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## **Title**

**‘Like a life in a cage’: Understanding child play and social interaction in Somali refugee families in the UK**

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## **Abstract**

Migration to a different culture may affect opportunities for play and social interaction, essential for children’s developing cognitive and social skills. We asked Somali migrant women about experiences of childhood (both while growing up themselves, and subsequent observations) in Somalia and the UK. In Somalia, they described a supportive, connected community and safe environment enabling children to play and learn together. In the UK, by contrast, multiple local stressors constrained children’s opportunities to play and interact. Understanding and improving neighbourhood geography, as experienced and shaped by parents and children, would seem important for promoting early child development in refugee families.

## **Keywords**

Migration, Somali; Child; Development; Environment.

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## **Introduction**

There is growing academic interest in how migrants make place around them, shaped in complex ways by past and present cultural interactions, both local and transnational (Marcus, 1995, Manzo, 2003, Brettell, 2006, Brettell and Hollifield, 2014, Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007, Castles, 2010). Addressing this in relation to the young children of one prominent group of disadvantaged, forced migrants, the Somalis, this study focuses on the development of pre-school children born in the UK from a Somali background, from the perspective of their mothers.

We have explored first generation migrant mothers' experience of children growing up in Somalia, and in their new home (the UK), from growing up themselves primarily in Somalia, and as parents living in the UK and visiting Somalia, to help understand the physical, cultural and psychological worlds that Somali children may be developing in. We will contextualise this in relation to i) the challenges the Somali diaspora may face while bringing up children in the West; and ii) the evolving and interwoven understanding of cognitive science and social geography for young children. We will then reflect on how parents' and children's experience of urban environments in the West could impair disadvantaged migrant children's early language and social development.

Somali people constitute one of the largest diasporas in the world, estimated at over 1.2 million (Hammond et al., 2011). Recent studies highlight the challenges Somali families encounter during and after forced migration to Western countries, including the physical and psychological trauma of war, persecution, hunger and violence (Heger Boyle and Ali, 2010, Betancourt et al., 2015, Kelly et al., 2016). Osman et al. (2016) describe challenges post-migration due to poverty, insecure immigration status, unemployment, social isolation and discrimination. Parents' sense of dislocation and powerlessness in the new host culture and its unfamiliar institutions and systems combine with the practical challenges from lack of resources. Forced migration also has profound consequences for family structure and parenting. In Somalia, the extended family and the wider community play an active part in raising children, which is rarely the case in the host culture. Loss and separation from extended family bring loneliness and isolation, and add to difficulty passing on traditional culture to the next generation.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of colonial and historical links, the UK has the largest and longest-established Somali community in Europe (Hammond, 2013). Large numbers of refugees began to arrive in the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a result of political instability, persecution and violence in Somalia. While the Somali diaspora in the UK is diverse in terms of clan membership and national associations that shape the political and social identities of many Somalis, overall it is socioeconomically disadvantaged and bears the burden of high unemployment, poor living conditions and educational underperformance.

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<sup>1</sup> Childhoods vary between different Western countries and contexts – this section attempts to bring out some of the common themes for Somali diaspora in the West, but clearly this is not a homogenous experience.

Bristol, a port city in the west of the UK, with a longstanding Somali population, has the fourth largest Somali community in the UK, estimated at 10-40,000 people.<sup>2</sup> Somali births have increased 8-fold since the late 1980s (ONS Annual District Birth Data 2013)<sup>3</sup>; at least 5% of Bristol children are now Somali (Mills, 2014). Somali pre-school children in Bristol are significantly underachieving in educational assessments at Foundation stage (20% fewer achieving a ‘good’ level of development), and the gap appears to widen at age 7-11 and at age 15-16 (Mills, 2014); Educational outcomes for Somali children in other UK cities are comparable to those in Bristol (Sporton and Valentine, 2007, Demie et al., 2008, Demie, 2015, Strand et al., 2015, Welford and Montague, 2017, Demie, 2018). Somali children born in Bristol are also twice as likely as their white peers to be referred to child development and disability services, and six times more likely to be referred for consideration of social communication difficulty or autism (Ambrose and Allport, unpublished data, University of Bristol 2017).

A systematic review of the mental health of displaced and refugee children identified multiple interconnected factors influencing psychological outcome (Fazel et al., 2012). There has not been an equivalent systematic review of the relationship between migration or refugee status and child development or learning. However, parental migration history has been associated with lower scores on tests of early measures of learning (To et al., 2004, Glick et al., 2012, Stich et al., 2012, Leventhal and Shuey, 2014), often interacting with disadvantage/deprivation (Glick and Clark, 2012). Children born to migrant parents, with research prominently including those of Somali and other African origin, may be at higher risk of cognitive, autistic and other neurodevelopmental disorders (Barnevik-Olsson et al., 2010, Magnusson et al., 2012, Becerra et al., 2014). Risk may be particularly high for children of first-generation immigrant parents (Keen et al., 2010). Refugee women’s reproductive health is also affected by migration (Gagnon et al., 2002), while effects on the mental health of refugees reach to their next generation of children (Lambert et al., 2014, van Ee et al., 2016).

Healthy cognitive and social development, and the brain architecture and neurochemistry that underpin it, are powerfully influenced by early experiences (Osher et al., 2018). There is a growing body of evidence that exposure to biological and psychosocial risks, beginning in prenatal life, compromises children’s development, with multiple cumulative exposures producing widening disparities over time (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Young children in socio-economically disadvantaged households are at substantially higher risk of intellectual disability, with multiple relevant environmental factors; high rates (50-70%) of language delay are observed in nursery-age children living in areas of disadvantage (Blackburn et al., 2010, Barlow, 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> Bristol City Council, 2016

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/33904/Population+of+Bristol+July+2016/858ff3e1-a9ca-4632-9f53-c49b8c697c8c>; the three largest UK Somali communities are in London, Birmingham and Manchester.

