



Article

“The Will to Survive”: The Lives of Young People with “No Papers” in the United Kingdom

Yeşim Deveci

School of Education and Communities, University of East London, London E16 2RD, UK; y.deveci@uel.ac.uk

Abstract: This article considers how undocumented youth in the UK survive and construct their everyday lives in precarious circumstances. Drawing on multiple in-depth narrative interviews with ($n = 7$) undocumented youth, I illustrate how these young people focus on the future and engage in purposeful activities as a way of enduring the everyday challenges of living with no papers. I reflect on the relationships, which young people draw on to enable them to endure adversity and rebuild their everyday lives. I conclude that the presence of love and community is critical for young people’s survival, safety and wellbeing, and I suggest how practitioners and researchers might make use of these findings.

Keywords: undocumented youth; young refugees; relational; love; wellbeing; UK



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1. Introduction

“Look, being undocumented or to put it with no papers, in a country like this, it’s almost impossible, but people are living it, right. People are living the experience [in somewhat] amazing ways. You don’t have documents. You can’t access the doctor. You can’t have a bank account. You can’t have National Insurance number, so you can’t work in a legal job. People will exploit you. For you, that’s the nature of reality. You can’t do anything about it. . .” (Rayyan)

“...it’s really hard when you don’t have a paper in this country. . . You don’t have a choice. . .you can’t go out with your friends at night, in weekends. You’re scared. You feel scared always. When I go to sleep I feel scared, I’m thinking, oh the immigration, they’re going to come now to take me. Always scared. They can catch me any time. It’s very hard”. (Ahmed)

As research participants, Ahmed and Rayyan¹ explain how living with “no papers” is a daily struggle; this is echoed in Tommi’s reflection that they, as undocumented youth, had nothing but “hope and the will to survive”. The ways in which people end up with irregular immigration status in the UK are multiple and may include refusal of asylum applications, visa overstaying, bureaucratic failures in processing immigration applications and, to a lesser extent, unauthorised entry (Sigona and Hughes 2012). Children and young people migrate for numerous reasons, and young people in particular transition between regular and irregular status during their migratory journey (UNHCR/Council of Europe 2014; Bloch et al. 2014; Schuster 2011). Bloch and McKay (2017, p. 71) argue that being undocumented is “one stage in a fluid process between different types of status”. I am using “undocumented” and “irregular status” interchangeably with “no papers” here to describe those who do not have authorised leave in the UK, as this is the term most often used by young people.

The experience of living in limbo, without status or leave to remain in the UK, is reflected in the literature on young refugees and migrants (e.g., Chase 2020; Deveci 2012; Gladwell and Elwyn 2012; Kohli 2014; Matthews 2014; Meloni and Chase 2017). Restrictive UK immigration and citizenship policies mean that many refugee and migrant children

and young people grow up with uncertain and/or irregular immigration status, which significantly impacts their everyday lives, health and wellbeing (e.g., [Apland and Yarrow 2017](#); [Thomas et al. 2018](#); [The Children’s Society 2018](#)). This article intends to contribute to the limited body of research focusing specifically on the lived experiences of children and young people in the UK with “no papers” ([Bloch 2013](#); [Bloch et al. 2009, 2011, 2014](#); [Coram Children’s Legal Centre 2013](#); [Sigona and Hughes 2012](#)).

This article aims to illustrate how young refugees with “no papers” survive and construct their lives in precarious circumstances by holding on to their dreams for the future and drawing strength from loved ones and communities. First, I outline the context and methods used in this research with undocumented youth and discuss the key concepts and issues of relevance to the findings. Following this, I consider how the participants focus on the future as a way of managing an uncertain present, their relationships with loved ones, past and present, and the ways in which they participate and belong to different communities, both local and transglobal. I conclude that the presence of love and community is critical for young people’s survival, safety and wellbeing, and I consider the implications of these findings for practice and further research in the field.

