Being alone or becoming lonely? The complexity of portraying ‘unaccompanied children’ as being alone in Sweden

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ABSTRACT
Research has largely focused on ‘unaccompanied minors’ as a vulnerable group at risk of developing psychological problems that affect their health. Separation from primary caregivers is considered one of the foremost reasons for these young people’s proposed loneliness. Thus, the official and ascribed identity is that they are lonely and that loneliness is their major problem. But research has seldom given the young people themselves an opportunity to express their views in an attempt to trace the often situational, dynamic and complex nature of social and emotional life. The present article analyses how ‘unaccompanied minors’ talk about everyday life and themes related to loneliness. The authors followed 23 ‘unaccompanied minors’ during a period of a year through ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews. Results: Loneliness may occur when these young people experience lack of control in managing life and when they feel no one grieves for them; loneliness may be dealt with by creating new social contacts and friends; loneliness may be reinforced or reduced in encounters with representatives from ‘the system’; the young people may experience frustration about being repeatedly labeled ‘unaccompanied’ and they may create a resistance to and critical reflexivity towards this labeling.

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Introduction
How long will we [have to] be called unaccompanied refugee children? (Maranga, ‘unaccompanied minor’)

During the past decade, unaccompanied or separated children have received increasing attention in both academic research and the public discourse. These young people have all left their country of origin without parents or legal guardians. They may be fleeing war, persecution and poverty (Halvorsen 2005). According to Swedish law, the term unaccompanied child is in harmony with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, that is, it refers to being under the age of 18 and arriving separated from parents or other legal guardians. The child’s best interest should always direct asylum assessments and decisions, and a custodian is always appointed. The responsibility for providing access...
to school, care, healthcare and lodging, both during the asylum process and after, is to be assumed by the municipalities (Migrationsverket 2016). The most central characteristic ascribed to these young people, both in the research and the media, is that they have arrived alone and without caring parents. In Sweden, these children are even called *Ensamkommande barn* (literally: children who arrive alone). But because the young people themselves are seldom the focus of research, it is difficult to say anything substantial about their own perception of loneliness and what could be done to reduce its impact on their lives.

Research on unaccompanied minors has mainly focused on reception (Stretmo 2014; Wernesjö 2011), on human or children’s rights as well as on grounds for asylum (Lundberg 2011; Schiratzki 2000). Psychosocial health among unaccompanied children has received considerable attention in the research focusing on the risk of developing mental health problems in general (Derluyn and Broekaert 2007; Groark, Sclare, and Raval 2011). These problems could emerge in the form of, for instance, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety or feeling lonely, isolated and like one does not belong. The research seems to have mainly explained this in relation to a few different, but interconnected, factors. First, separation from caregivers at a young age was suggested to contribute to an increased risk of developing psychosocial problems later on (Lustig et al. 2004). Second, trauma from witnessing or being part of war, violence and/or persecution has been discussed (Fazel, Wheeler, and Danesh 2005; Pacione, Measham, and Rousseau 2013; Papageorgiou et al. 2000). And, finally, there have been studies on post-migratory stress (Sack 1998), which is stress that emerges as a consequence of being in a new country and having to cope with new rules, regulations, agencies, a new language, or as Kohli and Mather (2003, 201) wrote, trying to navigate through a ‘maze of systems’.

In the present article, we will turn to the young people themselves. Through qualitative interviews and meetings, we listen to what they have to say about themselves, their social situation and everyday lives, with a special focus on loneliness. The research design is rather open and involves meetings with 23 unaccompanied youth over the course of a year. At these meetings, they are asked to describe various aspects of their lives and to talk about how they reflect on different everyday life situations. The participants are encouraged to come up with topics on their own. This approach to conducting interviews is inspired by the method of long-term ethnography, where the ethnographer sees participants as teachers who provide knowledge about their lives: They are the experts on their own lives (Bourgois 2009; Lalande 2016). The present research is characterized by our quest to capture different aspects of their lives, and how they use words to construct feelings and experiences. A large part of our conversations has concerned social aspects of life, such as social relations and contacts, but also feelings of loneliness and how difficult life sometimes can be. It has been clear that the social dimensions of life are vital to the young people in motivating them to continue struggling to achieve a stable and harmonious life.

