

**A new research on Somali young people in the
UK [Part I]
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Growing Up Somali in Britain

**The experience of a group of young Somali men and women coming of
age in London**

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First and foremost, I owe a great debt of gratitude to all the young people and their parents who willingly shared the most intimate details of their lives with me for the benefit of this research. They did this, in part, because they believed (as I do) that their story was an important one to tell. My ability to sustain my attention to this project over the years was, in fact, due in large part to their faith in my promise to tell their story. With the completion of my research (and hopefully the publication of my thesis in a book form soon), I hope I have kept my promise to them.

My own interest in the experience of refugees from Somalia in the UK stems from very personal issues. I am a refugee from Somalia myself, and brought up my own children in this country. The topic for this research, therefore, meshes intimately with my deepest professional, personal and social commitments. It is this story that largely determines the theoretical and philosophical approach I adopt in this study.

The research originally began as a project looking at the war-time educational experience of children in Mogadishu, Somalia. That project was started in 1994 when I won a scholarship from the Africa Educational Trust to study at the Institute of Education, University of London. However, in time, I found myself unable to pursue this particular project to a successful conclusion. Part of the problem was data collection. Because of the chaos that reigned (and still continue to reign) in Mogadishu, I simply couldn't travel to collect data from that city. Things just dragged on and, being a scholarship student, I soon realized that my funding has dried up.

At the same time, more and more Somali refugee families and their children were arriving in the UK, and these (rather than those back home) were 'in the eye of the storm' in terms of what people wrote about Somalia and its people. It is a social science axiom as old as the hills that social research reflects the preoccupations of the time.

Thus at the beginning of 1997, and very close to the end of my scholarship, I refocused my research to look at the experience of those arriving here. Between June and July 1997, I conducted interviews with ten Somali refugee parents (6 mothers and 4 fathers) across London to understand how their experience and attitudes framed the immediate environment of their children (compare Portes & Rumbaut 2001). I had amassed a great deal of data from these interviews about parental reflections on why they had decided to leave their country, their pre-migration and flight experiences, their experiences of discrimination and racism in the UK, their perceptions of inner city schools and neighbourhood environments that (in their view) were inhibiting and not supportive of children's emotional and academic adjustment, and how they viewed their children's current lives and future in the UK. Unfortunately, the data was never systematically analyzed because I had to pull out of the course for personal circumstances in 1998 without completing the research.

I have always cherished the idea that education and learning was a life-long process, too precious to be the exclusive domain of the young. So older but perhaps wiser, I returned to my studies in 2004. By then, an academic debate has already emerged about the future the children of today's many immigrants and refugees face. In this context, I draw on the extensive research done in the U.S. about the children of immigrants and refugees, about the second generation, and about the new Americans.

Here in the UK, my refocusing on the young people was also stimulated by concerns about Somali children's decline. Their parent generation has come into Britain as refugees and asylum seekers and has endured much occupational and social downgrading (see Harris 2004; Griffiths 2002). According to some recent figures, Somalis had the lowest levels of employment among the new immigrants at 12.2 per cent, and also the highest proportions of inactivity at 60.2 per cent (Kyambi 2005:3). A more recent IPPR report puts the latter figure at 71 per cent

(IPPR 2007:17). In terms of settlement, the Somali population was clustered in inner-city neighbourhoods characterised by deprivation, high levels of unemployment, crime problems, poor quality services and limited local amenities (Cole & Robinson 2003:ii).

Most Somali young people were said to fare less well than the children of other new communities in the UK (Rutter 2003, 2005, 2006; Watters 2008).¹ Many of them leave full time education unconfident and underachieving, and their job prospects limited (*ibid.*). As Muslims and recent arrivals, the Somalis' language and culture cuts them off from mainstream British society and decreases their children's access to education and employment in the new environment (e.g., Griffiths 2002; Rutter 2006; Harris 2004). Thus, it was suggested that Somali youth were potentially excluded from mainstream society, and were at risk of depression and developing mental health problems (Harris 2004:4).

