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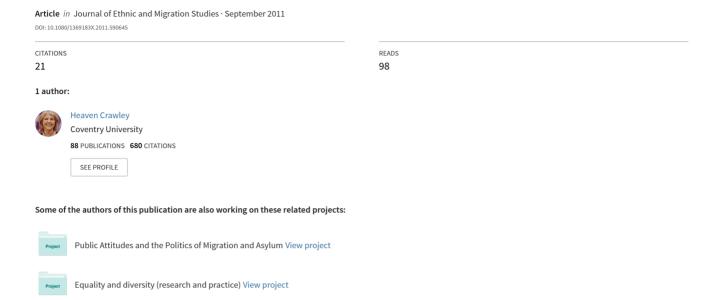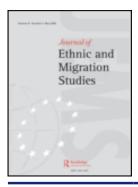
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This article explores the experiences of separated asylum-seeking children and considers the implications of dominant understandings of 'childhood' for the ways in which the children's experiences of persecution and violence are interpreted in the UK asylum system. Although there is a widely held consensus among academics that the boundaries of 'childhood' are socially constructed—and that this is reflected in differences in what it means to be a 'child' over time and across space—this understanding is largely absent from the policies and practices that constitute the asylum determination process. Children who claim asylum are constructed as passive, vulnerable, dependent, asexual and apolitical victims (usually at the hands of adults) who should be allowed to stay on a discretionary basis until they turn 18 but who are not considered deserving of, or entitled to, protection under international law. Where children assert their agency and insist that their political and sexual experiences are taken into account, this may undermine their claims to be children at all. This article draws on the accounts of separated children seeking asylum in the UK to suggest that a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of the political, social and cultural contexts from which children originate is needed to ensure that children are granted the protection they need and deserve.

Keywords: Asylum; Childhood; Politics; Sex; UK

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Introduction

The experiences of children who leave their countries of origin without their parents and seek asylum have increasingly caught the attention of policy-makers, advocates and academics. This is perhaps not surprising. Separated asylum-seeking children,[1] more than any other group of migrants, epitomise concerns about the vulnerability and helplessness of those who are forced to leave their homes. Not only are they without the protection of a state, but they are also lacking the protection of an adult to steer them through the vagaries of childhood. At the same time, however, these children are also perceived as a threat, not only to systems of immigration control but to our ideas—and ideals—of what it means to be a child and, in turn, the values and responsibilities that we hold as adults.

Although many researchers now believe that the boundaries of childhood are *socially* constructed, 'the asylum-seeker' is often construed in overtly *political* terms. The evidence presented in this article suggests that the interpretation of children's experiences in the UK asylum system reflects a particular conceptualisation of 'childhood', and more specifically, the 'coming together' of 'the child' and 'the asylum seeker' as social constructs (Giner 2006). Children are often caught between the two. On the one hand, the assumption that political activity and identity are the exclusive realm of adults undermines recognition of other forms of political engagement. Meanwhile children who fail to conform to dominant notions of what it means to be a 'child' and how children should look and behave may not be accepted as being children at all (Crawley 2007).[2]

In this article I draw on evidence collected as part of a study exploring the experiences of separated asylum-seeking children whose age was disputed.[3] The research was undertaken during the first six months of 2006 and included 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and meetings with policy-makers, legal representatives and voluntary-sector organisations, three days observing procedures at the Asylum Screening Unit in Croydon, in-depth discussions with 32 social workers from 14 different local authorities, and interviews with 27 separated asylum-seeking children. The testimony provided by these children provides new insights into the ways in which their experiences of persecution are shaped by the particular social, political and historical contexts within which they are embedded.

