

‘We were already strong’: Young Refugees, challenges, and participation during COVID-19.

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of refugee young peoples’ narratives about their lives and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in Melbourne. Intersectionality is used as a method and analytical tool to interpret these experiences and show how young people have adapted during this time, taking on roles as navigators, carers, providers, and innovators.

The article highlights that the roles young people adopted through the pandemic are very similar to those undertaken by young people in their pre arrival to Australia.

The research points to the importance of involving refugee young people in settlement and public health initiatives. Finally, it is argued that we need to recognise refugee young people as experts in their own complex experience, valued partners in settlement, future leadership, and potential change makers.

Key words: Refugee young people, COVID-19, settlement, resilience, intersectionality.

Introduction

There is growing recognition that existing structures of inequality have impacted on peoples’ experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Maestriperi 2021). As in previous pandemics, COVID-19 has spread rapidly among vulnerable communities, interacting with pre-existing inequalities along dimensions such as gender, age, socio-economic conditions, geography (Eaves and Al-Hindi, 2020).

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Grills and Butcher have noted that:

across the world, [culturally and linguistically diverse] communities and poorer people have experienced higher COVID-19 infection rates and poorer health outcomes due to lower social determinants of health including poverty, overcrowding, lower education, exclusion and poorer access to health lead to increased risk of infection and spread and that cultural, religious and linguistic differences impact on how well a public health message is understood and acted on. (2020:1)

The disproportionate rise of infection in these communities has exposed decades of health inequalities, overrepresentation in essential work, poor health coverage and even unconscious bias in health workers (Lokot & Avakyan, 2020).

These trends have been reflected in the Australian context with recent research demonstrating that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected and disadvantaged culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Grills, & Butcher, 2020). The impact on refugee young people in Australia has been profound and far reaching across many aspects of their lives: in education, employment, health and wellbeing, housing, and income support, and in disruptions to family and social structures (MYAN, 2020a).

Refugee and migrant communities in Melbourne have also found themselves in the spotlight. In June 2020 (during Melbourne's second wave), several Melbourne suburbs with large culturally and linguistically diverse populations were highlighted as Victorian COVID-19 hot spots. Although the Victorian Government did not release subgroup data, the COVID-19 hotspots were in low socio-economic suburbs that are culturally and linguistically diverse and have large recent immigrant communities. This caused many migrant communities to claim that they had been unfairly singled out as the city entered a second wave of infections (Razik & Baker, 2020). There were claims that the government had engaged in an 'ad hoc' approach to communicating COVID-19 messaging to culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Dalzell, 2020), ignoring the proactive role migrant communities were undertaking in addressing the pandemic and instead 'blaming' multicultural family structures (Vrajial 2020).

The following month, public housing towers in Flemington and North Melbourne were put under lockdown — residents were primarily from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and many were Muslims. In both cases, these communities felt they were 'blamed' for the spread of the virus.

This article emerges from a research project conducted during this time which explored refugee young people's experiences of the pandemic. Interviews conducted with young people found that despite many instances of acute hardship, difficulties and often sustained environmental stresses, young refugees have taken on roles as navigators, carers, providers, and innovators. Young people described these roles as being very similar to the roles adopted in their pre arrival experiences. The involvement of young people in responding to the tower lockdowns draws attention to rethinking the participation of refugee young people in responding to situations such as COVID-19.

This research also utilises intersectionality theory as a method and tool of analysis to explore young people's experiences. It aims to move away from a deficit approach research paradigm to investigate aspects that have increased young people's ability to challenge, resist, adapt and thrive in the face of COVID-19. Intersectional frameworks have been used in research to highlight systems of power and oppression but drawing on it to explore strengths and agency is rare (Njeze (2020: 2003).

Intersectionality and young refugee people in Australia

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds represent a significant proportion of the youth population in Australia. Almost half of Australia's young people are first- or second-generation migrants, and one in four Australians aged 18 to 24 years are born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Young people aged between 12 and 24 comprise approximately a quarter of arrivals through the Humanitarian Program and one fifth through the Family Migration Program (MYAN 2020c).

