility, embracement, adjustment and marginality and furthermore offer a concrete outlook on how these boys are positioned in the local society. Findings presented in this section derive from the views and experiences of local professionals and public figures.

I should indicate that my sample is not representative of all welfare staff and public figures who encounter directly or indirectly asylum seeking minors; neither does it represent the views of all the communities where the reception centres are located. It conveys some general perceptions, traditions and trends as to the local peoples' responses and reactions to the presence of the minors.

Regarding these perceptions, I thought that I should also involve public figures' views who may encounter young asylum seekers without having any specialist or direct role in that regard. Although the professionals' responses revealed some interesting indications in relation to the attitudes of the local people to minors, research may have been biased if exclusively encompassed the views of 'dedicated' or 'prejudiced' practitioners. It could be that such mainstream staff could have more judgemental attitudes towards the local communities or their clients than do public figures who have more distant relations with the minors.

Nevertheless, since I spent some time in each of the communities I visited, I thought that I should access a number of key public figures and not only those merely seen as sympathetic to the minors. I felt that their views would offer robustness and roundness to the perspectives raised until now. Those I spoke with were the police, a mayor, a priest, and a director of an NGO, managers of social service and a public servant.

The theoretical perspective inspiring my analysis at this stage is situated in and builds upon the concepts of philoxenia and xenophobia, understood as two divergent historically constructed forms of attitudes and feelings shaped by embodied socially and politically defined norms, traditional values and meanings. As indicated in the literature review (see section 2.4.4.), xenophobia describes the nature of negative feelings and treatment against foreigners and philoxenia<sup>28</sup> refers to the aspirational relationship of the hosts and guests which somewhat corresponds to the English word of hospitality. It also refers to the welcoming of the stranger, the sense of engaging with the other and to the values of bonding and belonging.

Professionals' and public figures' views and impressions of the local attitudes towards young people will be discussed, bearing in mind changes over the period since financial recession appeared in the country. Both standpoints provide insights on public attitudes to asylum seekers and minors in Greece. Before, reflections on migration in Greece are given.

## **10.2. Some reflections on migration**

Many of my interviewees stressed that the country's features and its particular geographical position largely affects its ability to control and manage migration movements. They explained that Greece is affected by a combination of various tensions. The country's location (south-eastern EU border) is in a point of an intersection between EU's economically prosperous countries, and poorer, politically unstable countries, with fewer liberties and social justice. These disparities are impulses for transnational movements towards Greece which constitutes one of the most significant entry points into the EU.

Based on these observations and other factors that are evident in the following abstract, the management of migration and the country's response to the asylum issue has been approached from the standpoint that it is not only a national matter but a matter of all the EU member states:

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<sup>28</sup> The word Philoxenia is the Greek word for showing friendliness to guests, i.e., hospitality. "Xenia" refers to Greek word "xenos" meaning the "guest", "foreigner" or "non-native".

*Europe as a whole raises its walls, trying most of all to prevent and restrict such migratory movements. The way I see it is that western developed countries have contributed... and of course have created in many different ways the reasons for people to move out of their (in conflict) countries, then the western countries are quite responsible for this situation....and we should make the question, do EU countries have the right to prevent the entry of those people in their territories? From the legal point of view, according to the International Conventions, states are obliged to accept and protect asylum seekers. (NGO Director)*

Considering this abstract, it seems to reveal that the EUs' political activity is linked to the circumstances of political unrest and poverty of the asylum seekers' home countries. This view yields a radical claim that problematizes the involvement of the EU in the forced migration issue, and thus asserts that EU states are legally and ethically accountable for the reception and protection of asylum seekers. It is also suggested that the EU is the primary agent regarding the implementation of migration policies and so far, its restrictive approach, in the form of military operations (i.e.: Frontex operations), has shown an increasing militarised tactic to keep unwanted migrants out of EU space. The implementation of restrictive policies in the field of migration could be perhaps seen as the unsuccessful attempts of the states to restore their impaired state sovereignty (Rosas, 2006).

Opposing views on this matter were revealed by three police officers who perceived the increasing military approach of the overall restrictive migration policy as an effective way of dealing with the overload of migrants. In fact, they used as an example the Frontex operations that were conceived as successful attempts to keep migrants away:

*The example of Frontex is one of the very few good examples of the EU migration and asylum policy, ahh...has good recruitment with capable people from all over EU who guard and control the movements at the borders successfully. The numbers of illegal migrants have decreased due to the Frontex interventions. (Police Officer)*

A few accounts conveyed the difficult role of Greece in responding to the unprecedented numbers of undocumented migrants who arrive in its territory and critically pointed to the responsibility of EU to tackle the migration issue from a

human-rights approach. In the following abstract, the Manager of reception centre C emphasises that EU states are differently challenged by migration and tackle the issue in different ways:

*Europeans are hypocrites...they think that Greece is their storeroom where human beings can be locked in. Let's take as an example a northern European country with the equivalent population of Greece and let's assume that they receive 500 asylum seekers every day. How would they deal with the migration issue? For example, Holland has one of the most developed reception systems in Europe for the minors.... But when the kids turn 18 they put them in the aeroplane and send them back home.*

This highlights the predominantly problematic position of Greece as an entry point to Europe and shows that even the most developed and equipped countries are unable to contain and control these movements (Hansen & Stepputat, 2005:18). It also implies that in countries such as Holland, where the reception and care system is well-structured and organised in comparison to Greece, minors' rights may be undermined after they become adults since their legal status is not secured.

### **10.3. Context and impressions**

The tensions stemming from the inflow of asylum seekers in Greece were also seen as being more pronounced due to the economic recession of the country. Greece has been in 'crisis' for seven consecutive years now and during this time, strict austerity measures have been implemented, living standards have dropped considerably for the majority of the population, the poverty rate has risen up with 21.4% of the population being officially reported to be 'at risk of poverty' (ELSTAT, Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2013) and unemployment has reached a record figure of 27.8% (Angouri & Wodak, 2014).

It is in this context, that the re-emergence of the far right in the shape of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn – Χρυσή Αυγή (GD), has been constructed by the public as a choice and solution for disappointed voters to express their anger and disagreement against the political system (Angouri & Wodak, 2014). GD's anti-system and anti-immigrant rhetoric (focused on expelling immigrants from Athens) and its emphasis on supreme national ideals such as 'nationality' and 'religion' found a response in a

number of voters who saw GD's rhetoric appealing as it fights for their 'at risk' ideals.

It has been argued that in a deeply injured socio-political and dire economic context, different groups of people are blamed for the country's problems while producing conflict between the rights of the natives and those of the non-natives and that the mere presence of non-natives creates a type of threat regarding the rights and benefits of the local population (Spyrou, 2010:32).

All public figures and professionals who participated in the study identified a relationship between the emergence of the crisis and the rise of xenophobia in public life in Greece. Some provided arguments based on historical observations about the increasing levels of racism in times of economic recession and political instability:

*It is historically proven that in times of a crisis, the far-right fans are increasing along with the xenophobic attitudes. This is exactly what is happening now. The migration issue is presented and constructed in such a way by the government and the media.... that it triggers hate, aggressiveness and xenophobia to foreigners. They (foreigners) are the scapegoats. And this is convenient because we have someone to blame for our own problems. (Lawyer of reception centre D)*

It was further stressed that in times of crisis, migrants are constructed as a target and a threat for the society resulting in increasing levels of hostility to foreigners who are blamed for the problems of the local people. In such migration discourse, the respondents argue that the government and the media play a fundamental role in intensifying separation lines between the migrants and the local people. The sociological work of Matza (1964) draws on the theory of subterranean values that, in a society of rapid change, these suppressed values, which are inherent in a given society or culture, find the right means to develop and be expressed. In such times, i.e. a period of a financial crisis, xenophobia can be conceived as a subterranean value that finds expression freely in the form of violence (Demetriou, 2013:314).

In the course of my fieldwork and while looking at a subject that was presented as a hot topic on the agenda of the government, I witnessed the harsh management to irregular migration; the construction of the fence at the north-east border, the inner

city sweep operations named *Xenias Zeus*, and mass arrests followed by the imprisonment of thousands of undocumented migrants in newly built detention facilities near Athens (i.e. Amigdaleza). Against this backdrop along with an anti-migrant rhetoric supported by the media and extremist groups, management of migration had certainly become a deeply polarizing issue with a permanent position in politics and public life in Greece.

Both professionals and public figures provided their understanding about the migration issue and their insights on how migrants are constructed in the described circumstances (financial crisis, rise of the far-right party, anti-immigrant attitudes). Their accounts convey the message that the current context, and in particular the prevalent discourse on migration, elicits hostility to foreigners and paves the way for extreme state practices against undocumented migrants. Has this general context affected the attitudes of local people towards minors?

#### **10.4. Public attitudes**

Public attitudes towards asylum seekers is a complex and difficult area in need of an evidence base that would provide a better understanding of the various factors influencing the attitudes towards asylum (Crawley, 2005:55). Although the material of the interviews was not intended in the first place to explore public attitudes in-depth, it provides some illustrations as to how young people are perceived by Greek people. The divergent responses mainly expressed by some public figures, offer a good selection of the type of attitudes to be found in small communities where the reception centres were placed and reveal the factors that shape contact and behaviours between minors and locals. It is important to note that the respondents' answers overtly refer to the presence of the Afghan young people in the local communities and not to all young asylum seekers. As it was revealed, there were surprising variations as to the attitudes toward particular ethnic groups.

The majority of professionals and public figures suggested inequalities in the response and treatment between the asylum seeking and indigenous young people. This was not a surprising finding given the existing unevenness and variation of benefits and services between the child protection and asylum policies. What really

surprised me though is when I heard that minors receive dissimilar responses and attitudes by the public due to their appearance. Discriminatory attitudes because of skin colour were identified in three out of the five communities I visited. A few public figures and professionals, such as the Director of reception centre B talked about strong divisions in the responses of the public towards young people-of-colour:

*There is strong distinction by the public to particular nationalities...well it is not a matter of nationality but of skin colour. In terms of working opportunities...the locals have the tendency to be prejudiced against black people. They will not employ the Africans although they may obtain more qualifications than other minors because of their skin colour [...] the Afghans certainly receive better treatment than the Africans.*

I was astounded when I experienced with my own eyes the unequal treatment towards the Africans. Once invited to a music event of a community, I realised that only the white young people were involved in the preparation and were helping out in exchange for payment. None of the Africans participated actively in this event. I became further astonished when I heard from some respondents that the Afghan boys were considered much more fortunate by some respondents due to their appearance in contrast to the African boys, because society accepted them and valued them as ‘western-looking children’.