With many predicting a bleak future for the children of Somali refugees, I set about finding out what exactly was happening to these young men and women and how they were faring in British society. I conducted a second round of field work late 2008 and early 2009. This field work consisted of follow-up interviews with the parents and fresh interviews with their now grown up children to understand their experience of life in inner city schools, institutions and neighbourhoods. Altogether I interviewed 40 individuals, 14 parents and 26 young men and women. Their stories serve to illuminate the challenges confronting Somali young people and the distinct ways in which they have attempted to adapt to their new environment.

The main object of the study was to understand the contemporary dynamics of Somali young people's adaptation to life in Britain. The study on the adaptation of

¹ All these authors have reported Somali academic underachievement in the UK in absolute terms. Rutter (2006), in particular, made comparisons between Somalis and other groups. In my view, her group comparisons are utterly unconvincing for they depict 'Somali underachievement' as something that has deep historical roots in the UK, and that is not the case. She also has not gathered data from a representative cross section of all young people from the various nationality or ethnic groups she referred to in her study (i.e. Congolese, Somalis, and Southern Sudanese). But even if she did, whatever method she used (i.e., surveys, interviews) can still reify ethnic groups and miss important differences in their conditions. In the words of Kasinitz et al. (2008:13), it is possible to read group comparisons as stereotypes or even racist generalizations [because] any reference to group differences makes groups appear more homogenous than they actually are. The young people that Rutter researched (like mine) would have belonged not only to ethnic groups but also to social classes, genders, social groups, and neighborhoods. Like all modern people, they had a multiplicity of interacting social roles and identities. But her effort in comparing groups will not make this apparent. Thus her comparisons would still not be meaningful (see Kasinitz et al., 2008:13). Besides, the facts uncovered in this research contradict her theory of 'Somali underachievement'.

refugee children is complex and has been examined by many researchers from many disciplines. This has resulted in a plethora of concepts and terms, often with overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, meanings (Berry et al., 2006:10).

Of particular relevance here were the following two questions: how is the group of young people in the research faring educationally and occupationally? What are the challenges confronting them in terms of adjustment to a new society, family and school life, identity, goals, aspirations, and achievement? What I found was quite different from the above gloomy prognosis.

The state of Somali young people in the study: a summary of the evidence

Despite all the hardships they faced and the recency of their arrival, most of my respondents went to college and had completed two or more years of post-compulsory education after leaving school. Many had achieved good academic results that would allow them to gain entry to demanding degree courses at both modern and old universities across London and the Southeast. A few have gained professional degrees from elite universities.

Overall, 16 out of 26 young people or 62 per cent of the respondents went to university. Six have already qualified whereas ten are still at university. Amongst the latter is a young man who was unable to secure a job for two years after leaving university with a first or upper class degree. He is now undertaking a self-financed MSc. Degree course in airport planning and management. Gender wise, 5 men out of 12 went to university whereas 11 out of 14 females (or close to 80%) attended or are attending university. Young people with the highest grades tended to attend the most prestigious universities. Among these are two females and one male who entered 'elite' universities within the 'Russell Group' (King's College London (2 females), and a male doctor who trained at University College London).

Like students from other minority communities, girls continue their advantage in my study group. Yet, they still face strong subject segregation for they are less likely to attend Russell Group universities (see Equality & Human Rights

Commission, 2010:647).² 12 out of 16 students attend a new university. One young woman is training to be an osteopath at the Surrey Institute of Osteopathic Medicine (SIOM). At that rate, they are no worse off than other black children in the UK. In the latest Equality & Human Rights Commission Triennial Review, it is suggested that less than 10% of Black students are at Russell Group universities, compared to a quarter of White students (Equality & Human Rights Commission, 2010:647). The proportion of my research participants at Russell Group universities is just under 19%, a slight improvement on the aforementioned figure.

The data gives a particularly good sense of how far these young people have progressed in their education. However, conclusions about their career outcomes must remain tentative not least because most participants are still relatively young (19-28, with a median age of 23 years) (compare Mollenkopf et al., 2005).

