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"The Best Risky Point": Agency and Decision-Making in Young Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers' Stories of Leaving Home and Travelling to Australia

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ABSTRACT

Seeking asylum is a perilous endeavour with unpredictable border crossings, protection prospects, and settlement outcomes. Young unaccompanied asylum seekers face even greater risks. Yet exclusively characterizing them as vulnerable or passive ignores their agency in making choices in a range of unique, dynamic, and challenging circumstances. In this article, we use deep ethnographic methodology to amplify young asylum seekers' voices, examining their capacity to enact agency along the asylum journey. We employ Bourdieu's non-doxic contexts and Jackson's "border situations" to describe the unstable environments young people navigate at home and during their journey to Australia.

Our findings reveal a nuanced picture of young people both as objects of other people's decisions (with reduced agency) and as highly engaged in dynamic decision-making during their journey to Australia (with more salient agency). These findings indicate the importance of research methods that steer away from fixed assumptions around vulnerability and victimhood to recognize the agentic capacity of young people to make life-defining decisions even as they find themselves in transnational border situations that seek to control and constrain them.

KEYWORDS

unaccompanied young asylum seekers; asylum decision-making; asylum journeys; agency; vulnerability; non-doxic situations; border situations

RESUMÉ

Chercher l'asile est souvent une entreprise grandement risquée et périlleuse, la traversée des frontières, les perspectives d'obtenir la protection et l'issue de la l'établissement étant imprévisibles. Pour les jeunes demandeurs d'asile non-accompagnés, les risques sont encore plus prononcés. Cependant, les qualifier exclusivement de vulnérables ou de passifs revient à ignorer leur capacité à faire des choix dans une série de circonstances uniques, dynamiques et difficiles. Dans cet article, nous utilisons une méthodologie ethnographique approfondie pour amplifier les voix des jeunes demandeurs d'asile, en examinant leur capacité à agir tout au long du parcours d'asile. Nous utilisons la notion de contextes non-doxiques de Bourdieu et les «situations frontalières» (*border situations*) pour décrire des environnements instables dans lesquels les jeunes se trouvent dans leur pays d'origine et pendant leur voyage vers l'Australie.

Nos résultats révèlent une image nuancée des jeunes qui sont à la fois objets des décisions d'autrui (avec une agentivité limitée) et fortement engagés dans une prise de décision dynamique au cours de leur voyage vers l'Australie (avec une agentivité plus importante). Ces résultats divergents montrent l'importance des méthodes de recherche qui s'écartent des hypothèses fixes sur la vulnérabilité et le statut de victime pour reconnaître la capacité des jeunes à prendre des décisions déterminantes pour leur vie, et ce même lorsqu'ils se trouvent dans des situations frontalières transnationales contraignantes.

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2021) estimates that there are over 150,000 unaccompanied children seeking asylum globally, a number that has risen consistently in recent decades (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019; Horning et al., 2020). As children under 18 years of age who have undertaken the journey to seek asylum without a parent or adult guardian (UNHCR, 2021), unaccompanied asylum seekers are rightly the focus of international concern and attention (Robinson & Gifford, 2019). Descriptions, definitions, and policies dealing with young people seeking asylum are contained within documents of international human rights and refugee laws, human rights frameworks, and key institutions, yet these documents and policies only categorize and instruct; they do not render anything of young people's lived experiences. The diversity and complexity of the experiences of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum are not widely understood (United Nations Children's Fund, 2016, 2017, 2018), particularly in the Australian context.

Unaccompanied young people seeking asylum share three intersecting and distinct traits of assumed vulnerability: they are children, they are asylum seekers (escaping economic, political, and social conditions of war and poverty), and they are unaccompanied. In transit, they often need to navigate uncertainty, extreme physical danger, long periods of waiting, and harsh treatment by people smugglers. If intercepted by immigration authorities, they are likely to encounter punitive management regimes that include immigration detention and restrictive visa conditions. It is vital to acknowledge the vulnerabilities of young people seeking asylum alone (Kohli & Mather, 2003). We argue, however, that exclusively conceptualizing young people seeking asylum through the lens of vulnerability misses an important opportunity to understand them as complex, agentic individuals making choices in a range of unique and dynamic circumstances.