Greek nationalist ideology is based on a White-Greek, Christian-orthodox doctrine. It would be expected that the religious principles of the Greeks would meet with the Christian doctrine of the Africans more so than the Muslim doctrine of the Afghans. Therefore, it seems that physical traits still have meaning as markers of social race identity in the Greek society (NASW, 2007).

Three professionals (two social workers and a psychologist) shared that they often felt bad on behalf of the local people because they didn’t know how to justify society’s rejection. They often had to defend and protect the Africans from local peoples’ prejudiced attitudes. Sometimes they would conceal the truth from the African boys especially when the boys questioned why they were not picked up for work although they had the most advanced educational level among the boys or why they were not invited to help local people in a festivity event. Some of them also

conceived the Afghans' appearance a strong point in terms of getting more opportunities for employment, social participation and integration. On this ground the Afghan boys appeared to have more benefits and a favoring response than the Africans:

*One of the strong points of the Afghans is their appearance. Some of them look like Greeks and this is an asset for them. Local people would pick up an Afghan to be their gardener. The African guys, for example, feel awkward in the Greek society because of their colour. (Manager of social service)*

The act of classifying groups of people by virtue of their physical characteristics as being not only different, but inherently inferior and thereby unworthy of rights and entitlements seems to be profound in some of the Greek communities (Kivel, 2002; McIntosh, 1988). These inequalities based on social structures are maintained by some professionals, a few of whom do not intend to do harm. It is not enough therefore to only recognise these forms of racism. Some of the professionals are just not able to marshal their energies to seek correction in society's processes by moving themselves and others beyond these forms of racism in order to achieve systematic change (NASW, 2007).

What the study revealed is that the experiences of people of colour in the category of UASM are significantly worse compared with those who are white, regarding the attitudes of local people. Although there have been some changes in the Greek society, racism in its many forms still persists. These forms of racism based on power differentials certainly shape the opportunities, life-styles, and quality of life for both Whites and young people-of-colour. In so doing they compound, exaggerate, and distort biological and behavioural differences and strengthen misconceptions and myths, on the part of both groups about one another (Pinderhughes, 1989:71).

Strategies geared towards different directions (i.e. work with the local people, social institutions, welfare professionals, and the minors) are needed in order to recognise and address "racism" as a factor for exploration and action. A further consideration will be given on the issue of structural and institutional racism at the discussion in the end of this section.

In contrast to what has been said about minors' unequal treatment in three communities, in the other two communities the responses of the professionals and officials run counter to the views that were already shared on the matter. One of these places was situated in an urban context where there were opposing views on the matter of migration. Nevertheless, the surrounding environment outside of the reception centre was described as welcoming and friendly. Neighbours were depicted as good people who cared about young people and as the ones who would contribute if they could in order to help. They would bring presents to the boys on celebration days and they would be guests in the events organised by the reception centres:

*...when there is a gathering or a party .... people from the community will come and join.... they will bring presents to the children....and things.... we had a party here and we kept the main street closed. We had large sound systems on the balcony.... house music and down on the street it was a big party....and the neighbours were here. So definitely there are no issues with the neighbours here.... on the contrary...and I don't refer only to the neighbourhood but to the wider area.... everybody knows the children. (Social worker of reception centre C)*

These respondents, both professionals and officials emphasised that all young people would receive the same response and treatment by the public. They did not refer to any incidents of xenophobic or racist attitudes towards minors, on the contrary they provided positive examples of the attitudes that contained features of 'philoxenia'. They underlined the mutual respect and support between the minors and the locals, they referred to the relations of the minors with their Greek peers and they finally shared that minors were feeling good living in an accepted environment of friendly people.

In another community in a rural area, historical and cultural factors appeared to be powerful in shaping views and arguments over the attitudes to Afghan young people:

*In the World War II the village of ... was looted and burned completely by the German troops. Local people lost everything they had... they were displaced and found refuge in neighbouring villages where they were hosted till the end of the war. Such experiences are reflected strongly in the memories of local people and were conveyed to the next generations as stories of suffering and pride. I think that we convinced local people of a small and*

*conservative community like (...) to accept refugee children in their area because.... we worked a lot in that direction. We reminded them of the history of the community and they found a sort of connection between their past and the experiences of the children. Well...there were reactions in the beginning but we managed to create a sort of sympathy for these children over time. (Public servant, former Director of reception centre)*

Thus local peoples' perceptions of refugee children can be greatly influenced by stories and memories of violence connected with indigenous historical persecution and suffering. In the case of question, the mayor claims that the background and history of the village gave rise to the anti-fascist political stance of the people and their zero-tolerance towards fascism:

*In '44 the Germans came and took out of the village the women and children...for 23 days they were looting the village. They stole whatever they could they burned churches and houses. Families were dismantled. The village was flattened. You understand that we know very well what the Nazi effects are and the risks posed by them. Still some survivors of the Holocaust live here. And I say with great pride that in this little.... (name of the town) there is no ground for fascists. (Mayor)*

Similar perceptions were shared by the rest of the respondents of the same community and most of them brought up the traumatic past events as shaping the present attitudes of the local people towards minors. Almost all respondents shared examples of friendly and welcoming attitudes with few references to xenophobic responses. Two officials shared that despite an overall sense of openness to minors, a portion of the community showed xenophobic doctrines and tolerant attitudes.

Welcoming attitudes, or else hospitality of local people, contained elements of what Derrida (1981) calls an 'unconditional welcoming' of the other. For Derrida, 'unconditional hospitality' is the ethical manner of receiving an uninvited stranger without imposing any prior conditions (Derrida, 1981, 23; 25; 27). Based on this view, a few officials, including the mayor and the director of the reception centre, portrayed the local people as hospitable and caring, for example collecting money when someone is in an emergency situation, inviting minors in family festivities and treating some of the children as if they were their own children. Nevertheless, the priest provided a cautionary counterpoint:

*...local people can be warm and soulful with strangers but can be very tough if you do not respect their values or if you offend them...So far foreign minors are welcomed because they do not create problems to the locals. They know where the line is and they don't cross it. (Priest)*

The priest spoke with an evident pride about his village and emphasised its history, the moral values and traditions that underpin the bonds and relations of the local people. Yet his account contained an element of a “them and us” situation that was obviously difficult to overcome, and was often expressed ‘as long as they don’t do this’ or ‘they do that’ as a generic reference for all minors. He conveyed an impression that the ‘intolerance’ depicted in his words was established on the basis of difference that provided the template to react and treat in a discriminatory manner to those who do not fit.

A very different, much less broadly accepting, situation exists in the remote community near the Greek and Albanian borders where reception centre A is located. All respondents who live and work in that area painted with bleak colours the relationship between locals and the minors. The general outcome from the interviews reflects xenophobic, distant and fearful attitudes towards foreigners. Given this, the presence of the reception centre in this community raises concerns for the protection and welfare of the minors. Although there were no indications of violent and direct racist attacks, there were a few incidents mentioned both by the minors and professionals demonstrating high levels of hostility and anger.

Such attitudes were attributed to the history of the community and incidents of the past:

*Now concerning the issue of education, I am sure there will be reactions by the parents of the Greek minors they will not accept refugee children in the school. Because local people have a background with negative experiences, in the 1990s when the borders opened and the Albanians came they experienced negative incidents.... like robbery, deception and things like that. (Sociologist of reception centre A)*

The Deputy Director of the centre shared an example of hostility act. The same incident was shared by the minors and was conveyed as a deeply offensive incident. The reason I chose to present this abstract again is because it discloses an additional dimension on the same incident whilst it shows how the response of the official may affect the already difficult position of the minors by avoiding intervening and thus normalizing the view of asylum seeking minors as *not part of us* (Capdevila & Callaghan, 2008):

*Yes... an incident happened recently to the Afghan group of people.... I don't know if they have told you anything.... it's about the swimming pool.... the owner of the place didn't allow them to swim while Greek youngsters were inside the pool. I told them not to be sad and disappointed. I mean.....I could have made an intervention and tell to the owner: 'Why are you doing this....and why don't you permit them to swim....eee.....but instead.....I explained to the children that they shouldn't be sad.....they shouldn't let this incident to bring them down.....and that they could go to the river if they want to swim.....and that they (local people) are the ones who are going to lose from this incident. (Deputy Director of reception centre A)*

There minors are represented as a marginalised group of young people who experience discrimination and profound unequal treatment. It has been argued that the institutional contexts in which welfare professionals are located make it very difficult for practitioners to blatantly express what might be perceived as oppressive, discriminatory, exclusionary, racist or prejudiced views (Masocha, 2014:4). It may also be that professionals and public figures find it hard as members of the same society to react, object and effectively confront with vigour and determination society's racist or discriminatory expressions.

The reaction of the Deputy Director to this incident depicts her failure to acknowledge the act of discrimination. The decision not to take any action against it, although not an actionable violation of law or policy, it is a subtle indicator of lack of respect (Rowe, 1990). If the welfare staff fail to understand the manifestations of the various forms of racism exerted on their clients, they help in the reproduction of the same structures that are responsible for maintaining and promoting racism.

## 10.5. Conclusion

This chapter has provided features of the public attitudes from the very specific contexts of local communities by consulting both professionals and public figures. Their voices revealed complex, distinctive and contrasting views on the attitudes of local people to the presence of the minors. Each of these representatives illustrated distinctive topographies of their local societies regarding the public attitudes and these oscillated between philoxenia and xenophobia. The attitudes demonstrated in each of these communities are not uniform or representative of Greek society. Not every Greek is xenophobic or hospitable to the presence of the '*xenos*', rather attitudes vary significantly across the communities when several features are considered. This study has revealed that a common persecuted background may elicit positive feelings towards the odysseys of the young asylum seekers, while negative history experiences regarding the interactions and relations of local people with foreigners can fuel racist and rejecting attitudes.



