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Understandings of self through the category of the 'unaccompanied asylum-seeking minor': a Danish ethnography

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Abstract

This article explores and unfolds the category of the 'unaccompanied asylum-seeking minor' in Denmark. By studying the notions that are embedded in the category, namely age and childhood, I analyse, through the narratives of the young refugees, what it means for both their sense of self and for their everyday lives to belong to, or to be excluded from, ascribed asylum categories, while finding themselves in complex situations of uncertainty. Using ethnographic material gathered during the refugee crisis of 2015-2016, I show that the young refugees' narratives point to contradictions in their understandings of the 'self', which are linked respectively to the notions of chronological age, upheld by the asylum system, and relational age operating within the context of their family relations. I further describe the changes that take place when a young refugee's status changes from minor to adult. Finally, I suggest how these changes may be linked to contemporary Western and welfare-related notions of childhood. The findings suggest that a relational approach that goes beyond the fixity of categories in the asylum and refugee system allows for a better understanding of the young people's situation and sense of self.

Introduction

They [Immigration Services] told me that if you are under or over 18, your asylum case does not change. They told me that the asylum case is the same; the difference is that if you are over 18 you go to centres for over 18. They talk with you like a grown-up man, like a big man, an adult man, but if you are under 18 you have to get some contact person, some *repræsentant* [in this case a legal guardian], but your case is the same. (Jabriil, conversation excerpt, September 2015)

Jabriil, a young Somali travelling without his family, entered the Danish asylum system

as an 'unaccompanied asylum-seeking minor' and was later placed in an adult centre after his age test deemed he was 19 years old. In one of the long conversations I had with him at his Red Cross school, he explained the legal and bureaucratic consequences of being inside or outside the category of the 'unaccompanied'. Despite Jabriil's explanation that belonging to the category of unaccompanied minor has no impact on the legal outcome of asylum applications, this does influence in significant ways how unaccompanied refugees experience their everyday lives in Denmark. This must be seen in the light of the dual mean-

ing of the term 'unaccompanied minor'. Arriving under age and with no parents, the category of 'unaccompanied child' is defined relationally in opposition to two other categories: single adult, age being the defining parameter; and 'accompanied minor', where kinship is the defining parameter.

In this article I will explore and unfold the category of 'unaccompanied asylum-seeking minor' to show how belonging to it affects young refugees' everyday lives and understandings of themselves in Denmark. I will first situate the article in relation to the existing literature and underscore the importance of conducting research on this rapidly increasing group of refugees. I will then explain the significance of being under 18 and the benefits it confers on individuals in the Danish asylum system. By studying the concepts embedded in the category, namely those of age and childhood, and by drawing on the narratives of young refugees, I will analyse what it means for both their sense of self and their everyday routine to be placed in this category. Finally, I aim to contribute to understanding the social implications of the relationship between young refugees and the Danish welfare asylum and refugee system.

Situating the 'unaccompanied asylum-seeking minor'

Research on 'unaccompanied minors' within the European Union (EU) and in Scandinavia has increased exponentially in recent years (Wernesjö 2012). Young refugees have become the centre of attention in anthropological and refugee studies, as well as in childhood and youth studies (see, e.g., Waters 2008; Ní Righallaigh 2011; Stretmo 2014). This work has tended to be characterized by two opposing approaches. One approach emphasizes the young persons'

vulnerability, trauma and psychological problems, showing how this affects their general well-being. An example can be found in Hodes et al.'s (2008) study comparing the psychological distress experienced by unaccompanied and accompanied children living in the UK. It found, among other things, that unaccompanied children experienced higher levels of trauma, with those approaching the age of 18 having increased post-traumatic symptoms, partly due to uncertainties regarding their future. The other strand of research, by contrast, stresses the unaccompanied minors' agency and their ability to develop coping strategies. This is exemplified by Luster et al.'s (2010) study of the successful adaptation of unaccompanied Sudanese boys in the US through the development of different coping skills. In a thorough overview of research in the field of the unaccompanied, Wernesjö (2012) underscores that much of the literature disregards the relationship between agency and vulnerability and tends to pathologize the category. Along similar lines, Crawley (2008), who has investigated asylum interviews with unaccompanied minors in the UK, also found that the interviews emphasised the children's vulnerability. If they expressed political views and demonstrated agency, conversely, they were no longer considered children, implying that agency was not compatible with being part of the category.

