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Published online: 28 Mar 2018.

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An abstract and nameless, but powerful, bystander – 'unaccompanied children' talking about their social workers in Sweden

Marcus Herz and Philip Lalander

Department of social work, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article investigates how 'unaccompanied children' in Sweden experience one part of the reception system – the social workers – in the context of their everyday life. The aim is to describe and analyse how these young people view and experience social workers and their relation to them, as well as their perceptions regarding the social worker's nature. The article is drawn from a research project where 20 'unaccompanied children' participated for over two years. During this period, the researchers have met with the young people continuously doing interviews, observations and informal conversations once a month. The results indicate that the social worker tends to become something of a *bystander*, a representative of the authorities who has played no active role in the young people's everyday life, except for when they 'pop up' to make a decision affecting their everyday life. The social worker becomes a bystander with power. This is discussed in relation to situational ethics and the importance of building relationships and trust to service users in general and to 'unaccompanied children' in particular.

Two months before Christmas of 2015, Saleh, one of the participants in the present study, received a phone call from his newly appointed social worker. She requested a meeting to introduce herself. They met about a month later at the family where Saleh had been living for a couple of years. Suddenly, during the meeting, she told Saleh that the social services had decided that he needed to move from his home to an own apartment because he would soon turn eighteen. This came as a shock to Saleh, who had a strong emotional connection to the family he was living with.

Saleh arrived in Sweden as an 'unaccompanied minor' and has since been granted permanent residency. Together with 19 other 'unaccompanied minors', he has participated in an ongoing research project in which we study young people's reflections on their everyday lives as well as social networks in relation to their possible agency in a 'hyper-connected' world – a world consisting of different open and sealed borders. As of today, we have been meeting with Saleh and the others for more than two years. According to Saleh, the social worker tends to be something of a *bystander with power*, a representative of the authorities who has played no active role in his everyday life, except for when she made a decision that threatened the core structure of his everyday life.

In Sweden, all individuals under 18 years who arrive without their parents or legal guardians are considered an 'unaccompanied child,' and all assessments and decisions affecting them are to be

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guided by the child's best interest. Responsibility for the reception of 'unaccompanied children' lies with the municipalities, both during the asylum process and afterward. All children are appointed a custodian, but many of the decisions made – concerning, for instance, housing, financial support and sometimes psychosocial support – involve a social worker employed by the municipal social services office (Swedish Migration Board 2016).

Previous research on unaccompanied minors has primarily focused on three topics: the child's psychosocial health (Derluyn and Broekaert 2007; Groark, Sclare, and Raval 2011), human rights and children's rights (Lundberg 2011; Schiratzki 2000), and the reception system (Stretmo 2014; Wernesjö 2014). The present article investigates how the young people experience one part of the reception system – the social workers – in the context of their everyday life. Those experiences may change over time, as the individual gets older and as life changes. Because we are following these young people over a two-year period, we are able to develop mutual trust, on the one hand, and analyse their narratives from a processual perspective (as something that changes with time), on the other. This makes description and analysis more dynamic than if we were simply to have met with them once or twice. Our approach to conducting qualitative interviews and observations is inspired by the method of long-term ethnography, where the ethnographer sees participants as teachers who can provide knowledge about their lives (cf. Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). Their narratives include different social situations that have taken place both in the past and in the present. Their narratives also include different persons who are important to them and their lives. These may be family members, friends, classmates, teachers, staff at group homes and sometimes, but not often, social workers.