Young people who arrive in Australia through the Humanitarian Program face several social and acculturative stressors including exposure to increased discrimination and family fragmentation (Shepherd, Newton & Farquharson, 2017). Young people experience settlement differently from adults and younger children. Their age, developmental stage, position within the family and the role they play in supporting the settlement of family members all play a significant role in their experience of settlement (Centre for Multicultural Youth, 2011). All young people face challenges during adolescence, but the challenges for young people with refugee backgrounds are more complex than their Australian-born, non-immigrant counterparts. The challenges of settlement are exacerbated by the transition into a new culture and society, new peer relationships, a new schooling system and moving from intensive English Language Schools into mainstream schools (Centre for Multicultural Youth, 2011). Many young people have grown up in a cultural context where the wellbeing of the whole family and community is prioritized above individual aspirations. As such, they are often juggling a range of pressures and complex relationships – negotiating family, cultural and peer obligations or expectations while simultaneously establishing their own identity in a new culture and society (MYAN, 2020b). The needs of this group of young people are often overlooked as they are a sub-group of both the broader youth and settlement/multicultural sectors and are underrepresented in the policy and advocacy work of both the government and non-government sectors.

When refugee young people arrive in Australia, they also set foot in a complex context, with its own unresolved colonial history, internal tensions, and contradictions (Ramos, 2018). As Ramos describes, this is space that is already contaminated by racial power relations that exist within a long colonial history and imaginary, and with racial/ethnic hierarchies firmly established. Once here, they too, become part of this complicated story (Ramos, 2018). To acknowledge this story, this research was undertaken using intersectionality as a theoretical lens, methodology and analytical perspective.

Intersectionality theory acknowledges the multiple and intersecting inequalities, derived from race, gender, class, and ability (Crenshaw 1989) and directs attention away from a focus on individual stories and experiences, to consideration of larger systemic and structural inequalities. By utilising this theory, the research not only explored young people's experience of the pandemic, but also the way knowledge is constructed about refugee young people (Couch et al., 2014). Young people in general have been absent from research, but the fact that refugee young people have been historically excluded is salient in this theoretical context. It was important that the young people's voices in the research was adequately represented (Couch et al., 2014).

Discussing intersectionality in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hankivsky and Kapilashrami (2020) define intersectionality as a perspective that:

Promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations, e.g., 'race'/ ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender, class,

sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion. These interactions occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power, e.g., law, policies, state governments, religious institutions, media. Through such processes, interdependent systemic bases of privilege and oppression derived from colonialism, imperialism, racism, homophobia, ableism and patriarchy are created (Hankivsky and Kapilashrami, 2020: 1).

In using an intersectional perspective as a research framework, I also aimed to respond to some of the critiques of research conducted with refugee groups, such as a sole focus on problems, overlooking protective factors, strengths, and resilience (Vervliet et al 2014; Betancourt and Khan, 2008), and of the lack of voice given to refugee young people themselves (Derluyn and Broekaert, 2008). This is important, because as Ni Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) note, there is a tendency for researchers to concentrate on vulnerability and the difficulties that young refugees encounter. Researchers have noted that with young refugees, twin and contradictory assumptions are firmly in place. On one hand young people are often referred to as 'resilient' and on the other, as 'vulnerable' or 'traumatized' (Couch 2017).

This terminology not only emphasises a 'deficient' outlook, it also lacks reference to resilience or self-empowerment (Eades, 2013). Thus, it assigns people with blanket characteristics that have become a 'refugee narrative' (p. 267). This narrative assigns roles to the refugee as dependent, fragile and traumatized and with no action or agency of their own.

This approach has serious limitations, including minimising the role of culture, oversimplifying experiences and pathologising normal stress responses (Mupenzi 2018):

While the legal label of being a refugee is lifesaving, the social label carries with it a risk of prejudice and stigma. The stereotypical perception of young refugees as adolescents at risk is not without consequences: it is difficult to spread one's wings when pigeonholed. It is of great social importance to see refugee youth not as passive victims without capacities but as survivors with social potential who can inspire with their ability to "bounce forward" (Sleippen et al 2013: 2).

This social potential has been recognised by some researchers. Shakya et al (2014) in the Canadian context has indicated that refugee young people already take on significant responsibilities in the settlement of their family and describes young people as 'settlement champions'. Young people are acutely aware of the settlement challenges facing their family and they play active roles in addressing them. They adopt crucial roles and responsibilities and navigate particularly complex identities.

The responsibilities that refugee young people take on for their family can be broadly categorized into six types:

1. navigating information, services, and resources
2. serving as interpreters/translators (at home, outside and while accessing services)
3. providing economic support through paid jobs
4. doing instrumental functions (e.g., finding housing, helping to move, getting food, taking care of family sponsorship applications and other legal matters)
5. mentoring/teaching younger siblings and parents/adults
6. giving care and emotional support (including taking care of younger siblings and grandparents and offering emotional support to family and friends) (Shakya et al, 2014).