At the time of interviews, 11 participants (3 males and 8 females) were in full-time university education. Three others were in professional occupations (a doctor, a nurse, and a solicitor). This group had strong academic abilities, attitudes and values during their schooling, which in turn have been shown to be related to the resources and the value placed on education in families of higher social class (Eccles, Wigfield and Schiefele 1998, cited by Osgood et al., 2005:345).

There were five further young people (three males and two females) who were working, some with jobs they viewed as steps on a career path rather than long term. One of the males, Mahad (22) has been working in his local Sainsburys' for the past 3-4 years. Another, 20 year-old Guure, has worked in Pizza restaurants and local supermarkets since he was 17. One of the young women (Deeqa, 27) has a job as an editorial assistant. She has already earned her bachelor's degree and has also embarked on a part-time MA course. The two young men were currently engaged in their first degree courses at university, but were also working at reduced hours.

² I think it is pertinent to note here some new figures just released, as reported by the Guardian, painting a bleak portrait of racial and social exclusion at Oxford and Cambridge universities. Figures revealed in requests made under the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act by the Labour MP David Lammy show that more than 20 Oxbridge colleges made no offers to black candidates for undergraduate courses last year. The Oxford college, Merton, has not admitted a single black student in five years. Oxford's breakdown of its latest undergraduate admissions figures suggest that just one black Caribbean student was accepted in 2009. A total of 77 students of Indian descent were also accepted. The FoI data also shows that of more than 1,500 academic and lab staff at Cambridge, none are black. Thirty-four are of British Asian (see Jeevan Vasager, Education editor, "More than 20 Oxbridge colleges did not take black students," the guardian, Tuesday 07.12.2010).

The third male, Alas (25), works as a driver for a London Council. He also had a second job on the side at his mum's Poundshop. The 2nd female, Dahabo (24), is pursuing further education at college alongside her part-time care assistant job. She brushed up her literacy and numeracy skills, and gained NVQ qualifications. At the time of interview, she was undertaking a nursing access and foundation course which, if she completes successfully, will allow her to study for a diploma in nursing.

The evidence also points to the fact that girls are outperforming boys both academically and in the labour markets. Consistent with existing literature, the data supports the argument that 'second-generation girl's more highly structured and monitored lives can have positive effects on educational attainment' (Foner & Kasiniz 2007:277). The young women in this study not only have higher educational expectations and attainment, they also aspire to higher status jobs than their male counterparts. The data illustrates how educational and occupational choices are intertwined, and how goals and trajectories differ for young men and women (compare Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005). While some of the young women have set their sights on traditionally gendered occupations, such as nursing, medical sciences and teaching, others aspire to attain higher status occupations. One young woman who trained as a solicitor had found a job at a top high street London law firm.

Like the immigrant youths in Berry et al.'s (2006:139) research, the young people in my study are generally well adapted. They have strong Somali ethnic identity, but also appear to be comfortable in their British/London context in terms of identity, language, peer contacts, and values. They demonstrated high English language proficiency and good Somali language command, and use both of them. They have friends from both their own ethnic group and from other groups, and generally feel that they are rarely discriminated against. Such profile, according to Berry et al. (2006:108), shows involvement with the new society by these young people while retaining their ethnic heritage, thus reflecting a general preference for integration.

In all, the young people in this research move easily among friends of many different backgrounds and enjoy the diversity, vibrancy, and hybrid culture of London, which defines Britain for them (compare Kasinitz, Mollenkopf & Waters

2004). Theirs is a life of working and networking, loving and living with others from different national, linguistic, religious and racial backgrounds (see Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard 2004:4). Asked ‘What are your friends like?’, one young man had this to say:

“I have friends from practically every country in the world ... I also have friends from work and those I socialise with.” (Farhan, m, 25).

