

Encountering authority and avoiding trouble: Young migrant men's narratives of negotiation in Europe

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Abstract

Drawing on data from seven European countries (Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy and the United Kingdom), this article seeks to identify how young migrant men engage with authority and avoid conflict against a backdrop of increasing hostility towards migrants in many European countries. As this article contends, even those with permanent residency status in the host country often find themselves having to justify their legitimacy to carry out daily tasks, resulting in many young male migrants living with feelings of perpetual insecurity. As such, a number of coping strategies are employed by young migrant men in order to assuage such feelings and mitigate potential risks. Focusing on the lived experiences of this group, as described in narrative interviews, our study found that many young migrant men are required to enter into negotiations with authority figures, where there is a considerable power differential. Acting as risk assessors, they find themselves forced to navigate complex and challenging social relations and support networks. We show how self-limiting behaviour intended to avoid or control interactions with authority and the negotiations conducted to minimize the risk of 'trouble' by young migrant men not only are problematic in the context of day-to-day activities but can very often have a detrimental impact on their lives.

Keywords

Migrant, insecurity, safety, men, police

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Introduction

Although there has been a long history of migration in Europe (Cohen, 2006), it has not been without difficulty, particularly over the past decade (Geddes and Scholten, 2016). During this time, many European countries have witnessed a political lurch to the right, with more mainstream parties placing the ‘threat’ of migration at the forefront of their campaigns as justification for building ‘hostile environments’ to discourage migrants from coming or staying (with very few exceptions – see Canning, 2019). ‘Crimmigration’ policies and legislation have become a common feature across Europe (Fabini, 2017). That is not to suggest that the patterns, strength and targets of hostilities have been identical across the European Union. There are, as Cohen argued, significant disparities to be considered:

In Germany and Britain . . . xenophobia has long roots. In France, with its stronger tradition of citizenship and assimilation, it has come as a relatively recent realization that some . . . are unlikely to be accepted and peacefully absorbed. In the southern countries of Europe . . . the general recognition of alarming levels of xenophobia is a post-1990s phenomenon.

(Cohen, 2006: 89)

However, commonalities exist across Europe and internationally (see Melossi, 2015; Nakhid, 2018), not least around the processes of (mis)representation and labelling of migrant groups. ‘Respectable fears’ (Pearson, 1983) over the rise in immigration have been stoked and heightened by political rhetoric and media (mis)representations (Friedman and Klein, 2008). As a population, young migrant men are viewed with particular suspicion and distrust, whether over their right to enter the country, their motivations for doing so, or the risk they are thought to pose to the ‘native’ population and the ‘values’ of that country. Hostility towards migrants and related community divisions are viewed in part on the basis of perceptions of fairness and entitlement in the allocation of resources within the welfare state, including the turnover of children in schools and the difficulties associated with teaching those with different languages and cultures (Ford, 2007; Pillai et al., 2007). Citing ‘mass migration’ and the strain that it can place upon shared resources is a familiar tactic employed by sections of the media. It is also common for media reporting around migrants to conflate them with criminality (Migration Observatory, 2013) by citing their ‘illegal’ immigration status or their attempts to dupe the ‘host’ country, using imagery that conjures up the stereotypes of the ‘threatening’ young migrant male (Buchanan and Grillo, 2004). Fabini (2019) found that, conscious of avoiding unwelcome attention from the police, many migrants sought to minimize the chances of being stopped by employing strategies to evade the attentions of the police, such as avoiding alcohol, dressing well and opting to avoid clustering with peer groups.

Presented as a modern-day ‘folk devil’ (Cohen, 2002; Alexander, 2000), young migrant men are frequently constructed as a risky population, associated with dangerousness, terrorism and disorder (Herz, 2019). This has been particularly acute in the case of young Muslim men (Archer, 2003; Mythen et al., 2009). It has created what Tyler (2013: 4) has termed ‘abject subjects’. Influenced by Kristeva’s (1982; 1991: 41) work on the

concept of abjection, where she considers ‘the prickly passions aroused by the intrusion of the “other”’, Tyler outlines how the process of ‘othering’ occurs through the production of ‘revolting subjects’; that is, those who can be constructed as markedly different from (and, indeed, in opposition to) the ‘good citizens’ and who present a threat to this population. This distinction forms the basis, according to Tyler (2013), of government rhetoric that seeks to deny the rights of certain migrant populations. However, as Fabini (2017) has pointed out in relation to the city of Bologna, responses to, in this case, undocumented migrants are complex owing to the matrix of national legislation, responses of formal social control agencies, and the actions of the migrants themselves. This creates ‘a system of control in which undocumented migrants are simultaneously criminalized, informally allowed to stay, and tolerated (even welcomed) in the shadow economy’ (Fabini, 2017: 57).

