

# Agency and Silence: Young People Seeking Asylum Alone in the UK

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## Abstract

This paper presents findings from a Department of Health-funded study into the emotional well-being of young people seeking asylum on their own in the UK. It discusses how young people accounted for only partly disclosing information about the circumstances surrounding their quest for asylum and subsequent aspects of their lives since arriving in the UK. Foucault's panoptic mechanism and its focus on the effects of power as dispersed through scrutiny are applied as a theoretical framework to contextualise these experiences. The paper shows that young people's decisions about how much of their current or past lives they share with others are more complex than indicated by earlier research. The paper argues that, for many young people, the predominant impetus for selective disclosure was a desire to retain a degree of agency as they navigated their way through immigration, asylum, social care, health and education systems and simultaneously sought to establish themselves in the social world. These findings have implications for how social care (and other) professionals engage and work with young people seeking asylum alone.

**Keywords:** Asylum, unaccompanied young people, silence, scrutiny, agency

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## Introduction

Every year, several thousand children and young people under the age of eighteen arrive on their own in the UK to seek asylum without the care or support of parents or other relatives. These young people come under the care of the local authority within which they arrive. The vast majority

of these separated young people are found to not meet the criteria for asylum under the Refugee Convention (1951, and amended in 1963). Nonetheless, until recently, they have normally been granted a period of discretionary leave to stay in the UK (usually until they reach the age of eighteen). Current policy developments, however (Home Office, 2007; Border and Immigration Agency (BIA), 2008), signal a more stringent asylum process applying to unaccompanied children and young people (Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (ILPA), 2007) and indicate that these privileges may be curtailed for some.

In the past few years, these young people have become the focus of increasing legislative, policy and research attention. An extensive body of research has documented the extreme trauma and upheaval to which many refugee children and young people have been subjected before fleeing their home countries, during flight or after they arrive in host countries. Research demonstrates that these experiences may be more extreme for unaccompanied young people seeking asylum who have limited protection and support from adults (Fazel and Stein, 2002; Rutter, 2003; Thomas *et al.*, 2004; Huegler, 2005). There is substantial evidence to indicate that many refugee children and young people from different cultures manifest symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health problems (Hodes, 2000, 2002; Ehntholt and Yule, 2006; Dyregrov and Yule, 2006).

Earlier trauma is also known to be exacerbated by the stresses and uncertainties placed on refugee children and young people as a result of the asylum-seeking and immigration processes to which they are subjected (Fazel and Stein, 2002; Steel *et al.*, 2004; Kralj and Goldberg, 2005). The particular stresses experienced by unaccompanied young people as they approach their eighteenth birthday have also been documented (Wade *et al.*, 2005; ILPA, 2004; Refugee Council, 2005).

Previous research into the social care of children and young people seeking asylum on their own has tended to centre on the perspectives of social care professionals (see, e.g. Kohli and Mather, 2003; Kohli, 2006a, 2006b; Wade *et al.*, 2005) and the moral and professional dilemmas they face in providing appropriate care and support to unaccompanied young people. Various studies have found that many asylum-seeking children and young people appear unable to talk openly to professionals at first, especially about subjects as raw as loss and separation from friends and family (Hek, 2005; Kohli, 2006a; Wade *et al.*, 2005). Young people can be silenced by language or cultural barriers (Craig *et al.*, 2006; Gronseth, 2006); or may seek to protect themselves by being guarded about what they tell others (Kohli, 2006a; Okitikpi and Aymer, 2003). Many professionals have also concluded that some young people are told by family members or agents who have organised their journeys to the UK to tell a particular story to assist their claim for asylum. This 'silence' maintained by some young people has been said to complicate the role of social

workers, sometimes placing them in the invidious position of not fully trusting in the child or young person's account of the circumstances surrounding their flight from their countries of origin or of how they came to arrive on their own to seek asylum (Kohli, 2006a).