## Chapter 11: 'Surmounting the impossible': Discussion

*'...we are many things [...] most of all we are young people and ordinary boys'*

### 11.1. Introduction

This dissertation has told the stories of a group of young asylum seekers that has never been shared before; it has charted the gripping journeys of thirty young Afghan men from the East to the West. In doing so, it has unknotted their obscured but vivid childhoods by enlightening recollections of struggle, loss, poverty, violence, as well as affection, courage and love, against the backdrop of their family nests of emotional wealth, and the wider menacing environment linked to communal violence and war. Their childhood histories are mostly filled with extraordinary life events generated through the deep shattering of war and refer to very few ordinary moments. Events linked to political impulses alongside other factors, such as losses of family and economic downturns constituted the turning points of these boys' decision to move away. Their movement histories are harrowing and their transitions inevitable. Their stateless presence of 'illegality' in transit places prompted their exposure to various degrees of discrimination and social exclusion, exposing them to commodification, and at the same time this process strengthened their hope to find in faraway Europe, their personal Ithaca<sup>29</sup>. The modern odysseys of these young boys are imprinted through Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Syria and Turkey on the way to Europe and, are played out by boat, by bus, by cramped cars, in stifling trucks, on foot, on horses and donkeys. Such an indication challenges the stereotype of the young Afghans hiding in the back of the lorry from Kabul to Athens. Young people's journeys revealed adventurous experiences and heroic moments of survival, as well as struggle against exhaustion, hunger, cold and heat, violence and exploitation, confusion and abuse. While lonely and *en route* these young boys were exploited as child labourers, hustled for their money, bought and sold, subjected to physical abuse and they were the recipients of dehumanizing acts exerted by border guards,

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<sup>29</sup> In chapter 5 of *Modern Odysseys*, I described how young people's aspirations and hopes are crystalized in a personal search for Ithaca. Their journeys to the west resemble with Ithaca which has a symbolic meaning as it represents the goals that people set in their lives and their desire to accomplish these goals.

militaries, police forces, and officials. Whether being lost in the Iranian mountains, trapped in cramped coverts by the Kurdish mafia, or being imprisoned in Turkey and Greece, these boys took risks against insuperable odds that speak to something fundamental in all of us. The ability to rise above what can seem like insufferable treatment makes us conscious of the indomitable quality of the human spirit. This realization is even sharper when we know that children were called upon to find such a quality within themselves.

Greece fails to play the role of the successful arrival in Ithaca. In Greece young people are cared for and treated as UM and receive poor services by an uncaring social/asylum policy. They are disregarded, unheard and subjected to discrimination, by the authorities, institutions, local people, and in some cases by peers and professionals. They become enmeshed in a system of bureaucratic and administrative mechanisms that traverse them between legality and illegality and keep them in a temporary state of existence. Yet whether they feel trapped or see hope in the near future, those boys are remarkably insightful, resilient, and resourceful.

## **11.2. Some reflections on the findings**

The study has been concerned with a relatively recent phenomenon of children and adolescents who migrate and cross borders without the presence of a responsible adult (Stein, 2005; Kolhi, 2007, Bhabha, 2011). The testimonies and life histories are only a small part of the wider conversations I had with these boys and the numerous situations I encountered with them - before and after the interviews, during breakfast, lunch and dinner at the reception centres, in joint activities and festivities, in local 'kafenias' [καφενεία] and internet cafes, in central squares, in river banks, on basketball and football courts – and which, altogether, inspired the reflections I present throughout this thesis. The material which was distilled by the professionals and public actors was also collected in various settings such as reception centres, offices, public places, tavernas [ταβέρνες], [restaurants] and cafes thus provided additional insights into the young respondents' circumstances, beliefs, values and judgements.

The encounters I had with these very different groups of people formed what I would characterise as an exceptional blend of both mutual and conflicting responses and reactions. This blend is transformed here into a reflexive device that bends back on and places at the centre, the experiences of the young boys. Based on the time I spent with them, my conviction is that these are young men who could tell amazing stories that would only cause admiration and respect. Their stories reflect pride, wisdom and are cautionary tales for us all who occupy a safe and comfortable place in this world. If these young men were valued as respected individuals, in other circumstances, they could make a positive contribution to the world they inhabit. Instead they feel worthless, insulted and humiliated. This research ‘gives back’ dignity and humanity to young migrants by recounting their itineraries, hopes and fears; accomplishments, strengths and resiliencies; as well as the deprivations and indignities they faced in their modern-day odysseys. Besides, this is what they hoped for; sharing their unique story.

### **11.2.1. Institutional racism**

The study has shown the tortuous, even Byzantine, paths of the bureaucratic and organizational structures through which the asylum processes and practices are performed. The concept of institutional racism helps us understand the differential access to services, goods and opportunities in Greek society. It also refers to the form of impenetrable bureaucracy (*grafiokratia*), [γραφειοκρατία], and a process of becoming a statistic and stateless object over systems that may be characterised by prejudiced actions, emerging within the institutions and as such they represent a collective action. “Gرافيokratia”, the Greek term for bureaucracy, is a word whose etymology refers literally to the sovereignty of inscription and documenting in administrative regimes. In Greece “grafiokratia” often penetrates to the social and political life and may validate the social existence of human beings. People who are not documented often do not exist in the society.

In this study, most professionals, public figures, and aid workers seemed to be aware of the shortcomings of the asylum and welfare systems and all the injustices surrounding human rights issues for asylum seekers. Evidently, some of them,

goodhearted, albeit frustrated, that I encountered would go an extra mile and find ways to survive while working within a broken system without being painfully wounded. A few of them had led their practice through rugged routes and desolate moments to do the right thing for these young boys, often coping with forces outside of their control with remarkable courage and determination.

We have also seen cases of emotionally distant frontline staff, and professionals who operate in a continuous indeterminacy, “a state in which subjectivity to the decisions of others is the norm”, and where “radical uncertainty” of procedures and outcomes reigns supreme” (Cabot, 2014:9). Irrespective of ‘good’ apples or ‘bad’ apples in the system, the overwhelming experience of ‘grafiokratia’, suspicion, prejudices, lack of transparency and ambiguity of status results in a state of institutional racism (The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, 1999).

Overall racism and violent acts have been detected in the borders, in detention, in the streets by racist and xenophobic groups. Thus the young people experience an uncaring state and a hostile mood within society. It is no wonder that they aspire to ‘move on’.

### **11.2.2. Global lives**

The experiences of young people are part of a multidimensional phenomenon of today’s global-mixed migration flows. If we are to accept that wider political and social processes impact on our everyday lives, and the mass displacement of people are all products of world-systemic phenomena (Gallagher, 1989; Hein, 1993; Zolberg, 1983; Zolberg *et.al.* 1989), then it becomes at least incongruous to localise them. From this perspective, as Lisa Malkki (1995) has put it, historically the movements of displaced people (and the control of the movement of people) have been inescapably global (see Anderson 1992; Appadurai, 1990), and as such displacement or forced migration should be located as a legal, social and political issue with world-wide dimensions.

In a world connected by flexible capital, mobile labour, transnational families, and movement across the borders, young people provide an important fulcrum of the

global processes their lives are both situated in and affected by. Following Massey's (2004) work on some philosophical assumptions that have inspired my understanding of young people's position in the world: young people are situated in places of interactions ranging from the new immensity of the global to the familiarity of the local, whereas their actions, images and the various ways they are attached, are all intertwined in embedded material practices. The stories of young people which have come to light here, are all possible multiple stories of becoming-others in various places with innumerable modalities, and thus this multiplicity is opened up to all possible futures that are hardly betokened by current neoliberal, academic or policy projects (ibid).

Research on diaspora and trans-nationality has pointed our attention to the complexity of today's world with reference to the many people on the move that may have many points of reference in the global space (e.g. Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Cohen, 1997; Ong, 1999; Urry, 1999). As this thesis has shown, young people move, work, study, travel and live across nations and are connected with local and global spaces at the same time. Some examples of young boys who had lived in transit places, revealed multiple connections with various places and people, containing family contacts back in Afghanistan and also friends and kin living in transit and hosting countries around the globe (with reference to Australia, Pakistan, UK, Sweden, Germany, Belgium etc.). Those contacts are established through "contemporary apparatuses" (i.e. skype connections, mobile phones and through other the social media).

These young people are and will be most definitely affected by the new patterns and consequences of globalization (i.e. migration is one of those) and the many meanings they attune to the process of interconnectivity with each other and the world as whole. Their strong inclination to be active members of the wider global culture leads them, perhaps to the only certainty they have in their lives; to make the "elsewhere" possible. The notion of risking life becomes less painful than the idea of staying immovable in their local realities (Vacchiano, 2014). Being part of the contemporary world is seen by the young Afghans as an instinctive representation, as

a ‘vision’ of a world in motion a significant form of experience with which they can be connected at high speed (ibid).

People, including children who stay immobile, and all those who stay behind – in some cases due to lack of physical skills or resources and acquaintances – they may be perceived as disadvantaged in comparison to the ones who are on the move. Bauman (1998: 2) puts it very well: “*Being local in a globalised world is a sign of social deprivation and degradation*” in a contemporary globalised world where mobility is emblematic to growth and aptitude. These young boys, although they become marginalised through mechanisms produced by the current system of borders and security districts around the globe, are plugged into a global-modern community through which they become socially transformed to active participants and contributors for themselves, their families, their kin and compatriots.

Afghan adolescents appear to be more work-oriented in transit and hosting countries because they are increasingly affected by the pace of modernity of our times. While they move across borders and nations they choose to spend their pocket money and work incomes not only on travel costs and family transmittals but also in fashion; they buy jeans, sneakers, smartphones and other necessities that define the teenage identity of our times and the desire to be part of this ‘global culture’ of youth which is often expressed through fashion, music, hi-tech devices and other consuming habits that have expanded everywhere through the channels of globalization (Fuss, 2005). In her study, in Latin America Punch (2007) has noted the importance of material goods (with reference to clothes) for young migrants, as representative to the neo-liberal Latin American governmental rhetoric that consumerism, is synonymous with freedom.

The thesis overall underlines the importance of thinking of the global spaces young migrants inhabit as spaces of multiple dimensions and meanings and open to processes (i.e. war, poverty, inequality) as well as to information, images, ideas, and emotions. This is to suggest that these young migrants explore and live between local and global spaces that do not merely yield complexity and ambiguity but are also lively milieus filled with promise, desire and surprise that introduce new ideas and motives. Such places convey multiplicity, liveliness, movement and fluidity which

are imprinted on the experiences of the young people, who carve out their subjective histories as they move, communicate, learn, arrange, struggle and cope in many places around the globe. In a word. These boys seek the ‘ordinariness’ of all boys their age.