Unaccompanied young people who travel to Australia by boat face an especially challenging policy landscape. Australia's management of asylum seekers who travel by boat has been globally criticized and described as "the most brutal immigration regime in the developed world" (Laughland qtd. in Laney et al., 2016, p. 135). Since the 1990s, mainstream political and media discourse has been hostile and xenophobic, resulting in increasingly tough policies (Gibney, 2004). The young people in this study were held in immigration detention and released after several months on permanent or temporary protection visas (TPVs). Permanent protection visas allow asylum seekers to begin their life in Australia with a degree of normalcy, including the ability to access government-funded health care, mental health services, government-funded tertiary education and student loan schemes, and government-funded housing. They also have full, unconditional access to employment and work rights, as well as a pathway to citizenship not unlike that of any other migrant living in Australia. In contrast, asylum seekers on TPVs do not have these aforementioned rights and access and, as such, can experience social isolation due to their inability to participate in work and study and confusion and uncertainty about their futures in Australia (Fleay et al., 2016).

Border protection and the issue of managing asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat has been a dominant feature of the election platforms and policy direction of successive Australian governments of the past 20 years. Academics and asylum seeker advocates argue, however, that the notion of risk that dominates Australia's social and political

discourse of border protection is greatly exaggerated. There is an overt incongruence between the relative insignificance of the problem and the power and political volatility that it is ascribed. While research shows that there is a widespread perception in the community that the number of boat arrivals to Australia is problematic, Australia's recent history shows that the phenomena has been disproportionally portrayed and used as a divisive political issue (Phillips & Spinks, 2013). Certainly, the number of asylum seekers Australia has hosted is comparatively modest in the global context. A review of literature about the negative public perceptions of asylum seekers in Australia by Laney and her colleagues (2016, p. 137) identifies a "seamless link" between perceptions of threat, illegitimacy, and instability in the minds of the public with the depiction of asylum seekers in the media. The public's concerns about asylum seekers' lack of assimilation and the "Islamization" of Australia are strong drivers of most negative attitudes towards asylum seekers (Muller, 2016, p. 11). Furthermore, it is primarily young Muslim men, not unlike those involved in this study, who have found themselves in the crossfire of Western perceptions of who should, and who should not, be welcomed into their countries and communities (Browning, 2007; Laughland, 2014).

In 2016 and 2017, we interviewed 25 young people who had sought asylum in Australia as unaccompanied minors between 2010 and 2013. The participants were young Afghan men between 18 and 23 years of age who were living in Australia on either permanent visas or TPVs. In this article, we report on the key findings relating to two areas of this research: the reasons young people left their home to seek asylum and their individual roles in the decision to do so, as well as their experiences travelling

to Australia. We found significant heterogeneity in the roles young people played in the decision to leave their home to seek asylum in Australia. Far from being passive subjects, most of the participants were highly engaged in the decision to leave home, and almost half reported making the decision themselves—either advocating their parents to let them travel or leaving without their parents' support. Similarly, the young people displayed high levels of agency throughout the journey itself, despite the many challenges they faced. While this does not negate their vulnerability, nor the risky nature of their circumstances, they were nevertheless able to make decisions within the constraining circumstances in which they found themselves.

We employ Bourdieu's (1977) notion of non-doxic contexts and Jackson's (2005) "border situations" to describe the instability of the environments young people navigate at home and during their journey to Australia. Non-doxic border situations are contexts of uncertainty and risk, in which young people make decisions without being able to predict the outcomes of their actions. Yet, despite this uncertainty, these decisions emerge as powerful expressions of agency that can form the foundations for greater resilience during the resettlement process. For us to understand the agency young people possess within border situations, it is vital that they are able to communicate the complexity of these experiences. As such, this study devised an original narrative methodology that draws upon McAdams & Bowman's (2001) redemptive and contaminant narrative types as a conceptual framework.

This article is organized into five sections. First, it provides an overview of current research on unaccompanied young people seeking asylum and the question of agency in their decisions to leave home and dur-

ing transit. Second, the article explains the concept of a non-doxic border situation that provides the conceptual framework for our analysis. Third, it sets out the original narrative methodology that allowed young people to communicate the complexity of their experience. The fourth section presents our findings, initially of the experiences of young people making decisions to leave home, and then of their experiences during transit. Finally, we consider the implications of these findings for the way scholars, advocates, and policy-makers respond to unaccompanied young people seeking asylum.

VICTIMS WITHOUT AGENCY? RESEARCH ON UNACCOMPANIED YOUNG PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM

Scholarship about asylum seekers often has a strong focus on structural elements that constrain the agency of people seeking asylum and can thus render them vulnerable (Celikaksoy & Wadensjo, 2019; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Menjivar & Perreira, 2019). The narrative of vulnerability focuses on the cumulative experiences of adversity embedded in the asylum seeker experience. Unaccompanied young people, as children who have experienced trauma, are particularly susceptible to narratives of this nature (Lems et al., 2020; Rodriguez & Dobler, 2021). However, when young asylum seekers' experiences are considered within the longer time frame of the migration journey and settlement story, the very factors that make a young person vulnerable can also contribute to accounts of surprising resourcefulness and resilience (Meloni, 2020).