Despite young migrant men being regarded as a particularly problematic group, there has been relatively little academic research into their experiences (Charsley and Wray, 2015; Datta et al., 2009). Counteracting the intersectional discrimination and marginalization of young men from non-European countries and implementing policies to support their well-being constitute a significant challenge to policymakers. Within this context, the large-scale European project upon which this article is based – ‘Migrant Men’s Well-Being in Diversity’ (MiMen) – sought to document and analyse the experiences of young migrant men who were residing in one of seven European countries: Germany, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Czech Republic and the UK.

This article draws on data from the MiMen project to understand the relationships between young migrant men and figures of authority, and the actions they took in order to avoid conflict. The project explored encounters (or potential encounters) that migrant men had with those who hold power, the strategies that they adopt to deal with these encounters, and the significance of these strategies. What emerged from these data is that a series of techniques are used by young migrant men in order to avoid or limit their interactions with those they view as holding positions of power, formally or otherwise. When these interactions were unavoidable, they were frequently viewed, and negotiated, with caution. Underpinning these strategies was the need to maintain feelings of safety, which involved avoiding potential ‘trouble’ and criminalization, detention or deportation. For many of the men in our study, this was linked to their fears of being removed from the host country, even if they had secure status allowing them to remain.

Having to manage various interactions, regulate their conduct and carefully consider their negotiations with different people and activities had a marked effect on the participants. As this article concludes, this is a domain where young migrant men face considerable strain, and therefore there needs to be some deliberation in both European and international-level policy discussions and academic research on the cumulative bearing upon the lives of these young men.

Research methodology

This article is based upon qualitative research conducted between 2014 and 2015 in seven countries across Europe: Germany, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Czech Republic and the UK. It presents the experiences of 282 male third-country nationals aged between

16 and 27 who had lived in the host country for at least a year. The young men were contacted through individual, personal and institutional contacts of project partners, primarily non-governmental organizations, and through respondent friendship and support groups. Participants shared their stories throughout the course of a year during individual interviews and follow-up interviews ($n=145$) or as part of focus group discussions ($n=137$).

The interviews were designed to generate narratives of daily life (past, present and future), using free-association techniques (Hollway and Jefferson, 2008), in order to unpack the lived experiences and challenges facing young migrant men as they attempt to make a home in new surroundings. In essence, our interviews provided a vehicle for the young men to tell their own contextualized stories and to preserve their unique perspectives specific to their experiences and way of life. The stories provided rich evidence of the young men's perspectives of their own lived experiences, attitudes and beliefs.

The interviews were structured around four 'starter' themes, focusing on current life, past life and hopes for the future, to help organize the telling of the story (Plummer, 2001). The narrative interview method provided a forum for respondents to identify and explore the specific issues of everyday life that they considered the most pertinent, whether those were the 'bigger picture' or the 'smaller details' (Phoenix, 2008). The interviews touched upon a range of socio-structural issues, practical considerations and broader emotional experiences around the complexities and nuances of their everyday lives and sociality.

The interview data were supported with up to six focus group discussions in each country, conducted with groups of up to seven young men who were already connected via support organizations or through friendship groups. Drawing on the themes of past, present and future raised during the interviews, the participants discussed their experiences as young male migrants in Europe and the complex challenges they faced. These group discussions allowed the exchange of experience, anecdotes and points of view, sometimes taking the discussion in unexpected directions (Kitzing, 1995).

Data analysis

Analysing a large cross-national dataset containing multiple languages is not a simple process. In the analysis phase of any such project some of the meaning, context and nuance of the data is lost (Pilkington, 2018). Although this is inevitable, any 'loss' was mitigated against through using a series of steps, set out below, to ensure the robustness of the data and the quality of the findings. Budgetary and time constraints led to the compromise position of using a 'summary' approach to the data analysis with the option of returning to the original data as a 'backstop', which was used, when required, during this project.

The interviews were carried out in the languages of the respective countries in which the migrants lived, and interview summaries were then produced in English. The summaries were led by relevant direct quotations from each interview and included background information about the interviewee and the interview setting, and a summary of the narrative with respect to various topic areas. The summaries were written by the original interviewer in each country, who had research, and sometimes lived, experience

of the local context. This produced over 500 pages of interview summaries across the dataset, which was then analysed and coded in NVivo10 by a small team working together to ensure coding consistency. The codes were developed based on the interview schedule and the themes that emerged from the summaries, and were eventually aggregated under seven main thematic domains. This article draws specifically, *inter alia*, on the themes of interactions with authority, safety and security.

The process of translating data and compiling summaries is not without its challenges. There is a risk of losing meanings and subtle complexities during interpretation, as Piazzoli (2015: 313) has suggested: 'giving words to experiences is a complicated process as the meaning of experiences is often not completely accessible for subjects and difficult to express in language.' Although it would have been desirable to avoid this process, it was a necessity of the trans-national, multi-language research design. In order to counter the potential methodological shortcomings, the translation process and the production of summaries were shared within each country's research teams to allow a process of transparency and to improve the rigour of these documents before they were shared with the wider research team. It has been argued that, although it is important to acknowledge the limitations associated with translations (Squires, 2009) and the use of interview summaries, they can play an 'insightful' part in cross-language research (Piazzoli, 2015: 80), allowing for meaning, particularly within the local context, to be considered and debated in considerable depth. This process of reflection and discussion can also substantially improve the rigour of the methodology and minimize any threats to the validity.