Thus, I aim to reframe the discussion in a way that recognises the centrality of young people's agency and their capacity to contribute meaningfully in ways that benefit their families and community, based on the experience and knowledge they have gathered from the world as they have lived it.

Method: 'Inside voices' - capturing the experiences and perspectives of refugee young people

This research was approved by the Australian Catholic University Ethics Committee. The data collection for this research had its origins in the nationwide consultations undertaken by the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN)¹. During the pandemic, MYAN ran consultations with young leaders from around Australia with refugee and migrant backgrounds, including current and past members of their Youth Ambassadors Network. These consultations covered the impact of COVID-19 on young people, their families and communities.

In addition to ongoing conversations with young people, MYAN has initiated regular national meetings with over 300 workers in the youth and settlement sectors to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on young people's lives and on youth and settlement service delivery. This included a national youth led panel which explored 'the new normal':

[Link to videos by National Youth Panel on COVID-19](#): exploring the new normal; produced by Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network.

The issues that were raised by young people and the innovations they identified, were the first stages in this study providing contextualisation and background knowledge. The study that emerged out of these consultations focuses on fifteen in depth interviews that were undertaken online and in person between May and September 2020.

Participants were recruited through youth workers and a smaller number through a 'snowballing' process with young people whom the researcher knows and who are living on the high-rise housing estate. An information sheet was developed and distributed asking young people to contact the researcher. Young people made contact at which point an initial meeting was conducted via zoom. At this meeting I shared how I was planning to undertake this study and what I was aiming to achieve. I asked them to think about what we had talked about and then decide if they wanted to participate or not. All except one young person who was initially approached agreed.

In total, 15 young people were interviewed, 9 males and 6 females. They came from 8 different countries and ranged in age from 15 to 20. They had been in Australia for varying lengths of time. Consequently, they were also at different stages of the settlement process. Although I began the research using semi structured interviews, this soon gave way to a process of informal conversations and storytelling, resulting in a thick description of events and day to day life under lockdown.

This project also required not only adhering to minimum ethical standards, but exceeding them (Block et al., 2012, 70). I ensured that each young person understood the project and their role within it. This was done by adapting both the consent form and information letter into a diagram of a tree. The roots were the risks, and the leaves were the benefits, and this was explained and discussed at length with the participants.

¹ Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN) is the national peak body representing the rights and interests of young people aged 12-24 from refugee and migrant backgrounds. MYAN works in partnership with young people, government, and non-government agencies at the state and territory and national levels to ensure that the particular rights and needs of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are recognized and addressed in policy and practice. (need a reference here)

Interviews and stories were analysed thematically using a tool called 'Framework' (Ritchie and Lewis, 2013). Analysis of the data was an ongoing and iterative method that commenced in the early stages of research and continued until completion. Interviews were transcribed into verbatim text. After this all material was closely read and a conceptual framework developed.

The framework involved identifying broad concepts and themes. All concepts identified as being important to the research questions were coded. These coded concepts were transferred into patterns and themes, at which point they were further scrutinized to understand the experience.

Results: 'It takes more than COVID to kill a Congolese'

In interviews, young people shared how they had to adapt to increasing responsibilities to their family and communities during COVID-19. Responsibilities included disseminating information, helping families navigate services, interpreting and translating, earning an income, caring for older and younger family members, providing educational support for siblings who are home schooling and giving emotional and physical support to residents during the tower lockdown.

Thematic analysis of participants narratives and stories revealed four central roles that young people have adopted during the pandemic – navigators & cultural brokers, providers, caregivers, and innovators. This section explores these narratives.

Young people as navigators and cultural brokers

Australia's social distancing measures in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented changes to the lives of individuals and their social activities. The effects of lockdown and social distancing impacted on refugees in more complex ways than in other communities. Refugees rely on a range of informal networks that are vital for maintaining educational and social services, such as tuition in English and other subjects, health and social care support, legal support, support with mental and physical wellbeing, and social and cultural activities (Gholami, 2020).