This paper presents findings from a Department of Health-funded study into the emotional well-being of young people seeking asylum on their own in the UK (Chase *et al.*, 2008). It discusses how young people accounted for why they only partly shared information with others about the circumstances surrounding their quest for asylum and the factors influencing their decisions to disclose or remain silent about these aspects of their lives. While some described not sharing crucial aspects of their asylum-seeking experience with social workers, they were equally as reticent with other significant people in their lives including friends, foster-carers, medical or other professionals. More importantly, however, the paper argues that for many young people in the study, the predominant impetus for this selective disclosure was a desire to retain a degree of agency as they navigated their way through a complex web of immigration, asylum, social care, health and education systems, and simultaneously sought to establish themselves in the social world.

Because of its focus on processes of surveillance and the effects of power as dispersed through scrutiny, Foucault's notion of the panoptic mechanism (Foucault, 1975) offers a potentially useful framework within which to understand young people's experiences of seeking asylum on their own. In particular, it may have utility within any set of social arrangements in which the actions and behaviours of a few (who lack power) are subjected to scrutiny by those who are more privileged. As such, it offers a tool to critically examine issues of power, marginalisation and the nature of knowledge. Within the context of asylum-seeking, many young people described themselves as being under regular scrutiny. Such scrutiny was multi-faceted, being variably exercised by social care professionals, immigration officials, other statutory sector personnel, as well as by the media and the general public. Within these arrangements, young people find different ways of engaging with the 'omnipotence' of the surveillance and strive to make sense of the structures through which they are channelled. The silencing therefore witnessed by others around them, it is argued, may be more about resisting the pressures placed on them by these multiple and insistent systems of surveillance and constructing a future for themselves that is uncoupled from the trauma of the past than it is about maintaining secrecy or being deceptive about their experiences.

## **Aims of the study**

The overall purpose of the current study was to explore factors affecting the emotional well-being of young people seeking asylum on their own in

England. The main research questions examined in the course of the study were: what factors are perceived to positively and/or negatively impact on the emotional well-being of unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum in England? And what types of health and social care provision and services may be useful in promoting the emotional well-being and mental health of unaccompanied children and young people?

## **Methods**

In total, fifty-four young people participated in the research. The majority (80 per cent) of participants were identified through a single London local authority in which there were a high number of young people seeking asylum and where there was a degree of specialist knowledge and expertise among professionals of working with this group. Young people were recruited to the study through three different specialist social work teams working with unaccompanied young people—reflecting different age groups of young people (under sixteen years; sixteen to seventeen years; and eighteen years and older). This provided a balance of young people supported under different care arrangements, including foster-care, residential care, semi-independent housing and independent living arrangements.

In order to provide broader contextual understanding, the remaining research participants (20 per cent) were identified through two main routes: a national independent advocacy service offering specialist provision for unaccompanied young people seeking asylum and London-based voluntary sector agencies. All of these young people were looked after (or had been looked after) by a number of different local authorities outside of the main authority hosting the research study.

Research participants originally came from a total of eighteen different countries (boys and young men originating most commonly from Afghanistan and girls and young women from Eritrea). The age of young people on arrival ranged from nine to seventeen years for boys and young men and twelve to seventeen years for girls and young women. At the time at which they were interviewed, the age range was eleven to twenty-three years and thirteen to twenty-one years, respectively.

Informed verbal consent was given by young people participating in the study. All young people were offered the option of an interpreter during the research interview, although only two Putonghua-speaking young women from China chose to have an interpreter present. Young people were asked to talk about their experiences since coming to the UK and to focus on the things that had made them feel well and happy since arriving here and the things that had made them feel sad or had created difficulties for them. The avoidance of terms such as ‘mental health’ or ‘mental health difficulties’ was intentional, and enabled young people to talk openly about

their lives and well-being in an integrated way (see, e.g. [Aggleton et al., 1998](#)). A topic guide was used to draw out key aspects of young people's lives and experiences, although a key principle informing the methodology was that the interviews were led by young people themselves, allowing them to focus only on those aspects of their experiences that they were happy to share with the researchers.

Discussions with young people lasted between forty-five minutes and three hours. Members of the research team<sup>1</sup> frequently met a young person on more than one occasion, for example an initial conversation in a neutral venue such as a café followed by a more in-depth interview at a later date, sometimes supplemented by an additional telephone discussion. In total, more than eighty interactions took place between the researchers and the young people taking part in the study. Detailed notes were made of initial introductory meetings with young people and demographic data were systematically recorded. The main interviews with young people were recorded, using a digital or tape recorder and then transcribed. When young people did not want the interview to be recorded, detailed notes were written instead. A National Health Service Local Research Ethics Committee and the Director of Children's Services in the participating authority granted ethical approval for the research to be conducted.