Most respondents also demonstrate resilience and continue to strive for success. Their resilience is fuelled from three main sources. One is relational – they have supportive friends and are connected with extended family and relations. But also in their relationships with others, they are friendly, respectful and responsible (see Suárez-Orozco & Todorova 2003:18). Secondly, they are most often people of faith, and are deeply family oriented. According to Sam et al. (2006:141), the experience of in-group support linked to a strong sense of religiosity protects youth from the otherwise negative effect that cultural distance may have. This sense of belonging, in Sam et al.’s view, is perhaps even positively affected by more or less adverse living conditions (ibid.). The third aspect of their resilience is that of persistence and hope (see Suárez-Orozco & Todorova 2003:18). They want to be able to get an education or training, better jobs, and thus more money (see Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova 2008:362).

Most young people thought education was absolutely essential ‘to acquire the skills, beliefs, capacity for moral reasoning, and experiences and opportunities required for effective participation in society’ (see Elliott et al., 2006:57). One young man declared that he wanted to be educated so that he can compete for good jobs with others, and join the ranks of the middle class:

I think absolutely it makes a big difference whether you have education or not. There have been examples of people starting at stacking shelves and making their way to the top of their company, but that is a very rear thing. To get a decent job, that is well paid, you need a good qualification. Everybody’s ambition is to get into a middle class life style so they can provide better for themselves and their families, and so on and so forth. I think a job without a degree will be okay, but it is gonna be so far below what you would have achieved if you’ve got a degree. The world of work is much more competitive than it used to be in the past, so you need good education and qualifications to be able to compete with other people. (Guure, m, 20).

When asked ‘What would you like to be doing in 10 years time?’, most respondents mentioned gaining a university qualification, a job, money, being married, and

having kids. Several young men and women had great expectations for their future. Among them was Zahra, a registered nurse working at a large teaching hospital, who still wanted to advance towards a higher stage in medicine by becoming a doctor:

I don't see myself as successful, I think I'm average...I would say I'm slightly successful as I graduated from high school, college and university and I landed a good job. I'm successful in terms of achieving what I've wanted but that doesn't mean I'm going to stop here, there's still lots of things I want to achieve...this is just a stepping stone, I'm still climbing up the success ladder. So in ten years time I would like to become either a cardiologist or gynaecologist. I've got another 4 years of education to go; I want to train as a medical doctor. I don't know whether to study it now or to wait a while, but I'll study it full time, it would be difficult studying medicine part time as it would take longer and it'd be harder. (Zahra, f, 24).

Most young people have demonstrated 'particularly rapid upward mobility' (compare Kasinitiz et al., 2008). We must, however, learn to temper our enthusiasm for this good news with the fact that a significant minority is being left behind. Of these, there are the long-term unemployed. Others are neet, or not currently engaged in employment, education or training. Entry into the labour market is a particular problem for both males and females. A few of the males have engaged in delinquent behaviours, and have even done sometime in Young Offender Institutions (YOI). Several young men also got involved with gangs and violence, and openly led a drug-dictated lifestyle resulting in some being sent back to Somalia 'for rehabilitation'. At least one young man has been resettled back in his parents' old home-town with a great effort on the part of his parents in London who were determined 'to save his life'.

Neet is an acronym for the government classification of young people currently "Not in Employment, Education or Training." In the UK, this classification comprises people aged between 16 and 24 (see the Centre for Social Justice 2009:8), but the focus has often been on those who become NEET after leaving compulsory education (16-18 year-olds) (see Rennison et al., 2005; Coles et al., 2002; Social Exclusion Unit 1999).

There are 7 NEETs in my research group (5 men and 2 women) as opposed to 8 people who are at work. The ages of the former ranged from 20 to 27. Three of them are above the age of 24: a married young woman with a child and two young men, one of them also married with a child. The rest are young people who have left

school with little or no qualifications. Some have had work experience, others not; and several have suffered extended unemployment.