Recent research on the reasons young people leave home to seek asylum include experiences of war and armed conflict, gang violence, and direct persecution (Bhabha & Crock, 2006; Correa-Velez et al., 2017; Horning et al., 2020; Moleiro & Roberto, 2021;

Vervliet et al., 2015). Young people also leave home for reasons associated with their family situations: for example, a parent dying or being imprisoned, or the need to reconnect with family who have already made the journey (McAuliffe & Koser, 2017). Many young people seeking asylum alone are also running away from the threat of recruitment into military or religious groups or from undesired situations after being orphaned, including forced labour and exploitation (Moleiro & Roberto, 2021). Research by the United Nations Children's Fund (2018) of over 4,000 young people in Asia, Africa, and Europe found two thirds were forced to leave their home because of conflict and violence, while the remaining third were motivated by the search for education and relief from poverty. Complex regional and geopolitical events, both historical and contemporary, have created a situation where the migration of young Afghan men has become commonplace, so much so that it has been described as "a necessary stage in their existence, a rite of passage to adulthood and a step toward manhood" (Monsutti, 2007, p. 167).

There is conflicting evidence in international research on the question of who makes the decision for young people to seek asylum (Horning et al., 2020; Vervliet et al., 2015). For example, in an Australian study, Bhabha & Crock (2006, p. 52) found that "a remarkable feature [of the 85 unaccompanied asylum seeker's cases they analyzed] was the lack of involvement of the young person in the decision-making process." This finding was supported by Correa-Velez, Nardone, and-Knoetze's (2017) study of young Afghan men's journeys to Australia that found that they had no role in the decision to seek asylum (see also Nardone & Correa-Velez, 2016). Contrasting evidence can be found, however, in scholarship on unaccompanied young people from Central America living

in the United States by Barraza (2005) and Khashu (2010); that on young people from Africa living in Malta by Spiteri (2012, 2015); and research undertaken by the UNHCR (2014) on unaccompanied Afghan children en route to Europe. Young people in all three cohorts were described as having a range of motivations, including being active agents in their decision to seek asylum.

Once the decision to leave home is made, the journeys young people take are often nonlinear and complex, frequently involving the use of people smugglers, exposure to physical risk and violence, periods of detention and deportation, and transit through multiple countries (Lønning, 2020; Lønning & Kohli, 2022). For some, there are many decisions to be made along the way. While the common routes Afghan asylum seekers take towards their asylum destination (from Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Iran through the Southeast Asian countries of Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia) are well documented (Loschmann et al., 2017; McAuliffe & Koser, 2017), the experiences of young people who travel unaccompanied require more attention. This is because despite the challenges they face, unaccompanied young people seeking asylum demonstrate high levels of adaptability and adjustment that protects them from long-term and incapacitating mental health problems (Copolov et al., 2017; O'Higgins, 2019). Moreover, they cultivate and continue to possess skills acquired during their journey that can ultimately facilitate successful settlement into their new home countries (Neve, 2022), including the capacity to attain and retain employment and achieve education and career goals (Celikaksoy & Wadensjo, 2019; Correa-Velez et al., 2010). We argue that this evidence of resilience, which our research confirms, points to a greater level of agency in relation to the constraints of the non-doxic environment of the border situation (Jackson, 2005).

BORDER SITUATIONS: A FRAMEWORK TO LOCATE AGENCY WITHIN STRUCTURE

To better understand the journeys of unaccompanied asylum seekers and the agency that they exhibit, our project employs two key frameworks: Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of doxic and non-doxic situations, and Jackson's (2005, 2011, 2013) application of Bourdieu's concepts in what he calls "border situations." These concepts enable us to describe the constraining environments that young people flee and the unstable and dangerous environments that they traverse on their journey to safety while recognizing young people's ability to make decisions and draw on resources within those contexts.