Separated Children in the UK Asylum System

The past decade has seen considerable changes in policy and practice in the UK's system for determining asylum applications and for providing support to individuals and families awaiting a decision on their claims for protection. These changes include measures aimed at reducing the number of asylum applications, decreasing the costs of asylum support, and forcibly removing those who are considered to be at the end of the process (Home Office 1998, 2001, 2005a). Whilst the use of welfare support as a mechanism of immigration control

is nothing new, the extent to which 'internal controls' have been utilised is unprecedented (Cohen *et al.* 2002), as is the discourse of exclusion for those who are not seen as 'legitimate' beneficiaries of support (McDonald and Billings 2007; Schuster 2005; Walters 2004).

The UK, like other European countries, has seen an increase in the number of separated children arriving and claiming asylum over recent years. In 1999 the Home Office reported that there were a total of 3,350 applications for asylum in the UK made by separated children. By 2002 this number had nearly doubled to 6,200 (Home Office 2005b) although it fell back to 3,525 in 2007 (Home Office 2008).[4] Although children had been protected from the worst aspects of changes to the asylum system, the increase in applications was met by growing expectation on the part of central government that those responsible for providing care and support to children should play a role in new procedures for controlling immigration. This has been associated with growing tensions between laws and policies designed to protect and support children in the UK and the experiences of children who are subject to immigration control (Crawley 2006).

At the same time, separated children are less likely than adults to be recognised as refugees under international law (and therefore accorded the rights and protection that this status affords) and more likely to be allowed to stay on a discretionary basis, at least until they turn 18.[5] In 2007, 11 per cent of separated children seeking asylum in the UK were granted refugee status compared with 16 per cent of adults. A further 67 per cent of children were granted leave to remain on a humanitarian or discretionary basis compared with 10 per cent of adult applicants (Home Office 2008). Similar patterns can be seen in other European countries (Halvorsen 2004).

Low refugee recognition rates among children seeking asylum have often been attributed to a lack of child-sensitive procedures for gathering information from children and to reliance upon the information of parents, rather than children themselves, where they arrive as part of a family group (Finch 2005). Changes to the asylum system, including an increasingly narrow interpretation of international refugee law, difficulties in accessing legal advice and representation, and increased emphasis on the credibility (or otherwise) of an applicant's account, have undermined the ability of *all* asylum-seekers to have their stories properly heard (McDonald and Billings 2007; Schuster 2005). Separated children may, however, find it particularly difficult to fully articulate their experiences in ways that are consistent with what is expected of applicants (Crawley 2006; Kohli 2005).

Concern has also been expressed about the failure of decision-makers to take account of so-called 'child-specific' forms of persecution, such as the recruitment of children into armies, their subjection to forced labour, their trafficking and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation (see, for example, Bhabha 2004; Bhabha and Finch 2006; Bhabha and Schmidt 2006; Ruxton 2003). Although these factors certainly help to explain, in part at least, why separated

children find it particularly difficult to secure protection, my research with those who have been age-disputed suggests that these are not the only explanations.

Constructing the Boundaries of 'Childhood'

The concept of 'the child' is increasingly recognised as a social and cultural construct, the meaning of which says as much (and perhaps more) about society in general than about the group towards which it is specifically directed (Cohen 2005; Cunningham 2005; James and James 2004; James *et al.* 1998; Stephens 1995). Although we tend to think of 'the child' as having a clear chronological meaning directly related to biological development, children are not formed exclusively by natural forces but rather inhabit a world of meaning created by themselves and through their interaction with adults. Thus the boundaries of 'childhood'—and, in turn, what it means to be 'a child'—are constructed in relation to what it means to be an 'adult' (Gittins 1998). This is reflected in almost constant disagreement, including within public and policy discourse, over where childhood begins and ends, when a child ceases to be a child and becomes an adult, and the rules, characteristics and behaviours appropriate for each category (Fionda 2001). It can also be seen in the existence of different—and sometimes conflicting—definitions of 'childhood' over time and even *within* a given society and *between* different children, or groups of children at any specific point in time (Gittins 1998; James and James 2004).