The project's participants were not a homogeneous group. The young men's experiences and responses were shaped by many things, not least their own biographies, their immigration status and their experiences with others, including those in power, since entering the host country. Failure to appreciate the diversity of this population can eclipse and deny the complex and varied factors that can serve to shape their life choices and that can also have an impact upon their marginalization (Datta et al., 2009). There were, nevertheless, some commonalities across the group, which this article highlights.

Findings

The narratives that emerged during the research documented the young men's attempts to make their home in one of the seven participating European countries and demonstrated the daily challenges faced when trying to achieve a safe and secure existence. The first section of the findings presented here explores the participants' experiences of encountering and negotiating with authority figures as part of their daily activities. These interactions, as described by the men, occur within a climate of perceived hostility and discrimination and are shaped by personal perceptions of risk. The second part of the findings focuses on the young men's responses to these encounters. In their attempts to avoid conflict in their daily lives, the young men in our study employed a number of tactics, including regulating their own behaviour and reframing their narratives.

Encountering authority: Discrimination, risk and the absence of trust

The intersection between young migrant men and those in authority is a space fraught with potential threats. The young men in the MiMen study often found themselves having to negotiate a series of, sometimes hostile, encounters with those in authority.

Such negotiations were exemplified by Luis from Ecuador, living in Germany with the right to remain, who recounted his experiences with authorities in Germany following the loss of his wallet and identification card.¹ This prompted the deployment of various forms of social control by both the police and the officials from the Foreigners' Registration Office in Germany. Instead of being given assistance, he was instructed to hand over his Ecuadorian passport and was forced to navigate a hostile and confusing administrative system. Once his wallet and identification card were returned, Luis was able to retrieve his passport. He then tried to complain to the police about his treatment:

Nobody helped, neither here [at the police station] or in the Foreigners' Registration Office. What I should I have done [sic], if I would not have found my wallet? And they said, '... we would have deported you to Ecuador'. Then I said, 'this is unbelievable!' ... This was my worst experience because I was in the situation in which I did not know what to do.

(Luis, 23, from Ecuador, living in Germany with the right to remain)

Encounters like this demonstrate both an imbalance of power and the feelings of helplessness and frustration that it can engender. In Luis's case, the threat of deportation was deployed as a means of control. Luis realized that, despite the opposing and perplexing instructions he received from the various officials, he needed to comply with them lest he provide justification for greater, arguably disproportionate, sanctions.

Challenging interactions with authority figures were not limited to the police but were experienced with a range of semi-authoritative figures. One example was presented by Essien, who described his attempt to enter a nightclub:

I was refused entry to a discotheque in Lübeck. The disco management said: 'We don't let foreigners in. If you've got black hair, you aren't coming in.' I said: 'I want to come in'; they said 'no'. I called the police. They said: 'Yes, that's right. You can go somewhere else.'

(Essien, 18, from Mali, living in Germany)

This double-handed negotiation with the police and the disco management revealed another reoccurring theme present in these types of interactions – the young migrant men were often told to 'go somewhere else', which for some could be equated with a suggestion that they 'return to where they came from'. John described how his appearance as a migrant prompted racist abuse from the police, which he felt unable to rebut:

They [the police] say 'go back to Africa' or 'go back to your country'.

(John, 25, from Malawi, living in Ireland with the right to remain)

The MiMen study found that the young men were often forced to defend the legitimacy of their everyday activities. Many of the respondents felt they were viewed as potentially suspect by the authorities (particularly by the police) and were therefore closely surveilled, and often stopped and searched, either in relation to the legality of their immigration status or for possible criminal activities. Robin, a 25-year-old man originally from Ghana but now settled in Ireland, reported being ‘hassled’ through a series of encounters with the Gardaí, the Irish police force. The first instance occurred one winter when Robin was driving home after taking his daughter to school. Upon being stopped by the Gardaí and asked to show his ID, Robin asked what the problem was. The officers claimed that he had aroused suspicion by wearing the hood of his sweater up. They then suggested that they were looking for his car. When Robin questioned the officers further about this, they relented and said it was a car with a similar registration and he was not in any trouble. Nevertheless, Robin was told to take his insurance documents to a local police station, which he duly did in order to avoid a confrontation. Further engagements with the Gardaí left Robin feeling intimidated and having to justify his daily activities.

Also in Ireland, Eric described the unnecessary surveillance he and his friends endured when they were simply ‘hanging out’. On occasion, this escalated and the local police would intimidate them and move them on, while making racist comments:

because we are there, even when we are not doing anything so it makes us feel on edge, tense and jumpy about them . . . It is kind of intimidating. . . They send us home really early, like around 5 or 6. . . They grab you by the jacket and say ‘get out now’. It happens every year and no one even looks twice about it. They say ‘why is so many of your kind [here]’.