### **11.3. Conclusion**

The main finding of this study revealed that protracted political insecurity, stemming from the intersection between children on the move and the state as a crossroad (Hess & Shandy, 2008), has a tremendous effect in young people’s opportunities of leading an ‘ordinary’ life. The study has shown how a European, western and democratic nation such as Greece respond to some childhoods, according them rights and responsibilities, and/or treating them as unwanted or criminal members, or ignoring their presence. It must be clear that this qualitative study is insufficient for an adequate understanding of the complexity and multiplicity of children’s experiences. Notwithstanding this the dissertation can also be read as a case study so that we can extrapolate from the Greek experience to a wider stage that depicts similar state attitudes that betoken racism, dehumanizing acts and marginalization e.g. not only characterizations of asylum seekers and more overt violence and racism of gangs, cases of street children, but also the sheer bureaucracy of becoming a person and regaining rights, especially the right to be treated as a child. The research has also shown that a complex inter-play of factors to do with institutional racism, bureaucracy, processes of classification and commodification are at work and without forgetting the findings of hospitality and good care practices, improvements in Greek state policy and practice will be a major consideration as this thesis comes to an end.



## **Chapter 12: Implications for theory, policy, practice and research**

### **12.1. Introduction**

In response to gaps in the literature and lack of academic knowledge relating to the synthesis of childhood-migration and lived experience, this dissertation has explored the background lives, the journeys to the west of a group of Afghan children, and their encounters on arrival and lived experiences in the hosting country. The study has provided a solid empirical base to identify and understand what it is actually to be a young person affected by dislocation and forced migration. Therefore, I have barely touched the surface in providing a complete picture of the complexity and multiplicity that surrounds young people's lived experiences. A lot more needs to be done in the field in order to grasp the broader picture but the study provides new avenues to that direction.

### **12.2. Implications for Theory**

The study throws new light on two inter-connected concepts; childhood and migration, and in doing so, provides a theoretical contribution to both.

An emerging finding of this study in relation to children's agency is that young people have prompted and in some instances, financed and sustained their own migrations. In fact, the majority of the young respondents reported being self-motivated and not dependent on adults' decisions. This view is opposed to findings of other studies that revealed an adult-dependent profile of the child migrants particularly regarding the decision-making process (see Hopkins & Hill, 2008).

The causes that lead children to flee are better understood when considering the wider harmful context of their living as children. Sometimes the decision to flee may be connected with other not so obvious social reactions. For example, Stites *et al.* (2007) found that in Uganda domestic abuse, hunger and abandonment by families were reasons that caused children's migration, and street work. Conticini and Hulme (2006) stated that in Bangladesh domestic abuse was a factor for children's independent migration. Ansell and van Blerk (2004) reported that in communities

with high rates of HIV, children migrated for work, to provide care for sick relatives, and sometimes experienced multiple moves. In this study, persecution due to young people's ethnicity along with reactions to loss and poverty was reported as being the main drivers of young peoples' migrations, besides war. As previously discussed, migration responses are not simple responses driven solely by economic incentives and conflicts, but informed by ideas of appropriate actions in a particular context (Whitehead *et al.* 2007).

The experiences of the young respondents differed greatly across nations but also within nations. For example, multiple childhoods were reported by the young respondents within the Afghani society. Afghani children of divergent ethnicities may experience differences in their daily lives, i.e. the migratory and transitional experiences differed between the young Hazara and young Pashtun. Such an acknowledgement of the fact that there is no single childhood, but 'multiple' even within a nation, adds empirically to the theoretical body that perceives childhood as being a social construction specific to time and place (Holloway & Valentine, 2000b; Bissell 2000).

Another contribution this study has made is related to the discussion about how displaced children can be turned into illegal, unauthorised and undocumented. Such analysis expands current theorizations of youth irregularization (Squire, 2011) and provides new meanings into how non-citizen children make sense of external classifications that impose new identities not of their own making. The classification process, as already stressed in chapter 9, is enforced by states, institutions and legitimate instruments that tend to undermine the resourcefulness and resilience of children on the move and demoralise their capacity to have an active role for themselves and their families.

A substantive understanding that emerges from this study is that there is now evidence that although young people detach themselves from meaningful affective ties and experience dehumanizing acts, experience interruption of their sense of belonging, and an ambiguous state of existence, they still carry with them the capacity to engage with new places, people and processes. The research shows that feeling like a boy on the move, may – in the case of the majority of the respondents –

be a state of independence, an opportunity to play a more active and useful role in the society and a chance to shape their own future by themselves.

The findings build on recent research which challenges the 'Western' notion of the ideal childhood that excludes paradigms of risk-taking, independent movement and/or living during childhood. Such studies have striven for a new conceptualisation, more fluid and open to the various and multiple childhoods. 'Navigating youth' is a concept emphasizing 'the intersection between agency and social forces' and the way young persons 'navigate their lives through social environments' (Christiansen *et al.* 2006: 16). 'Circulation' is conceived as a form of flexible movement which is used as a metaphor for the unsettling childhoods that can live life in multiple physical and social locations (Stryker & Yngvesson, 2013). Similarly, Leifsen's (2013) study of flexible care arrangements in Ecuador challenges conventional notions of childhood that regard as problematic child circulation outside of the secure zone of childhood.

My own study seeks to unsettle normative assumptions that view childhood in the light of 'fixed' childhoods and feed our thinking with more unsteady and shifting notions of the wide-ranging subjectivities of young people (Leifsen, 2013). The findings confirmed that young people did not see risk-taking and independent movement as exclusively problematic but as an essential practice of their multiple movements and transitions and as an opportunity for surviving and participating in the society. Transnational movement for young people was experienced as a 'multiple process' rather than a one-way and one-off move. As the findings of chapter 4 and 5 suggest the migration process can be understood adequately as the outcome of the synthesis of factors, including socio-cultural and political forces, and gendered and childhood norms and rules, that is revived through continuous interactions with places and people.

Young people's desire and determination to achieve their goals through such movements demonstrate that they trust their abilities to live as autonomous human beings, who take on adult responsibilities. Their accounts suggest that they experience their mobilities as painful but beneficial for their trajectories. They should therefore be recognised as active members of the society and responsible persons in

their own right, not as illegal minors who do not deserve respect. They should be valued as contributors for their selves, their families and the communities they live and mobility should be seen as an integral part of this. This study shows migration in a very different light – it is part of children’s realities in Afghani society, it is seen as an exodus from all the adversity that surrounds their daily lives and as a necessity for future prospects. Finally, this thesis has offered additional insight and new understanding relating to the commodification of asylum seeking children.

Powerful state agents (child welfare experts, immigration officers, lawyers, police, and social workers) should recognise these magnitudes especially every time they are about to intervene in the lives of displaced children who live on the margins. Lack of recognition of the above, as we will see now, has important implications for the way policies are formulated and transformed into welfare practices.

## **12.3. Implications for Policy**

### **12.3.1. Towards a human centred approach**

In chapter 2, the discussion around the issue of asylum seekers has been focused on one fundamental postulation; asylum seekers are an existential threat to society. I argued that the issue of asylum seekers, within the EU’s political discourse, challenges society’s political regime, national security and identity. The ongoing increase of people’s movements on the way to the European territory poses grave challenges to the strength of state power and notions of its sovereignty. I further suggested that immigration policy in EU has been developed within a political discourse which views migrants and asylum seekers as ‘modern invaders’ and that migration is conceived as a risk to the society’s current order that must be tackled (Sales 2007; Shuster & Solomos 2004; Zetter 2007). Similar views are further illustrated by authors who talked about ‘Fortress Europe’ (Sommer, 2013, Geddes, 2001), and articulated expressions of racism in the name of the ‘need to control’ (Shuster, 2004).

Likewise, perspectives raised by some professionals and public figures in chapter 10 revealed indications of immigration’s policy being built upon a very specific

rhetoric: that the threatening ‘others’ pose a risk for the society’s cohesion and security. For this reason, it is argued a strenuous control of migrants’ movements and securitization of the borders is required.

Congruence has been found between the responses of the public figures, professionals and the literature regarding the way in which EU asylum policy has been conceptualised and implemented in the context of harsh securitization and control. As it is clear from the distinct understandings of the development of asylum policy that emerged in the empirical material, it is also provided a foundation towards a theorization for what it is highlighted as important in thinking about alternatives in asylum policy. In the Greek case it leads to a stress on what can be identified as human-rights led policy development. This recognition was stressed as being fundamental for the reform of the migration policy on a European level, as illustrated below in the account of the Mayor:

*The ideology that accompanies the migration issue should change in a European level. We have seen the results of the neoliberal politics regarding this matter and what is coming out of the political determination to prevent refugee’s movements...in the end there is no serious solution recommended. Effective policies would require... firstly the demolition of this wretched political stance which was inspired and applied by the EU leaders, and secondly the adoption of a human-rights approach on the issue.*

There is no easy solution to reframe immigration and asylum policy, but my study has drawn attention to a critical realization: the policy spotlight falls more strongly on the need for transformation at the political and societal level. As long as the asylum issue is approached on the basis of security and sovereignty, the rights and needs of asylum seekers will continue to be severely violated. Society becomes infused by the dichotomizing rhetoric of asylum seekers being a threat, and eventually fear and distrust amongst people takes place.

It is suggested that the Greek state will not be able to solve its problems by its current recourse to repression, increased detention and deportations of undesired refugees (including children). As ‘fortresses’ emerge between the borders, youth asylum seekers will continue to be trapped in countries with inadequate means to provide protection and a sustainable long-term stay. A more constructive and inclusive

solution must be found which will be based on a human centred approach to the issue. As the study has stressed at the beginning, the concept of asylum itself is already pervaded by ambiguities and internal contradictions. Although the Greek state has driven forward inclusive asylum reforms over the past five years, slightly improving its current asylum system and practice the findings reveal continuing deficits in the asylum system.

Undoubtedly a radical transformation of the current refugee regime is highly advisable, but it can only be entirely successful with a restructuring of the current world order. A new world order should eradicate global inequalities and circumvent unfair procedures that lead to dehumanization processes. A global response based on mutual perspectives towards forced migration may be the key to the radical transformation of the current asylum regime. On this ground, there might be more cause for pessimism than optimism. Although my study discusses implications for policy on a national level and introduces some suggestions for improvements, these can only fully succeed against the backdrop of a humanitarian approach on a transnational level.