<sup>3</sup> Reflecting both increased numbers and high birth rate.

Play, shaped by the physical and sociocultural environment, has a crucial role in children's development - as a mode in which children learn and develop capacities of communication, symbolic representation, self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978, Aitken, 2001, Whitebread et al., 2012), and thereby a sense of self and other (Winnicott, 1971). The geography of children's play has attracted increased interest in recent years (Matthews and Limb, 1999, Holloway and Valentine, 2000, Harker, 2005, Horton and Kraftl, 2006, Skelton, 2009, Jeffrey, 2010, Woodyer, 2012). Play opportunities in urban areas exist for children around the home, in the school and public parks, and in wider public spaces (i.e. streets, shopping centres, open areas and informal spaces) (Wilkinson and Lockhart, 1980), and spaces "left over" during the urbanisation process (Moore and Young, 1978), away from parental control (Malone, 2007). Playful environments can enhance children's levels of physical activity and fitness (Fjørtoft and Sageie, 2000, Sallis and Glanz, 2006), enhance their mental health, independence, confidence, social interaction and socialisation (Crespo et al., 2001, Bixler et al., 2002, Cole-Hamilton et al., 2002, Undiyaundeye, 2014).

In the West, discourses surrounding children's play have generally been grounded in a developmental perspective, focusing on the trajectory to becoming competent adults, with adults designing and guiding play environments and activities (Shimpi and Nicholson, 2014). However, these approaches tend to ignore the different sociocultural contexts that shape children's play around the world, with community values, beliefs and cultural routines shaping very different ways in which children play and learn in their everyday lives. O'Brien, and colleagues (O'Brien et al., 2000), in their groundbreaking study, sought to map children's use of and feelings about local urban space, comparing children's experiences in contrasting urban environments. Girls, and children from minority ethnic communities, were more restricted in their use of urban space. The authors also highlighted the importance of studying the diverse ways children inhabit their cities, to assist in the development of social policies to enhance participation for all children.

Children's experiencing of 'place' in a built environment is inherently relational (Webber, 1964, Cresswell, 2015), shaped by and shaping the complex 'situated, embodied, and embedded' interaction between physical environments, neighbourhoods, socio-cultural, technological and economic systems, and individual & family presences and histories (Stewart, 1982, Burton and Jarrett, 2000, Brereton et al., 2008, Mullins and van Bortel, 2010, O'Connor and Brown, 2013, Atkinson et al., 2016). Similarly multi-faceted conceptualisations link social relationships, environment, child development, wellbeing and resilience (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000, Sampson et al., 2002, Brereton et al., 2008, Stiglitz et al., 2010, Masten, 2009, Chetty and Hendren, 2016, Feldman, 2015, Gaskins et al., 2007), including for refugees (Ager and Strang, 2008, Williams, 2010b). As a result "particular social groups can be encouraged, tolerated, regulated, and sometimes excluded from public space depending on the degree to which they might be deemed 'in' or 'out of place.'" (Holland et al., 2007). Therefore, how neighbourhoods support or hinder children's development and wellbeing, as well as parents' collective 'efficacy'<sup>4</sup> (Sampson et al., 1999,

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<sup>4</sup> A construct seen as combining social cohesion and informal social control.

Collins et al., 2017) is an important topic this study seeks to address in relation to migrant families.

Children need a ‘secure base’ from which to explore and play (Bowlby, 1988, Waters and Cummings, 2000). However, perinatal stress and depression are substantially more frequent in disadvantaged populations, including refugees and forced migrants, with stress and trauma playing an important role (Fazel et al., 2005, Steel et al., 2009, Collins et al., 2011). Parental stress and fear during pregnancy may affect children’s predispositions, for example through epigenetics<sup>5</sup>, and/or altered stress-response system settings (Hertzman and Boyce, 2010, Slavich and Cole, 2013, Glover, 2014), as well as impairing early attachments, parent-child interaction and child development (Talge et al., 2007, Kinney et al., 2008, Walker et al., 2011, Kingston et al., 2012, Crittenden, 2013). The experience of safety, or fear, in a local environment, for families with young children and for whole communities, may be critical for children’s wellbeing and learning (Marris, 1991, Grossmann et al., 2005, Pain, 2006, Kohen et al., 2008, Belsky and Pluess, 2009, Corburn, 2009, Fazel et al., 2012, O’Connor and Brown, 2013, Foster et al., 2014, Sharkey and Faber, 2014), with wide implications for society as a whole (Marmot et al., 2010).

In summary, the children of disadvantaged migrants in the West are at risk of delayed and disordered early development, with multiple factors potentially contributing; Somali families may exemplify many of these challenges, with evidence accumulating of poor developmental and educational outcomes. As yet largely unexplored is the relevance of ‘place’ in this process. There are many differences between the physical, cultural and psychological environments of rural Somalia and urban UK, which may have wide-ranging implications for young children’s experience of play and interaction, and their subsequent development.

This study therefore set out to explore the geography of childhood from the perspective of Somali mothers who have resettled in Bristol. Drawing on a ‘lifeworld’ perspective (Seamon, 1979), valuing the phenomenological aspect of understanding child development in its ecological context (Spencer, 2006), we collected Somali mothers’ descriptions of childhood, play and learning related to ‘place’, both from growing up themselves primarily in Somalia, and also as parents observing their own and other children in the UK and on visits to Somalia. The intention was to understand their experience of what shapes children’s development, culturally and geographically. The findings illustrate how the physical and social environment of a UK urban context, as experienced by migrant Somali mothers, may act to constrain young children’s development.