(Eric, 18, from Nigeria, living in Ireland with the right to remain)

Likewise, Luyanda described being singled out and questioned, ostensibly for appearing to be a migrant. On the first such occasion, Luyanda was approached by police officers who instructed him, but not his Irish companions, to produce his GNIB card (Gardaí National Immigration Bureau), even though there was no requirement to carry it. Upon searching Luyanda, the officers found his GNIB card and accused him of being disrespectful and ‘smart’. On another occasion, Luyanda was in a park with an African friend and two Irish friends when they were accused by the Gardaí of selling ‘weed’. The officers told Luyanda’s Irish friends to leave, then began to question the young migrant men more aggressively, threatening them with various sanctions, including imprisonment:

I was shocked really. For nothing, they stopped us! But the really shocking thing was that they let the Irish guys go.

(Luyanda, 20, from South Africa, living in Ireland with the right to remain)

These encounters are indicative of the intersectional challenges of race, gender, youth and immigration status. Located at the sharp edge of these intersections, the young migrant men felt that their appearance placed them at risk of being viewed with suspicion and deserving of scrutiny. Many described tense stigmatizing encounters in which they

became caught in a double bind: experiencing both the discriminatory migrant construction and criminalizing attitudes towards black, Asian and minority ethnic populations (Arnold, 1990), particularly young men and boys (Webster, 2018). This was further accentuated by the well-documented public perceptions of the 'deviant (male) youth' (Newburn, 2011; Cohen, 2002), resulting in the creation of a 'permanent suspect population' (McAra and McVie, 2005: 27). Set within the context of a hostile political discourse and negative media representations, difficult encounters with authority led the migrant men to question the approaches of those in power and the amount of trust they should invest in officials who so often perceived them as problematic. This lack of trust, especially in relationships with the police, was expressed frequently in the interviews:

It was really sad to see how they [the police] just treated me with little respect and dignity, and that they did not believe what I was saying. And that was the hardest thing, if no one believes you.

(Abbas, 22, from Afghanistan, living in the UK as an EU national)

There has been a significant amount of research that has considered the often troubled relationships between police and migrant communities (Farren and Hough, 2018). Much of the research has suggested that migrants have little trust in the police and question the legitimacy of police actions (Farren and Hough, 2018), although there have been a significant number of studies that have countered this view (Bradford et al., 2017). Unsurprisingly, where trust is found to be lacking, perceptions of unjust treatment at the hands of the criminal justice system feature heavily (Tyler 2001, 2005; Tyler and Smith, 1997; Tyler et al., 1997). These injustices can include harassment and discrimination by the police (such as described above by Luyanda), grievances about police responses (Van Craen and Skogan, 2015) and concerns about other interactions – or lack of them – with the police (Bradford et al., 2017; Weitzer, 2010). Despite some research that questions the relationship between discrimination and a lack of trust in criminal justice agencies (Röder and Mühlau, 2012; Harries, 2014), examples of unjust treatment and negative attitudes towards the police featured heavily in the narratives of the young men participating in our research. In line with Tyler's (2000) observations, these personal experiences included appraising the transparency and fairness of decision-making processes and the manner in which those in power behave towards those over whom they hold power, all of which appear to shape migrant communities' perceptions of those in authority. Where these experiences indicated injustice or discrimination, trust in authority was compromised. Some respondents strongly believed that the police operated racial profiling practices, which they felt led to the over-policing of their peer groups. Many of our respondents were worried about difficult encounters with authority figures, with some men displaying an acute sense of insecurity, particularly regarding those with significant power. For some this was due, in part, to pre-existing feelings of insecurity. For others, it related to past encounters with the police (in the country of origin or the current country of residence) that in turn underpinned such wariness (see also Tanner, 2008):

The police should be your friend and helper but I don't see them like that . . . I get paranoid thinking 'what will they say now?' because they are the law they can do whatever they want.

(Rohan, 18, from Turkey, living in the UK as an EU National)

Some were left feeling threatened in the new host country as a result of their migrant status. Others found the frequent police harassment irritating or over-bearing. Ernes, an 18 year old from the former Yugoslavia living in Germany, explained how this 'got on [his] nerves' but recognized that this was the cost of wanting to 'hang out' with his friends in the 'nice playgrounds', which they knew were under 'police control'. Sékouba, aged 25, from Guinea, now resident in Finland, spoke of how the intense monitoring by authorities made his earlier experiences of being in Finland feel 'like a prison'. The treatment by authority figures was regardless of their citizenship status – even those who had become citizens of the country or had settled status felt they frequently had to defend their legitimacy to carry out legal day-to-day activities (see Jones et al., 2017). For those both with and without permanent status, this undermining of legitimacy caused them to feel insecure. Being perceived as 'temporary' while being permanent required the men to negotiate and manage the contradiction between perceptions of them as 'illegal' and their actual status. At times, this resulted in a bifurcated identity, which in turn could ignite tension and uncertainty among some young migrant men, who existed in a state of perpetual insecurity that they had to guard against, even if they were not irregular migrants. As Pavel (aged 26, originally from Russia, currently living in Finland) remarked, 'there is nothing more permanent than a temporary situation'. The 'migrant identity' – where these men are viewed as irregular migrants with no legal status based on little or no evidence – often became the basis of challenges to their rights as citizens, and prompted them to develop the strategies to negotiate or avoid negative interactions.