This study draws on recent studies that examine the ways in which notions of age, childhood and youth shape the lives of unaccompanied minors. For instance, in their comparative study of Finland and Sweden, Kaukko and Wernesjö (2017) explore how unaccompanied minors in the two countries experienced participation as providing a sense of belonging in their everyday lives. They argue that the children positioned

themselves along a continuum between childhood and adulthood and that their levels of participation were not fixed but depended on the particular situation in which they found themselves, thus emphasizing that age and the feeling of being a child or a grown-up are fluid and complex. In a roughly parallel study of the experiences of young refugees in Sweden, Gustafsson et al. (2012) show that young refugees strived to continue with their lives, but also that they felt themselves to be in a void between childhood and adulthood and therefore experienced having “a life on hold”.

Despite the increase in research on unaccompanied children in Scandinavia, studies in Denmark have focused primarily on other categories of refugees, such as adult asylum-seekers or accompanied children (see, e.g., Whyte 2009; Vitus 2010; Brinkmann 2016). When unaccompanied minors have been included in Danish studies, they have been conceptualized as part of the broader category of minors and have not been at the core of the research (see, e.g., Vitus and Lidén 2010). By directing exclusive attention to the situation of unaccompanied minors in Denmark, this article not only fills an important gap in research, but also moves beyond the dichotomous approach mentioned above to consider the co-existence of, and inter-relationship between, the vulnerability and resourcefulness of young refugees in a vein similar to that suggested by Wernesjö (2012: 500).

Furthermore, the sheer numbers and growing prominence of young refugees calls for greater attention. In 2015, when the refugee crisis peaked in terms of both numbers of refugees arriving and media and political attention, almost 83,000 unaccompanied minors arrived in the EU, representing approximately a quarter of asylum applicants under 18 years old (23%). Until

2013 the EU had been receiving on average 12,000 unaccompanied minors every year, but in 2014 the number increased to 23,000, and by 2015 it had grown four-fold. A substantial majority of the unaccompanied minors were male (91%) and between 16 and 17 years of age (57%) (EUROSTAT 2016: 1). In Denmark, the figures show a similar pattern, taking into account the size and population of the country. In 2015, Denmark received 21,316 asylum-seekers, a seven-fold increase compared to 2010; of these, 10% identified themselves as unaccompanied minors (Immigration Services 2016a). This figure represents a four-fold increase compared to 2013, when unaccompanied children only represented 4.6% of the total number of asylum-seekers. Following the tightening of asylum policies implemented by the liberal right-wing government headed by *Venstre* immediately after this party assumed power in June 2015, the total number of asylum-seekers declined. By August 2016 (latest available data), there were only 4,969 applications for asylum (Immigration Services 2016a: 5). Nevertheless, no less than 21% of these involved unaccompanied minors, a four-fold increase over the last three years. The total numbers and relative importance of this group thus underscores the significance of devoting special attention to young refugees who arrive as unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors.

