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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe the reception of separated minors in Sweden and analyse some central ideas and ethics as they are manifested, interpreted and practiced by professionals involved in the reception system. What impact do these ideas and ethics have on separated children? This article is based on extensive fieldwork consisting of more than 100 interviews with and observations of actors in the reception system. Theories of differences and similarities are used to investigate how professionals perceive of minors both as normal teenagers and as culturally different aliens who need to become “Swedish”. The study concludes that a combination of the ideas of similarities and differences, where the minors are recognised as persons with various backgrounds and experiences, could upon reflection result in a more gracious reception.

Introduction

“They [professionals working with separated minors] think we come from a bad country, and people assume that we do not know or understand anything, that we are only interested in eating and sleeping. They see us as merchandise, an easy business you can make money from.”

The quote comes from a boy who came to Sweden as a separated minor in 2009. He was reflecting on the professionals he had met during his time as an asylum seeker. Where does his view, that he is seen as merchandise, come from? In order to understand this notion, let us switch perspectives from that of the boy to that of professionals working in the Swedish reception system.
The Swedish reception of separated minors is based on the rights set forth in international agreements, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva, the asylum-seeker’s rights according to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Geneva Convention and, in national legislation, the Aliens Act (SFS 2005, 716), the Act on the Reception of Asylum Seekers and Others (SFS 1994, 137) and the Social Service Act (SFS 2001, 453).

In 2002, the government was assigned the task of improving the reception of separated, asylum-seeking minors. This led to changes in the enactment of SFS (1994, 137), the Reception of Asylum Seekers and Others Act, which went into effect on 1 July 2006. Under special agreement and with a clear division of responsibility, Sweden’s municipal authorities and county councils, together with the Migration Board and the National Board of Health and Welfare, have joint responsibility for separated children. The Health and Social Care Inspectorate at the National Board of Health and Welfare has a supervisory role. Confidentiality is observed between the different authorities. Since January 2014, reception of separated minors is a non-negotiable obligation for all municipalities in Sweden and a “whole Sweden model” is practiced. Since 2006, almost 30,000 separated minors have arrived in Sweden and applied for asylum. The majority of them are young boys and most of them come from Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea and Syria. The legislative changes of 2006 and 2014 and the “whole Sweden model” mean that new municipalities and actors with no prior experience of receiving asylum seekers and refugees are now entering the arena of reception with respect to separated minors. Many municipalities and professionals must build the reception system from scratch.

In this article, I will map out the reception system and analyse some of the ideas apparent among those who work closely with the separated minors on a daily basis. What ideas do professionals have about separated minors? How do these ideas influence the way in which they work and meet with the separated minors?

Material and method

This article is based on a research project called Behind closed doors – the impact of interpreting for legal security and integration, with special focus on the reception of separated children and young people 2008-2011 (www.tolkprojektet.se). Within the framework of this project, two fellow colleagues and I have carried out extensive fieldwork, including participatory observations at group
homes for separated asylum-seeking children and young people who have received permanent resident permits. We observed ten asylum interviews and conducted more than 60 in-depth interviews with guardians, foster parents in family homes, social welfare officers, residence staff, teachers, case workers at the Migration Board and others who work with the reception of children. We conducted 74 interviews with community interpreters and 23 biographic interviews with ten separated children. On three occasions, we assembled reference groups of people who had arrived as separated children during the following years: 1946 from Finland, 1979 from Uruguay and 1992 from Croatia. The reference groups’ collective experiences and knowledge allowed us to investigate various possible situations brought up during the interviews and observations.

Theories of differences and similarities

In order to analyse and understand the ideas, perspectives and ethics that are present among the professionals working in the reception system, I will use theories on differences and similarities derived from the philosophy of science: methodological collectivism and methodological individualism (Gilje & Grimen 1995; Johansson 2000). The choice of theory is inspired by an article, *Difference and similarity: Narrativity, Politics and Theory*, by the ethnologist Ella Johansson (2000).

Methodological collectivism implies that a social phenomenon, for example “culture”, has unique qualities that go beyond the acts and capacities of individuals. Any human situation, experience or action must be understood through the impact of society, culture or other collectives (Gilje & Grimen 1995). A methodological collectivist perspective creates interpretations and stories of difference that give us an opportunity to understand humans as collective beings embedded in different contexts that go beyond the rationality of the individual. The advantage of methodological collectivism is that it creates an ethical standpoint wherein we have to understand humans in terms of particularism and recognise the fact that not all people do interpret the world and act in the same way (Johansson 2000). One drawback of such a perspective is that it might diminish the recognition of each person’s own individual activity and rationality. At its most basic level, it could lead to the idea that people are “slaves” operating under the rules of the collective. This is not an unusual but still a very simplistic explanation of how “culture” functions (SOU 2005, 41; Gustafsson 2007).