2. Context and Methods

The doctoral research project grew out of 15 years of experience of working with young refugees and migrants in an urban context and a desire to understand more about the lives of those without authorised status in the UK. In 2000, I founded the Dost Centre for Young Refugees and Migrants and led the development of a “360° relationship-based model” of practice ([Price 2013](#)), offering practical and emotional support (advice, advocacy, therapeutic casework), education and social activities ([Deveci 2012](#)). This practice experience informed all aspects of the research, which aimed to explore the everyday lives, life histories and hopes and dreams of young people aged 16–25 with “no papers”.

Drawing on my professional networks, I recruited participants via an intermediary “gatekeeper” or relevant “trusted person” in their life ([Miller 2004](#); [Duvell et al. 2009](#)). The Table 1 below provides demographic information about the participants.

Table 1. List of research participants.

Name (Pseudonym)	Age on Arrival in UK	Age at First Research Meeting	Gender	Country of Birth
Ahmad	15	23	Male	Afghanistan
Muhammed	14	22	Male	Afghanistan
Precious	10	17	Female	Nigeria
Rayyan	9	19	Male	Bangladesh
Sarah	8	22	Female	Jamaica
Sekou	17	24	Male	Guinea
Tommi	3	20	Male	Jamaica

Over a period of nine months, the young people took part in multiple individual in-depth narrative interviews. I took a reflexive, relational approach to data gathering, prioritising relational responsibility throughout the process ([Gergen 2015](#); [Price and Deveci 2022](#)). Rich interview data were analysed using a relational, thematic analytic process to explore subjective experience and social life in the data ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#)). The project was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) at the University of East London.

3. Key Concepts and Issues

3.1. Waiting and Living

Research with children and young people subject to immigration control has drawn attention to the frustrations and stresses of waiting and delays in the asylum process ([Brighter Futures 2013](#); [Chase and Allsopp 2021](#); [Stalford et al. 2023](#)). Drawing on research

with 30 young migrants and further dialogue with some of the participants spanning over a decade, [Back et al. \(2018\)](#) speak to the experience of seeking asylum in the UK as one characterised by waiting and living in limbo. Waiting in this context is described as an “existential straitjacket”, which restrains and defines the limits of life for young migrants ([Back et al. 2018](#), p. 77), who are effectively “sentenced to the condition of waiting” ([Back et al. 2018](#), p. 82). While [Back et al. \(2018, p. 99\)](#) conceptualise this period constrained by precarious immigration status as the “dead time” of waiting, they also note that this time may be used to think and plan. This is shown by [Allsopp et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Ramachandran and Vathi \(2022\)](#), who demonstrate how people subject to immigration control use creative tactics to counter the system and take agency over their futures. The paradox of waiting is explored in [Kohli and Kaukko’s \(2017\)](#) research with asylum-seeking girls in residential care in Finland, in which the participants’ experience of waiting is shown to be both debilitating and productive.

“[Name] told me that sometimes, on bad days, they feel like prisoners. What is even worse, the difference is that prisoners know the length of their sentence, unlike these young people (Field notes)”. ([Kohli and Kaukko 2017](#), p. 10)

The parallels between imprisonment and living without papers are echoed in evidence given to the All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry into the Use of Immigration Detention in the United Kingdom in 2015 by an individual, who had served a prison sentence for working illegally, before being held in detention, who said “*in prison, you count your days down but in detention you count your days up*” ([Bail for Immigration Detainees 2019](#)).

Although for the girls in [Kohli and Kaukko’s \(2017\)](#) study the length of waiting was unknown and often felt unbearable, the present was shown to be not merely a liminal gap between the past and the future but rather a time of generative activity in which living continued.

3.2. Enduring Relationships and Love

Young peoples’ capacity to endure the challenges of living in limbo is closely tied to their engagement in meaningful activities and the availability of social networks and supportive relationships. The significance of a supportive, enduring relationship with an adult professional—someone “like family”—can be seen in research about vulnerable youth in a variety of contexts ([Crawley and Kohli 2013](#); [Kaukko et al. 2022](#); [Thrana 2016](#)). Building on [Gergen’s \(2009\)](#) conceptualisation of a relational self, wherein “the individual represents the common intersection in a myriad of relationships” ([Gergen 2009](#), p. 150), [White \(2017\)](#) argues that the quality and availability of the relationships we are engaged in are key to health and wellbeing. This is further developed by [White and Jha \(2023, this volume\)](#), where they identify being seen, known, respected, even loved (“cared for”) in everyday life, as a central feature of wellbeing.