A thematic analysis was conducted of all interview transcripts using the constant comparative method ([Glaser and Strauss, 1967](#)) to identify recurrent themes. Emerging themes were then checked for 'negative instances', or examples that contradicted these themes ([Merriam, 2002](#); [Seale, 2002](#)) prior to their inclusion in the findings.

## **Foucault's panoptic mechanism: a theoretical framework for understanding the reported experiences of young people seeking asylum?**

[Foucault \(1975\)](#) borrowed from the architectural features of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon design of prison institutions to develop a theory of surveillance and to illustrate how economic, juridico-political and scientific systems, like physical structures, were constructed in ways that give power and control to the few over the many, ultimately creating a disciplinary society. An institution—or indeed system—designed according to the Panopticon affords the perception of constant surveillance of those within it—prison inmates, people in mental hospitals, school children or factory workers, for example—even if those being observed cannot physically see whether or not they are being watched, or by whom. Foucault maintained that the strength of the Panopticon was 'so to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action' ([Foucault, 1975](#), p. 2001). A disciplinary society establishes and

maintains order through three key processes: *hierarchical surveillance* through which those in control develop knowledge of individuals on a continued and cumulative basis; *normalising judgement* or continuous evaluation of conduct allowing the application of impositions or privileges; and *examination*, which combines the former processes to differentiate between individuals and judge them (Foucault, 1977, cited in Parton, 1991). As will be argued below, there were elements from the accounts given by young people in the current study that strongly resonate with the characteristics of the panoptic mechanism and the disciplinary society more broadly, and which may have important implications for how young people respond and relate to social care professionals.

## Findings

### The branding of the ‘asylum-seeker’

For most of the young people in the study, the decision to leave their countries of origin had not been made by themselves, but rather by some other significant adult in their lives—usually a relative or close family friend. In the majority of cases, an intermediary or agent was paid a fee to transport the child or young person from their country of origin, and many young people reported having no prior knowledge of where they would travel to, or by what means. Aspects of what might be seen as the workings of a panoptic mechanism can be identified in the narratives of young people seeking asylum from the moment they came into contact with immigration systems in the UK, usually upon arrival at a major airport. From here onwards, young people frequently described finding themselves catapulted into a series of interlocking systems of surveillance and control that were completely alien to them but that had been set up to identify, label, oversee and monitor. Central to the workings of these mechanisms was the categorisation of young people as ‘asylum-seekers’ (or otherwise)—labels that many soon recognised, and fundamentally defined other people’s perceptions and treatment of them. Examples of surveillance, judgement and ‘othering’ abounded in young people’s descriptions and analysis of their subsequent experiences.

Claude,<sup>2</sup> interviewed at the age of eighteen, originally fled his country, Burundi, in the company of an older brother and sister when he was just five years old. He subsequently spent most of his young life in refugee camps in Tanzania and Malawi, eventually arriving in England alone at the age of fifteen. Claude’s description of his arrival at the airport and his feelings of bewilderment and confusion by the whole asylum process are highly illustrative of hierarchical surveillance. Uncertain of what he should or should not say, he described why he opted to remain silent:

They took me inside, they took picture . . . something like that and they ask me if I come to claim asylum . . . I say, ‘What is asylum?’. I had no idea what

is asylum . . . so I just stay like that (remain silent). They just took picture, finger prints and X-ray to see if I've got chest infection . . . But it's hard when you claim asylum here because you don't know what to say. 'Cos for me, I told you, I didn't get interpreter. I didn't know what is asylum—those kinds of things.

Having been to some extent forewarned of the scrutiny to which he would be subjected, Kenneh, aged seventeen, described how he attempted to maintain some control over the situation surrounding his arrival from Liberia at the age of thirteen, despite the fact that he was terrified by the situation. He had heard from other people in Liberia who had been returned from Europe that it was better not to say who you were or where you had come from. He described his first encounter with immigration services:

I just still remember those eyes. I was so scared, yeh?, but I didn't want them to see that I was scared. 'Cos I see worse things yeh? But it was a totally different environment. I didn't even want to tell them my name or where I came from like . . . . But they treat me like an animal—that is the worst thing.