Methodological individualism, on the other hand, implies that all social phenomena have to be understood through the acts and capacities of individuals. For example, culture is no more or less than the total of every individual’s actions and capacities. Culture has no life, actions or qualities on its own. A methodological individualist strives to understand the perspectives, experiences, rationales and actions of the individual without regard to the com-
munity, society or culture. For several researchers, this have led to an idea of social atomism where individuals constitute the smallest parts in society just as atoms are the smallest parts of everything in nature (Gilje & Grimen 1995). When everything — society, culture, language, etc. — is peeled away, all individuals have the same needs and the same rationalities and, last but not the least, the same values. In this way, methodological individualism creates an idea of universalism and similarity between individuals (Johansson 2000). An advantage of this perspective is the fact that ideas of similarity form the basis for an ethical approach premised on respect for the equality of all individuals rather than on a recognition of differences. It stands to reason that all individuals, irrespective of their background, gender or other status, should be accorded the same respect and equal treatment. One drawback of this perspective is a lack of recognition of differences, which might lead to a point of non-recognition (Taylor 1994).

In everyday life, for example within the reception system for separated minors, the ethics of reception may be interpreted as being based on ideas of collectivism and differences or individualism and similarity. The former idea makes it possible to recognise the particular and concrete person embedded in collectives. The latter idea leads to recognition of a universal, similar and abstract person; it does not matter who you are or where you come from. As a human being, you have equal worth and the right to the same kind on respect regardless of culture, religion or nationality (Benhabib 1992).

**Terminology**

The official terminology used in the European Union to refer to minors who migrate internationally without the company of a parent or other legal guardian is *unaccompanied children*:

> “An unaccompanied child is a person who is under the age of eighteen, unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier and who is ‘separated’ from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so.” (UNHCR 1997, 5)

Alongside this definition, the UNHCR and Save the Children in Europe use the term *separated children* in the joint programme Separated Children in Europe (SCEP), which has been in existence since the 1990s. The term better reflects the fact that children are not alone or without company and that they, during transit or after arriving in the receiving country, are cared for by adults who are not their parents or their customary primary caregivers (Statement of Good Practice 2010). Within the field of research on migration, children and youth, the con-
cept independent child migrant has become more and more common (Orgocka & Clark-Kazak 2012). The concept was introduced to challenge and contradict the widespread idea of the vulnerable child who needs to be cared for. The concept assumes a fundamental respect for the capacity of the individual in line with modern childhood sociology. Children are recognised as capable human beings on their own terms (Corsaro 2011). In this article, I will use the term separated minors since its focus is on the reception system. Still, my scientific approach to those whom I study and write about is better captured by the concept independent child migrant.

**Mapping the reception of separated children in Sweden**

On a national basis, Sweden is ambitious in planning and organising its reception of separated minors. Within just a few years since 2006, municipalities and private companies have built up a huge administrative system and acquired extensive staff to work with such children: this includes social secretaries, staff at residences and family homes, guardians ad litem, school teachers, interpreters, and so forth. New actors and practitioners are entering the arena every day. These professionals work for different authorities and organisations with different tasks, mandates and special laws and regulations. In the research project Behind closed doors, we described and mapped out the Swedish reception system in order to provide an overview of it (Norström & Gustafsson 2010). The mapping process also illustrates the position of minors in relation to professionals working in different areas of the reception system. Figure 1 shows quite well the complicated web of professionals and institutions involved in the situation of minors.

In the next section, I will summarise the results of the analysis of the interviews and observations of professionals working in the reception system and return to the questions raised in the introduction: What kinds of ideas do professionals have about separated minors? How do these ideas influence the way in which they work and meet with the separated minors?

**Teenagers and aliens**

The professionals, and especially those who work closely with the minors, stressed that they are working with teenagers. This means that they treat the separated asylum-seeking minor just like any child or young person and that they focus on teenage problems. This perspective on the minors is supported by the fact that most people working in the reception system have worked with other groups of people in need of social care before: delinquents, the disabled or young persons who otherwise are considered dysfunctional for different rea-
sons. For example, their parents may be drug users, have criminal backgrounds or be in need of social services. Such a perspective is reasonable. The minors are teenagers and they might well act like it and be going through the same existential situation as typical teenagers while growing up.