By following the young people over time, we build trust and create opportunities to gather data on how life can change and how emotional life changes due to events in social and everyday life. We base our design on symbolic interactionism (Collins [1996] 2004) and its basic assumption that social situations and encounters, as well as their qualities and existence, are affecting emotional life. The present follow-up design is rare in the research on unaccompanied minors. Interview studies often include only one interview with each participant (often without forming any relationship before the interview, and sometimes requiring a translator), and the interviews are often conducted in an institutional
setting (Stretmo 2014; Wernesjö 2011). Our research design includes regular follow-up interviews and meetings, at different times and often at different places, thus giving us the opportunity to analyse the situational and emotional complexity of the young people’s life over time. Their feelings of loneliness and togetherness, separation and inclusion, may change over time as things happen in their lives and as they interact with other people.

The aim is to discuss experiences of loneliness and related themes through unaccompanied children’s own narratives on their current and previous situation in Sweden. Thus, we will highlight their emotions, their strategies for dealing with these emotions, their social situation, their efforts to put up resistance as well as their resignation in terms of balancing and counteracting loneliness. This article is part of a larger ethnographic study with an overall aim to study young people’s own reflections on their everyday lives as well as their possible agency, that is their possibilities and motivation to act in a certain environment or life situation, including resistance towards dominant structures. The study is being financed by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE).

**Loneliness as a concept**

According to previous research, one of the most common problems unaccompanied youth seem to deal with is loneliness or isolation, possibly stemming from the loss of friendship, family or a home (Groark, Sclare, and Raval 2011; Kohli and Mather 2003; Papadopoulus 2002; Wernesjö 2011). The general assumption concerning loneliness as a concept seems to be that it should be considered harmful to the individual, an assumption that is common in the research on psychosocial problems in general. Studies have pointed out loneliness as a ‘risk factor’, something that increases the likelihood of depression, self-harm and suicide, among other things (Jones et al. 2011; Lalayants and Prince 2014; Majorano et al. 2015).

Although the focus of research has partly shifted from risk to resilience in an attempt to portray unaccompanied minors as survivors rather than as victims (Raghallaigh and Gilligan 2010), there are still concerns regarding normative assumptions about childhood and family (Engebretsén 2003; Wernesjö 2011). This may apply in relation to how separation from caregivers is interpreted, almost by definition, as something harmful, or in relation to how a childhood that takes place outside a house, a (biological) family or a society is interpreted as ‘lost’ (Engebretsgen 2003, 195) – both interpretations being biased by ideological values concerning the family and childhood. With this in mind, loneliness could be interpreted as being caused or influenced by the breaking of biological bonds, but also by doing childhood differently than what is thought to be done in an ‘ideal’ childhood.

We consider focusing solely on specific risk factors – such as separation from primary caregivers, psychological trauma, stress and loneliness – to be a problematic approach, as it could contribute to masking complexity and situational factors. As stated earlier, loneliness may be a temporal and situational phenomenon rather than a static one, often dependent on different social situations. Weiss (1973), for instance, observed six social necessities for not feeling loneliness or isolation: feeling connected through close and intimate relationships with others; being able to care for others; feeling socially integrated in a peer group; being assured of one’s value by others; having a reliable alliance; and having access to others’ advice and support. Thus, loneliness emerges in the gap between society
and individual. This, in turn, means that loneliness does not have to be harmful; it is, as indicated in the last section, more complex and situational than that. Loneliness is more like an emotion in motion than something permanent or fixed. Loneliness needs to be approached through relationships between individuals, as it is constantly given shape in the complexity of their everyday lives. In some situations, we feel lonely; in others more interconnected with other human beings (compare Collins [1996] 2004).