Love has become the subject of considerable attention among scholars exploring the concept of love in social work and education (e.g., [Byrne 2016](#); [Collins 2023](#); [Gatwiri and Ife 2023](#); [Ross 2023](#); [Vincent 2016](#)). In [hooks’ \(2001, p. 4\)](#) seminal work *All About Love*, she cites [Peck’s \(1978\)](#) definition of love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth”. She emphasises Peck’s focus on love as a choice: “Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action” ([Peck 1978](#) cited in [hooks 2001](#), pp. 4–5). For [hooks \(2001, p. 94\)](#), love is an intentional practice, an ethic defined by actions of “care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect and knowledge”. While the interpretations and contexts differ, there is some agreement among the scholars cited above that “love” involves what [hooks \(2001, p. 5\)](#) describes as a “mix of ingredients”, including care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust, honesty and open communication. [Lanas and Zembylas \(2015, p. 36\)](#) theorise love as a transformational political concept with six dimensions—“love as an emotion, love as choice, love as response, love as relational, love as political, and love as praxis”—arguing that love has a “transforming power” in our institutions and everyday lives. The possibilities of love in professional practice as potentially transformative for those experiencing difficulty

and distress in their everyday lives are suggested in a number of recent studies, including Thrana's (2016) research with vulnerable youth in Finland, Ross et al.'s (2023) study with peer mentor trainees, carers and mental health professionals in Australia and Kaukko et al.'s (2022) research with refugee children and teachers in Finland and Australia. In Kaukko et al.'s (2022, p. 732) study, the loving actions of teachers are shown to be experienced by children as a form of "devotional attention to their wellbeing", supporting the establishment of a sense of safety in an unfamiliar context.

3.3. Community

In *All About Love*, bell hooks (2001) equates love and belonging, saying "...where I felt loved, where I felt a sense of belonging" (hooks 2001, p. ix). The linking of love and belonging, as articulated by hooks (2001), is helpful for thinking about the lives of young people with no papers and considering the role of community in wellbeing, as discussed by White and Jha (2023) in this volume. As hooks (2001, pp. 129–30) argues, communities sustain human survival:

"To ensure human survival everywhere in the world, females and males organize themselves into communities. Communities sustain life...[...]. We are born into the world of community. Rarely if ever does a child come into the world in isolation, with only one or two onlookers. Children are born into a world surrounded by the possibility of communities. Family, doctors, nurses, midwives, and even admiring strangers comprise this field of connection, some more intimate than others".

The significance of community and social support is confirmed by White (2017, p. 14), who draws attention to the relational aspect of wellbeing as "arising from the common life, the shared enterprise of living in community—in whatever sense—with others". While relationships sustain life, and relationality is generative, questions of belonging are complex, and particularly for those, whose right to belong is constantly in question. In Meloni's (2019) research with undocumented youth in Canada, she conceptualises belonging as ambivalent and fluid; an assemblage of meanings which allow for the possibility of multiple belongings across space and time, rather than anchored to a specific place or identity. Meloni (2019, p. 43) posits that the social worlds and relationships of the young people in her study were "constantly shaped by constraints that defined, in ambivalent terms, their subjectivity and materiality of belonging". The notion of belonging as a concept encompassing permanence and impermanence is helpful for considering the role of faith and religious practice in the lives of young refugees and migrants, and particularly the ways in which belonging to a religious community might sustain the will to survive. Raghallaigh and Gilligan's (2010) research with unaccompanied minors identifies six coping strategies, which contribute to resilience and "active survival". Significantly, religious practice alongside a strong belief in God was shown to support young people's use of the various coping strategies. Similarly, Scott et al.'s (2022) research with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people found that religious activities and faith were an important sustaining and guiding aspect for the participants, as they had been foundational to the societies, communities and families they were born into.