Bourdieu (1977, p. 72) defines **habitus** as a generative, dynamic, and evolving relationship between the structural and personal elements of lived experience that gives coherence and consistency to personal and social life. Within habitus are various fields: elements of people's lives that have their own rules, schemes, legitimacy, and power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1977). **Fields** are structured social spaces that are experienced intimately, such as families, workplaces, and schools. Each person operates within the structuring spaces of habitus and field by drawing on their **illusio**: their deep, learned knowledge of the workings of the field, and their personal qualities and unique dispositions. As Jackson (2005, p. xxiii) explains, "while habitus defines the field on which a game is played, together with its spoken and unspoken rules, the illusio is our feel for the game, and all those qualities that convince us that it is worth our while to play." Bourdieu (1986) argues that the more power a person has in the form of cultural and social

capital—such as health, education, status, or means—the greater their feel for the game and, importantly, the greater their chances of winning. While people seeking asylum may be actively, or even desperately, invested in the game, their chances of winning are often limited if they lack the minimum cultural capital to give them what Bourdieu describes as pre-emptive power over their futures (Jackson, 2005, p. xxiii) and what this study refers to as **agency**.

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of doxa is concerned with the learned, deep-founded beliefs and values that people take to be self-evident truths about themselves and the world. Doxic situations emerge when illusio, habitus, and the field align: where the relationships between individuals and the complex social environments in which they live are congruous and self-reinforcing. When a situation is doxic, people will typically experience life as harmonious and feel at home: they are safe, their thoughts and behaviours make sense within the dominant culture, and they are able to understand their social environments and roles within them. Additionally, doxic situations provide people with symbolic power that allows them to express agency mediated by various forms of accumulated social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

In contrast, non-doxic social conditions develop when people do not have familiarity with the social schemas that regulate their environments and circumstances. Non-doxic situations can be unknown, unstable, and often hostile social environments. People seeking asylum navigate multiple non-doxic social situations: within their home countries where they face violence and oppression, and, by definition, as they travel through various transit countries and navigate immigration regimes within which their physical and symbolic power and social, cultural, and

economic capital is not only constrained but systematically destroyed (Nipperess & Clark, 2016).

Concerned with how people exercise agency in non-doxic situations, Jackson's existential anthropology examines "humanness as the outcome of a dynamic relationship between circumstances over which we have little control" (2005, p. xi). In what he terms **border situations**, habitus and the field are shifting physical, political, and social landscapes, and any promise of an anticipated doxic social knowledge or currency is elusive.

Unaccompanied young people's experiences of asylum seeking are critical non-doxic moments, consistent with Jackson's idea of a border situation. Although people seeking asylum bring with them diverse skills and knowledge, they are unable to draw upon any of the illusio that only made sense in their previous habitus and field. Expectations that emerged from their habitus are no longer reasonable possibilities, and their illusio—or their knowledge of their identity in relation to the world—is ruptured. They also lack the symbolic power that resides in doxic social situations, and they have very little by way of accumulated social, cultural, or economic capital. The breakdown of habitus and fields in the varied non-doxic social situations experienced by our study's participants is examined as a moment of opportunity that gives rise to diverse outcomes and experiences.

Our study asks how, within non-doxic situations, young people retain their capacity to exhibit agency and make choices about the way they interpret and respond to their experiences. Our findings provide examples of young people as objects of other people's decisions (with little agency) and/or highly engaged in dynamic decision-making during their journey to Australia (with salient agency). Interestingly, our participants exhib-

ited much more agency in decision-making than previous studies have suggested they do. These divergent findings indicate the importance of research methods that recognize how young people can make decisions despite finding themselves in border situations that constrain them.

RESEARCH METHODS

The Participants

In 2016 and 2017, 25 young people who arrived in Australia as unaccompanied asylum seekers shared their stories of leaving home, the journey to Australia, and settlement experiences. All participants were young Afghan men, predominantly of the Hazara ethnic group, who had settled in Australia between 2010 and 2013. At the time of the interviews, they were aged between 18 and 23 years and had lived in Australia between 3 and 7 years. They all reached Australia during a policy period in which their time spent in immigration detention was limited to several months. They transitioned relatively quickly through remote detention centres into community detention, and within several months were living independently in the community. Of the 25 participants, 10 were in tertiary education, 20 were employed, 1 was completing an apprenticeship, and 2 were neither employed nor studying. Fifteen young people were living in Australia as permanent residents (having received permanent protection visas when they reached Australia), and 10 held temporary protection visas (having reached Australia after August 2012, a policy shift reintroduced TPVs for all boat arrivals).