Calling individuals or a group of individuals lonely or unaccompanied repeatedly may, as indicated in the quote introducing the article, affect their identity and emotional status, because loneliness often is considered a problem. Another consideration is that feelings of loneliness may be created and perceived in relation to the social system one lives in and what possibilities one has to influence the situation, i.e. agency. If a system treats one as an object, as less human, one may feel alienated (Marx [1867] 2001; Westberg 2012), objectified and like a representative of a problematic category rather than like a complete human being. However, people can try to overcome the power of the system by using their agency and put up resistance (Lalander and Sernhede 2011).

Method

Our research project studies 23 young people, ages 15–25, who have arrived in Sweden without their parents or legal guardians and been given permanent residence in Sweden. Our aim is to study these young people’s own reflections on their everyday lives as well as their possible agency in a ‘hyper-connected’ world: a world consisting of different open and sealed borders. Open borders refer to the fact that maintaining contacts over long distances through the Internet, telephones, mobile phones as well as travel has become easier. At the same time, we can talk in terms of sealed borders, for instance, through border controls, not only at physical borders, but also inside the European Union and Sweden, as well as borders created and upheld by racism and prejudice (Back, Sinha, and Bryan 2012; Herz and Johansson 2012).

We have followed the young people for a year and will continue following them for one more year, including follow-up interviews, informal conversations and observations at least once a month per participant. This gives us, as previous described, the opportunity to analyse how changes in their lives occur and how they deal with these changes.

One possible drawback of the study has been the difficulty in reaching young girls. This is probably related to two factors. First, fewer young girls come to Sweden than young boys, the approximate ratio being 10-to-1 (Migrationsinfo.se 2015). Second, the young girls who do come to Sweden tend to be placed with relatives already living in Sweden to a higher extent than young boys do, which makes them more difficult to reach (Stretmo and Melander 2013). At the moment, we are following only two girls.

A possible strength of the study is that we have engaged young people who vary in terms of their backgrounds, living conditions, ages and current situation. Although they mainly originate from Afghanistan and Somalia, because these have been among the largest nationalities arriving in Sweden (Migrationsverket 2015), their backgrounds differ both in terms of where they lived as well as 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 15–25 years of age. Some are studying and others are working. This creates variation in their current situation.
The participants have been approached through different sources to allow us to capture a variety of experiences. Some of the participants 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 proven 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 towards the group-home they previously lived in. This is probably related to an increasing trust between 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 during the course of the study. Because of their young age, we put effort into explaining and discussing the conditions for 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 participants themselves have often decided what to talk about and were at any point able to change the subject or to end their participation. The research group have had regular meetings to discuss ethical considerations and dilemmas, 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).

The empirical material presented here is based on interviews and observations. Interviews were carried out in Swedish and, at a few occasions, in English. Almost everyone participating speaks Swedish or in some cases English. The young people themselves have most often introduced the themes presented. Some participants have talked about being called ‘unaccompanied’ or loneliness, but 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 participants themselves have introduced issues presented in the empirical material that might be considered sensitive, for instance those concerning family or close relatives. These kinds of questions are also affected by the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, as it has developed over time, the aim being to create a sensitivity based on listening and understanding.

The interviews have been transferred and transcribed in full from digital recordings by the authors. All names are anonymized. Some conversations were not recorded, but captured through observation notes (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). As stated in the introduction, 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). The topic of the present article – loneliness – emerged from this process of reading and listening. In narrowing the focus, we searched for narratives and parts of narratives that had to do with loneliness and related topics. We searched for patterns, nuances and contradictions that could help us understand the experiences of everyday life from the perspective of the young people. In that process of listening, interpreting and analysing, we identified various themes related to social life and loneliness. These are presented below.

**A lack of control and not being grieved for**

Loneliness seems to be closely connected to participants’ understanding of themselves as having been categorized as unaccompanied children. Their stories tend to be told in connection with their entrance into a ‘system’, as one of the participants, Maganga, calls it, or related to their actual arrival to Sweden, as another participant, Yousef, tells us. This is, however, not to say that the young people do not feel alone or are not lonely, only that being called and perceived as ‘alone’, ‘separated’ or ‘unaccompanied’ seems to contribute to feelings of loneliness and how they see themselves as individuals. Yousef exemplifies this further, when asked about his experiences from arriving in Sweden.

