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## Which Refugees Deserve Our Help?

HOW POLARIZED REPRESENTATIONS SHAPE PUBLIC OPINIONS AND INDIVIDUALS' LIVES

### WHO DESERVES TO HAVE A FUTURE IN SWEDEN?

In 2015, an unprecedented number of unaccompanied refugee minors arrived in Sweden. All in all, 35,369 unaccompanied minors were registered, equaling to 40 % of all registered unaccompanied minors in the European Union (Eurostat 2016). Seeing that the Swedish Migration Agency's prediction at the beginning of 2015 had been to receive approximately 7,800 unaccompanied minors during the year (Migrationsverket 2016), the actual number put a great strain on the municipalities. In a study from 2016, Human Rights Watch found several shortcomings in the Swedish reception system, resulting in many children not receiving the care and attention to which they are entitled. It was also found that there was a lack of prioritization of applications from vulnerable children. Consequently, some severely traumatized children have had to endure long delays in the process of their asylum applications (Human Rights Watch 2016).

According to several studies, unaccompanied minor refugees are exposed to more traumatic events and suffer from higher levels of mental health problems than other refugees or immigrant children (see Oppedal & Idsoe 2015:203). A recent study by *Barnombudsmannen* has shown that many newly arrived refugee children in Sweden suffer from mental ill-health and that unaccompanied children are the worst off (Barnombudsmannen 2016). On the other hand, it has also been noted that many of the unaccompanied minors demonstrate a strong resiliency and agency. If the circumstances are right and a social supportive network in the resettlement country is enabled, many have good chances to improve their mental health (Oppedal & Idsoe 2015).

Consequently, the future of the several thousands of unaccompanied minors, who are expected to stay in Sweden, is dependent on their social environments. This seems especially relevant these days, since asylum policy is one of the most polarizing and debated issues in Sweden over the last two years. Moreover, a general skepticism regarding the legitimacy of refugees' and unaccompanied minors' rights to receive asylum in Sweden has been palpable in the country. Much attention has been given to statistics and numbers, especially regarding the costs of the refugee reception and care from the Swedish state. The pertinence of the matter is visible on the political level as well, especially with the rise of the anti-immigration party Sweden Democrats, who in a poll from spring 2017 proved to be the largest party in Skåne (SVT 2017). Moreover, there has also been a marked change in discourse from the more mainstream parties. Therefore, it seems highly relevant to take a closer look at how notions about unaccompanied refugee minors are socially constructed in Sweden.

### REPRESENTATIONS OF AN OTHER

The background to this paper and the source to my material was an eight week research project, where I conducted a multi-sited ethnographic research (see Marcus 1995:97). My strategy was to follow connections, associations and different forms of relationships relevant to the situation of unaccompanied minors in southern Sweden. The methods I used were interviews of different kinds, participant observations, digital ethnography, and, most of all, field notes. The material collected for this paper is a total of seven semi-structured interviews, notes from five conversations, and field notes from five different settings.

The focus of this paper is how representations concerning the identities and rights of unaccompanied minors are shaped. To construct a representation is an act of power in itself, for representations are fundamentally political and influential (see Johnson 2011). Thus, representations of unaccompanied refugee minors directly affect how policies are written and, later, interpreted, supported or contested by the public belief. Seeing that the large majority of the unaccompanied minors arriving in 2015 and 2016 were between the age of 16 and 17 and nearly 92 % were male (Migrationsverket 2016), I have specified my investigation by taking a closer look at conceptualizations of male versus female, as well as child versus adult.

In my analysis I first look at processes of Othering and how these are interlinked with polarized representations of refugees from the global south found in the media coverage in Europe and Sweden. Consequently, I look more closely at the situation in Sweden, while embedding examples from my fieldwork to highlight normativized notions, concerning unaccompanied minors. Finally, I theorize what the found insights entail and how they might be relevant in future work and research concerning refugee children and youth.

### THREATENING, MALE, INVADING OTHER(S)

To be able to understand which publicly perceived ideas are attached to unaccompanied refugee minors and how these are socially constructed, I believe it is helpful to look at the different semantic components which make up this term. By turning them into questions, we get an analytical reference point: How are refugees understood? How are minors understood? What difference does it make if the individuals are male or female and if they look like children or not? Who are seen as deserving of help and why?