4. Findings: Dreams for the Future, Love and Community

This analysis focuses on young people's articulations of their dreams for the future and conversations about significant individuals and communities in their lives. From here, I discuss how these future plans and experiences of love and community sustain life and wellbeing for young people with "no papers" in their present—and imagined future—material and social contexts (White and Jha 2023).

4.1. Dreams for the Future

A vivid uncertainty about the future was an everyday reality for the participants. As in Bloch et al.'s (2009) study, the young people I met with often spoke about the difficulty

in imagining a future. Muhammed spoke of “hard work for nothing. . .”, Rayyan described his sense of “nothing changing”, while continuing to live in the face of despair was the closest thing to hope:

“...the only options you have is continue with life—doesn’t matter how shit it is—and just hope that things will be positive in the future. That’s the motivation. It can be years. I mean, for me it’s been five, six, seven years. It’s continuous rolling and rolling and rolling, but nothing seems to be changing. But I’m hoping things will change soon”.

Nonetheless, it is notable that alongside these stories of struggle were young people’s plans for the future. The future offered the possibility of freedom from the limitations and restrictions of the present. For example, Precious planned to become a social worker:

“...life is hard. Every time I cry. Every time, every day I cry that I don’t want to be like this.

But I know that—I always have a hope that one day I will have papers, I’ll be able to work. Because my plan is I want to be a social worker. I want to have a public school for children who are in need, who doesn’t have anything, who doesn’t have warm parents because like now my mum is dead and my dad, he doesn’t care about me, he doesn’t even remember me. I’m just by myself. So, I want to do the same thing for children because I’m having the benefits now so I want people in the future, if I have the ability to have my papers and study more and work . . . I want to give to other people in future”. (Precious)

Many of the young people I spoke to had clear plans, which sustained them through their present struggles. Sarah also intended to train as a social worker when she was granted status.

“I still want to be a social worker. I’m still going to do it. I’m still going to call the College and get my interview again and go back to college, so I can do what I want to do”.

Those, such as Precious, who were currently in education articulated the steps they needed to take to reach their goal and retained a clear focus on the future, regardless of immigration status:

“I just focus on my education because even if my immigration comes I’ll continue and if my immigration doesn’t come I’ll still try to continue until I get what I want and . . . try to achieve my goal. I haven’t achieved it but I’m still achieving. I will see. . . just have to put that faith, put faith that I’ll achieve. . . Even if I had like 20 steps, I’ve reached like five steps, it means 15 steps to go”. (Precious)

Precious, Rayyan, Tommi and Sekou described a multitude of ways in which their lack of settled status had hindered their ability to continue or progress at various points in their educational journeys. However, they held on to their ambitions and aspirations, determined to continue striving towards their future goals. Precious took every opportunity available to study; she had no control over when her “papers” would come and so took agency over the areas of her life, which were within her control.

For some, engagement in education offered a framework within which to construct an idea of the future and organise daily life. For others, preparing for the future was enacted in the careful organisation of everyday life, engaging in meaningful activities and building social networks (Allsopp et al. 2015; Ramachandran and Vathi 2022). Although Rayyan had been offered a place at university and had a scholarship for the first year, his focus was on working to fund his immigration case and gain status. Likewise, Ahmed organised himself in the present to stay physically and mentally healthy, dividing his time between home, work, gym and mosque. Like Rayyan, planning involved focusing on employment and saving as a priority:

“So that’s why I just think, let me wait. . . if they send me back home I’m going to come again. I’m not going to stay in Afghanistan because if I stay in Afghanistan

that's it, I'm going to die there. I'm going to come and put my life in danger again but I have to come here, because I can't stay there. So I just save a little bit of money for myself, every week when I work I save, maybe, I just think, if anything happened to me in the future then I can use this money for—again to come to the UK or to other country, to do something". (Ahmed)

Reflecting back on his experience of living without papers, Tommi identified the importance of having a goal:

"Have a goal. If you have a goal, I believe that will get you far in life. Because when you have nothing to hold on to it makes situations worse. Whereas if you can channel your frustration into reaching for something that you want, eventually you're going to get that thing".