### Resisting the stigma of 'asylum-seeker'

Being defined as an 'asylum-seeker' and the consequent stigma this evoked was ubiquitous in many young people's accounts of their lives in the UK. Kenneh, like other young people participating in the study, was struck very early on by how people seeking asylum were portrayed in the media:

And you come here and the first thing you do is you turn on the TV and see about asylum seekers, anyone would think we are just animals.

Kenneh thus highlights the impact of 'normalising judgements' and evaluations made of people seeking asylum, not only by those overseeing the immigration process, but by society more generally. This had the impact of subjecting all aspects of their lives to varying degrees of scrutiny and judgement.

Miguel had come to England at the age of twelve from Angola. Now aged eighteen, he commented on how negative media representation of 'asylum-seekers' in turn fuelled the assumptions made about himself and others:

It seems like they paint a picture of us as in people who just arrive randomly to leave their country and move to England for no reason . . . and that we are here just to get benefits or something, or get an education. All that is not helping really, I don't think they paint a good picture of asylum-seekers.

Chrisna, aged eighteen years, who had arrived from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) at the age of fifteen, was aware of even the most subtle reactions, of others, on learning that she was seeking asylum:

Sometimes they give you this look, like, 'what are you doing in this country?' They don't want to say it but they are showing you with the look.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, many young people talked of developing strategies to distance themselves from the ‘asylum-seeker’ label or avoid situations in which they would have to answer to it. William, aged nineteen, had arrived in England from the Democratic Republic of Congo when he was seventeen. When asked about how open he was able to be about his asylum-seeking status, his reply was indicative of the normalising judgements he feared from his peers:

No, the British I don't tell them, I don't tell them . . . all of my friends they don't know, they don't know I am an asylum seeker. I just feel, you know . . . I never tell no one. 'Cos they never ask as well. Most of the people think I am French and I never tell no-one I'm French. I just feel embarrassed to tell them . . . 'I have been here for this, blah, blah' . . . it's not quite good.

Malashu, aged seventeen years and from Eritrea, commented on how when she first arrived at the age of fifteen, she had observed other young people being teased and called names because they were asylum-seekers. Not wanting to be treated in the same way, she said she told no one about her situation, not even her friends.

For slightly different reasons, Zemar (aged twenty), who had arrived from Afghanistan four years earlier, explained why he felt the need to keep his asylum-seeking status a secret from his peers. His response exemplifies how the surveillance and panopticism of the asylum process is central to his own world but is essentially meaningless to others not subject to immigration control:

I have to lie in some situations . . . I lie because I don't want to have fuss on my ear. I don't want to have to explain to anyone. How can I explain to say a British born 19 year-old man what indefinite leave to remain is, what exceptional leave to remain is, what discretionary leave to remain is, what the appeals process is? That's the sort of questions they would ask you, and they can't get their heads around it.

Despite their efforts to disassociate themselves from being an asylum-seeker, however, young people frequently faced procedures and processes that meant that their status was undeniable. These experiences were indicative of the pervasive nature of the panoptic mechanism and the reactions it provoked in others not subjected to its gaze. Mesaret, aged eighteen, having arrived from Ethiopia at the age of sixteen, described one example of this:

What really gets me down is the term ‘asylum-seeker’. When I tell people, I feel really uncomfortable. I have to fill in a form at college and I have to say I am an asylum-seeker. I see their faces change.

### Selective disclosure of the past

Many young people described either not telling friends or carers about details of their past and their asylum-seeking status, or carefully selecting one or two people whom they confided in, usually other young people

who had endured similar experiences. Their reasons for this selective disclosure were varied.

Hellen, aged seventeen, had come from Ethiopia two years earlier. Although she reported talking to her friends when she was upset, she commented ‘there are some things I don’t talk about—private things’.