By taking a brief look at the media coverage of the “refugee crisis”, a few things quickly become apparent. One is the stark contrast between stories of victimized refugees and of the foreign threat (Nasrollahi 2016:20). This seems to be a manifestation of the well-known processes for anthropologists and ethnographers of Othering. As Mary Douglas (1966:4) has famously put it, we exaggerate differences between male and female, with and against, in order to create an illusion of a common experience in an otherwise untidy world. We use the image and ideas of the Other to distinguish and to create order and consensus, in, for instance, the process of creating a national identity. In fact, we need the other in order to not only define our national identity but also define ourselves (Hall 2000:147). Thus, we construct differences between a normalized national belonging and subjects marked as deviant from this constructed norm – “racialized subjects” (Dahlstedt 2016: 5). Masquelier (2006), who in her article explores connotations connected to the word refugee, concludes that “refugeeness” essentially connotes “otherness” (2006:738). Drawing on Malkki, Masquelier agrees that refugees are conceptualized as an anomaly and a problem, requiring specialized correctives and therapeutic interventions (2006:738).



Photo: Henrik Peel

Furthermore, there is a distinct difference between how male and female refugees are constructed and represented. According to Johnson (2011:1016) the identity of the refugee in recent years has been racialized, feminized and victimized. Johnson argues that the concurrence of these trends is significant and, in fact, strategic since the feminization intersects with the construction of political (non)agency (2011:1016). Building on Johnson's argument, Nasrollahi (2016), elaborates that the visual representations of female refugees are portrayed as innocent people, whereas men are portrayed as those who spontaneously arrive at the European borders and who consciously are looking to exploit and take from the countries that they come to (2016:21). This is also the way the “floods” of overwhelmingly male refugees “invading” Europe were most often described in the media coverage of 2015. Interestingly, this use of language referring to refugee migration with terms such as “floods”, “hordes” or “flows” has become normalized fairly recently and is strongly influenced by a northern context that sees the southern or Asian refugee as a different “other” (Johnson 2011:1023).

These ideas, although not explicitly said, certainly seemed to frame some of my informants' ideas about the arrival of refugees in southern Sweden. All in all, I noticed a big difference in how male refugees were perceived in comparison to female refugees during my fieldwork. The effect was certainly amplified by the overwhelming majority of male refugees arriving in Europe and Sweden. While speaking to one municipality representative, she described the recent situation in her municipality as follows: “For a while we had nearly 600 men in one of our accommodations for asylum seekers. This changes the streetscape and the feeling when walking in the streets; it effects normal citizens.” (Freier, L. 2016, personal communication, 14 September).

What I understood between the lines of this statement was that the municipality representative believed that I would naturally agree with her that 600 foreign-looking men would *involuntarily* scare the “normal” citizens of Sweden. This assumption was something which didn't need to be explicitly articulated nor explained, for she saw me as being part of the same cultural sphere, sharing the same standardized values, and, thus, being able to mediate similar experiences (see Douglas 1966:48).

The degree of her assumption might have been informed by how many news providers and social media outlets chose to portray male refugees: as a foreign, violent, and, even, dirty threat. The discursive frames found in media and popular narratives can help us learn a great deal about how fears of cultural, ethnic and religious difference are mobilized and how this is interlinked with a shift in the responsibility for people that suffer (see Holmes & Castenada 2016:13). There is a prevailing tendency to portray men from the global south as fanatics, or part of ungovernable masses (see Nasrollahi 2016:14-16). Within Migration Studies, there is a tradition to depict refugee men as either perpetrators or protectors of women (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). Furthermore, it has been noted that refugee men's masculinity oftentimes is understood and represented as both primitive and dangerous (see Rettberg & Gajjala 2016) and, hence, something which should be



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'rehabilitated' within their families and camp communities (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014:10). These representations of refugee men and their masculinity leave little room for seeing them in other ways, such as victims of war in the need for protection and help.