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<sup>5</sup> Heritable changes in gene expression (active versus inactive genes), for example during fetal or early life, that do not involve changes to the underlying DNA sequence.

## Methodologies and Methods

Qualitative semi-structured interviews, analysed using an interpretative phenomenological approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006, Smith, 2015) were used to generate rich description and understanding of the individual 'lived' experience of the participants.

The semi-structured interview schedule was developed to address the following research questions:

For Somali mothers in Bristol, what is their experience of early (pre-school) childhood in the UK and Somalia? What do they see as facilitating or restricting children's early opportunities for play, social interaction and development?

Additional prompts were prepared relating to physical, social and cultural environments. Sequencing of questions was flexible to prioritise rapport and follow the respondents' interests or concerns (Smith, 1995, Mack et al., 2005). The interview guide was revised following the first interview to focus on participants' experience of children's activities and relationships.

Sample sizes using an interpretative phenomenological approach are typically small in order to maintain a commitment to idiography and context-sensitivity<sup>6</sup> (Brocki and Wearden, 2006, Smith et al., 2009, Robinson, 2014, Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). Six Somali women participated in a total of five interviews, involving, respectively, two participants jointly and four individual interviews. Participants were Somali women identified by informal contact at community Somali 'Ladies lunch' meetings, having received information about the study in person and in writing (in Somali), and two Somali Link-workers/interpreters (employed by the Community Child Health team). Although Somali interpreters were available, all participants chose to undertake interviews in English. Participants gave written consent for interviews to be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.<sup>7</sup>

Analysis was conducted from an interpretative phenomenological epistemology, in relation to the research question, looking to interpret the meaning and interconnection of themes in the context of participants' life world (Van Manen, 2016).

Themes were identified by reading each transcript three times, the first time identifying and annotating the left margin with general thoughts, the second time annotating each section of text with 'codes' and the third time to develop an overview of the 'codes'

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<sup>6</sup> This aims to understand in detail the experience of a homogeneous group, preserving individual voices, without attempting to achieve representativeness.

<sup>7</sup> Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Bristol Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry Committee for Ethics. Participants provided written consent for interview and audio-recording.

allocated to identify potential broader themes, which were grouped into overarching themes. A 'cut and paste' technique was used to place sections of text under the headings of each overarching theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Text that related to two or more themes concurrently was duplicated for analysis in relation to each theme. After reorganisation, the content of each overarching theme was described, and both linkages and potential dissonant/contradictory aspects explored and discussed in relation to existing evidence. This led to a single final theme being identified that portrayed the unity and diversity of participants' experience related to the research question. The findings were audited by a researcher experienced in interpretative phenomenological approaches (Smith et al., 2009).

In the excerpts presented in the Results section, pseudonyms have been allocated to participants; specific details and quotes have also been altered to protect confidentiality and identity. Many participants will have had traumatic experiences in their home country and during the migration process, as well as the ongoing challenges they describe in these accounts. Simple demographic questions can connect people to very distressing experiences of loss or separation. For this reason, we decided not to ask participants to tell us about their home or family circumstances, rather to focus on the questions of our semi-structured interview schedule as our starting point. In such a small sample, to add reflections on individual situations and their accounts would risk making them identifiable within this paper. We therefore are unable to place these accounts within individual contexts of participants' lives, but do not believe this detracts from the coherence, plausibility and rigor of the findings.

In preparing the study methodology, during the interviews and the analysis, the intention of the researchers was to develop and maintain cultural awareness, knowledge, sensitivity, skills, desire and competence (Papadopoulos and Lees, 2002, Campinha-Bacote, 2002, Stuart, 2004). This was grounded in a process of reflexivity throughout (Finlay and Gough, 2008), drawing on personal and clinical experience of the authors, discussing assumptions or prejudices identified along the way, appreciating that a cohort of individuals do not speak as one homogenous group but as a collection of individuals (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996), and attempting to acknowledge, account for and/or reduce aspects of power imbalance (Reich and Reich, 2006, Kelly et al., 2010). While the interviews were primarily conducted and analysed by a white British woman, the semi-structured interview schedule reflected advice on relevant and appropriate topics of conversation from the Somali co-authors, and the findings were developed and refined collaboratively.<sup>8</sup> Members of the research team have professional and academic roles that include work with Somali people in Bristol in the field of early child development and disability, as well as previous roles in other African countries, and have drawn on this background to reflect on participants' experience in this study.

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<sup>8</sup> We have attempted to remain attentive to self/other & insider/outsider discourses throughout the research.

## Findings

In this section we present an interpretive analysis of the participants' accounts of their experiences of childhood (both while growing up themselves, and subsequent observation of their own children) in Somalia and the UK. By comparing and contrasting their experiences in the two different places and cultures, we draw out the features that are likely to inform the design of culturally congruent interventions to support the development of Somali refugee children.

These descriptions are not intended to be phenomenological descriptions of children's lives in the two different countries. Rather, their aim is to illuminate Somali mothers' experience of place as an important context for how children of refugees develop in an urban Western context.

### The interaction of play and place

#### *Somalia*

In Somalia, mothers described a daily rhythm shaped by the environment - rising at sunrise, home for a siesta at midday, and children returning home to eat and sleep when the call comes from the muezzin<sup>9</sup> at sunset. Men leave early for work, women run the home, and children can be outside in the mostly warm, dry weather. Children are allowed to roam outside as soon as they can crawl or walk.