Methodology

This article is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between January 2015 and September 2016 in different locations in Denmark. My informants entered the Danish asylum system classified as ‘unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors’, but they were on the boundaries of this category. Some were close to turning

18, others had an uncertain status because their age was being contested, and finally some were no longer minors, having become legal adults after several years in Denmark. Thus my informants can be clustered into two groups: the 'newcomers', who had been in Denmark for less than a year, and the 'older' refugees, who had been in Denmark for over five years. In this article the ethnography focuses on the first group, that of the 'newcomers'. They formed a heterogeneous group of young refugees, including Afghans, Syrians, Eritreans, Somalis, Moroccans, Sri Lankans and Syrians, as well as Kurds from Syria, Iran and Iraq. They identified themselves as being between 16 and 24 years old. During fieldwork I had contact with more than eighty young refugees, eight of whom became close informants. Most of my informants were boys, reflecting their larger absolute number (90% of all unaccompanied minors), and in this article I only use ethnography from my male informants.¹ All their names have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

Unaccompanied minors occupy what Sirriyeh (2010) calls "transitional 'in-between' spaces". Their 'in-betweenness' is double because, as young people, they are seen as being between the life stages of childhood and adulthood, whereas as asylum-seekers they are regarded as being in the 'borderlands' between origin and 'host' societies (Sirriyeh 2010: 214). I will refer to my informants as 'young refugees': 'young', to highlight their position in between different life stages; and 'refugees', to describe both those who are still waiting for asylum decisions and those who have been granted permission to stay. This choice of term is emically driven, reflecting the words used by my informants, who referred to themselves as refugees (*flygtninge*), and not as asylum-seekers (*asylansøgere*).

Methodologically I challenged the rigidity of these categories and explored the different categories that the young refugees navigated by doing fieldwork in places representing the different stages of refugeehood: the asylum centres for the newly arrived unaccompanied asylum-seekers, the centres for adult asylum-seekers for those whose status as minors had been rejected or who had come of age, and the municipalities where the unaccompanied minors were placed after being granted the right to stay. In this way the study crossed the child-adult and asylum seeker-refugee dichotomies. Initially I conducted semi-structured interviews, however, due to the resemblance of this methodological approach to the interviews conducted by the immigration authorities to assess the young people's case for asylum, I opted for more participant observation and 'friendly conversation' based approaches carried out while going for a walk, sharing food or doing some activity, methods I found generated more data (cf. Spradley 1979).

In 2016 there were 48 asylum centres in Denmark, of which nine were for unaccompanied minors, two of them being run by the Red Cross, and the rest by different municipalities. My fieldwork took place in two asylum centres for the unaccompanied, two asylum centres for adults, where my informants had been placed upon coming of age, and youth houses for young refugees who had been granted the right to stay. Young refugees were at the centre of my research, and most of my time was spent with them, though in the process of understanding their lives I met a range of others who formed a part of their everyday lives. I therefore also conducted twenty-two semi-structured interviews with legal guardians, social workers, mentors, nurses and doctors, lawyers, immigration service officers and NGO representatives and volunteers working with

these refugees, as well as participant observation in the case of the Red Cross staff and teachers. Most of my fieldwork took place in English except when the refugees were better at Danish than English, in which case I used an interpreter, who was a volunteer and helped me gain access to the field. This was the case, for example, with Wassid. As fieldwork progressed and my own Danish skills improved I conducted fieldwork with my informants in Danish, as was the case with Rahim. On several occasions I recorded interactions, always with full consent, and in other situations I relied on field notes. I adopted an inductive grounded-theory approach for data analysis.

The significance of being an ‘unaccompanied minor’

The Danish Aliens Act concerning the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers classifies foreign nationals under the age of 18, who come to Denmark and seek asylum without their parents or other adults who can replace their parents as ‘unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers’. This definition closely mirrors the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ definition established in 1994 (UNHCR 1994). In legal terms, as Jabriil made clear at the outset of this article, whether or not an applicant is a minor has no impact on the outcome of his or her application for asylum. However, the Danish welfare state stresses the vulnerability of unaccompanied minors and uses special guidelines for them.

First, unaccompanied minors’ applications are processed more rapidly so that, should they be granted asylum, they can settle in a municipality (*kommune*) and enrol in the integration programme as quickly as possible. Secondly, unaccompanied minors have special privileges where family reuni-

fication is concerned, since they can apply as soon as they are granted asylum in Denmark. In comparison, those categorized as adults must wait a minimum of three years before they can begin the application process (Immigration Services 2016b). Thirdly, beyond the possibility of reuniting with their families, the unaccompanied are placed in special asylum centres (*børnecentre*), where, as will be explained, they are given special care and support in the process of applying for refugee status. Furthermore, they attend school on a daily basis, and special everyday routines of care are made available to them.