### **12.3.2. Reforming policies**

The study has demonstrated concerns for the position and circumstances of UASM in Greece and has identified gaps in legislation and practice with regards to the effectiveness of the provided protection and care. A vicious cycle has been observed between the quality of services and the absconding rates from the reception centres for young people. The ineffective protection system for UASM encourages their departure to other countries and at the same time the profile of children as a moving population deters governmental durable solutions. Due to the absence of any governmental efforts to mainstream services for UASM into the national child-care system, the protection and care of UASM in Greece remains highly detached from any consistent central authority of protection.

There is a pressing need for the establishment of a central Greek authority that would be responsible for the implementation of measures on a policy level linked to the protection of UASM. At the moment, different aspects pertaining to the protection

and care of UASM are delivered by different governmental units. For example, the Ministry of Labour is responsible for the reception of minors, while the Ministry of Education over schooling and the Ministry of Justice over the issues of legal guardianship. These detached 'silos' lack efficient coordination mechanisms resulting in delays with regards to decisions, irregularities and poor service delivery. It is suggested that an entity assigned and responsible for the overall competency of measures and policies with regards to the protection and care of UASM would bring about coordinated actions and a coherent plan that would strengthen policy on the protection of UASM.

There is also now evidence that the Greek asylum policy is not merged with child welfare policy, even more it is clear that the dimension of migration overrides the rights and needs of displaced children. In particular, the findings of chapter 6 and 7 provided indications of the national migration and asylum policy being at odds with human rights and exposed strong evidence that the principle of promoting the best interest of the child is undermined in various stages (upon arrival, in care, after care) (Sandahl *et al.* 2013).

Challenges for policy makers at the national and regional levels include practical ways of enhancing social participation and integration for young people, but also more ingrained issues related to the way welfare policy interacts with asylum and citizenship. The study confirms the need for a radical re-evaluation of both policies and a commitment to safeguard the needs and rights of displaced children. The dimension of asylum should be of secondary importance and young asylum seekers should be treated as children first.

Policy makers and key administrators who are involved in policy development should consider seriously two important aspects every time they are about to affect the lives of young people through procedures and legislation: the first one has to do with the understanding that the young person's stories should be a priority. Only by listening with an open mind to what these young people tell us can we come up with effective solutions. Secondly, by reflecting on the limitations that are imposed on non-citizen children which are liable for removing rights that give access to civil entitlements, policy makers ought to consider those as markers or means of

supporting and improving asylum and immigration policies. Overall, the objective should be to give voice and choice to young people. If policies in Greece can be built around these two principles, then I think that there will be a fruitful ground for the improvement of protection and care of UASM.

In Greece, service provision has tended to resort to residential care as ‘the only solution’ for UM, marginalised children, child poverty and other areas of risk. There is minimum effort focused on any kind of retrospective efforts towards preventative actions, coherent community-based support to children without parental care. There is a pressing need at national level in the reform of the childcare system. This study brought much needed evidence regarding the effects of residential care on the well-being of the children for supporting the development of the relevant policies for reform of the childcare system to promote deinstitutionalisation in Greece. Importantly, there is an increasing need for alternative care settings for UM and children without parental care, e.g. community-based care in the form of homes, foster care within family settings, where children’s voice is given consideration.

I will now ponder on two stages in which further policy measures can be developed on a national level – some immediate and some long term.

### **Upon arrival**

From the moment young people set foot in Greece they encounter numerous, incomprehensible, and as I described in chapter 6, Kafkaesque procedures that govern their lives onwards. Serious deficits are identified in the registration procedures that determine who is a minor, or an adult, and what happens to them. There is absence of reliable mechanisms to identify and register properly displaced young people and as such there is no way that we can know how many of them are out there. An issue of a mounting concern in Greece is the lack of correct registration of a person. Different practices are followed at different entry points. Especially, the compelling increase of arrivals over the last year has made registration a much more difficult task.

Although proper identification and registration is significant for making displaced young people visible, on the other hand, there is opposition to the application of

biometric technologies (see EURODAC system) which facilitate the identification process (Feldman, 2012:117-122). I have argued in chapter 6 that through the application of biometrics, Europe has invented a modern way to impose state control and decide on the exclusion of human beings. In other words, it is the objective of the use that is problematic; if there was a different perception of the usefulness of these devices then there would be an appreciation of their value, especially regarding the improvement of children's lives.

The lack of reliable data tends to make these young people invisible and modify their real needs and rights (Hammarbeg, 2009). In this respect, policies should be developed on the basis of producing reliable data with the aim to implement effective strategies and identify the necessary resources to respond appropriately to the needs of displaced children.

This means that there should be specialised state infrastructures for receiving and dealing with underage children in an appropriately and sensitive manner. There should be professionally qualified staff capable to identify and assess their needs and examine their claims. There is a necessity for other experts who would be coordinated by an authority specialising in human rights. Ensuring homogeneity of protection through detailed guidance would improve the registration procedure of the competent authorities in different parts of the country. The law specifies that competent authorities and local administration *shall take care to provide special treatment to applicants belonging to vulnerable groups [...] in particular unaccompanied minors* (P.D.:220/2007). Therefore, there is lack of a specific framework aiming at identifying vulnerable groups of people. Psychosocial services at the registration stage are also deemed essential at this stage.

All the involved state officials should undergo assessments about their capacity to be engaged in reliable and effective registration procedures. The study has shown that police officers are sometimes responsible for hasty and unreliable assessments and for violent and insensitive actions related to the protection of UM. Instead of this, other state officials with expertise on protection issues should be involved in the front line. Various commenters have underscored that registration requires legal expertise in order to identify those in need of protection and endorse international

legal standards in the everyday practice. Further, it must be stressed that training must be provided constantly to the involved professionals in collaboration with expert international and national actors.

Following registration, a referral to the responsible public prosecutor takes place and a notification for accommodation is made to the National Centre for Social Solidarity (EKKA). While the UM is waiting the identification for a placement by EKKA, as underscored in the accounts of the young respondents, they are placed in detention facilities and in police stations. The literature suggests that detention criminalises displaced children who ultimately become the threatening ‘others’ in a society that tends to marginalise them (Dona & Veale, 2011). Detention is one of the most prominent examples as it projects so overtly the inhuman face of the state institutions and mechanisms. The accounts demonstrated that the Greek authorities detain these boys for lengthier periods, until a placement in appropriate reception facilities is found. It is troubling that young asylum seekers are not exempt from the measure of detention. In order to avoid extended time in detention and being afraid of being detained, young people often declare themselves as adults. This study recommends that detention should be immediately abolished as practice of placement for underage children and other alternatives should be put into practice i.e.: establishing open transit centres in border zones where UASM are temporarily accommodated while the procedure for long term accommodation is set in place.

The impact of the asylum protection system on children has been mostly centred on the aspects of the asylum system itself; its process and its outcome (Bhabha, 2011). The period covered by this study (2010-2015) involved two significant changes in the Greek asylum and immigration policy, including the unaccompanied minors’ policy scheme. These were the adoption of the new asylum process and the entry into force, as of 1 June 2014, of the Code of Immigration and Social Integration (Law 4251/2014, Government Gazette A’ 80/1.4.2014, in EMN, 2014:5). Although, it is too early for an evaluation of the new tools, it is thus hoped that these will bring forward a fairer, speedy and reliable asylum procedure. Notwithstanding these developments, the protection and care of unaccompanied minors still remains a highly contesting issue to be addressed.

## **In care**

A variety of experiences of young people who are hosted in reception centres for UM in Greece is highlighted in this study, which relates to other research conducted in UK about young people looked after in public care; their experiences are often, though not invariably, more positive than was the case for those in care in Greece. (Biehal *et al.* 1995; Dixon & Stein, 2005; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004). This study has drawn attention to a number of areas that are significant to young people's well-being. Recognition of their political and legal rights through a fair asylum procedure was appreciated as the first and foremost consideration in all decisions affecting them. Relationships inside and outside of the reception centres were seen as fundamental for establishing their sense of belonging (with staff, peers, the wider community and families of origin). Furthermore, experiences regarding how young people are classified were reported as impactful to their daily lives. The ways child migrants are labelled in policy, shape their experience and can include or exclude children from support. As we know from the international migration literature, social policies are often a core mechanism of exclusion, and asylum seekers are often depicted as abusers of social systems (Shuster, 2004; Hall, 1996). Attention should be given on how policy makers, officials and professionals classify these young people. Clearly policy on migration and asylum should be both protective and supportive, outside and inside of care facilities.

## **After care**

There should also be greater attention to the development of after-care support given the complete absence of specific structures for those who turn 18. A clear national framework in the form of a pathway plan should be put in place to better protect and promote the rights of young people leaving care. The need of those young people should be addressed, irrespective of their immigration status (Lane & Tribe, 2006). The plan should take into account young people's education, housing, health, leisure and support requirements, and should be reviewed regularly by social workers.

I also suggest that there should be grants and scholarships to allow students to continue their studies and apprenticeships for those who are inclined to study. The adult respondents in this study (professionals and public figures) provided examples of minors who had done better than others; they suggested that those who managed to use their skills and training after they turned 18 constituted positive examples of their capacity to succeed and adapt in a new environment.

## **12.4. Implications for Practice**

### **12.4.1. Social Work**

It is in the broad field of children's welfare and asylum policy that the finding of young people's dehumanization as asylum seeking minors has far-reaching implications. The study suggests that there are also wider implications for social work practice with UM as a whole. A first step towards better social work practice would be the acknowledgement of the complexity of young people's experiences – both regarding their exile, in transit and settlement experiences – but also the difference social workers can make on the lives of these young people: particularly the appreciation of a meaningful and trusted relationship with the young people. As aforementioned young people thought that they would have benefited greatly from supportive, meaningful and trusted relations with the staff. In a context of an unceasing economic downturn, the shortages in resources and services are an everyday reality that leaves little room for quality social work practice and needs-led interventions. Social workers often felt that they disbursed their energy in the wrong direction, that the understaffing in combination with the lack of resources, and a stable flow of funds, prohibited them from bringing about 'positive changes'.

Social workers and social care providers in general should not be agents of immigration and asylum policies but agents of children's rights. This creates tensions between policy and social work values and there is some evidence of this derived from the accounts of social workers who questioned and challenged the implementation of the asylum current policy.

Social work ought to engage with policy and rights issues with a strong commitment to children's rights. The role of the SW profession should be proactive and social workers ought to collaborate with various public bodies, institutions and agencies in order to develop anti-racist and progressive policies with the aim to promote equality and justice.