Within many refugee background communities, the elders usually make the important decisions. However, as Marlowe and Bogen (2015) note, refugee young people often adjust to their new country and culture at a quicker rate. Largely due to their school experiences, they are in constant contact and exchange information with members of the wider society. Through these continuous social encounters, young people learn the host language, and begin to understand, acculturate to, and possibly integrate with, local norms, social protocols and cultural protocols (Marlowe & Bogen, 2015:4)

Older members of migrant and refugee families have less connection with the host community while young people tend to develop strong connections to resources and social networks beyond their ethnic community. As a result, young people become cultural brokers, or 'family interpreters' (Faulstich-Orellana (2007) translating information for their families and their communities:

The news was so depressing, I try not to watch it, but my grandmother always asked me to tell her what was happening. I was trying to keep up with what everyone was saying. Sometimes I got confused and she would be asking me to tell her – and then I had to tell the neighbours. (17-year-old young woman)

When everything locked down, I really noticed how many people live in our house, because usually people are out. Out of 15 people, my English is the best. I really felt a lot of responsibility – everyone needed to make calls. If there were bills to sort and pay, I did it. If there was a teacher to ring or something to sort out, everyone asked me. Yeah, I really felt a lot more responsibility. (19-year-old young woman)

For refugee background communities, inadequate language proficiency is a clear barrier to receiving and accessing correct information (Marlowe & Bogen, 2015) about the pandemic. This deficit in linguistic capital can lead to misunderstanding messages regarding social distancing and lockdown. The deficit can also create difficulties understanding government assistance packages. Marlowe and Bogen argue that “this ‘deficit’ is closely related to and impacted by exogenous structural limitations which often assume that people are fluent in the host society language and therefore have access to information” (2015:7).

As young people adapt to cultural and linguistic contexts more quickly than their parents, they are called on to interpret and translate key messages for their family and community, and serve as potential cultural brokers with the wider society:

So, people who needed to see the doctor were told not to go to hospitals or clinics – instead, we were meant to use video calls. I had to help my mum and about three of her friends do all this because they had no idea how. It was embarrassing too. (18-year-old young man)

During a pandemic, a community’s ability to access and understand safety guidelines and official information is critical. Linguistic competency and social capital resources are crucial. Complex social and cultural factors affect how communities receive, understand and act on information. During this pandemic, government did provide translated information using various mediums including radio and social media, but this was not offered soon enough and was often translated into formal language, unsuitable for many communities. Young people who used Facebook and WhatsApp became ‘linguistic and digital bridges’ for their families and communities (Marlowe and Bogen 2015) ensuring that crucial information was received and understood:

A lot of the information was in English and if it was written in our language it was formal. Not like we speak, so I had to explain when to get tested, where, why, how. (17-year-old young man)

This process of acting as bridges is also dependant on young people’s relationships of trust in communities, or their ability to build trust. A cornerstone of trust ensures that messages are delivered, understood and acted on.

COVID-19 also resulted in a radical and unprecedented reliance on digital technology for information about the pandemic. Within migrant and refugee communities, young people tend to be the most digitally literate people in their households (Marlowe & Bogen 2015). With the nationwide closure of educational institutions, young people were essential in helping their transition to online education. Many young people became a key resource in ensuring that digital messages related to education were received:

My parents had really no idea. They don’t speak good English and have low education. There are six kids so, as I am the oldest, I had to help. We have two computers and not good internet. I hated zoom tutes at uni because at my house it was complete chaos and it felt like everyone else was going fine.

Some days I had to be a tutor, some days I had to email the teachers and every day I had to help my brothers and sisters with their homework. I had to translate everything for my parents and give them all the information about everyone. (19-year-old young woman)

Since many refugees rely on informal relationships within their community for information, rumours and misinformation spread with ease. Young people noted:

We're trying our best to provide translated information from reliable sources on our WhatsApp groups. (17-year-old young man)

Given the global nature of the pandemic, young people also noted that this digital literacy was important in linking communities together – not just locally, but also as a way of communicating with friends and family overseas:

The only positive thing is that we started face timing and zooming overseas. We did not do that before, as it made us feel further away and that's been really good. We also know people are safe and we can also give them proper information. Some of them do not know the basic things about the virus. (20-year-old young woman)

The use of social media platforms to communicate with family and friend overseas forms part of the aggregate set of resources used by young people to maintain and manage group membership, solidarity and belonging, involving a complex interaction between a sense of connection and reciprocal moral duty to friends and family overseas (Wilson 2015).

Therefore, by acting as translators and cultural brokers, young people become crucial to the community's wellbeing and ability to cope and recover from the associated adverse circumstances (Marlowe & Bogen 2015), playing a critical role in public health management.

Young people as providers

Young people are being hit the hardest by job loss because of COVID-19 and will suffer the long-term labour market consequences of economic downturn. It is also anticipated that refugees and migrants will experience these effects disproportionately (Centre for Multicultural Youth, 2020). However, as the Centre has noted, young refugees have faced persistent barriers that contribute to long-term unemployment, underemployment, or insecure employment.