All participants identified themselves as Afghan and Shia Muslim and had spent their childhoods living with their families in their homeland of Afghanistan or, having already been displaced, in Iran or Northern Pakistan. They lived in the state capital cities of Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Hobart, and Canberra and the regional towns of Ballarat and Griffith. The cultural identities and gender of those who participated in this research reflect the general statistics on asylum seeker arrivals to Australia between 2010 and 2013 and is consistent with cohorts in other Australian studies (Correa-Velez et al., 2017). Ethics approval for data collection was granted through the Australian National Ethics Application Form and University Research Ethics in 2015. Rigorous ethical considerations underpinned the task of collecting young people's stories and included strategies related to cross-cultural data collection, harm minimization, privacy, and confidentiality (Vervliet et al., 2015). The participants chose pseudonyms that are used in this article.

Structure, Agency, Contamination, Redemption: A Narrative Methodology

We designed an original methodology to examine how young unaccompanied asylum seekers navigated border situations. The aim was to produce participant-driven biographic narrative data that captured the complexity of individual stories at a discrete moment in time, while acknowledging that stories, and the meaning we ascribe them, evolve over time. The method responds to the challenges of cross-cultural communication and research and the widely recognized ethical complexity of researching young people who are asylum seekers (Vervliet et al., 2015). This innovative methodology contributes to a growing body of research about refugees and asylum seekers that uses ethnographic and narrative methods to privilege personal accounts as authentic means of relating to the world and as a primary source of social knowledge (Lems

et al., 2020). McAdams & Bowman's (2001) classifications for narrative methodologies—structure, agency, contamination, and redemption—were a key influence in the methodology design.

To capture young people's stories, we collected data across three activities. First, each young person constructed a narrative timeline of their childhood, journey to seek asylum, and settlement in Australia. The use of a temporal framework allowed for the development of narrative coherence, where events from past, present, and future were expressed as meaningfully related to each other and central themes could emerge from that narration that integrated lived experiences (McAdams, 2008). The second activity gave each participant the opportunity to control the topic of discussion by choosing from a prepared set of word cards. The researcher presented the participants with 20 different words on cards, written in English and Hazaragi, and asked them to choose 5 to speak about. The choice of words was informed by McAdams & Bowman's (2001) structure, agency, contaminant, and redemptive classifications (McAdams, 2001). The final stage of the interview involved four open-ended questions on the themes of agency, decision-making, and participants' sense of the future.

KEY FINDINGS

Young People's Roles in the Decision to Leave Home

For some of the study's participants, home was a doxic environment, one in which they had social fluency, a degree of agency, and cultural capital. For many others, however, home could be described as a non-doxic situation, characterized by instability, change, and danger. This was particularly the case for those young people whose families had

already been displaced (e.g., to Pakistan or Iran) and whose daily life involved negotiating within a tense and uncertain environment. These classifications of home help us understand the character and circumstances in which the young people made a decision to leave.

The participants had various levels of involvement in the decision to leave home to seek asylum alone: 10 participants made the decision themselves, 7 made the decision with their parents, and the parents of 4 other young people made the decision for them. The participants commonly spoke about their decision to leave home as an expression of agency, hope, and optimism, regardless of whether they made the decision themselves or not. In the following excerpts, Chris (1 of the 10 who made the decision themselves) and Abiden (1 of the 4 whose parents decided for them) describe the circumstances around making the decision to leave.

> That hope was when I come to know that I can get to Australia somehow illegally. It's not really good but still there was a little bit of hope for me that I can get there and start my new life over there. That hope really was, I think, the best risky point for me and the best thing that I have ever decided for my life. (Chris)

> Well, that was my mum who decided, who took that decision. [She said,] "I don't want you to be killed in front of my eyes. So, just go." She knew it was plenty risky … her friends arranged someone. They knew someone who was doing this sort of stuff, I mean, a people smuggler. … And then a week later I started the journey when I was 16 and a half. That was the hardest moment—and I was pretty excited. … I wasn't really mature, but … I would have freedom, I could do my own thing. I didn't know how hard it was going to be, this journey, [but] it was a good experience for me. (Abiden)

While Chris's home life could be described as relatively stable and therefore a doxic situation, Abiden's home environment was clearly non-doxic and becoming increasingly

dangerous over time, leading his mother to make the risky decision for her son to leave.

Another young man, Ali Mahdi, describes how he and his parents made the decision about his future together. Despite being Hazara and living without rights afforded to citizens or any government protection in a diaspora community in a large city in Iran, Ali Mahdi describes his business-owning family as financially and socially comfortable. This cultural capital did not protect the family from an increasingly non-doxic situation, however. Ali Mahdi explains how the growing suspicion of Shia Muslim minorities living in Iran motivated him, the eldest son in a family of mostly married adult sisters, to make the decision to leave Iran:

> [The cops] sent me back to Afghanistan … because I had been living [in Iran] illegally. … But I came back to Iran because I couldn't live in Afghanistan too because of my accent, my looks, the way I put clothes on. … I could be recognized easily. So, I decided to come back to Iran and then my dad said, "In Afghanistan you will face death and in Iran you will face many things, like torture." It was then we decided I must come to Australia.