Recognising that the boundaries of 'childhood' are socially and culturally constructed has important implications, not just at the theoretical level, but also in terms of understanding the concrete, material existences of children and their everyday lives. If 'childhood' is neither constant nor fixed, then the situation and experiences of children—as individuals and groups—will inevitably reflect the social, economic, cultural and historical contexts within which they are embedded. Childhood in the UK, as in other Western societies, is regarded as being very much separate and distinct from adulthood and is endowed with particular qualities and experiences. Children are conceived of as physically and emotionally dependent on adults. Threats to this relationship and the ideal of childhood—for example, child labour—are viewed with concern (Aitken 2001; Boyden 1997; O'Connell-Davidson 2005; Ruddick 2003). The norms and values upon which this ideal of a safe, happy, protected, carefree and educationally focused childhood are built are culturally and historically bound to the social and economic preoccupations of the capitalist countries of Europe and the United States (Boyden 1997; Hart and Tyrer 2006; Stephens 1995). The dominance of this understanding of what it means to be a child has implications for the ways in which the experiences and identities of children who seek asylum in the UK are (mis)understood, not least because many of these children come from contexts where the experience of 'childhood' is a very different one.

Children's Political Engagement

Within both contemporary discourses of children's rights and the emerging discipline of childhood studies, increasing attention has been given to the notion of agency (Hart and Tyrer 2006). Despite this, the possibility of children's political agency and their active political participation is only rarely affirmed by academics, advocates or policy-makers (Smith 2009). As Philo and Smith (2003) suggest, studies focusing on Politics (with a capital 'P') tend to be adult-centred, precisely because the actions and institutions involved are almost entirely made and changed by adults. Part of the reason for this neglect lies in the fact that people below voting age cannot—and do not—have much direct influence on the obviously 'political' phenomena and structures (Kallio 2008; O'Toole 2003; O'Toole *et al.* 2003; Philo and Smith 2003; Wyness *et al.* 2004). Children are effectively excluded from the adult world of formal political activity through definitions of adult privacy (and freedom from state intervention) that tend to sacralise—and effectively privatise—parts of the family (Cohen 2005). Children are assumed to be disinterested in politics and/or protected from political processes. Little attempt is made to explore how children themselves define what constitutes 'the political' (O'Toole *et al.* 2003).

In order to understand the experiences of children who seek asylum, it is important to recognise the different forms that political participation can take, as well as the range of broadly 'political' activities with which children may be involved. Research with asylum-seeking children suggests that many are directly engaged in the issues affecting themselves and their communities and deeply interested in affecting change (Crawley 2006, 2007). These children are not politically active in the conventionally understood meaning of the word: they are not members of political parties or persecuted because of their formal political opposition to the state. But neither can they be characterised as apolitical. Most are highly articulate about the political issues affecting them—both in their countries of origin and in the UK—and about the disconnection between these issues and mainstream politics. Their responses demonstrate the ways in which politics is, for them, very much a lived everyday experience rather than a set of distinct arenas that they choose to enter or to avoid (see also O'Toole 2003).

The nature of children's engagement is itself a reflection of the way in which children are perceived and positioned within the society of which they are a part, and the opportunities for engagement that are—or are not—available to them (Hart and Tyrer 2006). The lack of power and resources with which childhood is associated can itself expose children to political violence and children have often been the first casualties of political disruption, war and other forms of social disintegration (Finch 2005; Hart and Tyrer 2006; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1999). But this does not mean that children are simply passive victims caught up in the crossfire, the 'collateral damage' of adult folly (Philo and Smith 2003). Rather children, or particular groups of children, may be seen as central to particular struggles, often

through familial and kinships and ties, as evidenced in the following case studies. Faela[6] described how her father had been a journalist in her country of origin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and how she had accompanied him when he went to the airport to cover the story of the opposition leader returning to the country after a period in exile:

> Suddenly the president's soldiers came to chase everybody. That's when it all started. Some people were killed there. They took me to a prison with some other people. I was there about one month. There were many girls there. They were really horrible...When I escaped they took me to a church for a few days, but they said it wasn't safe to stay. *Because they knew I was my father's daughter they wanted to get me* (emphasis added).