Young refugees are highly aware of the labour market barriers facing their family and often step in to contribute to the family costs. The job losses and reduction in hours during COVID-19 have significantly affected young people, sometimes impacting on housing security and the ability to support family members overseas:

It was very difficult when coronavirus started, because I lost my job. When my mum had the twins, she told me I had to help with money because she couldn't work. There is a lot of pressure now to pay our rent, but also to send money overseas. Coronavirus is everywhere and we are so worried for our relatives. My sister kept her jobs but had to drop out of uni – if I get another job, I will have to as well. (19-year-old young woman)

Young people who have maintained their jobs during COVID-19 have reported concerns about their health, safety and rights at work. These concerns reveal how vulnerable they are to

potential exploitation given that many are desperate to maintain an income:

I work in a supermarket so I'm kind of on the front line, I worry about catching it and passing it on to my grandparents who live with us. (16-year-old young woman)

Young people will also be disproportionately negatively impacted by the looming economic slow-down as a result of COVID-19. Past financial downturns have shown that young people take far longer than other age groups to recover after becoming unemployed, particularly those without a degree (Productivity Commission, 2020). The events that shape someone's transition to employment have a long-term impact on their future working life; referred to as 'scarring'. There is a likelihood of employment and future earnings being reduced for up to 10 years or more (Seccombe, 2020) with long-term implications for health and wellbeing. The implications are not lost on most young people:

I think when we come out of this, it's going to be so much harder. Even before COVID I found it so much easier to get a job than my parents. Imagine now. I need to study hard; I need to go to uni. But I also need to get a job, because I honestly do not know how we can all manage if I do not work. (17-year-old young man)

Young people as caregivers

The pandemic has required refugee young people to take on caring roles such as teaching younger siblings, giving care and support to grandparents and offering emotional support to family and friends. This was not always viewed negatively:

Even though at times I was annoyed when my mum asked me to help people in my community, it also makes me feel so good. I'm part of something, we are survivors. We know how to cope when everything is uncertain. I have never been more thankful than I am now to be part of my large Sudanese family and community. They ground me. We can share our troubles. You are never alone. It was just one more thing we went through together.

The restrictions of lockdown and the anxiety related to the risks associated with COVID-19 have been central to refugee young people's difficulties. The increase in their caring load has prevented them from turning to their established coping strategies such as spending time with friends, going to school or engaging in a hobby.

Many young people provided care as well as emotional support to family members, with many talking about having to look after children in the family and their aging grandparents/relatives. Some spoke about having to console and emotionally support their parents when their parents were feeling down because of economic and other difficulties:

I kept telling mum it was going to be ok. I kept saying, there are many things that will kill the Congolese people before coronavirus. (17-year-old young woman)

Social isolation and increased familial tensions due to home confinement also presented mental health challenges for the whole family. Young people noted that lockdown caused re-traumatisation. Faced with uncertainty and living in a confined space reminded them of "facing detection and persecution back home":

What we are facing now during this crisis is reminding me of the revolution I

witnessed in my country, the state of panic, the constant horrific news and the speed of which new rules and measures are being put in orders is quite triggering and scary. (20-year-old young man)

Young people spoke about the amplified difficulties in managing the practicalities of supporting their families during the lockdown. Examples included not being allowed into shops and lack of access to transport. Other difficulties included the following:

Whenever I leave the house to do shopping for the family, I feel like people are staring at me. One lady said, 'you shouldn't be wandering around at this time'. (16-year-old young woman)

I got a fine. I was taking money out from the ATM for my mum, so she could do shopping. The police asked me why my mum could not buy her groceries online. I told him, it's not the way we do things. (18 year old young man)

The COVID-19 pandemic has also underscored society's reliance on women carrying out a higher proportion of unpaid care work than men. In some ways, this is unsurprising given gender norms in most families. Care roles mentioned by young women included the care of children, adults, seniors and sick individuals. Many young women have carried disproportionate caring responsibilities that may be an additional stressor as they navigate their own priorities, be they educational or other. It is also likely that male family members are given higher priority for digital access when there are not enough devices or data to meet the needs of all family members studying at home. Therefore, many young women experience additional disadvantage in the context of new demands/requirements of COVID-19.