Nadine, aged nineteen, was originally from Rwanda and had travelled to the UK from Tanzania when she was fifteen. She spoke of her highly selective disclosure about her past and her rationale for this, indicating a profound awareness of the possible negative reactions of others and the need to be constantly guarded about what she did or did not say and to whom:

There is (sic.) only like two people who know my situation, so they can always understand if I am a certain way. But not everybody, I would never tell everybody... because some people, you know, they don’t like asylum seekers so they are bound not to understand the way I am feeling.

Ruth, aged thirteen from Eritrea, similarly commented:

I cry sometimes but I keep it to myself. I never talk to no one about my mum and my family. My friends at school don’t know about me living with a foster carer. They just think I live with my mum. But my friends at church know.

Chrisna from DRC similarly had strategically selected her confidantes:

With my friends from college, I never feel comfortable about talking to them about what I’ve been through with my family. My boyfriend and my social worker and the people at the children’s home are the only people I’ve told.

Maryam, age twenty-one from Iran, told how she had, in the past, tried being open about her asylum status with friends at college but felt rejected because of it. When she subsequently started university, she decided not to talk about her status or situation with others. Aware of the negative consequences on herself of not being open with her peers, she commented:

It’s strange because I feel they (friends at university) are my closest friends but they they’re not because they don’t know about me. It’s good to be able to be who you are, without hiding bits and pieces of your life.

Nasir, aged eighteen, who had arrived from Somalia a year previously, similarly responded that he did not talk about his situation or status to anyone but a few very close friends because ‘they don’t understand, most of them were born here or have been here for many years’.

Some young people also talked of how they were reticent about their past even with foster-carers, describing how they valued those carers who were able to ‘give them space’ and were not intrusive. Thierry, aged sixteen years from Burundi, indicated that the difficulties with his first foster-care placement at the age of thirteen largely emanated from the carers attempts to overly examine and scrutinise his past:

The people wanted to know too much, asking me a lot of questions so I didn't like feel comfortable. I didn't feel part of the family, I used to feel like a stranger every day.

And Asif, aged fifteen, having arrived when he was ten years old from Afghanistan, commented on how difficult it was to communicate his experiences to foster-carers who had no knowledge of his life previous to arriving in the UK:

Sometimes you can't communicate. You try but it doesn't always work out. It's not your own family, it's not your real mother. If I had my family, I wouldn't be having this meeting right now (with the researcher). I'd just get on with my life. But living here is much different so that's why I can't always communicate things with the foster family.

As well as being selective of whom they confided in and what they disclosed, young people had other reasons for not referring to the past at all. For many, it was only through 'bracketing' the past that they could focus on the future without being distracted by the upset and trauma of what had gone before. Peter, aged eighteen from Uganda, had arrived in the UK five years earlier. Like many other young people who spoke with us, he explained that not openly talking about what had happened enabled him to look to the future and move forward with his life:

I don't keep secrets but I keep to myself. I keep quiet about some issues. I tend to hold in some issues... I feel that if I hold in those issues, they won't feel bad on me... sometimes they go away but at some point they always catch up... I've just come... its come to be where I just keep quiet about the whole thing. I don't really talk about it, or think about it. I just tend to move on and carry on with my life. I'd rather carry on with my life than address some issues.

### Resisting the intrusive elements in the system

Young people often described complex relationships with social workers and other social care professionals. While some such relationships were depicted as being open, offering young people extensive practical and emotional support, others were less positively portrayed.

Almost all the young people interviewed valued the opportunities that they had been given in the UK—even though many resented the common misconceptions about why they had come—and knew that they enjoyed a degree of safety, freedom and security that most would not have in their own countries. Somewhat paradoxically, in the context of their silence on many issues, a number of young people talked about the 'freedom of speech' that they had in this country compared to their countries of origin.

Yet, these feelings were often juxtaposed with a sense that they were to a large extent controlled by social care and immigration systems, that the privileges they enjoyed were limited and that their futures were

highly uncertain. These concerns were more evident among (though not exclusive to) those young people in the study who were nearing the end of their discretionary leave to remain in the UK, and who had been exposed more directly to the confusion and uncertainties surrounding the immigration system. These young people were also more mistrustful of the interplay between social care and immigration services. Several young people who spoke with us disliked what they felt to be a degree of constant scrutiny and intrusion on the part of others.