The professional background of people who work in the reception system might also strengthen the idea of normality. The minors are normal and functional, not delinquents, disabled or dysfunctional, and thus they do not need care to the same extent. In line with other studies, I can note, based on my empirical material, that professionals often stressed the fact that the separated minors seem even more normal and better behaved than many other categories of teenagers. The explanations in these cases are based on the assumptions that the minors have had a good upbringing and received a good education at home (Kholi 2007).

There is another, parallel, perspective on the minors. In the interviews with professionals, the perspective of the minors as “the other” was expressed in at least two ways: through discrimination and by citing cultural differences. Several professionals complained that almost nothing in the reception system, from the investigation of social services to school and health care, is “good enough”. Those who stated this point are critical of the fact that municipalities do not provide the separated minors with the same services as those received by native Swedish children. The director of a group residence gave examples of repeated

Figure 1. A map of the most common contacts with authorities and professionals for the single separated minor. In this figure the separated minor is called Akram.
discrimination carried out by the authorities in the municipality where she operates. One example had to do with a preparation class offered in a basement full of mould and separated from the rest of the school.

A woman working at a group residence reported an appalling situation in which the minors have health problems or sleeping disorders, feel stressed or are either in despair or depressed. Instead of psychological care, the minors are treated with chemicals. She describes her work as “working in a hospital, distributing different kinds of pills from morning to evening”. This is not medically secure for the minors. Besides the criticism of inadequate solutions and discrimination against minors, there is another perspective related to the professionals themselves. In addition to the perspective mentioned above – that the professionals are working with normal teenagers – they also hold the idea that these teenagers are culturally different and alien.

One common story among professionals, often women, is that the separated minors, who are often young men, do not respect women. This disrespect, or even contempt for women, is considered a consequence of culture and cultural clashes. The idea of culture as something essential among separated minors goes hand in hand with a long history of culturalizing the immigrant (Eriksen 1999; SOU 2005, 41). When professionals talk about minors, it often ends with the conclusion that “they” are different from “us”. If these differences are abolished, integration and harmony will be achieved. This idea of integration, meaning that “we” can teach “them” how to speak, behave and value things, is essential in the reception system. Many of the professionals interviewed believe that their most important tasks are to represent the Swedish society, convey Swedish values about gender and teach the Swedish language. The preparation classes in school are described as “super important” for this reason by a guardian ad litem. He was worried about the cutbacks in schools for separated minors and argued that they (the guardians) have to fight for the preparation classes, since learning about Sweden and how to speak Swedish are the most significant goals for the minors in the long run.

The sense that the minors are aliens and different from “Swedes” is reinforced by the fact that they speak languages other than Swedish. Professionals in all areas of the reception system have the legal right to use community interpreters (Norström et al. 2011), but it is not possible to have an interpreter around all the time. One account, often reported in the interviews, is that the minors learn Swedish quickly. Professionals working with daily care tasks state that they even avoid the use of interpreters to “force” the minors to learn Swedish. Besides, many of the professionals told us that “body language is global” and that it is good enough for everyday life communication.

During one observation at a group residence, we attended the “Thursday interpreter and guardian ad litem hours”. The event is repeated every week on
Thursday afternoons. The staff requested interpreters for all relevant languages. The interpreters and guardians ad litem came to the residence and communicated the whole week’s agenda in two hours’ time.

When the conversation with the guardian ad litem was finished, there were a few minutes left before the interpreter had to leave. One person on the staff used the time to ask a boy if he remembered that he had spilled tea on the kitchen floor earlier in the week. The boy nodded. “Well”, the staff member said, “I am not pleased with the way you wiped it up, using your sock. You should have used a Wettex.” The boy nodded. The staff member looked over at the guardian ad litem and sighed. Then he addressed the boy: “Do you have anything else on your mind before we end?” The boy did not look at the other two or the interpreter. He folded his hands and asked, “I am very worried about my brother. Would it be an easy question; maybe we can deal with it next Thursday. We cannot keep the interpreter here any longer.”

There might be a long history behind those few words and the short, explicit question about needing help in finding the boy’s brother. Maybe they discussed this many times and the boy was never satisfied or perhaps the staff member was not prepared to adequately respond to the boy’s despair and concerns. If we consider the latter explanation, a lack of preparation for dealing with the emotions and concerns of minors, we discover another prominent feature in the empirical material about professionals: fear. A fear of being too close and too curious on the one hand and a fear of violence on the other.