### DESERVING CHILDREN & GRATEFULNESS

In contrast to depictions of refugee men, depictions of refugee children, regardless of their gender, have inspired strong protective reactions in recent years. Nowadays, children and, particularly, migrant children are viewed as being vulnerable and dependent, in strong need of public protection (see Bhabha 2014:322-323). However, 'children' and 'childhood' are social categories as well, always changing and adapting to the fluctuating world views of societies (see Ambert 1994:530). In fact, Ariés (1962) argues that 'children' didn't even exist as a distinct category in the middle ages and neither was childhood a distinct phase in life. Moreover, regarding the welfare of children, it is also only recently that child abuse has become one of the main concerns (Hacking 1999:132).

In Sweden, children are today seen as society's most vulnerable and, at the same time, most valuable members, representing hope and future. Moreover, Sweden has vigorously promoted children's rights on the international scene in the last decades. Among the public there exists a moral sensibility to protect children's wellbeing, across ideological and political borders. On the other hand, the portrayals in which refugee children have been cast have ranged from vulnerable victims to untrustworthy exploiters, resonating with the polarized discourse regarding asylum-seekers that is prevalent in Sweden (Eastmond & Ascher 2011:1186-1187).

The polarization of how refugee children are framed can partly be explained by general currents of anxiety in Europe concerned with diversity and change within a paradigm of limited resources. This anxiety, in turn, is informed by the neoliberal disassembly of social systems in many industrialized countries. Felt consequences thereof were, among others, debt and austerity as well as decentralizing responsibility and shifting it to the shoulders of individuals. Media and political statements further enhance this polarizing tendency by morally delineating the deserving from the undeserving. This discourse of deservingness deflects the responsibility from historical and economic policies supported by powerful actors and locates it in the displaced people themselves (see Holmes & Castenada 2016).

The fine line between deserving and undeserving refugee children was visible in my fieldwork. While conducting a participant observation at a musical event targeted towards unaccompanied minors, the musician holding the event was visibly upset that so few, precisely one, participants showed up. At first she talked about how it would probably have been better to go to the home in which most of unaccompanied minors in the town resided. However, as the time passed by her agitation seemed to shift focus and increasingly target the unaccompanied minors themselves instead. Three consecutive quotes that I noted were: "The young ones are so ungrateful, where is their sense of duty?", "Somebody ought to take the young ones by the ears and drag them here", "We pay taxes in Sweden and then I get money to do something for you, you know".

These charged quotes could be unpacked in different ways, unveiling different kinds of social phenomena. What is relevant for this discussion, however, is how the deservingness quickly is put into question by a perceived ungratefulness. Ignoring other rational explanations, such as that the information about the event might not have reached her target group or that they already had other plans, the woman instead took it personally. Ungratefulness is strongly tied to the notion of debt, for gratefulness seems to be the least and easiest way in which to reciprocate a gift, which according to Marcel Mauss is an obligation of the receiver of the gift (1970). In his essay, Mauss developed an anthropological theory, which is based on the hypothesis that human relations are tightly intertwined with giftgiving; that the exchange of gifts builds relationships between humans. In the foreword, Mary Douglas concludes that there is no such thing as a free gift, for every gift has to be received and reciprocated. Consequently, there is no such thing as charity. In this way, we can explain the musician's indignation, since it seems she felt she had prepared a gift with the help of the Swedish state and its tax-paying citizens, and she was frustrated that there was a lack of a recipient to the gift. In his essay, Mauss points out that the process of giving and receiving creates a link between the people involved. However, the link between a representative of the "giving" country and the "receiving" refugee will naturally never be equal nor will the debt ever be fully repayed. As Moulin (2012) notes in her essay on the phenomenon of refugees having to choose between protection and freedom, gratitude reflects social hierarchies and places those who receive in a subordinate position from which they are expected to obey certain rules as a form of reciprocity (2012:12).

Talking to the unaccompanied minors themselves, I certainly noticed their need to show how grateful and happy they were to be in Sweden. During an interview with three boys from Afghanistan at a home for unaccompanied boys, the most frequent expression was *jättebra* (really good), which was the reply I got to most questions. For instance, when asking how they experienced life in Sweden right now they said:

Boy 1: Feels really good to be here.