> From the beginning you felt completely alone, you don’t know anyone, you had no friends […] You had friends like the staff and the people living there, kind of. They were more or less the closest. Yes, it feels completely alone actually.

Yousef has possibilities to try to reduce feelings of loneliness, but he may feel lonely because his social network in Sweden is limited to the institution he lives in. He feels cut off from other parts of Swedish society. Cruze made a similar statement in response to a question asking what is toughest when an ‘unaccompanied minor’ arrives in Sweden:

> The toughest is first of all language maybe in some way. Moreover, it depends on the experience a person has had during the journey, the journey to Europe. Some have their fingerprints in different countries in Europe, some don’t. But they may have another problem. So I thought, when I first arrived, it was language. Then I couldn’t understand what people said. And plus loneliness, being vulnerable. If you’re not in this society, you’re outside it. And that’s very tough, because you’re already lonely when you come here. Moreover, that you’re excluded here too. So it is difficult.

He relates the idea of being unaccompanied to being excluded and alone. But he does not do so in accordance with the official definition of being an unaccompanied minor, that of arriving without caregivers. He relates it to language, to not being able to bridge the communication gap with the ‘Swedes’ and the authorities. In this respect, he lives in isolation from the society he moves in. Thus, loneliness is the result of a positioning, rather than of being separated from one’s primary caregivers. Loneliness is created and reinforced through communication difficulties, manifested as a lack of control and the absence of recognition in the eyes of other people. It creates a feeling of not being included and, thus, of limited agency (cf. Herz and Johansson 2012). Loneliness is not something essential he carries within him, rather something created in the marginal social situation he experiences and lives in.

Cruze had a tough time when he arrived to Sweden. He started drinking a lot of alcohol and smoking hashish. At the time, he was an undocumented immigrant, hiding from
Swedish authorities. But after some time he came in contact with an activist movement. They helped him with a residence permit, accommodation, and gave him some money. This made him feel that he was not alone, that other people cared about and grieved for him. He says that they made a huge difference to him, that they gave him hope for the future. Judith Butler (2006, 2009) uses the term grievable or ungrievable to analyse how some human beings are seen as less human than others are, and thus as ungrievable. His experiences from the encounters with the activist group were that he was grieved for and that others cared about him and his well being, which increased feelings of hope for the future.

Bella was also living in a highly vulnerable and stressful situation. She expresses concerns about being able to manage on her own, at the same time as she misses her relatives. The longing for family and friends, as well as for a country you feel you understand, may increase feelings of loneliness and anxiety. It creates a situation of uncertainty and a lack of control. The guilt and pressure – both self-pressure and pressure from family and friends – following the flight and establishing oneself in Sweden may further enhance feelings of having to handle too much on one’s own. Thinking about the family may also involve the rest of the family still being in a refugee camp:

I asked how he was doing, Adel answered things weren’t that good, that he thought a lot about his family members left in the refugee camp in Uganda. He told me that the process has been very mentally trying and that the uncertainty was starting to eat at him a lot, so much that he feels he can no longer focus on school (Observation note).

Adel, like Cruze, Bella and others, worries a great deal. They discuss the difficulties of being physically separated from the rest of the family. But having contact, via phones and social media, could also put strong pressure on them, making them feel guilty when they cannot help their family in the way they believe the family expects. This lack of control may be transformed into feelings of loneliness. But the situation may also change and is by no means static or absolute, as the example of Cruze encountering The Asylum Group indicates. Thus, part of the loneliness can be negated. In the next section, we will see how the participants, despite their socially vulnerable situation, establish and maintain relationships that improve their feeling of agency, of being in control of their lives, thus challenging the image of being unaccompanied or lonely.