At the time of interview, Ali Mahdi was living in Melbourne and, in his father's footsteps, was attempting to build his own business. When reflecting on the decision to leave his family and build his life in Australia, Ali Mahdi frames it as one of ambition and independence and describes himself as industrious and hard-working. Throughout the interview, Ali Mahdi described many areas of his life where he acted to maximize the opportunities life in Australia had given him and spoke about his personal responsibility to re-establish the cultural capital he once enjoyed through determination and hard work:

> I believe every second in your life is sort of an opportunity. You shouldn't miss any opportunity, like the opportunity I took to come to Australia. Even in 10 minutes' spare time, I'll try to fill it up by doing something good. I'll see it as an opportunity because who knows that I'll be alive the next day.

In another example of a young person expressing their agency in the decision to seek asylum, MJ describes his motivation to take "one chance" for a better life while bedridden for several months in his family home after being injured in a bomb blast in 2011. During his early childhood, MJ's father died, after which MJ's mother left Afghanistan with her four young children and moved across the border into Quetta, Pakistan, an area MJ calls "Hazaratown." MJ described his mother's ongoing struggle, and his own diminished opportunities, in terms that clearly identified his home environment as a non-doxic situation. These events led him to risk everything by leaving his family to try to reach Australia:

> MJ: I still remember those days, like I was just arguing with my mum, let me go. But she was the one who was saying it's too risky.
>
> Interviewer: So, it was your idea?
>
> MJ: Yeah, it was always my ambition. My mum was not allowing me to go outside of the home, and I was like, how am I going to survive for the rest of my life living here? I just felt like I don't belong here. I felt like this place is not right for me. Finally, I said to my mum, "Mum—I don't want to live for the rest of my life like you, because you guys are working really hard and, in this country, you cannot travel, you cannot go outside. You're not safe." So finally, I made her accept, just to give me one chance. This chance was like, really good. I risked it, but in the end I am here.

Unlike Ali Mahdi and MJ, other participants explained that they had not been involved in the decision to leave home; instead, the increasingly non-doxic environment prompted their parents to act on their behalf. Joey's description illustrates this experience:

> My family decided to send me to Australia—there was target killing and no one can go for a walk, for a job or anything. No one can go to school, because

every day there was like target killing and bomb blasts. So, they decided to send me. They want me to just go somewhere else because they don't want me to stay there.

Like many of the young people interviewed, Joey is still in regular contact with his parents and describes their influence on his life in Australia as significant. Joey expressed complete trust in his parents' decision for him to travel to Australia. His lack of involvement in making the decision did not foreshadow indecision or passivity in his current ambitions. While Joey said he misses his family and the familiarity of his home life, he has found stability in Melbourne, working early mornings at a large flower market, and continues to plan for his future. He has developed illusio and cultural capital in his new environment.

Omai is another example of a young person whose parents made the decision for him within the context of a highly dangerous non-doxic situation:

My father made the decision because in 2013 there was a bomb blast on our road. … We went home, and I saw there was a car in front of the house. I didn't have time to pack up my things. My mum already packed them. My mum went that morning to buy a chicken to cook for me and my grandfather was there, and I took a last photo with him.

Of the participants who indicated that their parent/s made the decision that they would come to Australia, none expressed resentment towards them. Instead, they were able to contextualize the decision within the broader non-doxic situation characterized by violence towards, and oppression of, Afghan minorities in their home countries. They could see their escape as a necessity for survival, an opportunity for safety, and a chance to achieve their ambitions.

Decision-Making in Border Situations: Young People's Stories of Travelling to Australia

The young people in this study described taking diverse pathways to reach Australia, including transit through Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Oman, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The journeys ranged from several days to several months. This is consistent with established knowledge about the routes that asylum seekers take from Afghanistan, northern Pakistan, and Iran to Australia to seek asylum (Loschmann et al., 2017; McAuliffe & Koser, 2017). Many young people described moving through complex situations and arrangements, often accompanied by a people smuggler who was recruited to facilitate their passage to Australia, and travelling alongside other people trying to seek asylum. Smuggler-led journeys included pre-organized flights; car, bus, and boat rides; time spent hiding in hotels or boarding houses; and the use of paperwork provided by the smugglers to the young asylum seekers. Many described periods of being physically jostled between places and processes of which they had little knowledge or understanding. These environments and situations would qualify as Jackson's border situations: unstable and uncertain places in which the young person's illusio or "knowledge of the rules of the game" was significantly eroded or altogether worthless.