Boy 2: I love every day. Every minute. I laugh. I therefore like Sweden. (short interaction in Dari, one of the official languages in Afghanistan)

Me: What were you talking about?

Boy 2 (mumbling): Not everybody gets to stay.

Boy 3: I also love Sweden and the school and the staff. (of the house in which they reside)

I haven't had any bad experiences.

Boy 1: All people in Sweden are nice.

(Freier, L. 2016, personal communication, 15 October)

On the other hand, it was also apparent that some of the boys were worried about their future prospects in Sweden. After having received answers from two boys regarding how they ended up in Sweden, I asked the third, more quiet, boy the same question:

Me: How come, *you* chose Sweden as your destination?

Boy 2: I lived in Iran for nine years but I couldn't stay there. I believed in Europe and I believed in Sweden. I would laugh. Life could be better.

Me: Do you have any plans or hopes regarding your future in Sweden?

Boy 2: I don't believe in the future, if I could I would like to be a police officer, but I know for sure that I can't.

Me: How come?

Boy 2: I only know Persian and Dari, I don't know Swedish. All people that live here, Afghans, that I have met, they can't talk Swedish. So I know.

(Freier, L. 2016, personal communication, 15 October)



Photo: Meesuk

Language is seen as key for a successful integration in a country, and, in the contemporary Swedish political debate, learning Swedish is highlighted as top-priority for newly arrived minors (Wimelius, Eriksson, Isaksson & Ghazinour 2016). More than that, there is a widespread expectation that if unaccompanied minors are allowed to stay, in return they should adapt to Swedish ways and acquire Swedish language skills (see Kayim & Johansson 2015), confirming the notion of debt and reciprocity mentioned earlier. It seems that the boy that I was talking to understood that the impossibility of ever mastering the Swedish language fully, functioned as a discriminating border, preventing him from freely choosing his path in Sweden. Seeing that Afghans he had met in Sweden hadn't fully acquired the language, and, perhaps, also did not have certain occupations, he felt it wasn't realistic to even dream of a possibility of becoming a police officer. He felt he *knew* this could never happen.

### SILENCES THAT SPEAK VOLUMES

If acquiring Swedish language skills was one of the most frequently mentioned topics throughout my fieldwork, the least mentioned topic was that of age validity and age assessment. Since many of the newly arrived unaccompanied minors lacked identity documents, the migration authority *Migrationsverket* makes age assessments. In order to give the unaccompanied youth the benefit of the doubt, they were categorized as children unless clearly over eighteen, which led to the controversy of how many of the unaccompanied minors truly were minors. None of my informants talked about this issue during an interview. Neither was it mentioned in any public setting concerning unaccompanied minors. However, I noted some statements from people, who talked to me in a more private sphere, such as "I am sure you've heard, many of them are lying about their age in order to stay. It's a real problem". These suspicions were amplified in the media with news stories bearing provocative titles such as *Sveket mot barnen* (The betrayal to the children). This specific example was posted by the news service of the Swedish national radio broadcaster in a report in which they claimed to have examined how the deficiencies in the system had led to arbitrary age tests, how gold diggers had cashed in at the expense of the children and exploited the resources of the Swedish society in order to find out who "the real winners and losers" were (SR Ekot 2016).

The language found in this title and description again highlights the aforementioned issue of how media, especially with regards to migrants and refugees from the global south, tends to polarize victims and villains, winners and losers. The debate became especially heated after a twelve-year old boy, residing at one of the many homes in Sweden for unaccompanied minors, was raped by two other boys residing in the same accommodation, who claimed to be fifteen respectively sixteen years old. Ultimately, both of the offenders were assessed to be older than eighteen and were sentenced to two years prison and deportation (Hjertén 2016).