**Important relations and encounters**

I am all alone here in Sweden, but I am never alone here [points to his head]. My family is here all the time (Adel).

Even if the participants talk about feeling lonely, most of them seem to find ways to deal with their longing and with their possible feelings of lack of control and guilt. This can manifest itself in engagement in relationships with friends, family members or organizations, but also in using social media to preserve and create transnational social relations and keep in touch with friends and family members all over the world.

Some encounters stand out as special, as evidence of how people can be altruistic and grieve for others and that solidarity exists. The case of Cruze and the activist movement is one example. When telling us about their journey to Sweden, the participants often describe harsh circumstances, for example traveling at night under a truck, but they
also talk about meeting people who really wanted to help them. Most of the young people traveled to Sweden either together with old friends or with friends they met on the road; people helped a lot of them in different ways. Morteza tells us about how a man and his wife helped him when he was traveling through Europe:

The man, told his wife that ‘He [Morteza], is going to Cannes and he can’t find Cannes’. […] His wife said: ‘Come, sit in the car, I will drive you’. So, they drove me to the train station, about an hour, they drove me in their car, they were very nice. They asked me: ‘Are you hungry?’, ‘Yes, I am hungry’. They bought me food, they were really nice, they bought me a ticket, and they gave me around 200 euros.

This memory of altruism stands out for Morteza. It becomes a kind of proof that there are good people who care about and grieve for him. Most of the young people actually had help from someone; they spent a night in somebody’s apartment or received help with travel. Many of them traveled in groups, with friends. These relations seem to have meant a lot to some of them in coping with loneliness and the feeling of lack of control, thus increasing their agency. And many have preserved these contacts years after the escape journey. But when the young people arrived in Sweden, the Swedish authorities placed no value on these kinds of social contacts:

‘I have friends all over Europe and all over Sweden’, he tells me over coffee. I tell him that it sounds nice to have so many friends. ‘Some are my cousins, others friends I came to Sweden with. I sometimes go and visit them’. He continues to tell me how they were separated when they first arrived in Sweden, which made him feel alone. They were being placed in different temporary accommodations while waiting to have their future in Sweden determined by authorities, and that the rules in these accommodations made it more or less impossible to stay in touch. The rules often let one person stay overnight, one night at the time (observation note).

Murad talks about how important his friends and family, who are scattered around the continent, are, but also about how difficult it can be to keep in touch because of housing regulations. He refers to rules regulating who is able to spend the night, when it is possible, and under what conditions. For people traveling from far away, it is more or less impossible to maintain contact when it is only possible to stay one night. The same rules even apply to close family members. That is, the housing facilities only allow one person to spend the night, one night at a time. Saif explains how these rules make it difficult for him to keep in touch with his brother, which further intensifies the feeling of loneliness or isolation. One way of reducing these feelings, however, is through the use of social media, telephones and Internet to keep in touch with family and friends.

Waldner: I bought it [with my own money]. I didn’t own a computer. I bought, I study, I need a computer […] It’s important to [be able to] talk to friends. Skype and such …

[…]

Interviewer: How often are you, approximately, in contact [with your family]?
Waldner: I call, well it costs a lot of money when you buy a telephone card from [a phone company specializing in cheaper calls abroad]. I usually call them twice a month, yes it’s expensive. I can’t talk much with them.

Interviewer: They don’t have a computer do they?
Waldner: No, they don’t have any, there is no Internet […] otherwise it would have been easy. You can see, even if they live on another continent, you can see the
person you’re talking with, on Skype. […] I would have liked to call them four or five times, but there’s not enough. I don’t have enough money.

In the interview, the on-going struggle many of the young people discuss is being able to talk to friends and family. Waldner buys his own computer so that he can talk to friends, and uses telephone cards to keep in touch with his family. But, because he has so little money, he cannot keep in touch as much as he would like. Although some of the young people use these kinds of pre-paid telephone cards, as Waldner does, this does not apply to all.