The aim of the present article is to describe and analyse how 'unaccompanied' minors may view and experience municipal social workers and their relation to them, as well as their perceptions regarding the social worker's nature. We will highlight how these young people describe and understand their relationships to and feelings about social workers. This will contribute to the academic discussion on the reception system, relational aspects of social work, and hopefully have a practical impact on social work with young people living in a vulnerable situation.[1]

Social work with 'unaccompanied children'

The relationship between social workers and their 'service users' has been valued differently over the years: from being considered 'the heart of social work' (Collins and Collins 1981, 6) to instead having fallen, as Trevithick put it, 'out of favour' (2003, 163). Exactly why this shift has occurred is difficult to say. One possible explanation, at least from a Swedish perspective, is related to how social workers now have less time to meet with their service users, partly due to the increased time they are required to spend on documentation (Lauri 2016). The tension between a social work based on bureaucracy and one based on professional autonomy has, however, been discussed for a long time, with increased concern about how the growing bureaucracy affects the core of social work (cf. Finch 1976).

This relationship, despite its current status, is still considered one of the fundamental tools of social work for creating change and providing support for service users (Hansen and Natland 2016; Payne 2005). Similar conclusions have been drawn from research in adjacent fields such as psychotherapy (Herz 2016; Turkle 2016) and social work in the addiction treatment field (Lalander 2016).

Research looking more specifically at the relationship between social workers and 'unaccompanied children' shows that it often tends to be weak. Wade, Mitchell, and Baylis (2004) showed that planning for when the children are to leave care was often non-existent, and that the transition instead was abrupt, brief and formal. They concluded that such work must take time and take into account the different choices the young people have so that they can make informed decisions.

Previous mappings of social work with unaccompanied children seem to confirm that local departments fail in their obligations toward these children, and that the relationship is, for instance, partly based on disbelief (cf. Ayotte and Williamson 2001). Stanley (2001) connected this to a change in social work practice, from care to control. Among other things, the only time the social workers met with the children in his mapping of the field was when the children needed money or similar. They

never seemed to visit the children in their home. Kohli (2007) argued that the unsatisfactory work illustrated in the research might be related to organizational aspects of social work (cf. Lauri 2016).

A similar point was made by Malmsten (2012), who claimed that social relations in the Swedish reception system are characterized by interchangeability, thus creating difficulties for unaccompanied minors to create and maintain relationships with social workers and other officials, as well as with people in general. Stretmo (2014) showed how officials tend to frame unaccompanied children in certain ways to justify their approaches and interventions. This can manifest itself by portraying 'unaccompanied children' as 'demanding' and thus in need of teaching if they are to learn how to work hard and be respectable. Stretmo further concluded that 'unaccompanied minors' desires and aspirations are considered unrealistic and that officials possess the interpretative privilege. Research has found two common approaches to 'unaccompanied children' used by social workers: one in which the child is considered deviant, thus steering the practice toward disciplinary action, such as teaching boundaries, and another in which the child is approached as any other child, thus steering the social worker toward offering support and care (Stretmo and Melander 2013). Backlund et al. (2012) focused on the initial time in Sweden, showing that the children want more care, closer relationships and open and honest communication with their social worker (cf. Lundberg and Dahlquist 2012). There are also studies showing that children feel they lack power over their lives and that they are not included in decisions concerning them, rather they are denied participation in decision-making concerning their own lives (Gustafsson, Fioretos, and Norström 2012; Wernesjö 2014).

Finally, some studies have revealed the opposite, showing caring social workers who try to establish a good relationship to the child. Kohli (2006a) showed that both social workers and the children seemed to value mutual trust. The social workers were helpful, therapeutic and good companions. Kohli even concluded by claiming that 'the social workers in this study appeared to care for them well' (Kohli 2006a, 9). Using the words from Banks (2011), these social workers seems to provide an example of *situated ethics*, because they take their departure in the human relationship with the unaccompanied children. Central for a situated ethics of social justice is that social justice is qualified by how it is situated, that is in the relational work embedded in the everyday practice and the particularity of the situation. Practicing a situated ethics means, as a social worker, that you need to engage in the relationship and encompassing emotions, such as empathy, care and compassion. As such, social workers need to exceed the bureaucratic parts of their jobs.