We have only one computer in the house. My brother is in year 11 and he uses that. I am in first year uni. I am trying to watch lectures on my phone, but it's hard. I can go into uni and use the computers there, but there is a lot for me to do at home. I must help my mum with so many things. I think I will have to withdraw this year. (18-year-old young woman)

Young people's care also went beyond their immediate family and communities, offering peer-to-peer support which can be effective in helping reduce anxiety and depression exacerbated by such a public health crisis. An example was the video series produced through MYAN in which young refugees posted about their daily lives under lockdown:

[MYAN 'Day in a Life' youth-led video series](#)

Link to 'A day in the life' youth-led video series produced by Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network

Young people as innovators – tower lockdowns

The above discussion demonstrates that young refugees have capacities that have enabled them to actively participate as carers, providers, and information providers during COVID-19 for their families and communities. It also highlights the strengths of young refugees, including cross-cultural knowledge, multilingual skills, adaptability and a strong sense of family and community.

However, as Westoby and Ingamells argue: 'young people themselves bring resources, but the expert gaze often misses them' (2007). Never was this more apparent than in the July lockdown in Melbourne of 3000 social housing residents in nine towers. These towers, spread across two inner city suburbs, are home to many newly arrived and refugee communities. There had been very little consultation with migrant communities prior to the outbreak - it was

virtually non-existent - and young people were often filling in the information gaps (Napier-Ramen 2020).

Residents of the towers were given five minutes notice via text that their communities would be shut for a minimum of five days. Over 500 police were immediately deployed. The presence of large numbers of armed police caused fear, stress, anxiety and confusion:

Not knowing what is happening, what each day will bring, lots of police and helicopters at night... it is scary. Not again. (19-year-old young man)

Yes, it reminds me of before we came to Australia. It causes me a lot of headaches. (15-year-old young woman)

Another consequence of the hasty measure was immediate distrust in public health messaging. In a community which has a history of 'over-policing,' especially regarding young people, the policing of the emergency lockdown took place in a negative context. There have been long-running and well-documented community concerns, including legal action about discriminatory policing, documented racial profiling, policing operations targeting ethnicities and multiple incidents of severe human rights abuses over many years (Napier-Ramen, 2020). Many have argued that the choice to deploy large numbers of police officers as the government's frontline response removed agency, self-determination and control from residents, local community networks and health responders (Davey, 2020). This was considered especially alienating considering the extensive expertise in health and social work among the residents, including aged-care workers, nurses and youth workers (Davey, 2020).

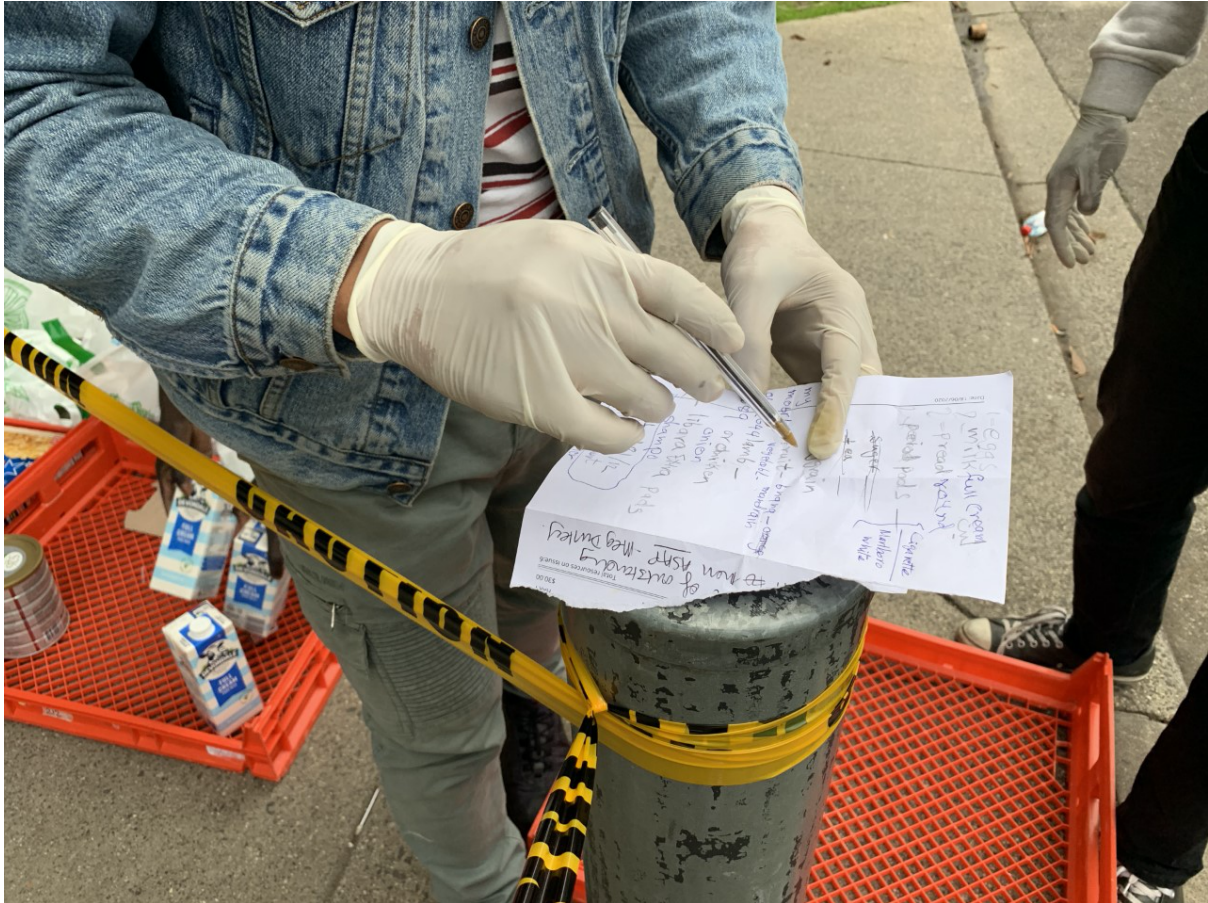
Within one hour, a youth work student formed an online group. People began mobilising to organize food and healthcare. Some focused on creating and distributing multilingual information. A group of young people aged 17 to 25 began door-knocking apartments, asking residents what they needed and noting down any emergency supplies. Donations, often personal and from the young people themselves, funded the first food and medicine drops. Young people emerged as carers as they comforted people who were distressed and confused:

Actually, when the lockdown came, I was at my brother's, not on the estate. I thought that I should just stay there. But how could I? My family and community were there. I knew how frightened people would be. When I got back there were so many police, it looked like something terrible had happened. We decided to go door to door in one tower block where we knew a lot of people. As we got to doors, we could hear crying. There were so many corridors, where that is all we could hear. (20-year-old young man)

As the days of the lockdown wore on, concerning reports emerged of residents not receiving food, or receiving food that was out of date or that was culturally inappropriate because it contained pork (Boseley, 2020). Some packaged food had no heating instructions. Reports also came to light that no testing of the coronavirus was being conducted and that there was a lack of translated information (Davey, 2020). Young people emerged once again as leaders – two participants were part of group of young people from the Australian Muslim Social Services Agency (AMSSA) Youth Connect based themselves at the base of the towers. They liaised with young people they knew via the nearby mosque and helped them explain to their parents what services were available so that families would open their doors to receive donated goods. They distributed food and supplies and communicated information.



Photos by Mariam Koslay. Permission of all photographed received.



The gaps in information and lack of trust became remarkably apparent when, at midnight on the third night of lockdown, young people were asked to accompany public health workers in going door to door to convince people to be tested (Napier-Ramen 2020):

We were asked to help the health workers go to each door, especially those people from our culture. We knew where they were and there were no interpreters. The health workers needed us as many people would not open their doors. (20-year-old young man)

Several research participants also began documenting what was happening on the estate, using Instagram and Facebook to capture how they were experiencing lockdown inside and outside the towers.

We began putting everything on Insta. For some of us we know how it is when you feel trapped. No power and not being able to do a thing about your situation. (17-year-old young woman)

Hashtags such as #weseeyou documented not just the lives of the residents locked in the apartments, but also of the young people from the community who were providing aid, support, and information. These acts showed how young people were providing care and sharing information:

We know what it is like to be invisible. A refugee's life is about walking a line between not wanting to be visible and then realising that if you are not, anything can happen. Being visible can be powerful. That is why we had to let people know that we saw them. (19-year-old young man)



This kind of innovative engagement inspired and motivated other young people into action, leading one media commentator to claim that it was young people who saved the towers from a wider catastrophe. As noted by Napier-Ramen (2020), the videos, posts and tweets posted by young people from the estate in the first 24 hours of lockdown drew attention to the multitude of logistic failures in implementing the shutdown.

Discussion: 'I've crossed so many rivers. I no longer get wet'.

Although many of the young people in this study are often living in constrained and disempowering circumstances, they show a remarkable agency in giving sense to their experience. Affects, memories and past experiences which many of us would find negative and perhaps damaging, are in fact utilised in productive ways by young people in the context of COVID-19, but also more broadly in their settlement (Wilson 2015).