### **12.4.2. Communication-Interpretation**

The quality of social support provided to the young people is largely related to communication and understanding. The data demonstrated that when social support was available, young people felt more adapted in their new environment. However, the data has also revealed serious deficits, misapprehensions and poor communication between the young people and the professionals. Some of these professionals were completely unaware of the cultural affiliations of the minors and did not have a basic knowledge of ethnicities. This creates the urgent need for cultural awareness training for the staff, for improved skills related to cultural differences and inequalities.

Kohli (2007) writes of the difficulties social workers may encounter in assisting young people to make sense of their situations, when they are often confronted with silence and (understandable) distrust. Their ability to gather information, particularly early on, may be further compounded by difficulties around language and understanding. It is suggested that every reception centre should provide adequate interpretation services for all ethnicities because only then can the professionals be aware of the stories and identify the actual needs of young people. Furthermore, children should not provide interpretation services for ethical and professional reasons.

### **12.4.3. Guardianship**

This study certainly communicates a strong need for statutory guardians and advocates who will support the needs and rights of these young people. In chapters 7 and 9, I described the nature of legal guardianship based on the accounts of the young people and professionals and I highlighted legal guardianship as being an 'urgent requisite' for the protection of young people's rights.

Young people, without guardianship, who seek asylum have no legal status and no long-term protection rights, and may face deportation once they reach 18 years of age. It is recommended that *'every unaccompanied child should be appointed a legal guardian who can exercise parental responsibility and ensure that their best interests are the primary focus for decisions made about their future'* (Refugee Council, 2007: 2). This is an issue that is particularly crucial for unaccompanied children, who are the only group of children without a legal guardian.

#### **12.4.4. Equality and Consistency**

A substantive division emerged from the findings in terms of resources, services and treatment between local and foreign children; UM do not enjoy the same rights to care and protection as citizen children. Inequality can be identified in a number of areas, such as; access to placements, education, legal representation, employment opportunities. Here the complementary interviews with the professionals and public figures provided additional information in that direction, despite the efforts of some welfare staff to claim even-handedness between citizen and non-citizen young people. A regulatory framework should be established aiming at providing consistency and equality in the provision of services for protection and care. Preventing disruption of services and promoting the development of quality services for children is essential.

#### **12.4.5. Racism**

Experiences of institutional racism are particularly significant given the scarcity of previous research on this topic. More specifically, previous research has identified the ways in which majority (sometimes identified as 'elite') group members may produce discourse that justifies inequality while denying being racists (e.g., Augoustinos *et al.*, 1999; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The findings of this study suggest that despite any efforts carried out by professionals and public figures to restrain the existence of racism it has been extremely evident in the testimonies of the young people.

The thesis acknowledges that there are no easy answers to the problem of institutional racism but it does propose that the host society and particularly the

authoritative figures who are in direct contact with the asylum seeking children need to be aware of the issues in this regard and they should also receive appropriate education in order to be able to protect children and young people from its consequences.

#### **12.4.6. Support and Guidance**

One of the greatest problems for the young people is loneliness and alienation, associated not just with lack of friendships but also with loss of home, as described by Papadopoulos (2002). When they come into the country, they feel isolated not only from other people, but also, in significant ways, from their origins and past lives (Kohli & Mather, 2003). The findings regarding experiences alienation confirm the importance of attachment to an adult figure for young people. When this is not available from a family member, there needs to be other ways of achieving this. Regular guidance from an identified individual would provide necessary support while in care and enable young people to learn better skills of independence, while also allowing early recognition of problems that might lead to eviction. Support should be continued until they have begun to settle into adult life. Finally, the role of peers and of electronic media is deemed significant in enabling young people to be in contact with their relatives and home country.

#### **12.5. Implications for Research**

Clearly the research base in Greece regarding displaced children is poor. As already indicated, this may reflect the indifference of a society to those children who are on the move and hard to identify. However, it is also likely that attention has been drawn away from longer-term issues, such as care issues, to focus on more high profile, crisis-driven issues in relation to child-abuse and detention. Although crisis-driven issues are equally important, there should be more focus on longer-term issues affecting the well-being of unaccompanied children, such as the impact of dehumanization and institutional racism on the emotional and social development of young people.

The experiences that I have gained in completing this study have been most valuable. I have found that a number of areas would benefit from further research and would provide a better understanding of young people's experiences at all stages. Like every new study, there are a number of different ways in which this research could be taken forward in more studies in the future. I will try to limit myself and pay attention to the core areas.

The research, has demonstrated a high level of quality; for instance, using a multi-method approach, interviewing young people, as well as interviewing service providers and exploring public attitudes to ensure the validity of the findings (e.g. Wade *et al.* 2005). But, I am aware that different approaches could have been used.

Firstly, I acknowledge the limitation of the study to explore young people's experiences of their country of origin from a retrospective position in terms of time and place. I am convinced that the findings regarding the Afghan lives would offer more accurate, richer and up-to-date insights, if part of the research was located in Afghanistan. This is to suggest further research both in the country of origin and hosting country for in-depth and robust outcomes.

Secondly, I suggest that the finding regarding the process within which children become commodified in transnational contexts as an effect of the wider process of dehumanization, should pave the way for qualitative studies that will look more carefully at the role of the dehumanization process in forced migration. As well as this, the findings regarding state violence, experiences of classification, and the impact of social isolation on the well-being of these young people, certainly merit further attention.

Thirdly, the study also showed the need for research to capture longer time spans. Larger scale longitudinal studies are key to understanding not only the emotional impacts of displacement, separation and migration, but also the changing experiences of Asylum seeking children over time and the longer-term implications for their identities, relationships and choices.

Fourthly, my study has been approached and conducted from the children's perspective; it would be interesting to research institutional care from the perspective

of staff and senior officials making policy. Another area of special importance is societal attitudes towards residential childcare institutions. This study provided only a few glimpses of prominent attitudes in society towards these young people. Further large-scale research on society's attitudes would shed more light on what kind of reception and treatment unaccompanied young people receive in Greece and would take further an exploration of the twin notions at play in Greece (and in Europe in general) of philoxenia and xenophobia.

Fifthly, a significant limitation of this study it has been the inability to reach out Afghan girls, include their voices and explore their experiences. Perhaps there would be more surprising results if the dimension of gender would be taken into consideration. This is a suggestion for further research in the field of children's forced migration in order to see how the childhoods and movements between boys and girls are played out in similar contexts.

The study has also confirmed that the lives of young people in the reception childcare system are hugely influenced by society's histories, beliefs and cultural practices and perceptions. It would be interesting to conduct comparative studies in other localities where historical and cultural influences on residential childcare systems are similarly strong. A comparative focus on different ethnicities would be also important, as it would give more credit to cross-cultural differences.

Finally, researching the lives of displaced children who left residential care disappeared or remained unidentified by the authorities is a great challenge. To date, the issue of children leaving care has been ignored. There is no evidence of the whereabouts of those young people who leave the reception centres and continue their journeys elsewhere or choose to remain undocumented in Greece. The experiences of these young people remain completely undisclosed in the literature.

## **12.6. Conclusion**

Young people's stories are formed across many commonalities and differences, emerging as experiences of transit and exile and the subjectivity that each journey entails. Interestingly, many of the core findings and emerging concepts, in Section II

and III, have further been of a dichotomist character: young people are sometimes accentuated as poor sufferers in need of support, yet at other times as survivors, and resilient subjects, and sometimes, as problematic and demanding individuals who are in need of guidance and support. Their predicaments oscillate between dependency and self-reliance, between legality and illegality. At times they are viewed as “swimmers” rising over their plights, and as “sinkers” who are incapable (mentally) of continuing their lives. Their treatment as “children in care” is played out between sympathy and prejudice and their presence incurs both xenophobic attitudes and welcoming approaches.

The Hegelian philosophical proposition that good and evil are the same but also different, presented in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, aptly provides the elusive character of those dichotomies:

*Since both are equally right, they are both equally wrong, and the mistake consists in taking such abstract forms as “the same” and “not the same”, “identity” and “non-identity”, to be something true, fixed and actual, and in resting on them. Neither the one nor the other has truth, the truth is their movement.*

This also points to what can be conceptualised as the so called “undecidables” a concept that has been developed by Derrida (1981) and later used by Bauman in his work *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991). Both authors are concerned with the ambivalence of the “undecidable” and not with the neutrality of the “undecidable” regarding to binary opposites. The subjects of this study fall into both categories as much as they do not fit in any of them. Their very presence constructs a societal ambivalence that is difficult to fit in social categories (Stretmo, 2014:189).

The study has sought to make justice of these boys’ stories by conveying their need to be ‘ordinary boys’ who are in the making. Their tales as unfinished stories suggest that their paths, dreams and possibilities are fluid in a world that it is not fixed for them, as they face a future that they cannot predict. Yet they are determined to reclaim their lives. To end with a child’s voice:

*We are not birds to make nests where we go. We are yellow leaves and when we fall from the trees people step on us. We have nothing else to lose and so we wish to become birds.*



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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Letters to young people

#### **Lost in Transition? Lived experiences of unaccompanied Afghan minors in Greece**

**Date:**  
**Hello!**

I am studying at the University of Edinburgh and I would like to ask for your help in undertaking a research aiming to find out more about your opinions and stories. For this reason I am planning to make interviews, focus groups and some activities with you. I am looking forward to hear your views and to learn more about your experiences. For getting more familiar with the process and purpose of the study, a one-day event will take place and together we will decide what would be the main topics of our discussions. We will also make some enjoyable and interactive activities.

The interviews, group discussions and activities will take place at the reception centres. In particular, interviews will be conducted in any place you feel is more comfortable for you within the centre. The group discussions will take place in a spacious room within the reception centre, appropriate for this purpose. Each interview will last no more than an hour and the group discussion will last approximately two hours. I would like to use an audio recorder and keep notes during interviews and focus groups if this is ok with you. If needed interpreters will be involved in helping with communication.

Whatever you choose to share with me will be kept confidential; unless you disclose sensitive information such as that you have being hurt in any way. In this case the information will be reported to the social worker or psychologist who is responsible for your own protection. All names of the participants will be changed before a final report is written and you will be asked to choose your own pseudonym at the final stage of our cooperation. Upon completion of the study a short report will be sent to each reception centre informed with the main research findings and you will be sent an e-mail with a summary of the main findings of the study.

You should know that you are completely free to make any decision you wish regarding your participation. You are completely free to change your mind and withdraw from the study at any stage of the process or you can skip answering questions you don't want to.