This importance of a dream to hold onto was echoed by Sarah:

"...never give up on your dreams. That's a big one, because even though you haven't got what you have, the faith and the hope and the reaching for your dreams, it still helps you to get by in everyday life".

For Sarah and Precious, accepting the limitations of their present circumstances offered a way of managing the everyday uncertainty of life without papers:

"I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, so you have to enjoy today. Every day I keep thinking okay what is going to happen tomorrow? Without papers I've learned a lot and I've achieved a lot. I'm able to have a lawyer who helped me to put my papers in but even though they haven't said yes, they haven't said no. They haven't even decided what they will do. So. That's it. I just have to hope. That hope is still there with a question mark. That dream is still there, hope and dream with a question mark". (Precious)

The tension between enforced waiting and the desire to keep pushing forward towards a goal explored in [Kohli and Kaukko's \(2017\)](#) study is evident in the narratives of all the participants and illustrated by this quotation from Sarah:

"...so you have all that opportunity and all the dreams and that but you still have to wait because the thing that you're waiting for is not there. . ."

For those on the cusp of adulthood, reaching 18 with uncertain immigration status exacerbated their anxieties about the future; turning 18 frequently resulted in significantly less social care support ([Meloni and Chase 2017](#)). Despite being former unaccompanied children, Muhammed and Ahmed were no longer considered eligible for support and were forced to survive by illegal means or risk destitution. At 17, Precious was entirely preoccupied by what would happen when she turned 18 and was no longer legally a child.

"Now they told me that they delay my application for three months. . .I'm going to be 18 in the next two months and if I don't have papers, it's just going to be too difficult for me".

Although living in limbo was experienced by the participants as intensely stressful and often debilitating, they continued to live their lives and progress their "life projects" ([Chase and Allsopp 2021](#)). Sekou described getting married during this time:

"...it was so tough. My wife wanted to do civic marriage. I couldn't. She has to wait for two years for me to provide a document for that wedding to happen. It was stressful, but we made it. It was good. It was a joyful day. I just wanted to do a wedding where everybody will come and enjoy themselves".

Sekou hoped that one day "...this immigration thing will be behind me" and he would be able to move on with his life, saying:

"It's a big hope for me, because I know when it's behind me there are other things I can do.

I always wanted to be a doctor, not because it's a dream, but it's actually a realistic dream for me. I just want to do this, because what happened to my mum, I don't

want that to happen to anybody else. . . . [a] Career where I'm stable. Offering something to people that I care about, I'm passionate about. And also these immigration things, I want to leave it behind. I don't want my life to be about immigration. I really don't".

In this quotation, Sekou traces a line between his past, his present commitment to studying to become a doctor and his dreams for the future. As illustrated by the data, the persistent tenacity of the participants is enacted in their focus on future goals; this focus is an organising feature of everyday life, enabling them to endure the daily grind of life with "no papers" and survive in a hostile environment. In the sections below, I discuss how this focus and generative activity are sustained by love—past and present—and the community of others.

4.2. Love

Love, notwithstanding its many complexities, can be seen in multiple aspects of young people's lives: in significant relationships with family and friends and with professional "helpers" and educators. In this context, I use the notion of love as a lived experience of being held precious—of recognition and regard, of being known and respected, cared for and accepted (hooks 2001).

For some of the participants, the love they had experienced as children was a treasured memory, which sustained them in the present. Sekou describes his relationship with his father, saying:

"I was so close to my dad. I relied on him so much on anything, everything. We'll debate, we'll discuss, six o'clock in the morning, because he used to wake me up. When he's sleeping and I'm awake, I would go and wake him up, say, Dad, come on, come on, even if it's weekend".

Similarly, Precious and Muhammed spoke about being woken up for school by their grandmother and mother, this small act representing love as care and attention. For Precious, this appeared to help her organise herself in the present; she drew upon memories of her grandmother as a source of strength. However, for Muhammed, the absence of this love was particularly hard to bear. Muhammed described how he had been happy in Afghanistan "because of family", but now in the UK, he was alone and struggling with depression, often unable to sleep or sleeping whole days. These ordinary features of daily life—a parental figure, who woke them up at the start of the day—were experienced by some as a memory to hold onto and others as a devastating loss.