**Fear of curiosity and violence**

In their interactions with the minors, most of the professionals feared the intangible, namely the feelings, histories and experiences of the minors. However, the professionals interviewed for the study did not use the word fear. Still, among the more than sixty persons we interviewed, it was for some reason obvious that “you should not ask the minors about the past or any personal questions”. Different persons used different metaphors, but the most common one was that “we are not supposed to ’dig into’ or ’spy on’ their past and backgrounds”. The professionals explained their own behaviour by saying that avoiding certain aspects of a minor’s life and history is a consequence of the minor’s status as a refugee:

“As a refugee and asylum seeker you are in an uncertain situation, you are under investigation. You might have entered Sweden illegally and you might have told a false story about yourself and [your] background in the asylum interview, but also in meetings with professionals in the recep-
This is one reason why professionals should not ask too much. The other is the fear of being trusted with deep, difficult emotions and traumas that the professionals are not prepared to deal with or to listen to (Kholi 2007). In one case, a staff member at a residence where an obviously traumatised girl lived argued that she could not do anything as long as there was no chance of the girl receiving professional psychiatric care. In the opinion of the staff member, she and others around the girl should not disturb her too much. Furthermore, the staff member explained that the girl would not get any psychiatric care until she had received a permanent residence permit. This was justified with the argument that if the girl was denied asylum, she would have to go back to her home country and would not be able to finish her psychiatric care. That would be of no use to her. This argument confirms the idea I touched upon above, namely that the minors are only interesting to the staff members in circumstances where they might become Swedish citizens with a focus on Swedish.

There was also another fear apparent in the interactions with the minors. It was the fear of violence and it was often based on personal experience. Violence is an outcome of the uncertain situation and perhaps traumatic backgrounds of the minors and is also, like in the quote above, interpreted by the professionals and explained by them as being the result of the minors’ refugee status. The smallest thing can start a riot at the group residences. During one observation, a riot started when the staff distributed telephone cards to the minors. The deal was that each minor should get two cards each month, but those minors who prepared meals at least twice a month received three cards. From the perspective of the staff, the extra telephone card was a reward. From the perspective of the minors, withholding the third card was a punishment if they failed to cook. The riot started when one boy stated that he forgot to write his name on the list of those who had prepared meals and one member of the staff stated that this was not true. There were ten minors against five staff members in this situation. A lot of equipment and furniture were damaged, including a television set and a microwave.

More grace and knowledge?

It is time to return to the minor’s quote in the introduction and then summarise the experiences of the minors we have described, analysed and presented in previous articles (Norström & Gustafsson 2010; Gustafsson, Fioretos & Norström 2012; Gustafsson, Fioretos & Norström 2013). The quote sums up feelings of
being badly received. Minors coming to Sweden find it difficult to figure out who is responsible for what; they feel like no one hears them or listens to them and that there is a lack of interest from people around them.

The discrepancy between the experience of the boy in the quote, who perceives that he is being treated as merchandise, and the ambitious and generous reception mapped out in Figure 1 may be understood in light of theories about similarities and differences. On the one hand, the analysis shows that there is an idea that the minors are normal teenagers. Being a teenager is interpreted by the professionals as a universal experience. This is based on ideas of similarity, of universalism and of methodological individualism. If the impact of society and culture is peeled away, all human individuals are perceived as being equal. Implicit in the interpretation of equality is also the idea of being not just “alike” but also “like” or “similar” (Gilje & Grimen 1995; Johansson 2000). The professionals emphasised that the minors should be treated as any young person without exception. In the interviews, they described examples of how the minors dealt with typical individual teenager problems stemming from their transition from childhood to adulthood. The story of similarities also explains the criticism directed towards authorities and municipalities regarding discrimination and inadequate solutions for the minors. The professionals wanted more equality for and universal perspectives on the minors, and they avoided singling them out in particular.