Faela's age was initially disputed and her claim for asylum refused. Although it was eventually accepted that she was a child and she was granted discretionary leave until her eighteenth birthday, the substance of her asylum claim was never considered.

Simret was 15 years old when she arrived in the UK from Eritrea. Her father had been elected by the community to work for the Eritrean government as a regional administrator. When war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998, Simret's father tried to evade military service but eventually he was conscripted, along with one of her brothers. When her brother went missing, it was assumed by the military that he had deserted. As a result Simret's mother was detained and beaten. Simret's father unexpectedly returned home from military service and was accused by security guards who visited their house of working against the government. Fearing that the remaining family members would be conscripted, Simret's father took her and her other brother out of Eritrea. Although her father was captured by the border police, Simret and her brother managed to escape and travelled to the Sudan, where they met with a group of Eritreans. The group travelled to Libya, where they were arrested for entering the country illegally and detained for three months. Simret and her brother managed to escape and Simret travelled to the UK on a ship and then a lorry with a number of other Eritreans. Her brother remained behind. Simret was refused asylum because it was not accepted that she was at risk of being conscripted into the army. At her appeal hearing the judge disputed the Home Office's interpretation of her experiences and found that she would be at real risk if returned to Eritrea. Simret was granted asylum on the basis that she would face persecution on account of imputed political opinion.

In other contexts, children are persecuted because they engage in forms of political resistance. These may be distinct from those most commonly associated with adults, either because avenues for conventional forms of political resistance are closed to all members of the community or because, *as children*, they lack power and access to formal political structures. In these situations, children use the strategies that are available to them—for example, disruptive behaviour and refusing to speak and eat—as tactics of resistance (Kallio 2008). Because the focus of the asylum system is on Politics (with a capital 'P'), these forms of resistance are not viewed as 'political' or

capable of putting children at risk. The experiences of Erbil, a Kurd from Iran, are illustrative of this process. Erbil describes how he had become involved in a local incident which led to a statue of an important Islamic leader being destroyed. He believed that the Iranian army would try to arrest him, as had happened to others involved in the event:

> I have a big problem in Iran. In my city—a town on the Iraq/Iran border in Kurdistan—I took down a statue. It was a statue of an Islamic leader. Me and my friends knocked it down. The Iranian army followed me to arrest me. My friends, when I ring my brother, they say he has gone to prison for five years. There was a group of children. The leader of them disappeared and others disappeared. They have their nails taken off... So that's why I escaped and came here to the UK...The Home Office looked on the internet about my case and they saw there was a problem. *But they said 'You are too young and the government wouldn't kill you if you go back'. They say I'm too young. It's not true* (emphasis added).

Tensions over the credibility or otherwise of a child's claim to be politically active are reflected in the subsequent determination of the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal (AIT). Although the judge accepted that Erbil was the age he claimed, he also concluded that this very fact made it unlikely that Erbil would have been involved in any political activity or that the Iranian authorities would be interested in him, stating that:

> Your immaturity was accepted as an indication of your age but also makes it unlikely that you were politically involved as claimed... [Erbil] shared no serious interest or real knowledge of politics, as of course would be expected of most boys of the age he was then...We regard his claim that he helped people to topple the statue and had been filmed doing so as no more than youthful bravado and unworthy of belief.

This case reflects a particular conceptualisation of children as incapable of expressing political views or engaging in activities intended to influence the course of political events. Erbil's participation in events, which might ordinarily—in the context of struggles for Kurdish independence—be viewed as intensely political, was dismissed as 'youthful bravado'. The child's 'trainee' status and exclusion on the grounds of 'irresponsibility' are predicated on the notion that children are socially and morally incompetent (Wyness *et al.* 2004). Ironically, Erbil's claims that his behaviour was politically motivated and that he had an interest in Kurdish politics were simultaneously interpreted by the Home Office as evidence that he was, in fact, an adult pretending to be a child in order to access services and support.