Hawa: *'...people live in houses like bungalows, most of them and there are no flats... so you just open the door in the morning... as soon as kids start walking, they are let outside'*

Ruqiyo: *'They [children] gonna play outside, while you need to clean the house and cook the food, if they tired, they going to come in... they going in and out... they know when the prayer of the sunset is going every child must come in otherwise they in trouble...'*

Participants described play as outdoors, free and spontaneous, without supervision; children using their environment to play and learn creatively and actively. Commercial toys being limited in availability and durability, children created toys themselves, made using imagination and recycled materials.

Luul: *'we have to make ourselves the toy, we have to make the doll, and house and whatever, and we play something like [Hopscotch]... '... sometimes we pretend to be cooking, sometimes we pretend to be pregnant (laughing)...*

Ruqiyo: *'Kids play by themselves outside... their own game and their own things... they got climbing trees, they got sliding for the river bank when the river's gone... we got a swing we made ourselves to push each other, and it was very dangerous, and we got tyre,*

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<sup>9</sup> Person leading the call to prayer from the mosque.

*and the other one go inside the tyre and you got to roll it (laughs)... that was absolutely perfect... there are millions of games we used to play, so you never ever feel bored...'*

One participant acknowledged that newer technology, for people who had them, had changed this pattern especially for more affluent families.

*Ruqiyo: 'The rich people they live in big houses, they've got loads of thing so their kids don't go outside, they just play inside... Now loads of people got TV, it's changed now... they still like playing outside, but at the night time everybody's watching TV.'*

There is of course a time lapse of a generation between our participants' experiences of their own childhoods in Somalia and current experience both in the UK and in Somalia - new technologies will be an important part of this in both countries.

### *UK*

In the UK, mothers described multiple constraints combining to limit children's opportunities for play and interaction with children and adults. In small flats in tower blocks (local social housing) with only minimal communal space or shared facilities, social interaction for participants and their children seemed difficult due to the limited indoor space to receive visitors and for children to play in. This also made it hard to fulfil their duty to welcome visitors, as expected in Somali culture. Other constraints included lack of access to outside play spaces, the climate (cool rainy weather), and lack of resources. Parks around tower blocks were seen as generally not being a good place for children to interact and play, with lack of money limiting children's access to preschools and indoor commercial play spaces. Compared to the rich description of outdoor play in Somalia, play in the UK was described as limited to parks, indoor 'play barns', watching TV and playing with toys in the home.

*Zainab: 'Most of the houses... are really a bit small... they don't have a garden ... everybody gets used to the culture here, everybody minding their own business... everybody keeping themselves to themselves... under one block I think there is a big park and all the blocks share it but it is not close... and sometimes really crowded... you will be just stressed and the kids are fighting...'*

*Nuur: 'It's no disrespect but everybody keeps to themselves. Socialising is really hard... When I used to live in a two bedroom flat it's hard for other kids or family when they visit... there's not enough space... when the weather's improved we meet up in the park... there is always a parent supervising...'*

These findings add to our understanding of the interacting roles of family, neighbourhood and culture in child development research (Burton and Jarrett, 2000, Osher et al., 2018). Play and social interaction are key modes in which children's learning is internalised (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003, Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Opportunities for free play may be

declining generally in western cultures (Gaster and behavior, 1991, Karsten, 2005, Guldberg, 2009, Gleave, 2010, Woolley and Griffin, 2015), which may have multiple negative consequences (Lester and Russell, 2008, Else, 2009, Gray, 2011). Key factors appear to be a decline in the quality and quantity of accessible outdoor public space, fears about traffic and strangers, and changing patterns of family life.

Migrating from societies in which adults are not directly involved in play but provide a rich and gradually increasing range of expected cultural responsibilities with whole-community supervision (Gaskins et al., 2007), parents may be challenged to help a child develop in a more individualist cultural environment. This would seem especially the case given the multiple other demands and burdens faced by refugee and disadvantaged migrant families (Ager and Strang, 2008, Williams, 2010a).

Elements of nostalgia for a society left behind (Milligan, 1998, Boym, 2007) and the understandable marked difference of a move from rural to urban society (Boyle et al., 2014) may play a part in participants' narratives, amongst the other social, cultural and economic changes they have experienced. Furthermore, accounts of positive experiences in Somalia predominated while experiences of war, violence and hardship were more difficult to elicit. For example, one participant chose to speak about distressing personal experiences of violence and loss in Somalia after the audio recording device was switched off. Those whose childhoods were more disrupted by the war (Leavitt and Fox, 1993) or who had experienced stigmatising experiences about which they were reluctant to speak (Hinshaw, 2004, Pavlish et al., 2010, Shannon et al., 2015) may have been less articulate in the interviews (Main and Hesse, 1990) and therefore their accounts potentially featured less in the analysis. However, these mothers' accounts from Somalia describe ways in which children grow up communally (Burton and Jarrett, 2000, Keller, 2015) that are highly meaningful for them as parents. They represent cultural assets that they could make more use of in the UK, potentially beneficially for their children, if more opportunities for interacting communally with other parents were available (Salami et al., 2017). Constructs of neighbourhood collective efficacy<sup>10</sup>, and of social capital<sup>11</sup>, are significant for bringing up children across a range of ethnic and socio-economic contexts (Sampson et al., 1999, Cohen et al., 2008, Mazumdar et al., 2017, Collins et al., 2017). Such concepts could also contribute to the design of interventions to improve children's developmental outcomes more generally in Western urban settings.

### Development in a cultural context

#### *Somalia*

Participants described children in Somalia being encouraged to develop a range of skills which support their confidence, independence and maturity, and their ability to

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<sup>10</sup> A construct seen as combining social cohesion and informal social control.

<sup>11</sup> A construct referring to social connectedness, trust and cooperation

communicate and socially connect with others. They attributed this to children interacting, talking and observing/copying during outside play with other children, and with a range of adults, as well as being required to help around the house, and share in daily tasks and duties, from an early age. Basic responsibilities such as tidying were taught very early, while children as young as eight could have responsibilities such as cooking and running the household. Parents also expected and enforced discipline. This was seen as helping children understand their role in the family and in society.