It is interesting to see how the actions of the newly arrived refugees in no way are connected to political interests. At this point I would also like to echo Beard, mentioned by Hacking (1999), who asks why our attention should be drawn to sexual abuse when poverty has been intensifying and welfare programs are run down. I am further inclined to agree with the statement that “for anyone who sees poverty and deprivation as the bigger enemy, single-minded preoccupation with sexual abuse must seem a dangerous deflection” (1999:133). This advertency naturally is not supposed to belittle or ignore the seriousness of sexual assault but, rather, to contextualize it and bring it into perspective of what can be seen as the bigger picture.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF MAKING ONESELF “EMPLOYABLE”

So what is that bigger picture? What is it that we potentially are distracted from? We get a clue from Hacking (1999), who talk about the phenomena of intensifying poverty and run-down welfare programs, both of which are directly connected to what has been referred to as the neoliberal turn. Neoliberalism is here understood as a paradigm shift with a new form of rationality – that of marketization, where the market principles influence all forms of governance down to the individual level (see Lauri 2016). With regards to refugees, this has led to a shift of focus from political-economic interests to the refugees themselves, where the responsibility and the blame are placed on the shoulders of the displaced people instead of the forces that caused the displacement in the first hand (see Holmes & Castenada 2016).

The same neoliberal trends of marketization, decentralization and privatization changed the Swedish welfare model. Now the norm of the Swedish citizen is the employable citizen and contrasted against un-employable and problematic others (Dahlstedt 2016:6-7).

The focus of both the municipalities and the social entrepreneurship that I worked for was to help the unaccompanied minors become “employable citizens”. Moreover, one of the questions which was asked during the invite-only *intressentdialog* (stakeholder dialogue) with the topic of integration, was “In which new and concrete ways can we make people more employable, so that they can support themselves?”. This was one out of five questions discussed around mixed tables, made up by chosen representatives from municipalities, the business sector and organizations, as well as selected entrepreneurs and artists, with the aim to develop ideas for innovation and development work regarding “integration that leads to productivity, welfare and economic growth” in southern Sweden.

Regarding unaccompanied minors, Lidén & Nyhlén (2015) argue that it is apparent that the economy is still salient in the determination of their future, while, at the same time, pointing out that municipalities could experience a great gain from them. In fact, one municipality that I went to talk to said that they were very interested in “catching those who had successfully integrated” and that they wanted “those who they had invested in” to stay. Even though these quotes might seem like very de-personalized ways of thinking

about individuals with full histories, refugees are seen as more than mere victims that need to be helped. Here there is something to win as well, since refugees are seen as resources with abilities that can enrich especially locations whose glory days are long gone. In these situations, the relationship is suddenly more equal and refugees as a group have a chance to neither be villainized nor victimized but, instead, be seen as individuals, with voices of their own to tell their stories.



Photo: Henrik Peel

### WE – THE PEOPLE

Child and youth migration is multifaceted and represents a protection challenge, a security risk and a development opportunity all at once (see Bhabha 2014). Unaccompanied refugee minors are oftentimes represented in the media coverage in polarized ways, either as victims deserving our help or as foreign threats or exploiting fortune seekers. Detrimental to how they will be depicted and publicly viewed lies on factors such as if they are male or female, if they look and act as we imagine children and if they are grateful or not. Gratefulness is one of the ways in which refugee children can symbolically repay their debt of having been given protection by the nation-state.

The current paradigm is influenced by the neoliberal turn and directly influences the situation of the unaccompanied minors located in Sweden. In addition, it seems that unaccompanied minors are directly influenced by the well-known human inclination of Othering, as described in this paper. Perhaps we may never overcome this tendency but it seems pivotal to remember that it might have detrimental effects, and effect the lives of others. We should be reminded that turning people against each other is part of subversion, and, in fact, one of the easiest and cheapest war strategies. It will always be of interest for the people and institutions in power to retain and expend it, most often

at the cost of others. Therefore, one of ethnology's most important tasks of telling the stories of those who are usually overseen continues to be important.

To not accept portrayals of refugees in a gullible fashion without questioning underlying motives is of importance for "how we imagine particular categories of people determines how we engage with them, who we accept as legitimate political actors, and who is able to participate in our world" (Johnson 2011:1017). Being more aware of what might be subconscious, internalized beliefs of the Other – in this case refugee children and youth – should help practitioners and researchers alike. Ultimately, how we view and receive those who are less known to us in our lives will define our and, especially, others' lives in the near and distant future.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

Photo on page 78 by Johan Persson