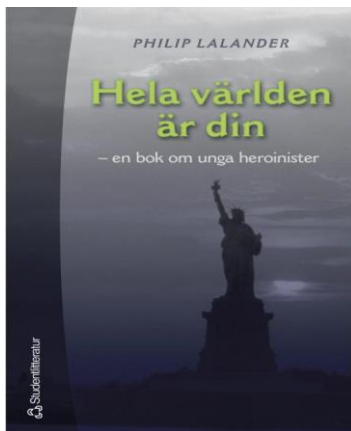




Beyond pop up social workers: migrants (unaccompanied minors) talking about social work and significant social relations

Philip Lalander, professor social work, KAOKO-workshop, 15.1.2018

Short biography on ethnography



2001



2009

2016



2015

A major interest in the sociology and social psychology of everyday life:



Research project on unaccompanied youth: Agency and networks: “young unaccompanied in a hyper interconnected world”. The situation while we did it:

- Sweden has long been considered one of the most generous European nations when it comes to providing for asylum seekers through allowing entrance and granting asylum. However, during the research project that is addressed in this paper (February 2015 to February 2017) Swedish immigration laws were rigorously tightened. The last two years of restrictions such as closed borders and temporary immigration laws allowing mainly temporary residency, if any, have meant that unaccompanied, young people are rarely allowed permanent residency.
- Instead, they are offered temporary permits or delayed deportations to be executed as soon as they reach the age of eighteen. The possibility for family reunification has declined, and stricter maintenance requirements have been introduced demanding that you can support yourself and your family members as well (Migrationsverket 2016b).
- Research points towards consequences such as increased social inequality, poverty, and segregation, affecting opportunities and possibilities for young people growing up and their abilities to form and realise their life-plans (Author 2011, Dahlstedt & Ekholm 2017).
- Finally, xenophobic and racist right-wing parties have increased their popularity among Swedes to the extent that an extreme right party, the Sweden Democrats, is the third biggest party in the parliament (cf. Hirvonen 2013). At the same time, various social grass root movements have emerged in solidarity with young migrants. Together, these changes permeate realms of everyday life and life planning for young people who have in common that they are subjects to forced migration (Aspinal & Watters 2010).

Method of the project:

We have followed 20 young people, with permanent residency: for two years (early 2015 to early 2017), including follow-up interviews, informal conversations and observations at least once a month per participant. Inspired by long term ethnography.

Opportunities to analyze how changes in their lives occur and how they deal with and feel about these changes.

Develop trust and eventually motivate them to present different aspects of their lives.

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.

At visits to municipally controlled group homes, we have mostly directed our attention toward the young residents rather than toward the staff, who are connected to the authorities. Referring to Erving Goffman (1959/1990), we have tried act so that the residents do not define us as being in *team collusion* with staff members

Sample

- Although they mainly originate from Afghanistan and Somalia, among the largest groups arriving in Sweden (Swedish Migration Board 2015), 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. Only three girls

Perspectives on those who are called unaccompanied

- As severely traumatized victims, psychologically vulnerable, something very different compared to "normal" youth. Danger of homogenization (everybody are the same)
- As actors with resources and power, who reflects, think and try to solve situations.

We have written many articles on this project

- **Being alone or becoming lonely? The complexity of portraying ‘unaccompanied children’ as being alone in Sweden, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2017. (with Marcus Herz)**
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676261.2017.1306037>
- **”Vi vet vad du behöver” Konstruktion och motstånd av ”ensamkommande” på HVB, *Socialvetenskaplig tidskrift*, 2017 (with Dawan Raooof)** <http://journals.lub.lu.se/index.php/svt/article/view/16795>
- **”I am going to Europe tomorrow”: The myth of the anchor child and the decision to flee in narratives of unaccompanied children**, 2018 (with Marcus Herz). *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, Volume 8, Issue 1 (March), doi: 10.1515/njmr-2018-0001, in press.
- **Life planning; opportunities and constraints among unaccompanied minors in Sweden**, sent to *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* (with Marcus Herz). Waiting for reply.
- **An abstract and nameless, but powerful, bystander – ‘Unaccompanied children’ talking about their social workers in Sweden** (with Marcus Herz). Sent to *Nordic Social Work Research*. Waiting for reply.

- The lecture is built on the two last articles.

An abstract and nameless, but powerful, bystander – ‘Unaccompanied children’ talking about their social workers in Sweden.

- The aim of the present article is to describe and analyze how ‘unaccompanied’ minors may view and experience (professional) 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.

The heart of social work?

- 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 Pamela Trevithick put it, 'out of favour' (Trevithick 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).

An abstract messenger and the production of uncertainty

- Saleh: I had a meeting with my social worker
- Marcus: I remember, it was about the time when we last met?
- Saleh: Yes, a month ago, something like that. 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: But, we talked about this shortly the last time we met. She called you up and said that she'll visit you for a meeting, because she was new, wasn't it?
- Saleh: Yes
- Marcus: And then she tells you, they want you to move from home. Have I interpreted that correctly?
- Saleh: Yes, exactly
- Marcus: Why do they want you to move from home?
- Saleh: Well, that is the thing, I really don't understand.

The social worker

- Becomes an *abstract messenger* providing some information, which triggers emotional processes in the bodies of Adar and Saleh. But he or she does not engage in any other contact or seem to consider the effects of the information given to the child.
- 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.

The social worker pops up

The social worker and Saleh had no previous relationship, 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.

Social workers as documenting agents and deliverers of punishment

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: Why do you think that is the case?

Chuhan: I mean, I don't know. It feels...

Paula: But do you think the social worker and the migration office are working together?

Chuhan: Yes, of course

Documentation helps to foster a critical gaze incorporated in habitus (Bourdieu 2002).

Andy on documentation

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.

Andys analysis came up with two concepts; **product and workplace.**

The strategy in order to deal with documentation: be careful and don't let the staff know much. Do not trust *friendly smiles* from representatives of the state. The question of authenticity (compare The Truman Show, with Jim Carrey).

One aspect of the phenomenological interpretation of the social worker: The social worker may be interpreted as a punisher or as a punishment (“if you don't behave you'll have to visit the social worker”).

Social workers that care for real; two faces of social work

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).

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.

Conclusions from the article

- The young people do not understand the decisions being made that affect their lives.
- They feel a lack power to influence these decisions, and that no one listens to them.
- The social worker becomes an abstract figure, but obviously connected to system power.
- The social workers tend to 'pop up' in their lives, delivering new decisions on behalf of an abstract system.
- 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.

Further

- 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 (Wilkinson, Smith and Gallagher no date, Herz 2016, Lalander 2016, Turkle 2017). This is also what the young people themselves seem to be asking for, but not getting.

People needs people and significant social relations; it's difficult alone; the interviews were full of people, from history or present

- Co-producers in the creation of individual futures.
- They are partners in navigation
- They care about the person without homogenizing, culturalize and victimize.
- They give security and feelings of being grieved for. These important people do not *stop you*, but *invite you in* and let you through (cf. Ahmed 2007).
- The people from voluntary organizations like Cruzes meeting with the Asylum group. "I could feel that they cared for me without wanting anything in return. I was a human being". Became a turning point in life.
- These caring key-persons can be people in face-to-face relations but also people on distance, through skype or facebook.
- *Relatives and friends historically anchored and embodied in habitus*. Andys father and voice when life is tough. The mother of Chuhan who had heart problems. The brother of Saleh in Germany. Important in order to hold lifestory together, a feeling of ontological security (Giddens 1991).