By adopting a notion of belonging that offers a person-centred and dynamic approach that avoids reifying social structures, I will explore how young refugees experience being placed inside (or outside) the category of the unaccompanied and make sense of who they are – their sense of self. I draw on May (2011), who argues that the notion of belonging is useful to understanding the interconnection between the self and society, in which case the self is conceptualised as a mode of being in society, rather than as an individual entity separate from society (2011: 375). Empirically I base my analysis on the narratives of Rahim – an asylum-seeker who depicts how his everyday and sociality were shaped by being included in and excluded from the category of the unaccompanied minor – and of Wassid, a young Syrian refugee who had been granted the right to stay.

To belong or not to belong

Rahim, originally from the Urozgan region of Afghanistan, had endured a one-year-long journey to Europe before entering the Danish asylum system as an unaccompanied minor. He had been in Denmark for ten

months when I met him and had been through the first interview with Immigration Services, where he claimed to be 16 years old. His age had been contested, and he was waiting for his age test results. One morning, as I walked into the school building, I found him eating breakfast with two friends. He greeted me warmly and eagerly informed me that we would have a day excursion to the Planetarium.

- *“Here no one comes knocking on the door to see if I am awake. I can be days without talking to people.”*

Rahim was one of the more disciplined boys; he would always have breakfast at 8.15 am, when it was first served. “They [Red Cross staff] wake us up at 8 am, but I wake up at 7 am to do my exercises”, he explained, as he showed me with his hands how he did push-ups. He added, “I also like going to boxing”, a weekly activity organized at the centre. Rahim had created daily routines for himself by participating in the activities at the centre for unaccompanied minors. In their analysis of the relationship between identity and mobility, Rapport and Dawson (1998: 27) suggest that routines, in the form of repeated practices and social interactions, play a key role in the development of a sense of belonging. I suggest that Rahim’s routines helped him establish a sense of belonging despite the uncertainties over his future.

As we waited for classes to start at 9 am, Rahim told me how the amount of pocket money they received had been cut. Using the whiteboard hanging from one of the walls in the classroom, he sketched with figures and a table the amounts they received before and now: “It is because someone broke the thing for the fire alarm [he opens the door to point to the alarm], and so we all have to

pay it back”, he explained. In reality, however, the amount of pocket money had been reduced for all asylum-seekers in all categories as part of the tightening measures introduced by the new government to deter asylum-seekers from coming to Denmark (cf. Immigration Services 2016b). After Rahim’s clear explanation for the reduction in pocket money, I told him that perhaps one day he could become a teacher, but he laughed and corrected me: “Actually I would like to become a lawyer”. The noise level increased as other young refugees entered the classroom, filling it with lively chatter. Rahim, however, sat quietly with his Danish grammar book going through the exercises from the day before. He had been out of school for over five years when he arrived in Denmark, and as he sat preparing for the lesson, the potential horizon of becoming a lawyer seemed less distant. This ambition for the future opened up the imagined possibility of belonging in Danish society.

A couple of months later Rahim informed me through Facebook, our main channel of communication, that his age test result had established that he was 18 years of age and that therefore he had been moved to a centre for adults. When I visited him at the new centre, which was located in a somewhat remote area of rural Denmark, he met me at the bus stop and walked me through the centre. He related how changing centres had affected him. He was moved during the summer months, so there was no schooling and no centre activities to participate in. He therefore spent his days in his room. This would change when the asylum centre for adults began to offer Danish classes after the summer break, but only on three days a week. Having nothing to do all day, he had asked whether he could work, but was told he was only allowed to do unpaid work cleaning the centre: “I want to work outside the centre so