Method

We have followed the young people for two years, including follow-up interviews, informal conversations and observations at least once a month per participant. This gives us opportunities to analyse how changes in their lives occur and how they deal with and feel about these changes. It also means that we, through repeated face-to-face interaction, have been able to develop trust and eventually motivate them to present different aspects of their lives. We believe that building trust is of vital importance in creating social encounters where participants truly want to provide a 'thicker' narrative (Kohli 2006b), that is, a more complex and nuanced narrative than they would have if they had only met us once or believed we represented the authorities. The importance of trust was stressed by Kohli (2006a, 708) who wrote how 'unaccompanied children' in long-term foster care are sometimes described as 'closed book children,' meaning that they 'worry about safely talking to others.' We have noticed similar tendencies in our project. We have found that the young people's caution in telling their stories often is related to experiences of being suspected, for example, experiences from interviews by the Swedish Migration Office. Among the young migrants living in municipal and private facilities, this may be a consequence of being treated, by staff members, like children who have failed to adapt to the desired 'Swedishness' (Kaukko and Wernesjö 2017; Lalander and Raoof 2016). Such experiences create problems in communication and trust, resulting in a situation where residents provide staff members with 'thin' narratives (Kohli 2006b), thus reinforcing staff-resident boundaries.

In our study, we have tried to overcome potential communication barriers through use of a long-term qualitative design and by repeatedly reflecting on how we relate to our participants and their narratives. This has implied that we, for example at visits to municipally controlled group homes, have mostly directed our attention toward the young residents rather than toward the staff, who are connected to the authorities. Referring to Goffman ([1959] 1990), we have tried act so that the residents do not define us as being in *team collusion* with staff members. We have continuously discussed, within the research team, how we present ourselves in settings where both our young participants and authority representatives are present. We believe this is of importance, because these young people have previously been distrusted by Swedish authorities.

Furthermore, our qualitative interviews have been relatively open, thus enabling the participants to decide when and how to talk about important themes in everyday life. The fact that we have met with them so many times has allowed them to wait to talk about sensitive issues, such as close family members, until they felt ready to do so. In line with Collins (2004), we view the conversations as relatively informal rituals of interaction that provide space for flexibility, creativity and listening, thus inspiring further interaction. The locations for meetings and interviews have been decided by the young people themselves. We have met in their own rooms, private apartments, chat rooms in their lodging or at our university, cafés, their workplaces, public parks and in our own homes. These different settings also present us as not connected to the authorities.

Interviews were carried out in Swedish and, on a few occasions, in English. Almost everyone participating speaks Swedish. The young people themselves have most often introduced the themes presented. But, because some of the participants have pointed us toward a subject and others have not, we have made sure to pose questions about these issues to all participants, thus allowing us to capture the nuances, similarities and contradictions.

The interviews have been transferred and transcribed from digital recordings by the authors. All names are anonymized. Some conversations were not recorded but captured through observation notes. The analytic process followed a pattern established in symbolic interactionism and ethnography, in that we first read through or listened to the material, making notes, and tried to find central themes concerning how the young people describe their everyday life, social relationships and encounters (Kvale 2007). One example of a topic that has emerged from this process of reading and listening is the topic of the present article. The theme, *experiences of the social worker* and *the perceived nature* of the social worker, was brought up by the young people themselves.

One possible drawback of the study has been the difficulty in reaching girls. This is probably related to two factors. First, fewer girls come to Sweden than boys, the approximate ratio being 10-to-1 (Swedish Migration Board 2016), which also corresponds to the number of girls in the present study. Second, the girls who do come to Sweden tend to be placed with relatives already living in Sweden than boys do, which makes them more difficult to reach (Stretmo and Melander 2013). One problem with the small number of girls is that it is easy to equate boys' experiences with those of all 'unaccompanied children,' thus running the risk of further marginalizing the girls' experiences. The gendered experience of being 'unaccompanied' is, thus, difficult to fully capture. At the same time, some of the experiences discussed – for instance, having to deal with the reception system, different housing experiences and social workers – probably overlap to some extent.