Managing authority and regulating behaviour

The young men in this study were not simply passive recipients of challenging and discriminatory responses from officials. Although often vulnerable and facing significant disadvantages, they were not without agency, and they employed a number of strategies to manage and respond to problematic encounters. Most of the participants in our study reported techniques that effectively sought to minimize the negative impact of encounters with authority either by regulating their behaviour or by reframing the narrative.

The most commonly discussed approach to managing potentially difficult encounters with authority was to operate a system of risk assessment, allowing the young men to identify situations that they perceived as problematic and to engage in a form of self-regulation, whereby self-limiting behaviours were deployed. Ghazal, aged 19, from Afghanistan, now living in Germany, was conscious that certain situations could cause 'troubles', adding 'I don't want risks', particularly ones that would jeopardize his plans to remain in Germany. Primarily, the participants reported that, by assessing likely 'risks', they could actively avoid situations that had the potential to attract unwanted attention and 'trouble', thus reducing their interactions with those in authority. Many of the men in the MiMen study resigned themselves to having to 'lie low' in order to evade

potentially difficult interactions. The strategic decisions they were able to take to remain under the radar worked to minimize the likelihood of a negative encounter. Sékouba, aged 25, from Guinea, now resident in Finland, felt the need to ‘scan’ public places ‘all the time’ in order to spot – and therefore avoid – any perceived trouble. He stressed the importance of being ‘prepared all the time’.

Participants identified the relative power that those in authority held over them, and felt that misjudging an encounter and responding in the ‘wrong’ way could have disastrous outcomes. The young migrant men reported uncertainty as to how they were being defined by authority figures and so each daily transaction was potentially fraught with traps and snares that were unknown at the beginning of the encounter. There was seen to be a need to balance appearing to be knowledgeable without coming across as being ‘too smart’ (something Luyanda recalled being labelled by the Gardaí in his account, above).

A tactic employed by many of the young men in our study was to stay out of sight; essentially to exist at the margins in order to avoid the gaze of those in authority. Methods of becoming invisible often involved taking an actuarial approach, through evaluating situations and potential outcomes of actions in order to weigh up the possible threats involved. This is not to suggest that it occurred in a conscious, rational sense; for some – but not all – of the men, the actions were part of their everyday routines, rather than something that was explicitly and routinely considered. Similarly to the findings of other studies (Bloch and McKay, 2017; Bloch et al., 2014), for many of the men, taking action to keep a low profile was a common way of avoiding problematic situations. George, originally from Vietnam, grew up in a troubled area in Ireland where ‘a lot of things [risky situations] happened’. Wanting to re-establish a sense of safety as a teenager, he then ‘learnt how to survive and how to keep moving’. Similarly, Fuat would take steps to ‘avoid stress’ by withdrawing from social situations that might cause problems:

I say to myself, you shouldn’t get into pointless arguments; they don’t get you anywhere.

(Fuat, 18, from Turkey, living in Germany as an EU national)

Utilizing such a tactic was not without problems: this range of self-regulating behaviours that were employed to ‘avoid trouble’ could prohibit the young men from living a normal existence. By avoiding the gaze of those with power – be that in an official state-sanctioned capacity or a more informal presentation of authority, such as within community networks – the young migrant men imposed forms of self-control and internal codes on themselves whereby they learnt to lie low and remain removed from social situations and typical daily activities. Consequently, the isolation and loneliness that had blighted many of the men as part of their migratory journey was further exacerbated:

It’s hard of course, but there’s no one I can talk to. It’s my problem. . . . No, I don’t want to discuss them. I want to work them out myself [he sighed].

(Tadi, 28, from Afghanistan, living in Germany, temporary status)

Avoiding the scrutiny of the state also presented limitations in accessing support and services. Mindful of this, and keen to avoid having to come into contact with authority figures, many of the young men said they would not seek help from the police, and instead would avoid situations that could pose conflict, handle any problems themselves, or opt not to disclose any victimization. Despite experiencing difficulties in living in the UK, Emmanuel was unequivocal in his belief that it was his responsibility to keep a low profile and avoid trouble:

You only get trouble if you put yourself in trouble.