On the other hand, there were stories among professionals where the minors were singled out as different and of differences based on ideas of diverse cultures, languages and the minors’ status as refugees. Instead of being genuinely interested in these differences and what they might mean, the professionals considered them obstacles to be overcome through learning about Sweden and Swedish values and culture and through speaking Swedish. From the perspective of methodological collectivism, the problem identified by the professionals is that the actions and capacities of the individual are characterised by society, culture or other collectives, and therefore, the problem is difficult to overcome. Still, there is an idea among professionals that it is possible to re-socialise individuals into new collective communities and for them to become “Swedish” in the end. Again, we find an idea of similarities and being the same, but in another context, one in which the idea is not based on universalism but on particularism. This idea of similarity is not based on equality but on an evaluation of culture and hierarchies. The original culture of the “other” (the minor) has to be overcome and the individual have to be embedded in a new “Swedish” culture if he or she wants to be treated as a person with equal rights.
None of the approaches are very beneficial in relation to the minors. The first idea about similarities tends to neglect the fact that the minors are more than normal teenagers. They are young persons with experiences of migration: breaking up, leaving home, conflicts, war and dangerous escapes through Europe. They have the status of an asylum seeker, which is a stressful and uncertain situation involving a great deal of administration and of regulation by and contacts with authorities. These experiences and their special status must be acknowledged and the minors need support from people around them who know about the system and can help them understand everything that happens to them once they arrive in Sweden. The idea of similarity means that the particular and special situation of young refugees and migrants is difficult to clarify.

The idea of difference is just as problematic with its simplified and essentialist focus on differences, which reinforces the idea of aliens as the “other” instead of allowing for a humble understanding of diversity. The risk is that the separated minors’ experiences, life situations and values will be dismissed as just being part of their “culture”. They can either leave all this behind and become Swedish or remain culturally different.

In order to understand the ethics of the reception of minors, I will introduce the concept of grace in contrast to, or as a complement to, rights. As explained above, theories of methodological individualism and the idea of equal but abstract individuals generates an ethical approach based on respect for equality and rights. The respect comes from the idea that an individual is a human being in a universal sense and it does not matter who you are or where you come from; you will always be treated with respect, respect for your person and for your rights. This is a basic ethical standpoint, one that has been laid down in liberal theory and is explicit in the laws of democratic liberal states, including Sweden.

One problem with this ethical standpoint is a lack of recognition of differences and a lack of knowledge about the concrete individuals who are embedded in various contexts and collectives, all with a history of their own and often affected by inequality in society. Yet, departing from the perspective of methodological collectivism and an interpretation of the differences between people and individuals leads to another ethical approach. Instead of talking about respect, equality and the rights inherent in the idea of universalism, this ethical standpoint highlights humility and recognition of the particular. It is an ethical approach that makes equality possible only if you address the fact that people are different from each other and also that through history, this fact have generated inequality between individuals. Only by recognizing particularism and differences is it possible to make
equality a reality (Gustafsson 2004; Young 1990, 2000). This ethical standpoint could be called the ethics of grace. The concept of grace captures the idea of recognition and humility and the need to have knowledge about the other, not just as an individual but also as a person with a background, a history, dreams and visions.

Using the theories of similarities grounded in an idea of methodological individualism and of differences grounded in an idea of methodological collectivism illustrates how the professionals working closely with the minors in the reception system are caught up in a series of shortcomings rather than possibilities. Combining the stories of similarities (the minors as normal teenagers) and differences (the minors as persons with various cultural backgrounds and experiences) and the ethical standpoints of rights and grace could, if reflected upon, lead to a more gracious reception for minors with a refugee status. The goal would be that the young person should be cared for and prepared to live anywhere in the world on his or her own terms.

Finally, the term receive has a dual meaning in this article. On the one hand, imagine Sweden as a society receiving separated minors as if it were receiving a gift. The minors and their families are the givers. The reception system receives and the minor gives.

On the other hand, my research shows that the idea within the reception system is that the minors are the receivers. As in other areas of integration policy and integration work in Sweden, there is quite a one-sided perspective in place, one in which it is the society and members of the majority population who give, tolerate, respect, compensate, educate, etc. (SOU 2005, 41). The reception system provides the minor with financial, social and symbolic capital, meaning, skills, an opportunity to learn Swedish, knowledge about Swedish society, its rules and regulations, and the ability to become an independent individual and citizen of Sweden. The separated minor is the one who receives, is tolerated, respected, compensated and educated. One party is active and the other passive. Being considered passive by the professionals might have made the minor quoted at the beginning of this article feel that he was viewed as merchandise.

This is of course a simplified description, but it is still a useful one if we want to understand the ideology behind “integration projects and policies” in Sweden today, how these ideologies shape work among professionals in the reception system and how they provide the minors with opportunities to participate and be recognised over the long term.
References