During the research, young people were asked about the strengths and skills that helped them weather the challenges associated with the pandemic and take on the roles we have discussed. Strikingly, many of the skills that young people talked about were learnt by young people enacting similar roles to those identified in this study.

Most of the participants talked about the knowledge they bought with them from their pre-arrival experiences, noting that in refugee settings, young people are often contributors to the social organization of camp life. They are often a conduit of information, serving as liaisons between aid structures and their own community:

Yes, even though when we came to Australia it was like learning again, in many ways I grew up early. As the oldest, I have lots of responsibility. In the camp I was used to negotiating, waiting, problem solving. So, when COVID happened, I just jumped back into my old self. (20-year-old young man)

When you have to leave your country... learning is how you survive. Every bit of the time, in every place you are learning. New rules. New thinking. It is the same with the pandemic. You must learn new things and help others understand. (17-year-old young woman)

Clark argues that in refugee and humanitarian settings, adults depend on young people to undertake a variety of tasks, placing them in roles and positions of competence and responsibility and that 'assumed vulnerable characteristics do not hold true' for all refugee young people 'in all circumstances at all times' (Clark 2007:285-6). This was echoed by young people in this study:

In the camp we were in for a while, I had to stand in line to get the food. We were with my mum, and she was not well. It's also dangerous. I was little but the oldest so... you are young, but you have to do adult things. (19-year-old young woman)

Indeed, in such settings, young people talked about being thrust into adult roles prematurely, 'becoming mothers and fathers, heads of households, husbands and wives, principal wage earners and more, with extremely limited support' (Lowicki 2002:33-34).

We lost my dad, and older brothers. It was my mum and us. I had to earn money for my family selling sweets every day until 11pm. There was no choice. Everything we earned went for the rent. (20-year-old young man)

The above discussion demonstrates that for refugee young people COVID-19 has unfolded in a complex context of ongoing individual life experiences, historical context, and cultural meaning. The context — before and during the pandemic — appears to play many roles in the interpretation and response enacted by young people.

Conclusion

In taking on roles as caregivers, providers and navigators in their communities, young people have demonstrated ability to endure and respond to complex challenges. Their response to COVID-19 shows that entire communities can benefit from the unique competencies young people carry with them, including effective coping mechanisms, adaptability, and resourcefulness.

In some ways this should be hardly surprising. Having endured pre arrival experiences marked by violence and limited resources, young people should not be presumed to abandon self-direction and agency on their arrival in Australia. However, it is not unusual that upon arrival in Australia, the capacity of young people to positively impact the world around them is often diminished and unrecognised. Adults are positioned as the recognized leadership, with young people often assuming roles of relative powerlessness. Adults become the spokespeople for communities and often make decisions that although impact young people, are not directly informed by them and therefore create an environment that is constrained by a vision of what adults judge necessary.

In focusing on the agency participants have shown, the suffering young people have experienced, and the importance of this collective experience, should not be minimised. We

should, however, avoid the tendency to pathologise the consequences of extreme human experiences.

This research has also shown that it is important that we acknowledge the roles young people play in their families and communities regarding settlement. Perhaps it is because that when youth participation is acknowledged, focus is placed on formalised youth participation in institutional settings rather than contributions in their homes and communities. Such participation, however, is instructive in that it reveals the ways in which participation is already taking place and may provide insight regarding settlement of young people, their families and communities. Participation may also be a protective factor, as it supports resiliency, self-esteem and a sense of wellbeing (Couch, 2007: 39). Acknowledging young people's participation and contribution can also help young people value themselves as people who are contributing both to their families and wider society. Collective activities may reinforce this positive identity (Couch 2007).

The active participation of young people in larger social systems has been shown to benefit them in many ways: as a means of developing their potential as a form of emotional bonding, and by empowering them to act as change agents. 'Through participation, adolescents develop skills, build competencies, form aspirations, gain confidence and attain valuable resources' (Rajani 2001: 2). They not only learn or refine healthy decision-making skills, but the opportunity to exercise this capacity can result in improved confidence and sense of belonging – essential for successful resettlement (Couch 2007).

Finally, we need to recognise refugee young people as experts in their own complex experience, valued partners in community healing, future leadership, and potential change makers. Whilst the pandemic has 'lay bare stark disparities in power' (Lokot & Avakyan, 2020), the creativity, resilience and agency of refugee young people should not be overlooked. Having already demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness in the face of enormous difficulties, it would be a substantial loss to society if refugee young people were not given the opportunities to apply their determination and skills in their new home – especially during a pandemic.

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