(Emmanuel, 26, from Ghana, living in the UK on a temporary visa)

The tactic of ‘trying to be invisible’ (Bloch and McKay, 2017: 166) is known to be an approach used by undocumented migrants (see Bloch and McKay, 2017; Bloch et al., 2014). What our data indicated is that the techniques of managing encounters with authority figures and avoiding trouble included living at the edge of society for many young migrant men, whether documented or undocumented. This situation is especially problematic for undocumented migrants, for whom the fear of deportation intensifies the importance of risk management. Maintaining life on the margins in order to develop and preserve feelings of safety and security can create ‘an underclass that is vulnerable on several fronts, including inadequate access to health and other services, limited recourse in the event of abuse at work or other arenas, and deportation’ (Goldring et al., 2009: 241). Our findings reveal that young migrant men who are not at risk of deportation employ similar tactics in ‘trying to be invisible’ in order to avoid unnecessary conflict with authorities and potential interaction with the criminal justice system.

There was some variation in the responses to criminalizing labels among the participants, including feeling unable to challenge the assumed criminality, even when residing in the host country legally, and who felt the need to live in the shadows (see Kubal, 2014). Bloch and McKay (2017) found that those who lack secure status were both ‘risk takers’ and ‘also risk avoiders, but above all they were risk assessors consistently assessing and reassessing risk’ (Bloch and McKay, 2017: 186). The narratives of the young migrant men in the MiMen study supported this contention, regardless of their status. The threat of being targeted owing to an insecure status was not limited to those who were without leave to remain in the host country but was also something that was felt by others, including those who were second-generation migrants.

When staying out of sight was not an option, the young men in this study employed other strategies to minimize attention from authorities. The resulting ‘self-regulation’ of behaviour included limiting time spent in public spaces, reduced socializing, avoiding being loud or having alcohol outside the home, avoiding certain people and specific places, and regulating their physical appearance. For example, Haydar (a 26-year-old Kurdish man, resident in the UK for six years, having travelled from Turkey) and Nasir (18 years old, from Afghanistan, living in Germany) were among many of our participants who felt the need to limit their socializing with friends and drinking alcohol for this reason. Likewise, participants in Fabini’s (2017: 56) study recognized the importance of avoiding ‘risk zones’ (see also Fabini, 2019), areas that attracted heightened police

presence and suspicions of illegality, and 'remaining clean', that is avoiding illegal behaviour, 'paying for tickets on buses and trains, not being drunk on the streets, and remaining quiet', and responding to authorities in a polite and calm manner. The latter was also recognized by many of the participants in each of the countries as critical in their quest to avoid 'trouble'.

Adapting behaviours to remain inconspicuous was a strategy that Eric recognized as key:

If we were just quiet and having [a] good time, there wouldn't be so much attention on ourselves [from the police].

(Eric, 18, from Nigeria, living in Ireland with the right to remain)

Haydar provided a cautionary tale of what could happen if a young migrant man failed to regulate his behaviour by hanging out in the wrong place at the wrong time.

A few times people tried to start a fight with me and once a guy threw a bottle at me, but I still did not do anything. Because I know, if I had a fight with them, I would be in trouble as well. The worst thing, I think, if you have a fight in the UK then you go to court. I have seen it happening to friends, even if you have not started it.

(Haydar, 26, from Turkey, living in the UK with UK citizenship)

Haydar was acutely aware that that there would be serious consequences of rising to the bait, including being susceptible to legal repercussions.

Negotiating networks. Another form of self-regulatory behaviour was evident in the social spaces and social networks that the young men inhabited. Social networks were seen as something to be monitored (Sigona, 2012) to ensure that they continued to offer a 'safe space' and alleviated social isolation (Bloch and McKay, 2017; Ryan, 2011). Even spaces that were usually considered 'safe' could become insecure, such was the fluid nature of the men's social relations and networks. As a result, social networks were not static but 'fluid, taking on different forms in different ways at different levels for different people' (Bloch and McKay, 2017: 130), and they were very often shaped by the interplay between macro, meso and micro contexts (Ryan and D'Angelo, 2018). This highlights Hagan's (1998: 55) contention that social networks are in a state of flux whereby they can 'both strengthen and weaken over time, can change differentially . . . and therefore, can have disparate effects on incorporation'.

Social networks with strong attachments can provide resilience (Small et al., 2010) and are viewed as essential in promoting well-being; as expected, feelings of loneliness have the opposite effect on well-being (Abrams et al., 2005). Living without strong bonds with others can easily result in an 'anarchic' orientation towards life: cynicism, lack of generalized trust, feelings of disconnectedness and rejecting offers of help (see, for example, Scherwitz et al., 1991). Forming friendships and networks with others was highly valued by participants in the MiMen project. Many had left family behind, and

hence, for them, their new social networks offered a vital source of support, friendship and advice. As Bloch and McKay (2017: 135) have also found, social networks, particularly among those who are undocumented, can be critical for a multitude of reasons, not least because they were fundamental in ensuring feelings of belonging and a sense of security. They can also be beneficial for economic and other resources (Diminescu, 2008; Poros, 2011), as Rashid (18 years old, Somalian refugee, resident in Finland) suggested: ‘If you have lots of people, you can move forward.’ Tawab (an 18-year-old refugee from Afghanistan, who fled to Germany four years ago with only his brother) also emphasized the value of having good social relations: ‘[t]here are no real problems, as long as you have someone you can go for help or work out your problem with.’