Please, consider that this is an opportunity for you to share your experiences and stories and have your voice heard. I am keen to cooperate with you in this project. If you decide to take part, I would be grateful if you could complete the participation form and return it to me. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me (you can find my contact details below).

With best wishes,  
Vasiliki Theocharidou

PhD student  
School of Social and Political Science,  
The University of Edinburgh,  
Chrystal Macmillan Building,  
Edinburgh EH 8 9DL  
Contact: [V.Theocharidou@sms.ed.ac.uk](mailto:V.Theocharidou@sms.ed.ac.uk)  
Telephone: (0030) 6938701056

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

I confirm that I have been given information about the study: 'Lost in Transition? Lived experiences of unaccompanied Afghan minors in Greece' and would like to take part in the study.

YES/NO

**Signed** .....

**Name of young person** .....

**Age** .....

**Contact details** .....

**Date** .....

## Appendix 2: Letters to young people in Farsi

من در دانشگاه ادینبورگ تحصیل می کنم

من از شما میخوام یگ پژو هش خواصی برای پیدا کردن اطلاعات بیشتر در مورد دیدگاه و داستان های خود و به دنبال شنیدن نظرات شما و برای کسب اطلاعات بیشتر در مورد تجربیات خود برای گرفتن آشنا با این روند و هدف از مطالعه یگ رویداد یگ روزه برگزار خواهد شد و باهم تصمیم خواهد گرفت از موضوعات اصلی بحث اصلی ما خواهد بود و برخی از فعالیت های لذت بخش و تعالیمی را باهم پیگیری می کنیم .

در مراکز پذیرش مصاحبه ها و بحث فعالیت های گروهی هم برگزار خواهد شد. هر مصاحبه بیش از یگ ساعت خواهد بود و بحث های گروهی حدود دو ساعت خواهد بود.

من می خواهم با استفاده از یگ ضبط صدا و نگهداشتن یادداشت در طول مصاحبه های گروهی تمرکز شما بیشتر می شود.

هر آنچه شما انتخاب میکنید برای در میان گذاشتن بامن محرمانه خواهد بود. مگر اینکه شما اطلاعات حساس رافاش کنید یا به هر نحوی صدمه دیده باشید در مورد این اطلاعات گزارش خواهد شد به مددکار اجتماعی یا روان شناس که مسئول حفاظت شما را به عهده دارد.

همه نام شرکت کننده گان تغییر خواهند کرد قبل از گزارش نهایی نوشته شود و برای انتخاب نام مستعار خود در مرحله نهایی از شما خواسته خواهد شد.

پس از اتمام مطالعه یگ گزارش کوتاه از همکاری ما خواسته خواهد شد.

بار سال اصلی یافته های تحقیقات به هر مرکز پذیرش مطلع ارسال یگ ایمیل یا یگ خلاصه از یافته های اصلی پژو هس از شما خواسته خواهد شد.

شما باید بدانید در هر گونه تصمیم گیری در مورد مشارکت خود آزاد هستید شما میتوانید زهن خود را تغییر داده و خارج از مطالعه هر مرحله فرایند شما اگر نمی خواهید به سولات پاسخ دهید می توانید جست خیز کنید.

لطفا در نظر داشته باشید که این یگ فرصت است برای شما برای اشتراک گذاشتن تجربه ها و داستان ها با صدای خودتان من مشتاقم به همکاری با شما در این پروژه

اگر شما بخواهید بخشی از مشارکت خود آن را بامن تکمیل نموده سپاس گزاریم .

اگر شما هر گونه سوال داشته باشید دریغ نکنید برای بدست آوردن هر اطلاعاتی بامن تماس بگیرید .

بهترین آرزوها برای شما خواستارم

واسیلیکی تیچاریدو

6938701056

## Appendix 3: Information Sheet (to professionals and public figures)

**Date:**

**Lost in Transition? Lived experiences of unaccompanied Afghan minors in Greece.**

Dear....,

I am studying at the University of Edinburgh and I will carry out research for my PhD study in order to find out more about the experiences of Afghan unaccompanied asylum seeking minors who are hosted in reception centres in Greece. What I am hoping to find out is about their pre-flight experiences, the reasons that led them to flee, their experiences of crossing borders, the treatment they receive upon arrival and while being residents in Greece. The study also seeks to identify the social services that are provided to this group of people and to explore what Greek people think about them. In this respect, I am planning to involve in the study Afghan unaccompanied asylum seeking minors, professionals who work in reception centres and as well as public figures who are involved directly or indirectly in matters that affect the lives of unaccompanied minors such as asylum policy and welfare services.

Asylum is regarded to be one of the most pressing challenges for Greece especially in recent years where there is a shift to the country's migration status from a 'sending' to a 'receiving' country. Recently, the Greek response to the arrival of asylum seekers including unaccompanied minors has been questioned by scholars and humanitarian organizations (Skordas and Sitaropoulos 2004; UNHCR 2008). Yet little is known about the experiences of this specific group of people in the Greek context that this study aims to explore. A main objective of the study is to influence areas in welfare and asylum policies that will eventually improve the well-being of unaccompanied minors in Greece.

I am planning to conduct interviews and focus groups with Afghan unaccompanied minors aged 15-18 by using a participatory approach. This means that in collaboration with the young people we will develop the main content of the discussions and the interviews. As the study seeks to give voice to unaccompanied minors and bring to the fore their matters, their active participation in the study is essential. Discussions and interactive activities will take place prior to interviews and focus groups during a one-day consultation event at each reception centre. At this stage young people will have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the process of the inquiry in case they decide that they are willing to participate in the study. Due to language differences interpreters will be involved in helping with communication with Afghan unaccompanied minors.

Thus, I think that the participation of professionals and public figures in the study is fundamental in developing understanding of their views and perspectives when dealing with unaccompanied minors inside and outside the reception centres. For this reason, I am planning to carry out in-depth semi-structured interviews with professionals and public officials in order to enhance my understanding about the treatment of unaccompanied minors within the Greek context and in particular to find out more about the most prevalent Greek attitudes towards unaccompanied minors hence, to explore issues of Greek hospitality or xenophobia. At this stage I would like to reassure you that confidentiality of all participants will be considered and respected at all times throughout the study. None of the participants will be identified in the written report. In this respect, pseudonyms will replace the real names of participants. All participants are completely free to withdraw at any stage of the inquiry without giving a reason.

I would be grateful if you could participate in the study and share some of your time with me. In case you have any questions or concerns about the study, please feel free to contact me and I will be happy to provide you with any other information that you may require.

Yours sincerely,  
Vasiliki Theocharidou  
PhD student  
School of Social and Political Science,  
The University of Edinburgh,

Chrystal Macmillan Building,  
Edinburgh EH 8 9DL  
Contact: V.Theocharidou@sms.ed.ac.uk  
Telephone: (0030) 6938701056

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

I confirm that I have been given information about the study: ‘Lost in Transition? Lived experiences of unaccompanied Afghan minors in Greece’ and would like to take part in the study.  
YES/NO

**Signed** .....

**Name of young person** .....

**Age** .....

**Contact details** .....

**Date** .....

## Appendix 4: Interview topic guide (to young people)

### *Section 1: Demographics*

*Name:*

*Age:*

*Gender:*

*Origin/Ethnicity:*

*Linguistic abilities:*

*Educational Background:*

*Name of the hosting centre/community:*

*Length of stay in Greece:*

*Length of stay in the reception centre:*

### *Section 2: Future plans*

1. What are your aspirations for the future? Would like to stay here (in Greece) or are you planning to go somewhere else?
2. Do you want to study or do something else?
3. What is your legal status at the moment (asylum)?

### *Section 3: Current experiences of living in Greece*

#### **Everyday life**

4. (Would you like to share with me some of your experiences as a resident in Greece)?
5. How do you spend your time here (in the hosting centre)?
  - What do you do in your spare time (TV, going out, sports/other)?
6. Do you have any friends?
7. Do you go to school at the moment?
  - If not, is there a reason for that?
  - If yes, what do you think of going to school?

#### **Relations**

8. Who are the main adults you have contact with in the reception centre (carers, social workers, psychologist)?
  - What do you think of your relation with them?  
(Do you receive adequate support or help from them-it will come out implicit)?
9. Have you been appointed with a legal guardian?
  - If yes, what do you think of him/her?  
(Do you get legal advices or assistance when you need?)
  - If No, why is that?

#### **Needs**

10. What kind of difficulties do you face here (community/centre name)?
11. How do you confront them?

#### **Services**

12. What do you think of the reception centre?
13. What are the main 'helps' provided to you here in the centre (housing, counselling, social work, legal representation/other)?

How would you value these ‘helps’?

14. Are there any ‘helps’ that you had difficulty to access or you would like to receive more information about?

- If yes, what are these ‘helps’?

### **Community and local people**

15. What do you think of the community (city, town, village, etc.) you live in?

- Impressions of the place you live?

16. Have you met any people other than the ones from the reception centre? (people at school, teachers, other young people)?

17. What do you think of them?

- Are they friendly with you?

- 

### ***Section 4: Experiences/events upon arrival in Greece***

18. When you first arrived what was the first thing that happened to you?

- Where did you sleep your first night?
- Did you receive any help from someone?
- If yes by whom?

19. What happened the following days?

- Were you offered any temporary place to stay before coming to the reception centre?
- If yes, how long did you spend there (what do you think of this place)?
- How did people treat you there?

20. What were the first authorities/organizations/services that you came into contact when you arrived in Greece (police authority, border services, NGOs)?

- Were they helpful to you?
- Were there any special people who helped you during your first days in Greece?
- If yes, how did they help you?

### ***Section 5: Experiences of the migration process/ journeys***

#### **Conditions/circumstances of the journey**

21. (Would you be willing to share with me some of your experiences before arriving in Greece)?

22. How did you travel to Greece?

23. How many days have you been travelling?

24. Were you accompanied with someone during the journey?

- Were there any other young people travelling with you?

25. Do you remember any places that you visited during your journey?

26. Did you know where you were going (was Greece the place you were expected to go)?

27. Did you face any difficulties along the way (if yes would you like to share them with me?)

28. How do you feel about experiencing such a journey?

29. Have you talked to anybody about your journey experiences?

***Section 6: Pre-flight experiences***

**Childhood and circumstances that lead young people to move away from home**

30. What are the moments of your childhood that affected you strongly in a good or in a bad way?
31. What do you like and what you do not like about Afghanistan (or other country)?
  - Is there anything that you miss/not miss about your country (family, friends, culture, food, and climate)?
32. Leaving Afghanistan was it your own decision?
  - If yes, what motivated you make this decision/if no...who made that decision?
33. Let's come back to the present. What would you like to do in the near future?