For a small number of young people, their facilitated journeys to Australia were executed efficiently by a people smuggler and resulted in the young person reaching Australia within a few days or weeks of leaving their home. The following accounts from Sayed and Ash illustrate passages from their home to Christmas Island immigration detention

(in Australian territory) that were relatively quick and straightforward:

> I was a few days in Karachi [Pakistan]. After that we went to Malaysia—we just stayed 24 hours. After 24 hours, they sent me by smuggler to the shore, to the bottom of Malaysia. So that was the first four days. It was very quick and very well—I was very lucky. I was then in Indonesia on the shore for eight days. Then someone spoke with the smuggler, and they told me, "Come, we are going to Australia." I came to Australia, Christmas Island, in just two days. It was really quick, and it was like fun for me. (Sayed)

> I have never been in other places. This is just my first journey so it's quite exciting and dangerous because we come to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia without a visa. We come illegally. We don't know the language well, so we are scared from the police and from the people. The thing is we are just sort of like an animal—we just followed the smell. (Ash)

When young people included stories about travelling with people smugglers, the length of the journey and the effectiveness of the smuggler impacted how they described their experience. A smuggler who was able to facilitate a relatively quick passage from their home to their boat and from Indonesia to Australia produced narratives of adventure, as was seen in Sayed's description. The border situation, in Jackson's terms, was quickly traversed and left behind.

In contrast, other young people described navigating the passage to Australia quite independently. Some began their journey with the assistance of a people smuggler who secured their flights to a transit country like Thailand or Malaysia, after which they were able to abandon the smuggler, or were themselves abandoned, and forged on with the assistance of people they met along the way. These instances commonly included extended periods of displacement in transit countries, during which the young people developed social capital in the form of relationships, routines, and language (Bourdieu, 1986; Sampson & Gifford, 2015). In some

cases, however, the border situation was more dangerous, and some young people spent time in jails and immigration detention centres after being captured for travelling illegally.

For many of the young people in the study, the greatest confusion, fear, physical risk, and harm in the border situations came from the adults they encountered, including both people smugglers and police. In the instances of protracted and disjointed journeys, young people commonly described their experiences with smugglers and police as both emotionally and physically distressing. The following example illustrates this:

> Morgan: It was extremely hard. So, the smugglers put me and my friends—there were so many other people in a room, and they just lock us in—we could not move freely, and I was afraid because I had no visa. The police could catch me and put me in jail. I was only 15 and I couldn't speak English at all. It was so hard for me.

> Interviewer: So, you didn't really know what was happening?

> Morgan: Yes, definitely. On the way from Malaysia to Indonesia I nearly passed away. The smuggler was really an angry person, so he just put us in the room for a long time, then one night he came in and took us to the jungle and we didn't eat at all, so I was so hungry, and I went in the jungle for two hours. After two hours then we got on a boat. So, we travelled around five to seven hours on a speedboat, and it was running really heavily. I was hungry, then I got a fever. When I got off the boat it was muddy, and I fell in it, it was so deep. I hardly got out of that. After that another smuggler put me in the car and the music was really loud, and I was continuously vomiting, and I had a headache, so I told him several times to please stop the car or I will die. He didn't stop the car at all. So, I travelled in that condition for about eight hours, and he just brought us to an isolated home in the middle of the jungle. That house was terrible. There were many cockroaches. The windows had no fly screens so even the insects can freely go and come out.

Morgan's story demonstrates the bewilderment of the border situation. What he de-

scribed is a non-doxic situation, comprising pain, risk, and fear: circumstances he lacked the tools to navigate. However, once he was separated from the people smuggler, he connected with other young people and began making decisions about how to look after himself and establish some social capital in Indonesia and how to secure a place on a boat to Australia. Morgan described using his intelligence and resourcefulness to help him decide what to do, including learning some of the local language and joining the community of other young men living on Indonesia's southern shores planning their passage. At the time of the interview, Morgan was in his second year of an engineering degree program (under a full academic scholarship) and described himself as hard-working and ambitious. Despite his gruelling and physically dangerous experiences during his journey to seek asylum, his final story is one of self-described success. Descriptions of journeys like Morgan's, where parts of the journey are extremely difficult, were common. Nonetheless, these stories were often interwoven with narratives of ambition, determination, and decision-making, in which the young person drew on internal or external resources to extract themselves from the non-doxic situation.