Having a sense of belonging to a community was very important for our respondents. Despite this, it was evident that friendships were to be approached and developed with a degree of caution. Relations with peers were very often viewed with some wariness. As part of the assessment of potential trouble and the negotiation of encounters, the MiMen participants said they were wary of disclosing too much information or associating with the ‘wrong’ people, namely those who might bring them into contact with authority figures such as the police. They also seemed to become aware of the need to be selective in terms of whom they would like to form closer bonds with:

If you are good enough you can never have bad company, you can turn a bad person good. You have to be very selective, if you choose good friends.

(Zaki, 27, from Pakistan, living in the UK, overstayed a student visa and claiming asylum)

Managing interactions with friends, acquaintances and other members of the public was seen as critical to maintaining a sense of safety and avoiding trouble. Not disclosing phone numbers, avoiding discussing asylum-seeker status, and staying away from drug-using acquaintances and others who were perceived as untrustworthy or a potential threat were all measures that the migrant men employed to ensure that they were not the target of discrimination or victimization or the focus of law enforcement activities. Once again, strategies for negotiating difficult encounters in order to avoid ‘trouble’ featured heavily in the young migrant men’s narratives. George, a 22-year-old man who had moved from Vietnam to Ireland aged 14, described how he would always walk away and not ‘cause a trouble [sic]’ when faced with difficult situations with other people in his social circle, in case it descended into violence. Similarly, Haydar discussed occasions when acquaintances or friends would ‘just start an argument without any reasons’, something that he found ‘upsetting’. He subsequently decided to take action to guard against these situations reoccurring. This included his decision to ‘never argue with anybody. Whatever they say, I say “yes, you are right”’, a tactic that he believed to be a ‘good thing about me’. Haydar also outlined how he was ‘trying to stay away from trouble makers’.

Such caution notwithstanding, the majority of MiMen participants had an array of emotional ties. Many were geographically separated by long distances from their families. This had a significant impact upon the men, particularly when they perceived themselves to be lacking strong social networks. Despite some efforts to ‘find more’ friends

and 'integrate', one of the Finnish participants acknowledged that he had 'virtually no friends', which resulted in him being 'lonely here':

It is difficult when you are alone. There is nobody who tells you what to do, what is good, what is bad. And now, my family is not able to help me.

(Omar, 22, from Somalia, living in Finland)

This situation was echoed by other participants from Finland:

My life is like . . . I don't have my mother in here and I've been fighting with my father. And my brothers live separately. You can understand how life is. Loneliness.

(Rashid, 18, from Somalia, living in Finland after being granted asylum)

Although contact through phone or Skype calls offered a certain amount of comfort to the young migrant men, some reported a sense of self-imposed social isolation. As mentioned previously, for some this was a deliberate tactic to limit the possibility of unwelcome attention.

Reframing encounters. The young men in our study used another important tool in managing their encounters with authority that allowed them to cope with difficult interactions. By reframing their encounters with authority, they were able to minimize negative experiences or to view them as some sort of trade-off for a better life.

Despite reporting discriminatory behaviour, including from police and other official figures, and other adversities, many of the young migrant men downplayed the role of their host country in these difficulties and sought to reduce their criticism of the police and other state actors. Eric, who detailed his harassment and discrimination from the Gardaí in Ireland, was quick to backtrack, attributing blame for this behaviour to himself and his peers whilst suggesting that they needed to adjust their conduct to avoid attention, adding that 'I don't really blame them for being strict and oppressive about it. . . . You cannot blame everything on Gardaí.'

Many of the migrant men had come from countries that were experiencing violent disorder, civil unrest and poverty. By comparison, the host country – although not without its own problems – provided a relatively safe haven. In their narratives concerning safety in the receiving country, the men often contrasted their feelings of safety with pre- and post-migration experiences:

There are huge differences. Of course, you shouldn't compare, but I have a lot of experience. I come from a country in the grips of a civil war. I have seen death. I have seen hunger; I have seen suffering. I have travelled through four countries without a passport; have been to prison, I know what hunger is. I can say what freedom means. But here, they don't know how good they have it here . . . That's the major difference.

(Idir, 21, from Somalia, living in Germany)

This type of comparison shaped the perceptions of safety and security in the receiving country. Accounts defining feelings of safety as the absence of violent political conflict, war and persecution, in addition to being able to 'sleep at night' (Finnish focus group participant, arrived seeking asylum), were common in the narratives. In the absence of strife or disorder, there was no need to feel in a perpetual state of insecurity:

We are not fighting a war or anything so it's *safe enough*.