Ayaan: *'... the kids are very clever... learning by themselves, they exploring by themselves, they are using their minds all by themselves, and then they are copying the other one..., on the outside, there are loads of kids, different kids, they are going to copy each other...'*

Zainab: *'[Children in Somalia] develop the talking very early, because when they are younger they can go out of the house and interact with adults a lot more, so a Somali child can talk really properly... In Somalia the kids are a lot confident... They teach the children to do the house work, early, early, they start with sweeping the veranda, like tidying up and all that... when we visit [Somalia] the children there all know how to look after themselves and help their families... my niece is eight and stays with my mum, she does everything for her, she cooks, she cleans... although she goes still to school, but she manages to do everything as well.'*

This occurred within a close-knit community, often with extended family living together or nearby, which exposes children to adults and children of varying ages. Participants suggested that families have a large support network where responsibilities and duties (including child care) are shared, and that a family facing difficulties can count on neighbours to support them.

Ruqiyo: *'they [children] gonna play outside, while you need to clean the house and cook the food... [grandparents] talk to them, they tell stories... they teach them... outside, there are loads of kids, different kids, they are going to copy each other...'*

Nuur: *'Normally one family would go shopping for other family... and another person would look after the other children, or grandparents or someone... you would know your neighbour if she was sick or not..., you should be helping each other, I remember... a family who was really struggling and you see the neighbours coming together and they would supply food...'*

Emphasis was given to Islamic studies from an early age for a Somali child, with children attending Qur'an school as young as three. Participants described socialising and play occurring during breaks and after school, and children walking together as a group to and from school.

Hawa: *'The children will be sent to those Qu'ran classes and they will meet the other kids. And they learn the Qu'ran there, and stay there for a couple of hours and they will play together... When they finish the study the children won't come straight back home, [but] ... play around and explore new things, and when they feel hungry, then they'll come back.'*

Ayaan: *'...some parents can send the child when he is even less than three years go with the other one, they listening, yeah and copy, but five years you must send the child to the Qur'an school...'*

However, while early learning and self-reliance were valued by the community, children who appeared different and unable to live up to the expectations others had of them, were not nurtured in the same way by their community. Participants gave accounts of children with disabilities who were being bullied and excluded from play and other social activities while parents were stigmatised and isolated from the community.

Ruqiyo: *'If someone's a bit behind, maybe some kid's got disability, they always left alone, they got loads of bullying... we used to call those kids names... you are not welcome if you've got disabilities... Because the people thinks bad things [about disability], they are not supporting you... they need to keep [children] inside the house, and they feel left alone...'*

Finally, the importance and social value placed on children becoming independent in self-care and social skills is illustrated in the excerpt below in which a participant highlights the difference between children raised in Somalia and her own children who were raised in the UK.

Ruqiyo: *'The little ones they don't need to be trained because they are getting from the older ones... they are going to copy each other... I went in Africa three years ago, and my kids were different, [the other] kids, they were going to the toilet by themselves, they were eating by themselves, they were playing by themselves, they were doing everything... but mine were absolutely behind, they were just waiting for me to do things for them... because that child is going outside and playing and everything in same language, but my child, I'm the only one speaking to him before the school and I don't have time to speak all the time because I am busy...'*

According to the participants, children growing up in Somalia mature and become independent at a young age as a result of being socially connected to older children and adults other than their parents and family. Talking and listening to others, playing, copying behaviours, and participating in social and religious activities were seen to enable the development of the skills necessary to function as a responsible member of the community. The community was seen as facilitating this process through sharing child care responsibilities and providing support. However, those unable to learn, mature and

participate in some activities such as children with disabilities were at risk of being rejected and stigmatised by their community.

### *UK*

In the UK, participants reported limited social support, without their extended family living nearby, and limited mutual support between neighbours. Participants missed having support from close family members, especially grandparents, to give advice and comfort, look after children and impart knowledge of Somali traditions and games to children. Combined with problems around a lack of suitable outside spaces, the often inclement weather, and a culture in the UK of 'minding your own business', participants found it hard to get to know new people and make friends nearby. This limited opportunities to develop trust and mutual support between neighbours.

*Zainab: 'Maybe your next door neighbours are Somali, as you, but maybe they have nothing to do with you and you don't go to them for help... it depends really on the people now and not the community... it depends on the people knowing each other, if I know you I am going to be helpful with you.'*

Participants described how multiple responsibilities limited their time to play and interact with children, especially where fathers worked long hours or lived elsewhere. As compensation for not going outside, the TV might be put on all day to keep children amused, as the excerpts below illustrate.

*Ruqiyo: 'It is very bad, and very hard when the [grand]parents are in Somalia, not here... the life is different because the father's working outside and so the mum's doing loads of things for herself, cleaning, cooking, having the kids, taking the kids to school, to Qu'ran, so mum in here is very busy, she don't have time for the child.'*

*Hawa: 'Sometimes, here there is a break up and there are a lot of single parents, so she might have three or four children and she is alone and she can't cope with that.... she does everything... so she just does the most important essential things like feeding them and cleaning them, taking to school and the house, so she doesn't have the time to sit with them and do play things, so just put on the TV and that's it.'*

Clan conflicts that followed Somali families into the UK contributed to dilemmas about the transmission of cultural heritage, affecting parents' confidence in the coherence of the framework of cultural and behavioural expectations set for their children. Participants described the importance of family and clan lineage for identity in Somalia; when people meet potentially-connected strangers they will try to establish a common ancestor through recitation of clan lineage. Due to concerns about inter-clan violence in the conflict in Somalia having ongoing effects in the UK, however, some participants described children in the UK who may not even be told which clan they belong to, or learn their lineage. Alongside this, they described concern at children no longer being taught Somali songs and dancing.