We have, however, been able to engage young people who vary in terms of background, living conditions, age and current situation. Although they mainly originate from Afghanistan and Somalia, among the largest groups arriving in Sweden (Swedish Migration Board 2016), their backgrounds differ in terms of both where they lived and social class. Their present living conditions differ as well, from group homes, foster families (both relatives and non-relatives), alone, to being reunited with their parents. The participants are between 15 and 25 years of age. Some are studying, and others are working. Thus, there is variation in their current living situation. The participants have been approached in different ways to allow us to capture a variety of experiences. Some have been recruited through official agencies, some through civil society, schools and social workers, and others through previous contacts. Such an approach, using several initial points to sample participants, has been shown to limit

possible gatekeeper bias that might otherwise occur when only organizational gatekeepers are used to gain access to potential participants (Bloch 2007). Another aspect that seems to have been successful in terms of limiting possible selection bias, e.g. only introducing us to people who feel good about their situation, is the temporal aspect of the study. We have paid attention to how some young people change their perceptions over time, from having positive attitudes to becoming more nuanced or even having negative attitudes toward the group-home they previously lived in. This is probably related to the increasing trust between the researcher and informant.

We have put considerable effort into the ethical aspects of the study, especially because it has been important to maintain the trust the participants have granted us, and because some of them live under conditions partly determined by others, such as social workers, group home staff or other official agencies. Informed consent was sought from everyone participating, both at the beginning of the study and continuously throughout the study. Because of their young age, we put effort into explaining and discussing the conditions of their participation. Initially we asked for written consent, however, the use of documents was often found to be associated with negative experiences of dealing with authorities. Thus, we decided to employ verbal iterative consent instead. This means working together in a partnership using a continuous dialogue with negotiations about the project, its changes over time and all participants', including the researchers', roles in the project (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007). The research group members have had regular meetings to discuss ethical considerations and dilemmas and to minimize the risk of the participants being harmed in any way. The study has been examined and approved by the ethics commission in Lund (reg. no. 2014/482).

An abstract messenger and the production of uncertainty

Saleh: I had a meeting with my social worker […] She told me that I need to move from home. To my own apartment. I kind of: 'no, I won't do that. I'm doing fine here'. They [the family] help me a lot, and I kind of need their help, to do better. I mean, I can cook food or clean, stuff like that I can do. But, I'm doing fine here and I wasn't planning on moving until I turned 19–20. But, she [the social worker] has arranged a meeting for us to sit and talk and see how it turns out.

Marcus: Why do they want you to move from home?

Saleh: Well, that is the thing, I really don't understand.

Let us return to Saleh and his meeting with his newly appointed social worker. This excerpt is from an interview conducted the month after their meeting. As mentioned in the introduction, the social worker and Saleh had no prior contact. Therefore, she is described in a rather abstract way, as a representative of the authorities who has face-to-face contact with Saleh for a very short period of time. The social worker, thus, becomes a *messenger sent from the system* who suddenly 'pops up' through a phone call.

For Saleh, the decision that he must move from home comes as a chock. He is not prepared for the meeting to be about his living situation; he thought it was for the new social worker to introduce herself, and for them to have a conversation. Besides the social worker being a messenger who enters the participants' lives when important decisions *about* the core of their social and everyday life need to be made, there is another important point to be made: Saleh knows that the decision is backed up by power that is very difficult to resist, but still he does not understand the decision.

The above view of the social worker as a messenger with a rather abstract and thin yet imperative character is found among some of the participants. Adar, another of the participants, suddenly starts talking about school during a meeting we had over coffee. Not that it is uncommon to talk about school, but this time he tended to return to the topic. 'I need to work hard to prove to the municipality that I can and want to stay,' he says. When we ask about what he means by that, he tells us how a social worker from the municipality is going to call him up in December the same year to decide whether he can stay at the school where he now both studies and resides. Adar wants to stay there, it is his home and he likes the school, but he does not know what they will decide.