I can practice my Danish. I want to become good at Danish. I want to work in like *Netto* [a supermarket] but the staff say I have to wait until I am 19 to have a *praktik* [internship] outside the centre". (Rahim, conversation excerpt, July 2016)

Being categorized as either inside or outside the category of the unaccompanied has important consequences for the everyday routines of young refugees. Becoming part of the adult category had disrupted Rahim's schooling and social activities, resulting in him spending many hours doing nothing and seeing no one.² "Here no one comes knocking on the door to see if I am awake. I can be days without talking to people", he explained. Rahim kept returning to his discomfort with the age test result and how it had affected him: "I don't know why, but I keep forgetting things. Every day, when I leave my room to go check the post in the mornings, I think 'Did I lock my door?' and have to come back. This is not working well," he told me, pointing to his head.

As Jabriil explained earlier, only those who are under eighteen will receive special care and protection. Rahim's problems concerned more than the loss of the extensive support system surrounding unaccompanied minors, which for Rahim had abruptly disappeared almost entirely (his former legal guardian continued to visit regularly³). Individuals learn how to behave according to the categories in which they are placed (Bowker and Star 2000: 311). Rahim had appropriated the category of the unaccompanied and had come to value the opportunities and the sense of direction that it provided. Having been removed from the category of unaccompanied minor, he had lost the sense of belonging and purpose he had developed through the daily routines and sociality at the children's centre (cf. Rapport and Dawson 1998: 7).

Understanding the self relationally

Wassid, unlike Rahim, had been granted the right to stay in Denmark after seven months in the asylum system. As a Syrian, and due to the war being waged in his country, his case moved faster through the asylum process. He had applied for family reunification to bring his mother and two younger sisters to Denmark, but when I met him he was living in a youth house with seven other boys who had also been granted refugee status as unaccompanied minors. Each of them had their own room. Wassid's was relatively large and simple, with a bed and a couch, though, unlike many of the other boys, he had no paintings or drawings on the walls. The most significant object was a big carpet filling the whole room: it looked like an antique, although he later explained that he had bought it in IKEA. When I walked into his room he asked me not to step on it with my shoes, as this was where he prayed.

During one of our first conversations, Wassid told me about his journey to Denmark and his first days after arriving. He described how he was moved to three different centres for unaccompanied minors, despite the few months he had been in the asylum system. We then started discussing his age and the implications for him of belonging to the category of the unaccompanied.

Andrea: "Did you know what it meant to be under 18?"

Wassid: "Yes, I told them [the police] I was 17 and that I should not be sent to a centre that was for the over 18."

Andrea: "So in Denmark, when you are under 18 you are seen as a child. How do you see yourself? Do you consider yourself a child, a young person, a man...?"

Wassid: "I'm 17."

Andrea: "Would you see yourself as child?"

Wassid: "Yes (he laughs and hesitates)... like a man."

Andrea: "So if it were totally up to you, would you say you are a child or a grown-up?"

Wassid: "A child."

Andrea: "And in Syria, what would your family consider you?"

Wassid: "As an adult. I think I'm a child in Denmark because I don't have any family here. But in Syria I'm an adult."

Andrea: "In Syria, would you have a wife?"

Wassid: "No, no, I am not married! It is just the family – my mum, my sisters – that would make the difference."

Andrea: "So, if your family were here, would you consider yourself an adult?"

Wassid: "Absolutely! If my family were here, then I would be an adult again."

(Conversation excerpt, March 2015)

- He explains his identity as a man or a child in relation to the presence or absence of his family, but his status as an unaccompanied minor in Denmark in relation to his chronological age.