This evidence suggests that what children do—and what is done to them—is not viewed as 'political'. As a result, applications for asylum made by separated children are often dismissed. Conversely, where it is acknowledged that political opinions or activities have resulted in persecution, it is assumed that the applicant must be an adult rather than a child as claimed. As Wyness (2004: 82) suggests, this is because the

very essence of childhood, at least in contemporary Western terms, prohibits political participation 'such that the "political child" is seen as the "unchild", a counter-stereotypical image of children that does not fit with the way we commonly view childhood'.

Children Who Have Sex

Within dominant conceptualisations of childhood, physiological sexual maturity is often seen as marking the boundary with adulthood and a plethora of rules and regulations define when, and what kind, of sexual activity is permissible. Sex, like politics, is assumed to be the exclusive realm of adults and there remains a commonly held belief that children are *asexual* beings (Aitken 2001; Kitzinger 1997). As a result, very little has been written about children and sexuality, with the exception of the vast body of literature on the sexual abuse of children (its causes, consequences and policy responses). This construction of children as asexual beings is, in turn, reflected in a very particular response to children who have sex by choice, through necessity or as a result of abuse. As Gittins (1998) suggests, the idea of sexuality in children seems to occasion horror in adults. O'Connell-Davidson (2005) suggests that this is because the construction of children as asexual beings is central to our construction of 'adulthood' and to our understanding of ourselves and our own sexual identities.

The conceptualisation of children as asexual beings means that children who have sex are not seen as agents in their own lives but are almost always depicted as the helpless victim of adult sexual demands (Chase and Statham 2005; Kitzinger 1997; Rafferty 2008). This is particularly evident in debates around 'trafficking'. The nature of contemporary debates on this issue—perhaps more than on any other—elicits a strong moral indignation around the idea that children might have sex (Breuill 2008; O'Connell-Davidson 2005). O'Connell-Davidson (2005) suggests that the reason why children's presence in the global sex trade is widely experienced as profoundly disturbing is precisely because it has the potential to rupture the imagined boundaries that serve to ring-fence both 'childhood' and 'commercial sex'. In so doing, children's presence in the global sex trade threatens to undermine other key pillars of the conceptual framework that is employed to structure, explain and give meaning to social relations in late-modern Western societies. Sex involving children is presented—and dealt with—as a crime not only against individual children but against childhood itself.

Although debates around trafficking are complex and contradictory, one of the (many) difficulties with the dominant discourse is that it oversimplifies the reality of many children's lives—including their sexual lives—in ways that are not helpful in understanding, and responding appropriately to, their experiences (Breuill 2008). The experiences of Lavdie are illustrative of this process. When Lavdie was 14 years old she was in a sexual relationship with her boyfriend, who subsequently raped her. She became pregnant. Her strongly Muslim family was in the process of trying to arrange a marriage partner for her at the time. Her mother told her that her father

would try to kill her and advised her to leave. Lavdie decided that she would prefer to continue her relationship with her abusive boyfriend than embark upon a marriage with a man unknown to her. She phoned her boyfriend, who promised to help her and who arranged for her to stay in a hotel for two months whilst he made arrangements for her to travel to Italy. She was taken onto a boat and given a tablet which induced a miscarriage. When she arrived in Italy, Lavdie was put in a house with two other girls from Eastern Europe and was informed by her boyfriend that he expected her to work for him as a prostitute. When she refused he threatened to kill her and then sold her to another trafficker. She was put in the back of a lorry which travelled to the UK, where she managed to escape and claim asylum. Although it might be expected that dominant discourses which position children who have been trafficked as victims of adult (male) abuse would ultimately enhance the protection available, in fact this was not the case. Instead her age was not disputed by the social service department to whom she was referred for support:

> All day long I was at social services, from 9.30 in the morning until 6pm. They were just saying to the boys collecting their cash, 'Does she look 15 to you?'. Everyone who used to come there, they would just say that... I had my ID card and the letter from the Home Office but they didn't believe me.