'It is not democracy if they don't listen to me, what I want', he says. I ask him if he has anyone at school that can help him sort out what is happening. No one can do it, he answers, it is up to them to decide. I ask him who is going to call him and make the decision, he thinks it is a social worker or someone else, but he is not sure, he says. 'Have you had any contact with the person who is going to contact you in December', I ask him? He hasn't. (Observation note)

Adar does not seem to be aware of exactly what is about to happen, or what it means for him personally. Nor does he seem to know who has the power to make decisions affecting him, or what his options are. He has ended up inside a kind of no-man's-land, where he believes he needs to prove himself worthy to stay at school. In that way, he tries to protect himself from the social worker and the power of the system. It is a matter of producing uncertainty. Again, as with Saleh, the social worker, as it later turns out, 'pops up' as an *abstract messenger* providing some information, triggers emotional processes in the bodies of Adar and Saleh, but does not engage in any other contact or seem to consider the effects of the information given to the child. In many ways, both Adar and Saleh are left alone to process the information, which especially in Adar's case seems to create confusion about what he can do to affect the outcome. Both know that the power of the system is strong, and they do not know what decision from the system will come next. This implies a *production of uncertainty*, which may affect everyday- and emotional life. For other participants, the relationship with the social worker becomes even more strained.

Bella lived in two family homes before she, with help from social services, got her own apartment. She was happy about that, she had wanted to get away from the small town where the family home was. One factor motivating her to take the leap was that she wanted to try to find her biological family and thought it would be easier if she lived in a larger town. Another factor was that her foster mother would not help her in her search for her birth mother, and this had resulted in a much more strained relationship with her foster mother. She, therefore, left the family. Her brother, however, still lived with the family. Bella wanted to keep in touch with her brother, but the social services sided with the foster mother and told Bella (as a messenger) that she was not allowed to meet her brother for a while. Bella was devastated.

She sent a text-message to one of the researchers in this project, Dawan: 'I'm very sad today, please help me!' He called her up and they talked. They decided to meet with the social services together. The social worker agreed, and they met. The social worker explained that they have had an 'inquiry call' and decided that it is best for Bella's brother that they do not meet each other, the explanation is that the social services: 'have the children's best interest in mind here'.

Bella is sad and quiet. The social worker claims that Bella's brother is upset every time after he sees Bella because she and her foster mother do not get along. Suddenly Bella starts to talk, she tells the social worker that it is her family, and that the foster mother is against her having a relationship with her brother.

Social worker: Do you remember that time you were supposed to get in touch before you visited the family?

Bella: Yes

Social worker: But you didn't. You just went up there, knocked on the door, which made [the mother] annoyed and you started fussing about, making [Bella's brother] sad.

Bella becomes angry when she hears what the social worker says, pulls out her phone and hands it to the social worker. The social worker reads a text that, according to Bella, shows that the foster mother has written that she no longer wants to be contacted by Bella, and that Bella no longer can contact her. After reading this, the social worker takes a softer tone, and says she will contact the mother to ask her not to express herself like that again.

This is, of course, Bella's side of the story, although Dawan also was present. Regardless of what is best for whom, and regardless of who is right or wrong, this case show that Bella is largely controlled by other people's decisions. The social worker does not seem to understand why this is important to Bella, and never includes her in the decision-making process, even though Bella seems to have important information regarding what has happened.

These examples show the young people's experiences of being left out of decisions that affect their own life. These decisions are not only related to what they want, but also to understanding what is going on and what they can do about it. Adar seems to believe that he did something wrong, and that he therefore needs to prove himself by doing better at school. Bella is feeling upset and left out of decisions concerning her and her family. Saleh does not understand the decision and is given the information from a social worker he does not know. These experiences correspond with the lack of power, exclusion from decision-making and denial of participation that have been observed in previous research (Gustafsson, Fioretos, and Norström 2012; Wernesjö 2014). The social worker's nature, as described thus far, is rather abstract and imperative, leaving little scope for the clients' agency. Instead, this nature, due to the lack of social interaction and dialogue, helps to produce ambivalence and uncertainty in the young people's emotional life. Below we further discuss the perceived nature of the social worker.