Hawa: *'And also our clan, yeah they teach all that as well, you know you are from that clan... but now our kids here, we don't even teach them what clan they are... I wouldn't put a lot of emphasis on Somali play, that is not very important now. You just teach the child how to be safe in a way, and songs, yeah you sing for them...'*

Ruqiyo: *'We came here to run away from clan fighting in Somalia... we don't ask each other, ... we just care about the life we got now... when that person helped you, so everybody forget what had happened before, and we make it a new life, a new thing, everything...'*

While learning Islamic values and traditions was seen as important for children growing up in the UK, participants commented on children missing out on social and communal aspects of that experience due to children not walking together to Qu'ran school.

Children's early learning and development in the UK was seen as constrained by a lack of space and time for play and social connectedness. Skills development such as dressing and eating independently, language acquisition and interpersonal skills were perceived as requiring parental guidance and supervision and thus time, as well as material and social resources, all of which were in short supply.

Nuur: *'Sometimes there are some kids who are a lot more behind because probably they only stay at home or maybe their parents don't take them out more often... they don't know how to share...'*

The importance of cultural context for development and learning is a key message of Vygotsky's work (Vygotsky, 1978, Vygotsky, 1980), which has been further developed by Rogoff and colleagues (Rogoff et al., 1993, Rogoff, 2003, Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003, Rogoff et al., 2003) to focus attention on cultural practices people undertake together, as key vehicles for children's development though gaining experience, confidence and competence.

Much of the variance in developmental outcome of pre-school children in the West, including for migrants, is explained by their parents' engagement with child language and learning (Hoff, 2006, Crosnoe et al., 2010, Gleason and Ratner, 2016). Migrants who set aside their own language and culture, from the understandable desire to help children learn the host culture's language, as well as trying to leave behind ethnic conflict (as described by our participants), may inadvertently step further away from a place of confident communication with their children. However, policies that rely primarily on encouraging migrant parents to use more language individually, directly, with their children (e.g. Duggan et al., 2014) may be poorly attuned to communal cultural practices and limited by the stresses and isolation described so eloquently by our participants. A more communal/collective approach, helping families meet together, could provide more culturally-coordinated opportunities for both communication and interaction, as well as

more confident parenting and increased wellbeing (Salami et al., 2017, Stewart et al., 2015).

Another reason migrants may set aside their own culture is if they are trying to leave behind ethnic conflict, as our participants described. Saliency, taboo and dilemmas about clan identity and tradition are familiar from other discussions of Somali diaspora experience (Langellier, 2010, Liberatore, 2013). This is related to the complex dynamics of transnational or diaspora social spaces, practices and identity formation after forced migration (Nagel, 1994, Smith, 2005, Brettell, 2006, Moghissi, 2007, Hanley, 2008, Brettell and Hollifield, 2014, Baser, 2015).

As highlighted in the previous theme, digression from expectations about what constitutes normal behaviour in a society has profound implications for families and individuals. While disability, neurological and mental health difficulties can elicit responses such as fear and stigma in any society, they also interact powerfully with the experience of ethnic or racial discrimination (Kediye et al., 2009, Shannon et al., 2015). Individual migrant communities' own beliefs and practices can play an important part; a common mechanism for the effect of stigma may be loneliness and social isolation (Westermeyer, 1989, Cone, 2010, Shefer et al., 2013, Świtaj et al., 2014, Selman et al., 2018).

### Perceptions of safety and danger influencing opportunities and social connectedness

#### *Somalia*

Participants' accounts suggested that the environment in Somalia is experienced as safe for children to play and explore outdoors because neighbours are familiar and trusted, and there are few hazards. Children have been allowed to play outside unsupervised in most areas even against the background of the civil war. Participants described how adults confidently take on responsibility to set boundaries and ensure safety of any children around them, while older children keep watch on younger ones as well as organising their activities.

*Zainab: 'As soon as they start walking properly, they are let outside the house, they would be safe to play outside... because all the community know each other... my two and a half years old niece got lost out with my mum... a neighbour of my mum recognised her and they told her elder sister and they get her... so it is still safe.'*

While the armed conflict had decreased perceptions of safety, it did not disrupt participants' overall sense of an environment facilitating play and social experience. Participants from northern Somalia/Somaliland, where the war had been bloody and disruptive but relatively short-lived, described the Somalia they knew as generally safe for children in the past and present, although they were wary of the impact of refugees from other ethnic groups. Participants from the south, and especially from Mogadishu, were more wary of danger, but still considered the environment as safe enough for outdoor play.

Ruqiyo: *'In Somalia I have grown up in a war, but when I was five years old it was quite safe... but now it is not like that, there is gun fire and everything, it's not safe, but the kids [are still] safe to play outside, you are not thinking your child is going to get lost and you are not thinking someone is going to steal it, because the child not going far and he got friends to play with... [grandparents] look after the safety of the child as well.,'*

Ayaan: *'I think still they play outside but it is not safe like before, because everywhere is shelling, guns and fighting...'*

Nuur: *'...the refugees come as the civil war is still happening in the south... not Somalis but other cultures, a few incident have happened on the news, people are trafficking kids, children for organ enhancement, you have to be really on your toes, now.'*

These accounts report mixed perceptions of safety and danger in a Somali context. The civil war resulted in differing experiences of violence depending on the geographical area in which the participants lived. However, even against the background of the civil war, the environment in Somalia was experienced as safe for children to play and explore outdoors.