## Appendix 5: Interview topic guide (to professionals)

### ***Section 1: Demographics***

*Name of reception centre:*

*Name of Service Provider:*

*Profession:*

*Length of working experience with unaccompanied minors:*

*Length of time working in the centre:*

*Capacity of the centre: a) general, b) at the moment*

*National backgrounds/ethnicities of children and young people:*

*How many Afghan young people live at the moment in the centre?*

*How old are they?*

*What languages/dialects do they speak?*

### ***Section 2: Role of the service provider/reception centre***

1. What is your role in your current position?
2. What is the role of the reception centre in relation to unaccompanied asylum seeking minors?

### ***Section 3: Needs of unaccompanied minors and how these are met by the reception centre and the community***

3. Regarding Afghan unaccompanied minors what are their needs?
  - Social
  - Emotional
  - Educational/Psychological
  - Cultural
  - Health
  - Practical
  - Legal
4. Have they retaining contacts with their family?
5. Are there any particular needs that you think are neglected?
  - If yes, which are these needs?

### ***Section 4: Services provided to unaccompanied minors***

6. What are the provided services to unaccompanied minors by the reception centre?
7. What are the strong points/weaknesses of the provided services?
8. How would you value the interpreting services?
  - Do you think they could be improved?
9. How would you value the legal assistance services (legal guardians)?
  - Do you think they could be improved?
10. Is there any service/s offered that could be characterised as a 'best practice' service?
11. Given your knowledge of service provision to unaccompanied minors do you think that the social services meet their needs (cultural, linguistic, social and emotional)?
  - If not, what do you think it should be done?

12. What challenges are you facing in your work?
13. In your opinion is there a need for additional training for the people who are working with unaccompanied asylum seeking minors?

***Section 5: Other social services and to what extent are meeting the needs of unaccompanied minors***

14. What other services (private, statutory, voluntary) are provided to unaccompanied minors by authorities/organizations other than reception centres?
  - What do you think of the adequacy of these services that are available to unaccompanied minors?
15. Is there any particular service offered to unaccompanied minors in Greece that could be used as an example of ‘best practice’?
  - If yes, can you describe why this service could be used as an example of ‘best practice’?
16. Are there any ways you could say that Afghan unaccompanied asylum seeking minors receive poorer and/or better care, support and consideration than other young people?
  - If yes, in what ways?
17. What do you think it should be done in order to improve the quality of services provided to unaccompanied minors (e.g. legal assistance, counselling, care, support, education)?

***Section 6: Debt crisis, asylum and welfare system in Greece***

18. How do you think the current economic and social instability in Greece affect the lives of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors?
  - What are the most challenging ramifications stemming from this situation (economic crisis)?  
(How are these affecting your work with unaccompanied minors/how do you cope with them?)
19. How do you think the current asylum system and legislation in Greece affect the lives of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors?
  - Are there any particular areas of the asylum system that affect them more?
  - How do you think they could be improved?
20. How far do you think that asylum policy has been mainstreamed or linked into other policy areas (e.g. child welfare and protection policies)?

***Section 7: Experiences of Afghan unaccompanied asylum seeking minors***

21. What is your perception about the main factors that motivate Afghan unaccompanied minors to seek asylum?
22. What are the key issues or challenges facing Afghan unaccompanied minors in their country of origin?
23. What are the main challenges they face upon their arrival in Greece?
  - Particular challenges that are greater than others
24. How does unaccompanied minors’ treatment on arrival affect their wellbeing?

25. Do you think that asylum seeking young people are given adequate opportunities to discuss their experiences when they arrive in Greece?
26. What are the processes and/or factors that aid or hinder their welfare as residents in Greece?
  - Processes and/or factors that are related to welfare, asylum and integration policies.
  - Processes and/or factors that are related to the community they live.
27. Could you please give an example (anonymously) of an Afghan unaccompanied minor who is doing well?
  - If yes, why is that?
28. Could you please give an example of an Afghan unaccompanied minor who is not doing well?
  - If yes, why is that?
29. Do you think that Afghan unaccompanied asylum seeking minors are given enough opportunities to participate in decisions for their lives and their future?
30. From your own experience from working with Afghan unaccompanied minors, what do you see as their main strengths?
  - In what ways do you think they should be assisted in order to make the best use of these strengths for their lives?
31. What are your priority issues/goals for the future in relation to your work?

***Section 8: Attitudes towards Afghan unaccompanied minors***

32. What is your general perception of the public understanding and attitudes in relation to asylum issues?
  - Public attitudes and responses towards asylum seekers.
  - Incidents and attitudes that indicate welcoming feelings/feelings of hostility towards asylum seekers.
  - Any actions/strategies taken for the integration of asylum seekers and promotion of community cohesion?
33. What is your understanding about the main attitudes towards Afghan unaccompanied asylum seeking minors in the community?
  - How do you think the presence of Afghan unaccompanied minors is perceived by the people of the community?
  - Could you give some examples (anonymously) of 'good' attitudes that reflect 'hospitality or philoxenia' towards Afghan unaccompanied minors by the people in the community?
  - Could you give some examples (anonymously) of 'hostile' or 'xenophobic' attitudes towards Afghan unaccompanied minors by the people in the community?

## Appendix 6: Interview topic guide (to public figures)

*General Guide (Given the diverse role of each interviewee, changes will be made accordingly):*

*Name of representative:*

*Name of Organization/Unit/Authority/ Service:*

*Role of representative:*

*Profession:*

*Nationality:*

*Length of working experience within the organization/authority/service:*

*Level of involvement of the organization into issues affecting unaccompanied asylum seeking minors (direct/indirect):*

1. What is your role in your current working position?
2. How is your work related to asylum issues?
3. What do you think of the people who seek asylum in Greece (Afghan UM in particular) ?
4. What do you see as the main issues created by the arrival of unaccompanied minors who seek asylum in Greece?
5. Do you identify any particular issues given the current situation of economic crisis in Greece?
  - If yes, how do you think these issues affect the lives of Afghan unaccompanied minors?
6. How do you think these issues affect the lives of local people?
7. How do you think these issues could be tackled?
8. What do you think are the main needs of Afghan unaccompanied asylum seeking minors?
9. Do you think their needs are largely being met by organizations/authorities/services?
  - Which unmet needs, if any, do you think are most important?
10. How do you think local authorities respond to the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors?
11. What do you think of the current asylum system in Greece?
12. From your experience, what do you think of the treatment of unaccompanied minors in Greece?
13. What do you think of the attitudes of local people towards Afghan unaccompanied minors?
14. Could you give any example (anonymously) of local people who have responded positively (e.g. helpfully, friendly) to the presence of Afghan unaccompanied minors?
15. Could you give any example (anonymously) of local people who have responded indifferently or even aggressively to the presence of Afghan unaccompanied minors?
16. Is there anyone else that you would recommend speaking to?

## Appendix 7: Services made available to young people

Table 7.2. - Reception centres and the provided services

	Reception Centre A	Reception Centre B	Reception Centre C	Reception Centre D	Reception Centre E
<b>Location</b>	Town (rural)	Town (rural)	City (urban)	Village (rural)	Village (rural)
<b>Capacity (residents)</b>	Up to 80	25	15	30	48
<b>Psycho-social support</b>	1 social worker 1 sociologist	1 social worker 1 psychologist (part time)	2 social workers (1 part-time)	1 psychologist	2 social workers
<b>Legal services</b>	YES 1 legal adviser (part time).	YES 1 legal adviser (part time).	Legal assistance mostly provided by other structures (i.e.: G.C.R. <sup>30</sup> and Lawyer's group).	YES 1 legal adviser on a full time basis (and coordinator of the program).	YES On a case by case legal assistance (provided by an external legal adviser).
<b>Education</b>	The centre aims to register minors at school.	Schooling is not compulsory.	Schooling is compulsory (Minors attend a multi-cultural school.	Schooling is not compulsory (none of the minors interviewed were attending school).	Schooling is compulsory.

<sup>30</sup> Greek Council for Refugees.

	Reception Centre A	Reception Centre B	Reception Centre C	Reception Centre D	Reception Centre E
<b>Greek language courses</b>	In-house on a continuous process by a full-time teacher.	In-house on a continuous basis by a full time teacher.	The classes are organised by other structures (NGOs and volunteers).	In house on a continuous basis, only a few hours per week (two to three).	In-house on a continuous basis by a full time teacher.
<b>English language courses</b>	NO	YES (one hour per week by a volunteer).	NO	NO	YES (not regularly only when the Greek teacher has time).
<b>Classes on minor's native language</b>	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
<b>Interpretation Services</b>	YES (1 interpreter is employed speaking Dari and Urdu).	YES (1 interpreter is employed on a full time basis speaking Dari).	Minors residing in the centre act as interpreters (in some case interpretation is provided by other structures).	YES (1 interpreter is employed speaking Dari).	YES (1 interpreter is employed speaking Dari and Urdu).
<b>Pocket money</b>	YES (3 euros per day)	YES (60 euros per month)	NO	NO	NO
<b>Health Services</b>	Local health services, In-house nurse.	Local health services.	Local health services.	Local health services.	Local health services, In-house nurse.

	Reception Centre A	Reception Centre B	Reception Centre C	Reception Centre D	Reception Centre E
<b>Employment</b>	Not promoted.	Actively promoted (Minors who work do not possess social security and work permit).	Actively promoted especially for minors over the age of 16 (they possess a social security and a work permit).	Not actively promoted (Minors who work do not possess a social security and a work permit).	Not actively promoted.
<b>Leisure, sports, arts, educational and other activities</b>	Minors participate in sports and leisure activities of the community (local gym and computing) on an occasional basis.	Minors participate in a local football club and constantly they are engaged in sport, music and leisure activities. Excursions and cultural events are organised usually on a monthly basis and according to funding.	Minors participate actively in sport, leisure and educational activities of the community. Most of these activities are organised by other structures (NGOs).	Not actively engaged in leisure activities of the local community. Events, excursions and activities are organised according to funding.	Sports activities are provided by an employed gym instructor on a full time basis. Occasionally, minors participate in leisure activities of the local community.