As some participants started to build lives in the UK, they developed loving bonds with partners and imagined their future lives. Precious had a supportive boyfriend, and Sekou was married, planning for a time when he could become a father:

"I do want to have a family when I'm stable. I'll spend more time with them not worrying about what's going to happen to me. That is a big thing for me. Family is very important".

Alongside narratives of familial love, many young people told stories about individuals, often practitioners, who supported them. These were people who believed in them and helped them navigate systems, advocating on their behalf, enabling access to finance and resources. Often, these relationships provided loving care akin to that of family and friends.

Rayyan spoke about the importance of the relationships he had with staff at his college and his psychologist in keeping him alive, helping him heal and continue living.

"I certainly have been helped by a lot of people. . . . There have been occasions where people pushed me forward positively where I just didn't want to. People encouraged me when I really wasn't even into it. It's almost like people forced me into living my life when I just couldn't be bothered. . . . It's down to a few individuals. A few individuals, a tutor, a counsellor, welfare and guidance manager, form tutor, these people have been constantly with me all this time, years and years".

Rayyan's experience of being "pushed forward" was repeated by Precious, who described how the manager of the shared accommodation provided continuous support and reassurance, a calming presence in times of distress.

"...it's one woman...she's the one that actually pushed me far...Not pushing me that you have to do this but she's saying that you can do this. If you could do this way, you can get to that place... Because when the Home Office sent me a letter that said they're going to send me back home, when I start crying and I don't know what to do, I was going crazy, start screaming, I was so stressed, I'm having chest pain, like proper pain. I couldn't sleep..."

In the quotation below, Precious explains how she calls the manager "mum" and "sister"—a person she could always rely on to help her cope with the constant pressure of life with irregular status.

"She keeps pushing me saying don't worry, everything is alright. Then we do it starting step by step... She told me that you don't need to cry, you know what, we're going to find another way. She helped me to find another way... I call her my mum, I call her my sister... For me to be in here today, for me to have a lawyer, for me to have most of the things, even for me to stand as Precious... standing like that, she's the one, she's the one that kept pushing me every time saying that everything's going to be alright".

This "transformative love" (Lanas and Zembylas 2015) can be seen in several participants' accounts. For example, Sarah describes a "support family", which includes professionals, saying: "That's been helpful, sustaining me".

"Alice and the charity, if it wasn't for them I would be literally on the streets. And Craig... He's amazing. If I need anything and I ask him, he'll give it to me. If I need someone to talk to, he'll talk to me".

When Sarah speaks about the "stranger" who took her in through a scheme to provide a temporary home for homeless youth, there is a profound sense that she experiences this as an act of love:

"Where I'm living, that's a really big support, because a stranger took you in and you've been there for—since Christmas. Since Christmas, you met all her friends, practically like family. So that's a big support for me, because when she first—when she was, like, oh, yeah, you can stay here for Christmas dinner, I was, like, is she serious? I stayed and met all her family. They were really nice and friendly. Do you know what she gave me for my birthday? A card and £20. I stayed in that room and I cried all night. That's how emotional I was. It was so emotional... I really can't know what I'll do but she's amazing..."

Similarly, Sekou in the quotation below states the importance of having a parent-like figure to bear witness to his achievements.

"Things like when I first got my Endeavour Certificate for Science and Maths at my school, I invited them to come with me. It was so important. My social worker should have been there, but I invited Matthew and Kate to come with me. That was special, I've got somebody, because everybody came with their parents. That certificate doesn't mean much to them to be honest, but being with me means a lot to me... Things like that".

In this example, Matthew and Kate's presence at the award ceremony can be understood as an expression of love, for Sekou to feel "I've got somebody". This long-term "parent-like" relationship with Matthew was crucial for Sekou, holding him through uncertainty and sustaining his capacity to believe in his own abilities. Sekou continues, describing how his teacher Matthew would advocate for him in educational contexts.