#### *UK*

The participants described a sense of lack of safety in the UK. This was related to concerns about traffic as well as fears of abuse or abduction. Participants no longer felt able to continue the practice of letting children play outside and walk to school and Qu'ran classes without being accompanied by an adult. Adult supervision was required for all activities outside the home, putting more pressure on parents' time and energy. The excerpts below clearly illustrate the participants' concern about the safety of their children.

Hawa: *'Here you can't just open the door, because the children might go missing, or something bad might happen to them. So when the new mothers arrive... they are told make sure you keep an eye on the kids, so they have to behave differently, and they teach their children, don't trust everybody...'*

Zainab: *'...yeah and paedophiles and all that, you think that it might happen to your child so you might as well keep them in your house unless you've got really the time to... stay with them in the park, so you don't feel safe to leave them by themselves, even as seven or eight years old... they might get bullied... because some community thinks because they have been longer than the Somali community here then they have more right... they could just bully the kids, because he's not that confident or something bit shy or slow, whatever reason.'*

Echoes of the conflict in Somalia were still present, with differing perceptions of how people here were dealing with them.

Luul: *'We still look after each other but not like Somalia... a Somali family, they don't want to go far from the Somali community ... they're scared... we always want to be close, but even Somali are fighting, tribe tribe tribe...'*

Participants reported how all these constraints contributed to a very significant sense of isolation for some families.

Zainab: *'Maybe their mum does not speak that good English and so they're a bit isolated.'*

Ruqiyo: *'So when they came here, they scared... some people have no idea, what is going on where they live, they just inside the house, so they keep the child until two, three years olds, and then they let the child go to the nursery... and they feel they can't speak the language there's no use to go outside... they don't know, the language, and maybe their husband work... like a life in a cage'.*

These accounts indicate how fear and a lack of social connectedness can lead to social isolation, expressed by one participant as 'like a life in a cage' – at once safe from the war in the home country and its devastating consequences of civil order and the availability of economic and material resources, jobs and education, but also trapped in an unfamiliar environment that holds other dangers.

Social isolation and loneliness are consistent risk factors for mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). When experienced by mothers during pregnancy and with young children they could represent critical risk factors for adverse child developmental outcomes, through the epigenetic, stress-response, attachment and interactional mechanisms referred to in the Introduction. Feelings of social isolation and loneliness increase a sense of vulnerability and vigilance towards threats, as well as a broad range of other psychological processes (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010). For example, isolation can impact on parents' decision-making around the tensions between risk and opportunity for their children (Talbot, 2013). Babies born after pregnancies where their mothers have felt stressed, and socially isolated or excluded could, we speculate, also have a sense of vulnerability and vigilance towards threats, which could make the route to secure attachment and confident interaction with their parents and others even more challenging.

Minority ethnic children are disproportionately more likely to live in deprived areas and to be socially excluded (Buchanan, 2004), with ethnicity, racism and family isolation having substantial impact on access to and experience of play (Hyder, 2004). Neighbourhood ties and mutual trust are important features (Sampson et al., 2002, Lester and Russell, 2008). Geography may have an important role in segregating or integrating people of different ages and cultures, with consequence for perceptions of risk and safety, as well as for transmission of cultural traditions (Vanderbeck, 2007, Hopkins and Pain, 2007, Johnston et al., 2007, Kwan, 2013, Mahdjoubi and Spencer, 2015). The challenge

may be to move from philosophies and politics of protection and inequality to those of resilience and connectedness by building child-friendly communities and by changing public policy and practice (Sampson et al., 2002, Valentine, 2008).

Overarching theme: the role of freedom and constraint in early child development

In our interpretation, the two different geographical contexts (physical and cultural) in Somalia and the UK afforded different freedoms and imposed different constraints potentially affecting early child development. We use the term freedom to refer to the physical, existential, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of the two places that offer choice and range for activities through which children can develop and learn. The term 'constraint' describes those dimensions limiting opportunities and presenting barriers, but also those defining the structures and limits for culturally-acceptable activities within a society. Constraints may therefore support confident, creative activities and identities.<sup>12</sup>

Freedom in relation to life in Somalia meant a life lived predominantly in outside spaces, in warm weather where there is communal responsibility for children's safety, without fear of strangers or physical dangers. Constraints were related to the somewhat rigid social structures and daily routines, children's early responsibilities, 'difference' such as disability leading to social exclusion and isolation, and the civil unrest and violence (although this appeared to have had a relatively little impact on children's lives).

Participants described the environment in Somalia creating a structure of shared understanding, expectation, support and responsibility. This interconnection of support and constraint created a sense of safety and freedom that allowed children to play, interact and mature. This highly positive view is summed up in this participant's description of the environment in which children in Somalia are nurtured and raised:

*Ruqiyo: '...sometimes [neighbours] are family as well... [grandparents] talk to them, they tell stories, they look after the safety of the child as well, know where the child is going, helping them to explore by themselves, yeah they teach them... they are welcome to go every house if they want to... The doors are open... all the neighbours going to watch them... they could speak very early, they know everything.'*

In contrast, the extended interview excerpt below gives an indication of this participants' distress that can accompany raising children in an urban environment in an unfamiliar country and culture, especially without material and social resources:

*Nuur: 'If I was better off I would take my child [to preschool], because she will learn, I'll take her to playgroup and then learn from there... I think each mum has her own struggle with the kids... It will have an effect on the child because instead of spending time with*

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<sup>12</sup> '...only when habits of order are formed can we advance to really interesting fields of action' William James Diary, April 29, 1870. Houghton Library, Harvard University