Jubran is in regular contact with his parents through use of the telephone and Internet. I feel a bit stupid asking him how they stay in touch, as his answer was: ‘well, they do have fibre optics there’. Somehow my prejudice seems to have made me think that fibre optics didn’t exist in Iran (observation note).

Jubran is one of many who use different applications to keep in touch with family. This meeting also highlights how easy it can be to conclude that all ‘unaccompanied minors’ experience the same conditions and needs. The truth, instead, is that they all have different possibilities and interests in keeping in touch with key persons, through the use of face-to-face encounters, calls or Internet applications. One thing they do have in common, however, is an expressed wish to be able to keep in touch.

In this section, different aspects of relationships with other human beings have been highlighted: relationships that are considered important to maintain and that could reduce feelings of loneliness and lack of control. These relationships involve a possibility to become grievable (cf. Butler 2006, 2009). This tension between being considered an unaccompanied or lonely child and being an active person who maintains and initiates social bonds, however, seems to be affected by the participants’ entrance into a ‘bureaucratic system’.

**Entering the ‘system’ and becoming a product**

Thus far, we can conclude that some of the young people do experience loneliness and to some extent even isolation. They further express how being labeled ‘lonely’ or ‘unaccompanied’ to some extent seems to exaggerate these feelings. But perhaps more importantly, we are able to observe how their encounters with the ‘system’ can both intensify and reduce these feelings.

First, there is the importance of good staff and of this staff being able to do their work. For some participants, it is clear that someone has taken an extra step in helping them or providing support. Others have instead experienced a lack of support.

**Interviewer:** How many legal guardians have you had?
**Yousef:** First, when I arrived I had one, then I had a girl when I lived in [another town] and then her, the last one. […] And social workers. I think I must have had three.

**Interviewer:** How many different accommodations have you had?
**Yousef:** [makes a booing sound and laughs]. Yes, it must have been four.

The huge turnover of staff, social workers, housing and legal guardians could contribute to their distress. Further, it makes it difficult to maintain relationships with the staff and with government officials. Being able to maintain relationships is crucial to not feeling alone or isolated (Westberg 2012).
Second, there is the importance of being valued and having the support of a reliable alliance, as Weiss (1973) put it. What differs between those who have had continuous support from staff members, teachers or others, and those who have lacked such support, boils down to a feeling of being listened to and taken seriously. This may increase the feeling of agency and motivation. Misaq is one of many who have experienced both support and the lack of it. He tells us about his relationships with two different social workers:

Misaq had received two extremely high electric bills when he first moved to his own apartment. Because of this, he tried to get in touch with his social worker to get advice on how to tackle the issue. ‘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 got 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).

Not feeling valued or cared for could create feelings of loneliness, isolation and passivity. In Misaq’s story, this occurs when his social worker does not want to see him. But his story further shows what a little effort and kindness did for the relationship and for Misaq’s own emotional status. When he talks about these issues, it is obvious, how different he feels about the two social workers and what effects they have had on him.

The participants tend to describe an on-going disciplining of their lives as well as a kind of normalization. Some bear witness to collective punishment; for instance when one young man failed to do the dishes, everyone was punished. Jubran asks us: ‘Why should we be punished for what others have done?’ Normalization is manifested in the way staff and government officials strive to accommodate a ‘normal’ childhood.

The dislocation between being ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ – which is fed by normative assumptions about childhood, family and culture – has been discussed in previous research (Engebrigtsen 2003; Wernesjö 2011). By linking resistance or other kinds of reactions to the supposed trauma of losing one’s childhood and the supposed break up from one’s biological family, it becomes something intrinsically individual. The individual is thus supposed to either be in need of treatment or to be disciplined towards ‘normality’ again. Given this logic, loneliness becomes more connected to the history of leaving childhood and leaving family, and less to these young people’s everyday situation.

Another aspect of ‘entering a system’ is the objectification of those who live at group homes. This is related to the fact that the staff are not allowed to develop a ‘deeper relationship’ with the young people. Andy used two concepts to describe what it is like to live under such circumstances: product and workplace. Already in the first interview, he said that he sometimes saw himself as a product, as somebody who had to behave according to the rules and who was constantly being documented. By workplace, he was referring to the staff – to the fact that they spend time there in order to work, not to develop relationships with people living there.