'Self', as Simmel (1950) and Elias (2001) both argued, can only be understood in an intersubjective manner; our sense of self is lived and constructed as part of a relational process involving both our interactions with other people and more abstract notions, including cultural values and social norms. The self is dynamic and shaped by entangled dimensions, including age, gender, sexuality, religion, education or occupation (May 2011: 370). Wassid's understanding of self was shaped partly in relation to the category he was placed in when entering Denmark as an unaccompanied minor. Categories affect the self and people's everyday lives. Like Rahim, Wassid learned how to behave from the cate-

gory he was placed in, which also determined where he had to live and the people with whom he could interact. This in turn had an impact on the way he understood himself. Categories are thus not merely abstract, but have real consequences for the lived lives of the young refugees (cf. Sørenssen 2015: 82). Wassid's self-understanding in our conversation is relational. He initially does not engage with the socially constructed notions of 'child', 'man' or 'grown-up', but dismisses them. Rather, when probed to state which established socially constructed category he belongs to, he insists on focusing on his age: "I'm 17". Age, and more precisely chronological age, has become his identity signifier, which in turn grants him the right to belong to the category of the unaccompanied. Chronological age is intrinsic to modern Western society, including the Danish welfare state, and it is calculated by reference to an absolute dating system (Binstock and Shana 1976). By claiming a chronological age, Wassid accesses the possibilities instilled in the category of the under-aged, that is, the politico-jural rights that come with belonging to the category of 'unaccompanied minor'. The dating of age and the recognition of chronological age are critical for the conferral of political and legal rights, that is, to be granted unaccompanied status and belonging to the category. However, as we shall see, chronological age is an external factor in family structures.

When asked to explain further what stage in the life cycle he felt he fitted into, Wassid vacillated between the life stages of being a child and a man. His explanation for his different feelings of belonging in Denmark and Syria respectively is premised on the presence or absence of his family, and can be explained through the lens of what the anthropologist Meyer Fortes (1984) referred to as generational age. In his study of the

Tallensi and Ashanti in Ghana, Fortes (1954) explained that, in many cultures, age is constructed in relation to the family structure. It is through a generational classification based on the family that individuals understand themselves and their place in society. The Tallensi would rank individuals by generation in the context of family and lineage relations and by order of birth in political and inter-lineage relations. "Do you know he is my father?" was the answer of one of his 20 year-old Tallensi informants when he was asked about a 6 year-old boy. The child was the son of his grandfather's youngest wife and was therefore his classificatory father (Fortes 1984: 102).

In Wassid's narrative, his intergenerational understanding of himself allows him to explain how he identifies himself as he shifts between different life stages and social contexts. Within the context of his family he would see himself as an adult since, being the oldest son, he would have responsibility for his younger siblings. However, the absence of his family and his being alone in Denmark make him perceive himself as a child. Later, when Wassid's mother and sister were able to come to Denmark after meeting the criteria for family reunification, Wassid as the oldest son assumed the responsibility for his family. Relational rights and obligations shift when a person who has been senior in one relationship becomes junior in relation to another person, or in this case an entity. Wassid is junior in his relation to the Danish welfare state, but senior in his relation to his family.

Generational age – or what I chose to call relational age – and chronological age compete in Wassid's understanding of his self, the two being out of sync (cf. Fortes 1984). He moves between his age-based and his intergenerational understandings of himself in his attempt to establish an understanding

of where he belongs. He explains his identity as a man or a child in relation to the presence or absence of his family, but his status as an unaccompanied minor in Denmark in relation to his chronological age. Chronological age is critical to belonging to the category of unaccompanied minor, and it takes the individual, in this case Wassid, as its unit of reference. This is in contrast to the generational approach, where Wassid's understanding of 'who he is' is based on the collective, in this case his family. Chronological age becomes relevant because of the political and legal rights it carries. As Fortes (1984: 112) showed, it is only when the politico-legal framework takes precedence over kinship relations, as it does with young refugees, that chronological age becomes significant.