Mahlet was aged sixteen and had come to England from Ethiopia at the age of fourteen. She described how she selectively disclosed aspects of her life, choosing to talk about 'it' (what had happened while seeking asylum) only to her closest friend and not to her social worker:

It's hard to tell... even now it's hard for me to tell you about my family because I don't want to talk about it. I just want to keep it for myself. They (social services) don't know anything about it. Like, if I want to talk about it I just talk to X (her closest friend). I don't like my social worker 'cos she keep asking me the same question and I tell her just leave me alone, don't ask any question. She keep saying, 'do you want to find your family?' I just say I don't want to... (and) I don't want the counsellor to hear my story again.

Mahlet then went on to describe the stress her friend had also encountered through being constantly questioned and reminded about the past by different people within the social care system:

It's just a waste of time... I don't know. I've got my friend downstairs and she says, 'don't ask me about my family, I don't want to talk about it'. 'Cos she got migraine every day... every day and she is sick. Her social worker left and now she has to see duty social worker. And when she see that duty social worker—when she needs something—they just say, 'who are you, where are you from, what happened in your life...'.  
 .

Hellen, from Ethiopia, said:

Sometimes they don't understand you when you are sad. They keep asking you questions. It makes me angry, it makes me want to shout. It makes me remember all the bad things and they don't understand that. If they ask me (questions) I will suffer for months.

Aliya, aged twenty-one from Somalia, commented that it was only when attending court about her claim for asylum that she was unable to escape referring to the past and what had happened to her:

I feel I talk about positive things mostly, but the negative and sad things, I prefer not to talk about it. The only time I could not run away from it was in the court. No matter how much I hated it, I had to talk about it.

Whether or not they felt obliged to talk about the past to social workers, the sense of surveillance that young people experienced in other ways was a recurrent theme. Nanu (aged twenty, having arrived from Eritrea when

she was sixteen) captured the way that many aspects of young people's lives were perceived to be controlled by 'the system':

Everything, they (social services) know what we are doing, everything . . . it is all on the computer. And every six months with social worker we have interview (i.e. review). And one month, my friend, when her social worker was doing a review for her she said, 'what are you going to do for your future?'. And she said, 'I don't know because all my future is in your hands (laughs), because when I say something to do you say "NO"—I always do what you want not what I want. Don't ask me about my future'. I said to her why did you said this (still laughing) and she said, 'all the time when I say I want to do this, she say don't do this you have to do this. She told me that when I am 21 they are going to take the house, they are going to stop supporting me, why she ask me about my future?'.

Importantly, Nanu spoke positively about the support she received from her own current social worker, contrasting this sharply with her relationship with an earlier social worker, more reminiscent of that recounted by her friend, above. And other young people, too, portrayed very variable support from different social workers, many sharing a view that the level of support they received depended very much on who the allocated social worker was.

The degree of explicit surveillance by professionals described by some young people was striking. Aliya, from Somalia, talked of how she felt when her social worker came to visit:

When they (social services) visit, it's really . . . , they have to 'cos they have to check the house etc. I didn't understand when he came to my house. I am very sensitive and I see that he is checking things but he is not saying it out . . . and I say, 'When you come to my house, you are checking on me and I don't like it'.

Similarly, Malashu, from Eritrea, felt that the support she received was too 'procedural', when really she would have liked to be able to build a rapport and be able to really talk to her social worker:

They visit every six weeks but they just write whatever they want to write. At the end of the day, they seem to just do their work and they go. They are not there for you.

For other young people, particularly those in their late teens, the sense of control wielded by social services departments was even more manifest. Miguel, from Angola, talked of how he resented the fact that social services had forced him, at the age of eighteen, to move from living with his older sister into independent living arrangements, far from all his friends and social networks. Mireille, aged eighteen from Cameroon and mother of a young baby, found the repeated accommodation moves she was subjected to extremely difficult to cope with, but felt she had no control over them:

I had to make a complaint about social services. They keep moving me; I have no security; I can't do anything. Next week they can call me and say 'you have to move'. They don't take care of you.