Andy explained that staff could be friendly, but that they always acted based on how they were expected to act, based on the rules of conduct regulating the interaction
between staff members and youth. This entails not being ‘personal’ or ‘private’ with the young people.

Interviewer: When one is an unaccompanied minor one is documented quite a lot?
Andy: Yes, exactly, that’s what we talk about. It’s kind of bad because you don’t have your own life then. That is, if they document you, it’s there in the municipalities’ network: if they want to check up on me they can find me. [...] They can read everything about me, and then I feel like a product, like I’ve said before.

Interviewer: You feel like a product?
Andy: Yeah, exactly, you don’t have a life of your own then. Everybody knows about you. I don’t feel comfortable with that actually. It feels odd. When I lived with my dad, my parents, my siblings. Then it was just them who knew everything. Not information that’s spread throughout Sweden.

He explains that staff members are not genuinely interested in him as a person, as somebody to really care about and grieve for. Sometimes he feels as if he is in the movie The Truman Show, a film about Truman Burbank, who grows up in a giant film studio, believing that all the social relations around him are real. However, as an adult, Truman comes to realize that all the people around him are actors. Andy expresses the similarity between his life at the housing facility and the movie by saying ‘everything is a fake’. The movie producer, in Andy’s case, is the municipality – the system that regulates the relationships and interactions between the young people and the staff. This makes Andy feel like a product, and it also creates a feeling of not knowing who is real and who is a fake. It is a feeling of alienation (Marx [1867] 2001), of objectification, of not being a real human among other humans. However, constructing concepts, such as ‘product’ and ‘workplace’, may also help people to penetrate (Willis 1977) and deal with the system, thus to make use of their agency.

**Criticizing the concept**

All unaccompanied minors are not the same (Andy, on why he wants to participate in the research project).

The categorization, ‘unaccompanied’, implies discourses and values. What Andy describes in the quote above is how he, by participating in our project, contributes to another, more complex image of ‘unaccompanied minors’. Thus, Andy’s participation may be interpreted as a form of resistance to homogenization and stereotyping. For some of the participants, the categorization ‘unaccompanied minors/children/refugees’ had stuck with them, and seemed to have become a barrier in need of transgression.

Maganga: So, in my opinion you’re unaccompanied […] until you live in a home or until you come of age [inaudible]. […] Or, well … How long will we [have to] be called unaccompanied refuge children, like I don’t know. Who came up with that name? I mean, it’s the system, maybe [the system] could create a new word? […] I think you shouldn’t be called anything. You are human, like everybody else. You don’t need a specific name, ensamkommande [arriving alone], then you’re separated.

Maganga explains how the on-going categorization of being ‘alone’ or ‘unaccompanied’ itself could become a problem. He seems to be saying that categorization locks people in, and that once one has been placed in a category, it is hard to get out of it. Andy,
who has lived in Sweden for two years, describes something similar, which is his desire to be seen as a human being and not as a category: ‘A bad thing is that we are still called [unaccompanied children]. Then we are not seen as Swedish’. The labeling creates a distinction between those who are considered insiders vs. outsiders in Sweden. Maganga’s statements reflect his feeling of not really being welcome. He continues: ‘They still call us refugees. And I know that the first generation that arrives to Sweden, maybe won’t be real Swedes. But the next generation, who will live here after us, maybe they will have something.’ The labeling affects how they think and feel about possibilities of being seen as a ‘Swede’.

Cruze tends not to use the category ‘unaccompanied minor’, instead he prefers ‘human beings’. What he describes is a world of injustice:

One can never judge human beings on the basis of their skin colour or how they look. You must get to know the human being who is on the inside. Then you can know that this human being is not a problem for society (…) they have left their family, friends, their country. They had to leave their country. They came here, they’re not criminals, they’re not bad. They are not dangerous for this society.