Even for those who have had jobs, it wasn't the kind of work most of them (or their parents) would have aspired to. It tended to be not just routine and low-paid, but also well outside the mainstream economy (compare Abrams 2010). These young people had thus accumulated significant amounts of nonwork in their early to mid-twenties, 'a period when young adults should be developing the job skills and work records that lead to long-term stable employment and wage growth, and that protect against poverty' (ibid.).

According to Corcoran & Matsudaira (2005:386), there is suggestive evidence (*in the American context*) that it becomes easier for high-income families to pass their economic advantages on to their children. That is something that does not exist for Somali young people who, owing to their refugee experience, grew up in disadvantaged economic circumstances.

Bloch (2009:170) cites past research with refugees that has consistently shown low levels of employment and underemployment (e.g., Dumper 2002; Charliff et al., 2004; Phillimore and Goodson 2006). In her own research, she found that, almost uniformly, refugees were unable to use their skills and experiences and were working in secondary-sector jobs for low pay, with poor terms and conditions of employment and with little or no opportunity for progression (Bloch 2009:182). Among her study group, the only community for which there was little difference in the labour market activity between men and women (i.e., in their low levels of employment) was the Somali community (ibid., p. 172).

The reasons for refugees' predicament, according to Bloch (2009:182), are diverse and complex but include the limited networks that refugees have and their heavy reliance on these networks for job seeking, which perpetuates and continues to root many in secondary-sector jobs. Other research has highlighted, among other things, attitudes to refugees, discrimination, and accent as impeding refugees' opportunities (ibid., p. 182). Are the children of Somali refugees facing a similar position in the labour market as that of their parents? While an examination of the employment barriers facing young Somali people was beyond the remit of this research, there are few anecdotal

reports of discrimination against young males in particular (I'll say more about this below, and in my later postings).

The challenges ahead

Overall, there are many signs of optimism. Educational aspirations are universally high for the young people who took part in the study. Like many generations of immigrant children from a broad range of cultures before them, these young men and women have truly yearned for learning (see Weinberg 1997:11), and most are progressing well educationally. Some are also successful occupationally. Gender-wise, women are far out-surpassing men in educational attainment. Many of the young women in the study not only have higher educational expectations and attainment, they also aspire to higher status occupations than many of their male counterparts (compare Feliciano & Rumbaut 2005).

However, there is bad news around a sizeable number of young people that is falling behind educationally. Some of the young men, in particular, have got involved with gangs and violence, and openly led a drug-dictated lifestyle. A corollary of this is the evolving Somali youth delinquency problems of the inner cities. In various parts of London and other major cities, drugs are increasingly reported to be the top problem among Somali youths, followed by violence and gangs.³ While not giving any figures, Rageh Omaar (the Somali-born Television journalist) contends that ethnic Somali youth constitute one of the largest minority groups in Feltham Young Offenders' Institution (Omaar 2006:43). How big is this problem, and what can be done about it? Omaar does not say, but he accepts that 'social deprivation or alienation' were salient factors in any

3. On March 30, 2010, as part of its campaign in the 2010 UK General Election, the Sun newspaper splashed on its frontpage the picture of two young black men it claimed to be Somalis, each holding a large heavy knife with a broad blade. Underneath the photograph was the frightful caption "Gang rule ... Chad and Mo ... show off their weapons". In the article by Nick Francis, the Sun claimed that Somali young men have brought violence and crime to the streets of the UK. "In crisp spring sunshine morning, on a bustling north London street and in full view of young mums pushing prams, we are brazenly handed four rocks of class-A drugs by two Somali gangsters," it claimed. As well as selling ecstasy and cannabis to the youngsters looking to "spice up" their visit to the capital, the article claimed, the Somali young men were also feeding the crippling addiction of thousands with harder drugs. These Somali youngsters, it was suggested, brought violence and misery to the streets of Britain. The Sun claimed that its coverage of the Somali gangs in the streets coincided with a shock new survey that showed how Britons felt let down by Labour's immigration record. Retrieved 3rd Dec. 2010 from <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/features/2912750/Sun-immigration-survey-day-2-Violence-on-the-streets.html>. However much this article had to do or not to do with it, the Sun finally won against the Labour Party in the 2010 general election.

explanation.