Similarly, Daisy, aged twenty-one from China, spoke of how she had been dispersed with her seven-month-old baby son at a day's notice to a city far from her partner (the baby's father) and friends.

When young people were asked about the factors that made them sad or created difficulties for them, almost all identified their immigration status and uncertainty about the future as their overriding concern. The immigration system therefore was perceived to exercise the greatest degree of control over young people and impacted on their daily lives. Ultimately, the decision made by the Home Office determined whether or not young people could remain in the UK, and ultimately decide every aspect of their futures.

### The position of social workers

The positioning of social workers within the asylum system is a difficult one to negotiate. They are expected to apply social care principles such as 'the best interests of the child', yet work within very clear organisational boundaries and regulatory codes—frequently dictated by resource and funding limitations. Equally, the ethical stance of social workers in relation to unaccompanied young people is a complex one. The British Association of Social Workers code of ethics for social work practice ([British Association of Social Workers \(BASW\), 2002](#)), for example, identifies a duty of social workers to 'seek to change social structures which perpetuate inequalities and injustices, and whenever possible work to eliminate all violations of human rights; (3.2.2;4). In addition, they have a responsibility to 'uphold not only civil and political but also economic, social and cultural rights' (3.2.2;6). In practice, while social workers assume the functions of corporate parent for unaccompanied young people—assuming the role of befriender, guide and mentor—they are simultaneously expected to fulfil responsibilities more akin to those of policing entitlements and privileges. This dichotomy is most clearly illustrated through the duty of social work departments to conduct age assessments of young people—a process that, despite clear evidence of the deficiencies in the technology and skills to arrive at an accurate determination of age ([ILPA, 2004](#); [Crawley, 2007](#)), largely dictates the trajectory for young people including possible detention, dispersal and/or deportation. This has been shown to be an area of social work that causes a great deal of concern for practitioners as well as young people ([Wade et al., 2005](#); [Chase et al., 2008](#)).

[Humphries \(2004a, 2004b\)](#) along with others (see, e.g. [Chambon et al., 1999](#); [Parton, 1999](#); [Lovelock et al., 2004](#)) discusses the pressures on social

workers to relinquish their responsibility to social justice as they are increasingly faced with expectations to monitor and restrict services according to narrowing definitions of eligibility. When working with those seeking asylum, [Humphries \(2004a, 2004b\)](#) claims that social workers are forced to work within the confines of what she considers dubious social policy with respect to asylum and immigration. Importantly, the General Social Care Council *Code of Practice for Social Care Workers* ([General Social Care Council, 2002](#)), while focusing on respecting and upholding the rights of ‘service users’, does not contain the same explicit expectation of social care workers to address injustices and inequalities as does the BASW code of ethics. Elsewhere, [Lovelock et al. \(2004\)](#) point to the ‘ambiguous and uncertain role’ of social work ([Lovelock et al., 2004](#), p. 187) in relation to the state, and Foucault himself commenting on the position of social work in the early 1970s warned of the increasing role of social work in the processes of surveillance:

... social work is inscribed within a larger social function that has been taking on new dimensions for centuries, the functions of surveillance-and-correction: to surveil individuals and to redress them, in the two meanings of the word, alternatively as punishment and as pedagogy (cited in [Chambon et al., 1999](#), p. 93).

In his research with social workers who have experience of working with unaccompanied young people, [Kohli \(2006a\)](#) implies (without commenting on it as such) a sense of judgement on the part of social workers as to who are the ‘deserving’ and, by association, the undeserving. Social workers may be willing, it is implied, to take risks for the ‘right’ sort of young person who told the right sort of story. [Kohli \(2006a, p. 6\)](#) comments:

Something about the stories that some of the young people told—particularly in relation to the depth of suffering they had encountered—affected these social workers and made them feel committed to seeing them through from extensive uncertainty to a durable resettlement. They admired their resilience and saw them as deserving of support.

A number of young people in the current study felt that they had been categorised as ‘undeserving’. In fact, about one-quarter of the young people who participated in the current study had their age disputed by the local authority within which they were resident. Although Kiki from Eritrea, for example, had been accepted by the Home Office as being aged fifteen when she entered the UK, the local authority in which she resided had assessed her as being eighteen years old. This meant that she was placed in independent accommodation, had no allocated social worker and very limited support from social services. At the time of the study, she was being transferred to the benefits system and was struggling to complete a complex housing benefit application.