"Like the university places. When people were refusing me, Matthew would come with me and would try to explain my situation where we are today. But

again, even if he didn't have to say anything, the fact that he's there to be with me, I think it means a lot".

Here, Matthew represents a British adult who believed in him and was invested in the relationship and Sekou's growth and development. The stories above indicate that where the young people were able to remember being loved and experienced being held in healthy, nurturing relationships in the present, they were more resilient in the face of adversity and often felt more positive and hopeful about the future.

5. Being in Community

"For me, my childhood and teenage-hood living on the estate, we wasn't the good kids, we wasn't the greatest kids, we got into so much trouble, but I wouldn't change it for the world, because behind that situation what was going on in my life, that's the only thing that made me feel normal, being around all those people, doing all that fun stuff, and just having general friends and friends that are not from school; friends that I live with them, my community".

In this quote, Tommi recalls his childhood on the estate and a sense of being part of a community. He describes the children in his neighbourhood like family:

"We're all a family. We all protect each other. If there's any trouble or anything, we look after each other, we go out together, all the fun stuff we did was together and a lot of us went to the same school as well. . . . It was the greatest feeling ever, your neighbour, your best friends, coming knocking at your door in the morning and you can walk to school. You never have to go to school alone. . . . When you're at a school, you know that you have a family outside of it and that family protected you in school as well, even though when we were in school, we all had friends. But when we came out of school, we were like this is home now, all on our estate".

Hence, for Tommi, his "community" was both the physical locality of "the estate" but also the community of shared experience, which he described as "friends that I live with" and "family". In the quotation above, Tommi links his sense of wellbeing to being part of a community where he feels safe and protected—this connection with his peers being "the greatest feeling ever". This sense of community is also echoed in Sekou's reminiscence about his wedding day and the description of his relationships with people who have become family to him:

"...my wedding day... they were full of people who were my groomsmen, people I met in this country. There was only one Guinean person in my wedding. That was my best man. . . . For me, that diversity in my wedding, it was good. . . . I know I have people I can rely on. Those are people that make me wake up every day morning and I want to do things differently, because they are like me. They're just getting on with their lives and doing things. [. . .] In the UK, I think I have learned from friends. I have met people here I call families. Uncle Matthew is like a family to me. Kate and her family is like a family to me. Omar is like a brother to me". (Sekou)

Sekou's comment that he had people to rely on speaks to the way in which being part of a community sustains human survival ([hooks 2001](#)) and wellbeing ([White and Jha 2020](#)). Ahmed was able to call on support from those in his social network when making a fresh claim for refugee status:

"... I told them when I had a fresh claim last time, like ten peoples, they was English, they give me papers, their passports to photocopy, to help with me. I have lots of friends like, big relationship with people. I had a lot of friends that say we can help. . . ."

This quote captures both the practical support, which this network provides, but also his sense of a community—friends from the gym, the mosque, his customers:

“I just chat with them. . . I have a lot of friends. They’re like my best friends. . . we get policemen, businessmen. . . We get a lot of different people. . . I am a good barber. If I was not illegal I’d maybe have my own business. I have a lot of customers that like me because I have been cutting hair for a long time”.

Ahmed lived on a knife edge, skilfully negotiating relationships with friends who knew of his circumstances and those unaware of his status, customers, including police officers, for whom he was simply a good barber. In Ahmed’s narrative, there is a sense that he belonged to both a community of peers and to the local “barber shop community”.

For many participants, the community, which sustained them in the present, was a link to their place of birth, a place where their right to belong was unquestioned. In Rayyan’s words, a place where

“ . . . there’s a natural sense of belonging. . . a place that you were born, you grew up in and you’re just part of the soil and the life and the air”.

Similarly, Sekou described being from Guinea as a key reference point:

“I’m from Guinea. . . even if my children are born here, even if I have a British nationality, I will always be a Guinean, I think. You can never erase that. . . because that’s where I grew up. That’s what I refer to”.