There are, of course, other explanations too: individual variables (such as aspirations, self-esteem or depression), social relationships (such as parent-child conflict), socioeconomic background, peer or environmental influences, *and neighbourhood context* (see Stepick et al., 2001:261; my italics). But there lies the first challenge. How could one shield these young people from such spiral of downward mobility in the face of what Portes et al. (2005:1009) describe as “multiple problems of poor schools, street crime, the lure of drugs, and the option offered by youth gangs, all opposed to parental aspirations for educational achievement and occupational advancement”?

Here is the second challenge. According to Hermione Harris (2004:41), institutional racism and discrimination are stacked against the Somalis. The segmented assimilation model argues that the second generation young people who adopt inner city ‘adversarial subcultures’ will experience down-ward mobility, in part because high levels of discrimination will preclude the option of joining the white mainstream, even if they are highly acculturated. Joining the native circles to which they have access may be a ticket to permanent subordination and disadvantage (Portes & Zhou 1993). Will or could that be the position of a significant element of Somali young people? And if they do encounter unequal treatment, do they develop anger and hostility toward mainstream British society or a desire to overcome the barriers they experience? (see Waters & Kasinitz 2010:102).

Apart from skin colour and ethnicity, an additional layer of disadvantage, especially one that sticks out in the current political climate, is the Somalis’ religious identity as Muslims. The issues here are not dissimilar to those addressed by Kasinitz et al. (2008:270) in their study on immigrant children in New York. They suggest that since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the public debate about religious cultural difference and immigration has focused on the experience of Muslim immigrants. As opposed to Muslim immigrants in America, they claim that Muslim immigrants to Europe have felt marginalized and discriminated against. The question for Somali young people in Britain is whether they will face systematic discrimination, thus hardening the boundaries between them and other groups and preventing assimilation (ibid.).

One area where the Somali community faces (and will continue to face) a huge challenge is youth unemployment. This is of course a universal problem, and there were recent media reports of youth unemployment hitting record high as a result of the economic crisis in the UK (e.g., Abrams 2009, 2010; Peacock 2010). A recent ILO report even suggested that youths were almost three times as likely as adults to be unemployed (Allen 2010). Somali young people face the additional barriers of 'institutional racism and discrimination,' suggested by Harris above. In my small sample, for instance, entry into the labour market was a particular problem for both males and females. Several young people were long-term unemployed. About seven were neet, or not currently engaged in employment, education or training.

Their parents faced barriers to employment, including employer discrimination and lack of network ties (Bloch & Atfield 2002; Bloch 2004, 2009). The latter, immigrant networks, are likely to be modified by human capital, in the form of skills, training, and years of education, and forms of social capital (Wright & Ellis 2001:84) which, on current trends, will be acquired by many in the younger generation. But will that be sufficient for them to succeed in the labour market? Or, as Muslims and black people, are they more likely to face economic disadvantage?

In addition to the questions and data needs described in the above discussions on Somali young people, I see some additional important avenues for further research. It is suggested that British Muslim women are the most disadvantaged faith group in the UK labour market, with 68 percent defined as inactive and only 29 percent in employment (Bunglawala 2010:4). With Somali young women currently progressing well at school and entering higher education in droves (11 out of 14, or close to 80 percent of my sample went to university), how will that reflect on their participation in the labour market? How are Somali young people, both male and female, faring educationally and occupationally nationwide? And how will they relate to their immigrant heritage and to their parents' country of origin? (see Foner & Kasinitz 2007:281). We need to conduct a larger scale study (i.e., survey research) of Somali children across the UK in order to answer these questions. That would be a massive effort that can help put the Somalis on Britain's social and political map.

*** Tomorrow, I am going to share with you the story of a young man who took a downward direction upon arrival. He dropped out of school, got involved with drugs and gangs, and has done sometime in prison. With very few skills and no job, he struggles to survive.

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