*the child you are thinking of tomorrow, like how get ready or get ready for the house, or helping one child, if one child is sick, even yourself if you are sick. I think it would be hard for Somali mum if her English wasn't that good, and she doesn't know how to communicate with the school, if she need help... sometimes asking for help you feel like weakness as well, weakness in the community, you thinking, you are not coping... the thing is sometimes she's putting herself so much stress not to be weak, if I am crying because I am stressed out about the kids, that seems like I'm weak... I mean it is really hard, it is really hard.*

This and other participants' accounts of childhood in the urban environment they inhabited suggested that in the UK they perceived few, if any, of the freedoms of the life they left behind in Somalia. While the UK provided sanctuary and safety from war, with access to an education system which they observed encouraging children to develop creativity and imagination, and to health and welfare systems providing services free of charge, and an attitude of inclusion towards those with disabilities, they experienced new problems and dangers for children. Such constraints related to lack of material resources, small living spaces in high-rise tower blocks with few communal spaces in which to socialise, outdoor activities curtailed by the lack of good places to play, fears for children's safety and the climate, a lack of social connections with family and community, and loss of cultural traditions.

Together with the loss of the familiar and supportive cultural environment in Somalia, and wider stress and isolation experienced in the UK, as a whole their experience of the UK environment was highly constraining to child play, interaction and development.

## **Conclusions**

This study focused on UK born children from a Somali background, exploring their mothers' perspective on experiences of childhood, in order to learn about opportunities and barriers for Somali children's early development. We report highly contrasting accounts of childhood in Somalia and in the UK that provide insight into the difficulties Somali mothers and their young children may face in the UK.

Our participants saw housing, environment and community in Somalia enabling social interaction, creating a structure of connection, safety and responsibility within which children are free to play and learn. In contrast, in the UK, multiple stressors including lack of knowledge and language skills, limited financial and material resources, conflicting cultural expectations, lack of social support, and fear of traffic or abuse, appeared to constrain children's play and interaction with others and might contribute to social isolation. Their accounts suggested that children growing up in Somalia mature more quickly as a result of their environment, developing independence, confidence and social skills more quickly than children growing up in the UK although children with disabilities are likely to be stigmatized.

We argue that these findings represent a detailed context for the way disadvantage can impair early child development (Shonkoff, 2003). (Sen, 2001, Watts, 2004, Harvey, 2009, Schwanen and Kwan, 2012) Lack of freedom to play and interact with children of all ages and adults other than their parents may be a key mechanism for social disadvantage impairing children's outcomes (Milteer et al., 2012, Galster, 2012, Mahdjoubi and Spencer, 2015, Menatti and da Rocha, 2016).

Somali parents in Western urban settings such as the UK may need to ensure they find places where they and their children can meet other families ('find your village') even if they are feeling stressed. This could help re-create their sense of community support, potentially to be experienced as their own 'village', in this new urban environment. We would encourage Somalis as a group to engage further with local services to help them understand the specific strengths and needs of Somali families, and to campaign for local environmental improvements so they feel it is safe for their children to play and interact.

Early childhood interventions are highly effective and cost-effective (Shonkoff and Fisher, 2013, Strelitz et al., 2013), have become a national priority for the National Health Service and for research in the UK (Davies et al., 2013, NIHR, 2014), and are increasingly central to social policy in other European countries (European Commission, 2011). The findings of this study could help tailor such interventions to improve refugee child developmental outcomes, drawing on locally- and culturally-congruent practices and networks (Beirens et al., 2007, Hawe et al., 2009, Vandenbroeck, 2009, Castro et al., 2010, Larkey and Hecht, 2010, Strang and Ager, 2010, Maller and Strengers, 2013, Michie and West, 2013, Blue et al., 2016, Kelly and Barker, 2016) and attending to the role of the local environment (Shaw, 2004, Evans, 2006). Interventions should attend to creating safer places for play and interaction, as well as to engaging and enabling families within a cultural context that reduces isolation and supports confident and culturally congruent parenting.

Similar approaches to developing and adapting interventions, and modifying the environment, may also be relevant to young children and families from other refugee and disadvantaged migrant backgrounds. We believe these findings have policy implications to assist in tailoring the NHS 'Healthy Child Programme' for refugee families, contribute to the evidence base for Early Years Education policy and provision, and to refine policy guidance and practice for urban design, housing and neighbourhood development spending, for example relating to communal space in shared housing developments, design of children's play facilities, and traffic flow alteration (Giles-Corti et al., 2016). It would also seem very much consistent with the UN's sustainable Development Goal 11: "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable by 2030" ([www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals))

With a small number of participants from a single community, these narratives cannot attempt to represent Somali women in Bristol, let alone the range of Somali experience in the UK. The sample size is typical for an interpretative approach; this account does not

argue that these are the only conclusions that could be drawn from these interviews; Somali fathers would be expected to have different experience and would be a valuable source for further exploration. However, we have attempted to present a coherent and persuasive interpretation of these mothers' experience, which we believe offer useful points of theoretical generalisation (Draper, 2004) – not as contemporaneous experiences of the two countries, but as vivid expressions of critically important context for early child development in an urban Western environment.

In conclusion, therefore, we believe that this small study makes an important contribution to understanding the experience of refugees from Somalia, and potentially other disadvantaged migrants, as they move from a predominantly rural, communal, collective society to urban, more individualist environments. It may also help make sense of the increasing evidence of delayed and disordered development in the children of refugees and disadvantaged migrants from non-Western countries. Public health policies and interventions need to take account of the interrelationships between geography and the migrant communities arriving into urban areas. Our study suggests that fostering environments in which communal child-rearing practices can be developed or continued would help reduce isolation and promoting child development.

Further exploration of neighbourhood geography as experienced and shaped by parents and children would seem an important part of improving early child development in the West – both for refugees and forced migrants, and for the population as a whole.

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