Within these stories of chaos, fear, and risk, young people had to make decisions about how they could proceed. Where would they go next? Who could they reach out to for help or information? How could they ultimately progress in their journey? Four young people—Omai, MJ, Amir, and Dawood—navigated the non-doxic border situations with similar resourcefulness and agency. Omai, travelling at 15 years of age with his cousin, was dumped in what he described as a "rubbish factory" by the smuggler his father had organized. Omai and his cousin found a taxi nearby, were robbed of $500 at knifepoint,

and spent hours walking the streets of a foreign city (which he could not identify) trying to find a hotel, a place to eat, and a phone to call his father. MJ, a more mature and educated 17-year-old, spent seven months in Indonesia trying to secure a boat to Australia. During this time, he learned the local language, took up smoking and drinking, and established himself as a source of information (both of local knowledge and the news he was able to translate) for other Afghan men who arrived in the region. MJ described a night when he and his friends were caught on the beach by police. He recalled the 16 of them in the back of a police van on their way, he presumed, to immigration detention, when someone opened a sliding door and he jumped from the moving vehicle, falling into a waterway, and injuring his ankle. Amir described several stints in immigration detention during transit, from each of which he escaped. One of his escapes took place during a tsunami that he said almost killed him. And finally, Dawood, who was the fittest of the men on his boat to Australia, found himself clinging to a rope between their sinking boat and a Chinese naval ship during a storm that threatened to capsize their boat and kill everyone on board.

It is notable that many of our study's participants transformed these challenging, protracted, and nonlinear journeys to Australia into a positive, ambitious mindset once they eventually secured a resettlement place and were able to establish themselves. Abiden and 007's reflections show how the non-doxic border situation of their journey to Australia became a wellspring for their later ambition.

> I was 16 and a half, and that journey was the hardest moment—but I was still pretty excited. … This journey—it was a good experience for me, I got pretty mature. I've got a saying in my own life—defeat is the first step to success. So, if you don't fail in your life, it's pretty hard for you to succeed. If

you are wise, and you are defeated, take it positive and then it's going to turn into success. (Abiden)

[On the journey to Australia,] I've had so many tough times, the times that I even sometimes thought it was kind of impossible for me to achieve my goal to get to Australia because of the situation I was in. But luckily, I don't know, somehow, every day in those tough times and those difficult situations make me stronger and wiser about the future and make me, yes, just support me, and encourage me to work harder towards my goals and dreams to get here. (007)

We give the final statement in this section to Che, who like Abiden and 007 described how the challenges of his protracted journey to Australia became a source of strength as he established a new life in Australia. In describing his four and a half months in Indonesia waiting to board a boat to Australia, he said:

There's always fear. Fear of everything. But then there's opportunity. When you see opportunity and when you have that opportunity then there's happiness because you know that something's going to happen. … Then that makes you strong. That gives you more confidence. It gives you more courage. You step up and then it's how you see your future, how you see the pathways. It makes you strong. It's powerful. You are powerful. It depends on how you think. I'm the one who's in control of my future.

CONCLUSION

While unaccompanied young people often experience cultural, structural, and personal risks along the perilous journey of seeking asylum, their age and vulnerability do not necessarily preclude them from acting with agency. Within non-doxic border situations, the young people in this study demonstrated that they could retain, and indeed develop, their capacity to make choices about the ways they interpret, respond to, and navigate complex situations. Their accounts demonstrate how their attitudes and actions can disrupt the non-doxic fields that

constrained them. This does not fully transform the non-doxic situations into doxic ones—they remain as dangerous and unstable as ever—but neither do young people lose their agency within these situations. Indeed, we often found that their very act of surviving the journey to Australia provided young people with a wellspring of strength from which they continued to draw as they established new lives in Australia.

Narrative methodologies that allow people to tell their full story are a vital tool for understanding these nuanced and complex accounts of agency, structure, contamination, and redemption. We argue that innovative methods, such as those we have deployed for this study, are critical for understanding young people's asylum experiences outside the constraints of the agency–vulnerability dichotomy by allowing young people to tell their own full stories. By their very nature, young people's asylum stories are full of instances of structure and contamination. But within specific contextual circumstances, these same young people show they can respond to these moments with agency and redemption. Framing young asylum seekers as victims overlooks their individual agency in the face of considerable constraints. As one participant, Chris, described, "[When] we've got a little bit of spark of brightness, we just really go towards it." Government policies and refugee support agencies must recognize these acts and narratives of agency and implement policies and practices that harness and strengthen them.

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