Lavdie, herself, recognised that her experiences were not typical of other children in the UK, commenting that '[a]s a teenager the situation forced me to become an adult very quickly'. She made it clear to social workers that she wanted to live with a foster family and that she wanted to go to school and eventually university in order that she could become a doctor. But it appears that her agency and capacity for survival further undermined, in the eyes of her social workers, her credibility *as a child*.

Lavdie's experiences are, in many respects, entirely consistent with the dominant discourse of trafficking. She is clearly a 'victim', and the deeply felt emotional and physical scars of her experiences cannot be doubted. But her experiences are also problematic, not because of what has happened to her in the past but because she refuses to allow these experiences to dominate her future. One of the consequences of the dominant discourse around trafficking is that it can position children as victims even where they *choose* to be become involved in sexual relationships or where, in situations of abuse, they find ways to resist what is happening to them. Indeed the idea of children exerting any choice (albeit constrained by the circumstances in which they find themselves) is viewed as an anathema.

This creates significant difficulties, not only for separated asylum-seeking children who are trafficked for sexual exploitation, but also for those children who are pregnant or who arrive with children of their own. A child who has sex or who appears sexually aware (even one who is a 'victim' of trafficking or rape) may not be viewed as an 'innocent' child, or even as a child at all, particularly where he or she refuses to conform with the view of 'childhood' as a state of innocence, dependency and vulnerability and is not willing to be 'rescued'. Similarly, children who appear to

be sexually mature may be viewed as adults by immigration officers and social workers, often on the basis of nothing more than a cursory assessment of physical appearance. Angelina was 16 years old when she arrived in the UK from Uganda. She described how her father was a police officer who lost his job after he was accused of collaborating with the rebels. One day soldiers came to the house and arrested him. Angelina and her brother ran from the house and when they returned they found that it had been burnt down and their father killed. They decided to make their way to a refugee camp:

> Because our house was burnt down we didn't have any food or clothes. We weren't prepared, we just ran. We didn't have anything. When we were going to the camp we were walking but we didn't know where we were going. We just followed people. That's when they raped me. They beat my brother and he was bleeding. They were soldiers in uniform but you don't know which rebels they are.

When Angelina reached the camp she was raped a second time and became pregnant. She was eventually assisted by an uncle to leave the camp and travel to the UK. She was heavily pregnant when she went to the Asylum Screening Unit to claim asylum:

> When I got to the screening unit they gave me a ticket. I waited about an hour. After they call you they talk to you and they write down stuff. They ask you when you came, where you come from, what you want…The lady at reception she asked me how old I am. I said 'I am 16' and the man behind the glass he looked at me like this…[looked up and down]… and he said, 'You don't look 16 because of your physical appearance'. He just looked at me and said no, I am not 16.

A young migrant being pregnant or having children of his or her own is viewed by decision-takers as the ultimate 'proof' that a child is not a child (Crawley 2007). In other words, evidence of contact with, or corruption by, adult sexuality is viewed as effectively disqualifying a child from childhood. No further investigations of a child's age and needs are considered necessary. The sexual child, like the political child, becomes the 'unchild' (Wyness *et al.* 2004).

Conclusions

The everyday lived reality of 'childhood' in Western societies is simultaneously becoming eroded and extended (Kitzinger 1997; Ruddick 2003). On the one hand, children are becoming more 'adult-like', as represented through their earlier sexualisation and heightened role as consumers. At the same time, the norms of modern childhood are being reorganised and displaced along the life-course such that the term 'adult children' is increasingly used to describe those adults who live with their parents in the family home. The boundary that marks the transition from 'childhood' to 'adulthood' is increasingly blurred (Valentine 2003).