Cruze creates a counter-image to stereotyped and racialized images of refugees and unaccompanied minors. He is trying to make this image much more complex, nuanced, and human. Some of the participants oppose the categorization and put it in motion, thus visualizing its problems. They see being labeled as ‘unaccompanied’ as an obstacle. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) talked about such categories as ‘zombie categories’ – categories that cannot be pinned down because of the diffuseness of identity, but categories that nevertheless are used to lock people in. These young people use their agency to challenge the zombie concept ‘unaccompanied’, thereby resisting their full identity being locked into a static category. Such resistance may have its costs, however, because it may lead to punishment and being denied help or support. The category ‘unaccompanied child’ could also contribute to getting help and support, because public services are often organized around such categories (cf. Järvinen and Mik-Meyer 2003). On the other hand, it tends to lock people inside a specific identity – that of being alone.

**Production of the lonely child – a concluding discussion**

Loneliness and isolation are considered substantial risks to these young people’s lives and development (Groark, Sclare, and Raval 2011; Kohli and Mather 2003; Papadopoulus 2002; Wernesjö 2011). This theme is, however, seldom discussed with the young people’s own agency in mind; rather it takes its point of departure from the fact that they have been forced to leave their biological parents behind. In our discussions with these young people about their own lived experience of flight and migration, loneliness takes different forms, is interpreted differently and handled in a plethora of ways. By listening to their narratives, we acquire the keys to understanding that loneliness is not only a feeling, but in many ways, also a construction they need to relate to. Another important insight from our study, which could help to guide future research, is the importance of time for these young people. They needed time to be able to talk about how they feel about encountering, in this case, the Swedish ‘system’.
A conclusion from the study is how many of our participants have numerous important relationships that they both wish and need to be able to maintain. Some of these relationships are considered family, while others are friends or sometimes even staff at institutions or organizations. Their relationships are maintained within a hyper-connected world that entails different obstacles as well as technical solutions for getting around these obstacles. When the young people enter ‘the system’, however, unnecessary obstacles to maintaining all these different kinds of relationships are created. First, staff members are not allowed to form more sustainable relationships with them. Second, when their friends or family would like to come and visit, they are not allowed to. Third, when there are no Internet connections, it is considerably harder to stay in touch with family and friends in other places.

To summarize, these obstacles lead to the production of the lonely child. We have shown that although the children are sometimes lonely, their feelings of loneliness increase through contact with ‘the system’. When they are treated as lonely or isolated, important relationships tend to be disregarded. Another important part of the production of the lonely child is the labeling that takes place.

Being labeled as unaccompanied or alone seems to further reinforce feelings of loneliness and even shape the young peoples sense of self, in terms of identity. Labeling – which involves separating ‘them’ from ‘us’ in terms of needs, rights and feelings – risks putting these young people in the position of being ungrievable. To grieve for people, we need to see them as fully human, as someone just like ourselves, and we need to be able to create sustainable and democratic relationships (cf. Butler 2006, 2009). Unfortunately, the label ‘unaccompanied’ tends to do the opposite, by creating a position in which the child has special needs because he/she lacks a ‘normal’ childhood, with a ‘good’ relationship to his/her family.

However, underlying the production of the lonely child are also high degrees of agency strengthened by encounters in which the young people are treated as human beings worth caring for (cf. Collins [1996] 2004). Besides these encounters, their criticism against being labeled ‘unaccompanied’ uncovers something separate from adapting to alienation and objectification. It shows their strong motivation to provide a counter-image, in relation to the official perspective, of themselves.

Herein lies the challenge faced by professionals who come into contact with these young people, as well as the challenge for future policymaking. Instead of trying to recreate a ‘normal’ childhood, the young people need to be included in defining their own needs, agency and identities. Such an approach would see the value of different types of social relationships with key persons, friends and family, as well as of engaging in new, solid and democratic relationships, and hopefully creating a situation in which those who arrive ‘alone’ do not have to feel alone.

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