Social workers as documenting agents and deliverers of punishment

Social work has an inherent duality. It is both a helping profession and a disciplinary and normalizing one (cf. Payne 2005). How social work is organized and perceived – not only by the young people or the social workers, but also by people in general – affects how the young people talk about their social workers. One example is how some of the young people tended to mix up different authorities, which affects the possible relationship with their social workers.

> Chuhan: You know when I was at the group home? You know, I felt, from the group home, the social services, the lawyer and everything, they all only tried to ask me all the time, because they don't believe in me. They don't believe the refugee, but they try to make you think they are nice. When I was at my social worker, she had files from when I was at the migration office, interview, what I said and so on.
>
> Paula: But do you think the social worker and the migration office are working together?
>
> Chuhan: Yes, of course

Many of the young people in our study have mentioned the constant keeping of records on them as something almost intrusive. They often question it and bring it up as a topic during our meetings with them. For Chuhan, all the questions and files tend to blur into one thing, because the social worker does exactly what other authorities before having done. He sees it as a sign of them not believing in him, as if the different authorities are working together. With that in mind, it is of course hard to create a relationship between a social worker and Chuhan. Andy says he does not know what the municipality does with all the information they document about boys who live in a group home, he laughs as he says: 'Maybe the whole town can read about me.' He also refers to his original family and says that when he was living with his family, it was only his parents and siblings who really knew about him. Because he feels bad about being documented, not knowing how the documentation will be used, he must keep quiet about things that happen or not say too much. It is a type of resistance that he shares with others. Both Chuhan and Andy indicate that the documentation and the uncertainty of what it can be used for creating barriers in their relationships with their social workers. They both report that the documentation and questions are not explained. The documentation just exists as an unexplained structure directed at the intimate spheres of everyday life.

Andy also tells us how he, one day, felt sad and stayed home from school. At the group home where he lives, the staff told him that he needed to talk to his social worker, to figure out what had happened. Andy feels this is a punishment that is out of proportion. He asks the staff to at least drive him there, but they tell him he needs to take the bike (Observation note). In this case, meeting the social worker is perceived as a punishment, and is constructed as such by the staff at the group home. This is not a good basis on which to develop dialogue and listening.

Another aspect of this is when other important people either spread rumours about the social services or ascribe them values and opinions. This happens to Quasai when his guardian tells him that the reason he is not able to move to another group home is because the social services 'probably do not want to pay that much for Quasai's housing arrangement' (Observation note). The guardian thus

ascribes an explanation to what has happened, according to which the social services, regardless of what the actual cause is, are supposedly basing their decision on not wanting to pay that much for Quasai.

What this shows is that how the social worker or the social services are perceived and approached by people around the young people affects how the young people interpret the situation. First, there is uncertainty as to what entity the social worker is connected to, based on the documentation and the questioning, which results in relating social work to lived experiences of other authorities and their distrust. In such cases, the social worker has not been able to explain possible differences in how he/she works, thus creating cracks in confidence. Second, the social worker risks being associated with punishment. Because the social worker tends to be interpreted as a messenger who presents decisions made by the system, social workers can be used as a diffuse threat. Finally, social workers can be blamed for these decisions, and the uncertainty concerning what the social worker is connected to or can make decisions about is thus reproduced. In the next section, we will discuss when this uncertainty is not present between social workers and the young people.

Making a difference

Although most of the participants in the present study seem to view social workers as having abstract roles, as powerful bystanders and messengers – rather than as complex human beings – there are exceptions. Saleh had a good relationship with a previous social worker. It was through her he became part of this project. They remained in contact for quite a while after their 'professional relationship' ended, and Saleh still talks about how important she was for him and his progress in settling down in Sweden. She, whom he always mentions by name, went above and beyond her professional assignment and helped him learn Swedish.