Ironically, the Western ideological construction of 'childhood' as the private domain of innocence, spontaneity and play appears only to have strengthened in

the face of rapid change, uncertainty and upheaval. This idea of childhood is barely recognisable in the accounts of the lives and experiences of children seeking asylum in the UK. This paper has argued that it is the 'coming together' of this ideal of childhood—particularly as reflected in notions of children as apolitical, asexual beings—with an asylum system that is adult-centric which explains, at least in part, the failure to provide separated children with protection and rights under international law. It has also been suggested that the conceptualisation of children as asexual, apolitical beings is reflected in the growing propensity of decision-takers and social workers alike to dispute that asylum-seeking children are, in fact, children at all.

The evidence presented in this paper confirms the observation made elsewhere that our ideas about children are paradoxical (Stainton Rogers 2009). On the one hand children are viewed as 'innocent'; as asexual and apolitical beings who need to be protected from adult exploitation and coercion. Yet, at the same time, children are also viewed as potentially menacing and dangerous. Situating an analysis of the experiences of separated asylum-seeking children within an understanding of the symbolic significance of 'childhood' enables us to see these experiences not only as a symptom of an asylum system which is unwilling to engage with the realities of life for refugees fleeing situations of conflict and human-rights abuse, but also as a threat to our very understanding of what it means to be a child, and therefore our own identities and place in the social world. There is much at stake in acknowledging the experiences of asylum-seeking children *on their own terms*. As Stephens (2005: 24–5) suggests, it means not only recognising the terrible loss of life and widespread suffering of actual children, 'but also the loss of a social vision of a different mode of human relationships—one represented by an ideal image of childhood as the focus of structured adult protection and compassionate nurturing'.

This is not to suggest that the conceptualisation of children's experiences within the asylum system cannot be challenged or that children must simply accept the *status quo*. Even within these structures, children experience varying degrees of autonomy as actors and exhibit considerable agency within the spaces available to them. But they are also pushed into situations where the agency that they exhibit undermines their access to protection and rights *as children*. There is no room for what Aitken (2001) describes as 'the unchildlike child'. This is the space that needs to be created to enable the experiences of separated asylum-seeking children to be properly understood, and to generate practical and policy changes which increase children's options and transform the social and political contexts within which they live.

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Notes

[1]   The term 'separated children' is used in most countries to describe those children who are outside their country of origin and separated from their parents or their legal or customary carer. In some cases children arrive on their own; in others they may accompanied by an adult who is not their parent or legal/customary carer.

[2]   In 2007 there were nearly 2,000 age-disputed cases (Home Office 2008). This means that 35 per cent of all asylum-seekers who arrive claiming to be children are age-disputed and treated as adults. Disputes over age have very significant implications both for the way in which an individual's asylum application is dealt with and for that individual's ability to access services and support (including housing, education and welfare) and to be protected from abuse by others.

[3]   The findings of this research were published by the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (ILPA) in a report entitled *When is a Child Not a Child? Asylum, Age Disputes and The Process of Age Assessment* (Crawley 2007). The report was launched at the Houses of Parliament in 2007 and resulted in the establishment of a Home Office working group to explore ways in which current procedures for age assessment might be improved. The full report can be downloaded at http://www.ilpa.org.uk/publications/ILPA%20Age%20Dispute%20Report.pdf

[4]   The recent decrease in the number of asylum applications made by separated children is thought to reflect increasingly restrictive pre-entry and border controls—which have made entry into the UK more difficult for all asylum-seekers—and an increase in the number of children whose stated age is disputed and who are therefore treated as adults.

[5]   Asylum-seekers who are recognised as needing protection under international law are granted refugee status and given permission to stay (leave to remain). Until 30 August 2005, those with refugee status were granted indefinite leave to remain but policy changes have since reduced this to an initial period of five years. Those who are not recognised as refugees under international law may be given discretionary leave to remain in the UK. The length of time that someone is allowed to stay will vary depending on their circumstances but it is unlikely to be more than three years initially. At the end of this period an individual is expected to return to his or her country of origin.

[6]   The names of the children who participated in the research have been change to protect their identity.

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