(Austin, 21, from Nigeria, living in Ireland with leave to remain; emphasis added)

Accounts like this were particularly prevalent among young men who had left their home country as teenagers or young children and still had vivid memories of traumatic experiences back 'home'. Ahmad, aged 24, fled Somalia when he was 18 years old to avoid being coerced into joining the militia. Compared with the threat he faced in Somalia, living in Ireland, where he had been recognized as a refugee, was 'great' and one of the 'best experiences' of his life. Similarly, Zaki from the persecuted Ahmadiya Muslim community, left Pakistan, where he felt he 'could not breathe', aged 21. Since coming to the UK six years ago he is 'not scared anymore' feels that he can 'breathe, love, jump!'. One of the respondents from the Czech Republic described how he valued the feeling of safety since arriving from China:

This is probably the thing I like most here. I used to live in a town where it was not safe. Here you can walk down the street at 3 a.m. with the headset on and you know nobody is going to smash your head.

(Liang, 26, from China, living in the Czech Republic as a permanent resident)

The dramatic change in their living standards and the associated feelings of (relative) safety meant that negative interactions with authority figures could be managed and tolerated, particularly when viewed as part of the 'trade-off' that accompanied being able to live in the host country. That is to say, in order to live in and be part of the host society, the young migrant men had to, in turn, tolerate some hardships. This became a process of internal negotiation, balancing the 'offer' of remaining in the host country against the uncertainty, unpredictability and discrimination it might bring.

Migrants often evaluate their lives through comparing, and subsequently juxtaposing, conditions in the receiving country and in the country of origin (Röder and Mühlau, 2012). This has been referred to separately as 'frames of reference' (Röder and Mühlau, 2012), 'dual frames of reference' (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003), or as a 'bifocal lens' (Menjívar and Bejarano, 2004). As Bradford et al. (2017: 398) have asserted, it is likely that, when asked about policing in the host country, migrants make a comparison with the police in their country of origin, and that, '[g]iven the nature of policing in many parts of the world, the British police may appear more professional, effective and better intentioned than would otherwise be the case' (see also Röder and Mühlau, 2012). Others have supported this contention, finding that 'frames of reference' can strongly influence perceptions of and trust in the police, with greater trust evident in first-generation and

more recent migrants (Röder and Mühlau, 2012). An alternative viewpoint is that those emanating from places with ineffective or corrupt police and criminal justice systems may find their frames of reference blurred. As a result of this, they may continue to see these organizations in the same jaded manner (Harris, 2006, cited in Bradford and Jackson, 2018). However, other factors have a role to play in shaping perceptions of the police and justice system (Bradford and Jackson, 2018), so it would be wrong to assume a clear-cut link between past experiences and experiences in the present country of residence.

Conclusion

The MiMen project uncovered a series of snapshots of the lives of young migrant men in seven European countries. Despite differences in national immigration policies, there were some striking similarities in the narratives of the young men involved in this research, most notably in relation to the importance they gave to the role of safety and security in their lives and the difficulties they faced in their interactions with authorities. There are, of course, significant differences in experiences between the participants in this study, since experiences are shaped by biographies, the local context, personalities, knowledge, existing support networks, and so on. However, a common feature of their experiences was the way that encounters with authority figures were negotiated in different spaces, sometimes on a daily basis. What became apparent across all the fieldwork sites was how young men with leave to remain employ similar risk assessment and avoidance techniques as those who are undocumented. This finding illustrates that many young migrant men in Europe are assumed to be in the host country illegally or are suspected of wrongdoing and criminal behaviour with little or no evidential basis. With regard to citizenship and residence, there exists something of a precariousness about permanency that derives from the insecurities that discriminatory practices engender. For young men living in the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy and the UK, this precariousness had a significant impact on their sense of well-being. Maintaining a positive sense of well-being was difficult for them when so many fresh encounters with the host society were fraught with the potential for 'trouble'.

In order to manage these potentially problematic encounters, it was necessary for the MiMen participants to be strategic in their approach to authority. Interactions with authority were something to be treated with caution. These 'spaces of asymmetrical negotiations' (Eule et al., 2017: 2717) were not limited to the physical location of public places or the offices of the police and other similar agencies, but instead have evolved and been pushed to other locations such as places of education. This places more strain on the need to negotiate carefully and with a range of different actors. The relative success of the young migrant men's negotiations or the ability to avoid them completely were perceived as dependent both on the situation and on those involved. Wariness and fear underpin much of these responses, alongside the desire to go about daily activities unimpeded. As narrated by the young migrant men in this study, discriminatory behaviour pervades the responses from authorities to their everyday activities, resulting in the production and reproduction of insecurity in the lives of young migrant men. The resulting strategies undertaken by many of the participants in the MiMen study have a

significant impact upon their well-being. Much work remains to be done, at all stages of the migratory journey, to reduce systemic, intersectional discrimination by authorities and to improve the lives of young migrant men.

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Note

1. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

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