In the beginning, when we met with Andy, he also had a rather positive attitude toward his social worker, claiming he could get the help he needed from her. He also tells us how he 'can call her anytime', suggesting she is available to him when he needs her attention. Thus, this social worker is not an abstract character who suddenly 'pops up'. Instead, she is somebody who 'is there' ready to answer a call from Andy, ready to listen to him. This also suggests that, in her gaze, he is an important human being. But, as we have seen above, this positive image of the social worker may, after a while, become more nuanced and even to some extent critical, as the social worker comes to be interpreted in relation to *surveillance through documentation* and *punishment for misconduct*. Although there is a shift in Andy's relationship to his social worker, it is possible that they at least once had a good relationship and that Andy felt helped by her efforts. Another example of social workers making a difference is provided by Misaq:

> Misaq had received two extremely high electric bills when he first moved to his own apartment. Therefore, he tried to get in touch with his social worker to get advice on what to do. 'Only if it's acute,' she told him, and it was, for Misaq. She didn't want to see him. Still to this day, it is painful for him. He later moved, which meant a new social worker. After a while she called Misaq and asked to see him. He went to her office. She asked him how he gets to school. 'I walk', Misaq told her. 'How do you travel to work then?' she replied. 'I take the bus'. 'Then I want you to apply for a bus pass. I will grant you one so that you can get to work and meet your friends'. Misaq looks at me and tells me: 'It made me so happy that I almost started crying'. (Observation notes)

In Misaq's narrative, we can see what a difference a small gesture like listening can make (cf. Back 2007), and that this type of reciprocal listening was able to improve Misaq's everyday life using quite small means. The first social worker tried to get rid of Misaq and was not willing to listen to his problems; the second one invited him to try to build a relationship with him. The difference for Misaq is obvious, not only does he express how he was 'so happy [he] could cry,' when talking about it, he is still moved by the gesture and his eyes fill with tears. The social worker becomes less abstract when she listens; she is humanized in Misaq's eyes.

It is by far less common for the participants to talk about their social worker as someone who makes a difference, but that occurs as well. Of course, it is easy to dismiss such narratives, i.e. when the young people seem to like the social workers who give them something they want or need. But we claim this is a simplification of what is going on. Saif, another participant, may clarify this.

Saif: I said I needed [somewhere to live], and she [the social worker] said, I can drive you to a doctor. I tell her, I don't need that, I need somewhere to live.

Dawan: So, when you tell her you need to leave [the village], she tells you to see a shrink?

Saif: Yes, I don't feel mad, I have nothing to tell a shrink. Everything is fine, if I need a doctor I will tell them.

Saif feels that he desperately needs to move from the village where he now lives, and tells his social worker he needs help moving. Her response, according to Saif, is that she could drive him to a doctor. What is interesting about Saif's narrative is that he – from one of our meetings to the next – has begun to realize that it all was a misunderstanding. The next meeting, he tells us:

Saif: At first, I didn't want to talk to them, but now I realize I got it wrong, but I still don't trust them. Before I did, but not anymore […]

Dawan: What do you mean, they were a bit right?

Saif: I think they are a bit right, there is a lot of residents in [the city] and I know there are not many places to live, maybe it's harder [there]

This shift in attitude highlights at least two things. First, again, Saif feels they have not listened to him. Second, when he was told why it is hard to help him find a new place to live, his approach to the social worker began to shift, because he was thinking: 'maybe they are right.' Although he feels the need to move, and needs help to do so, this is not what makes him so angry with the social worker, rather it is a matter of him not being heard. Similarly, in Misaq's and Saleh's cases, it is also more about being seen and listened to. In their narratives over the two years, they have both returned to talking about their social workers and what they have done, but not in a sense that the boys have got what they wanted or felt they deserved, but rather that they were being seen as humans (cf. Herz and Lalander 2017). These cases show how important it is that social workers practice aspects of situational ethics, thus establishing relationships and an emotional trust (cf. Banks 2011).