Nancy, aged nineteen from China, found the attitude of certain social workers dismissive and unhelpful. The interpreter translated as

follows: ‘... sometimes she feels that the social workers, some of them are not very warm-hearted and not helpful. She said one social worker accused her of lying that she was 18 and told her that she looked like 22 or 23. She felt angry and also her English was very poor and she could not argue this point very well.’

## Discussion

The accounts of a number of young people in the current study resonate strongly with aspects of Foucault’s panoptic mechanism and its elements of hierarchical surveillance, normalising judgement and examination as instruments of exercising power and control. Young people variably described feeling under scrutiny, were mistrustful of social workers’ attempts to get to know them better, resentful of professionals’ frequent allusions to their past and frequently experienced the wider effects of the panoptic mechanism in terms of how they were evaluated and judged by society in general and their peers.

Collectively, young people portrayed a dual relationship with the various social care, immigration, education and other systems with which they interacted. On the one hand, these systems afforded them safety and security (albeit temporary) as well as opportunities and life chances that they were unlikely to have had in their countries of origin. On the other, however, the same systems controlled and limited them, determined the degree of support they were eligible for and curtailed or extended their opportunities in apparently whimsical fashions. These processes of control were maintained through constant surveillance and monitoring by social care and other professionals as well as by those concerned with immigration control.

Previous research has shown that unaccompanied young people seeking asylum have tended to conceal aspects of their earlier lives from social care and other professionals. These silences have been variably attributed to young people being instructed by others to present a particular scripted account of events, not being able to articulate or describe the trauma they have experienced, or cultural or linguistic barriers. The accounts of young people in the current study indicate a more complex picture. They disclosed certain aspects of their experiences only to carefully selected other individuals. The reasons they gave for resisting disclosures about their past and their current status as ‘asylum-seekers’ fall into a number of categories, including:

- coping with asylum and immigration processes of which they had no or little understanding and which had been instigated by others;
- distancing themselves from the label of ‘asylum-seeker’ and its incumbent stigma; and

- an overriding concern to forget the past and move forward with the future.

A further reason for not sharing certain information with social care (and other) professionals, as well as with their peers and the public more generally, however, appears to reflect a degree of resistance on the part of young people to a set of structures and systems that are perceived as controlling their lives. Indeed, one of the most striking themes from this study was the way in which the asylum system and the categorisation of ‘asylum-seeker’ impinged on just about every dimension of the day-to-day lives of young people. Uncertainties about the future, the insecurities of their asylum status and of the story they had told in support of their application, how they could best position themselves in their contemporary social worlds and the fear of being returned to situations from which they had fled cumulatively created a huge amount of stress in young people’s lives.

The association of social workers, therefore, with those aspects of the system that related to surveillance, age determination, allocation of placements or placement moves, for example, meant that some young people felt unable to trust them enough to share the more intimate details of their past lives. By withholding information, or selectively sharing it, young people seemed to strive to maintain a sense of agency and control over their lives.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated how a degree of silence on the part of some young people may constitute a rational response to their circumstances that are fraught with uncertainties, stigma and anxieties. These findings suggest that silence serves multiple purposes for young people seeking asylum alone as they navigate their way through the quagmire of immigration, asylum and social care systems, strive to fit in with their social surroundings and establish new lives for themselves. As they do so, they are often acutely aware of how their categorisation as ‘asylum-seekers’ influences the treatment and responses of others, both professionals and society in general. These perceptions, I have shown, are not misplaced and in relation to social care practice are indicative of a wider set of dilemmas faced by social care professionals about how they both address the needs of young people seeking asylum whilst working within the confines and expectations of the state. Maintaining a degree of silence therefore could be argued to be a form of agency, providing young people with a mechanism to cope, to look forward (rather than back) and to retain a modicum of control over their lives. Understanding these perspectives and the rational positioning of young people may assist social workers in reflecting on how they might best work with young people seeking asylum on their own within the constraints of the systems and procedures that govern their work.

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2. All the names of the young people have been changed.

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