For Rayyan, it was his relationship with God, which offered continuity and constancy, his religious identity being an expression of his membership of a transnational community beyond the bounds of citizenship:

“As a Muslim you need to understand the British Government still doesn’t concern [consider] me as a British National so I am forced to find myself an identity. Even if become a British National when that happens I’ll still consider myself to be as a Muslim because I consider this to be the fundamental aspect of me”.

This is exemplified by Sekou, who described how his faith was an integral part of his life from a young age:

“My ethnic group, Jakhanke, they’re very strong in religion, agriculture. . . My dad is more liberal. My dad actually is a very good believer. He taught me Qur’an by himself. I know the Qur’an in and out, because his dad taught him when he was young”.

In exile in the UK, Sekou’s wife was Christian; they got married in a church and continued to follow their own faiths, each respecting the other’s choices.

“I’ll go to church with [my wife], but I’ll just sit there quiet, like I don’t know anything. But that’s fine. If I want to know, I’ll question her. When I’m doing Ramadan, I don’t force her to sit until nine o’clock or 9:30 to eat with me. When I’m in [Ramadan], I say to her, go and eat on your own unless you want to wait. That’s your choice”.

Precious describes growing up with both Islam and Christianity as part of her heritage. However, it was only when she came to the UK that she started to attend church regularly, finding a strong community among the congregation at her local African church and joining the choir.

“ . . . it’s only when I get here then I actually practice going to church, and doing all these night vigils, all the everything. I start having more interest and I’m in the choir. So I love to sing. So when they bring me song I just sing and I just feel the grace, and then now I just want to go every time. I just want to go and just sing and dance, and just sit there”.

For these young people, the religious practices, values and communal activities provided a connection to the past and a thread of continuity, which helped them navigate the uncertainty of the present. Like those in [Raghallaigh and Gilligan’s \(2010\)](#) and [Scott et al.’s \(2022\)](#) research, for Ahmed, Rayyan, Sekou and Precious, having grown up in

religious societies, their faith provided direction, comfort and a way of coping with their present circumstances.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

“Love is life force.

I believe that the creative spirit is nothing less than love made manifest.

I see love as the essential nature of all that supports life.

Love is opposed to the death of the dream. Love is opposed to the delimiting of possibilities of experience”. (Jordan 1977, p. 11)

Reading Jordan’s (1977) description of love as a life force, I am reminded of the multitude of ways in which young people with “no papers” resist the impact of UK immigration control by holding onto their dreams and experiences of love and community. In a hostile environment, love supports life. As a small-scale qualitative study, the research findings are not generalisable, and the participants cannot be seen as representative of all undocumented youth in the UK. However, by documenting the lived experiences of the young people in this study, I have attempted to highlight the themes, which, in my view, are important to consider when seeking to understand more about the lives of young people with “no papers”.

The findings presented here are not intended to be conclusive but rather are offered as a first step towards sensitising practitioners working in social care and social work, education, healthcare, youth and community work settings to the lives and everyday experiences of those with “no papers”. This research speaks to the importance of practitioners establishing and sustaining long-term relationships with young people with irregular immigration status and of actively supporting them to achieve their future goals. Moreover, it invites practitioners to consider the strengths and adaptive strategies, which these young people bring and explore together what might help them construct their everyday lives safely.

Beyond the practice implications of this research, data from this study suggest several avenues for further exploration. One area, which merits further consideration, would be research with young refugees and practitioners to explore their understanding and experience of “love” and how professionals might develop and deepen their practice to align with a love ethic (hooks 2001). Similarly, further research using methodological approaches which centre young refugees and migrants knowledge creation, can contribute to developing praxis around issues which matter to them, and methods which enable their participation in, and authoring of, research. Finally, despite a growing scholarship concerning the experiences of children arriving as lone migrants, there remains a limited body of scholarship regarding undocumented youth in the UK or longitudinal research with those, who were given permission to settle. Further research exploring the everyday lives, histories, desires and dreams for the future of these young people and adults is therefore needed.

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Note

¹ To preserve participants’ anonymity, all names in this paper are pseudonyms.

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