Discussion: beyond 'pop-up' social work

The main issue for the young people taking part in our research is that they often do not understand the decisions being made that affect their lives. They also tend to feel a lack power to influence these decisions, and that no one listens to them. As many of the young people see it, the social worker is an abstract figure, but obviously connected to system power. They also feel that the social workers tend to 'pop up' in their lives, delivering new decisions on behalf of an abstract system. The social workers are thought to behave like powerful bystanders and messengers. The social worker may also be viewed as intimately linked to other parts of the state's control apparatus, such as the migration office, and to some extent associated with punishment and correction of undesirable behavior. This creates uncertainty not only about who the social worker is, but also about what the social worker can do.

This is on a clear collision course with what many researchers consider 'effective' social work to be. In such social work, the professional-client relationship is central, and collaboration, dialogue, trust, respect and clear and honest communication are vital to a good outcome (Herz 2016). This is also what the young people themselves seem to be asking for, but not getting. These issues correspond to how 'unaccompanied children' have talked about social workers in previous research, which has also shown a lack of participation and power (Gustafsson, Fioretos, and Norström 2012; Wernesjö 2014) as well as a weak professional-client relationship (Wade, Mitchell, and Baylis 2004).

This, however, is not to say there are no good relationships between social workers and 'unaccompanied children.' As indicated above, such relationships are not common, but they do occur. Some of the participants have spoken about their social worker as someone who listens and as someone who can be trusted. Some social workers even stay in touch after their 'work relationship' has ended. But they are, as mentioned, exceptions to the rule. It is not possible to discern what is evident in Kohli's (2006a) research: helpful and therapeutic social workers who care and are good companions. At least not as they are portrayed by our participants.

One advantage of the present study, which has been conducted for over two years now, is that it is possible to see how relationships and perceptions change over time. Some, like Andy, have transitioned

from being positive to becoming more and more sceptical and critical. For others, like Saif, a better understanding between him and the social worker has developed over time.

It is not possible to explain, from a social worker perspective, why the relationships seem to be as distant as the participants experience them, but there are some indications. In many national contexts there are requirements related to the need for legal certainty in the public sector, that increases the bureaucracy, for instance the demand that the social worker provides enough documentation to be able to make a decision (cf. Edvardsson and Vahlne Westerhäll 2014). However, as Stanley (2001) and Kohli (2007) pointed out, the social work profession, in general, has also been reorganized, moving toward control rather than care, or more bureaucracy and less professional autonomy (Finch 1976). In the present study, we can see something similar. Organizational differences, huge staff turnover and only having time to meet with the children when a decision is about to be made might also have affected at least some of the relationships described by the young people. If such is the case, it raises important questions not only for the relationships between these young people and their social workers, but also for social work as a profession. Future research is needed to explore, over time, how relationships are built and maintained between social workers and 'unaccompanied children' and other socially exposed 'client groups,' as well as how the 'system' is decoded by service users and incorporated into their bodies.

As mentioned, it is easy to dismiss these experiences by claiming that the young people are disappointed or angry about specific decisions. Sometimes this is the case, as it would have been for most of us, but most often it is not the case at all. Rather, the young people ask for information, try to understand, want to become part of the decisions being made, to be cared for and, not least, to be listened to. Such needs should, at the very least, be important to take into consideration in all kinds of social work. We believe that being a bystander or messenger who practices *pop-up social work* creates barriers to trust and mutual dialogue, and that we need to reflect on how social workers can build on cooperation and dialogue in shaping clients' individual futures.

Social work often consists of both a bureaucratic and a relational, supportive and caring side. However, according to the young people in our research, there seems to be an exception to receive this kind of relational support. Based on previous research, both on social work in general and on social work with unaccompanied children, we know how important mutual trust, empathy, care and emotions are for a practice of situational ethics in different kinds of encounters between the social worker and the service users to provide social change and justice.

Note

1. The study is being financed by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE).

Disclosure statement

Funding

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