I argue that Wassid's understanding of his 'self' is relational to both his family and the legal category, which allows no fluidity or change. He is affected by both the political (the Danish asylum system) and the social (family and kinship relations) system he is a part of. As a norm-fixing institution, the Danish welfare state imposes, through its refugee system, politico-jural demands upon the social system. This contrast reflects the opposition between the family as the core of the domestic domain and the politico-jural framework of the total society, or the welfare state (cf. Fortes 1984: 108–109). The asylum system and the family pull in opposite directions rather than complement each other, thus contributing, I argue, to a feeling of ontological uncertainty.

Questioning life stages: "a child... a man"?

To analyse the category of unaccompanied minor and the chronological age that defines its boundary further, it is important to

examine how notions of childhood and adulthood inform this bureaucratic category. For this purpose, the Western politico-jural notion of life stages is useful. 'Life stages' regulate the 'order of things' and are embedded in all kinds of institutions, including the Danish refugee and asylum system. Moreover, anthropology has traditionally understood, and thus reified, people's lives through this notion. For instance, Mead (1936) famously used it when arguing that the process of coming of age differed in various societies, as did Read (1968), who based her work on a life-cycle model consisting of stages, or *étapes de vie* (Van Gennep 1909), organized sequentially. In a critical discussion of the 'life stages' approach in anthropology, Johnson-Hanks has noted that it has been common to view life stages as a universal framework of life that operates in an irreversible and unilinear manner – universal, in that all members of society, regardless of place and time, will pass through a sequence of set life stages; irreversible, because it is not possible to revert to an earlier stage. They are therefore unilinear (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 866).

In her study of Beti women in Cameroon, Johnson-Hanks questioned the notion of life stages⁴. She found that the age at which the women have their first child varies enormously, and it is therefore not possible to correlate chronological age with attaining the status of motherhood and, by implication, adulthood. Furthermore, if a young woman has a child, she does not necessarily become a socially recognized mother who has crossed a clear threshold to adulthood. Rather, she may give the child to the father's family, return to school, and refer to the horizon of becoming a mother as if she had never given birth. For Beti women, motherhood, like adulthood, is a loosely bounded and fluid status.

Wassid's understanding of his ontological being, as he wavers between being a man and being a child, also challenges the understanding of life stages as unilinear. He does not perceive childhood and adulthood as irreversible *étapes de vie*, but rather seems to operate with two co-existing life stages, depending on whether he adopts a generational or a chronological understanding of his self. He therefore challenges the coherence and rigidity embedded in the life-cycle understanding when he privileges the family as being at the core of who he is. Indeed, Wassid regards childhood and adulthood as something temporary, something one can go into and out of. Wassid's fluidity in his perception of his conjunctures does not point to a processual transition towards adulthood, but rather to a nonsynchronous co-existence of life stages. His sense of self, his ontological being, is therefore multi-faceted, multiple and fragmented (cf. Johnson-Hanks 2002: 868). As with the Beti women, his self does not develop in a clear trajectory of life. Rather, it is multi-layered and made up of different entangled dimensions.

Wassid's understanding of his self is fluid, but he is faced with a category that is structurally irreversible and rigid. The category of unaccompanied minor exists within the paradigm of life stages that are coherent, universal and strictly ordered. They are understood as ordered along a path that everyone goes down in the same sequence and that does not permit reversal to an earlier stage. As with chronological age, life stages exist as a result of an institutional project, in this case the project of an organized asylum system that classifies people (cf. Johnson-Hanks 2002: 866). The Danish asylum system allows for no fluidity. Wassid's understanding of himself is trapped between understandings of his identity as fluid and malleable through generational

age, and the 'life stages' that are organized by the Western understanding of childhood as defined by chronological age, allowing for no deviation.

Welfare state perceptions: "You also have to be a child"

To understand better the life stages paradigm that is at the core of the category of the unaccompanied, this last section will look at welfare state ideologies and understandings of childhood. This in turn will allow understandings of the self to be explored further.

Sandra and I are sitting in her office as she is telling me about her work as a social worker at one of the centres for unaccompanied asylum-seekers in Denmark (*børnecentre*): "We have to talk to them, especially those who, for example, come with younger brothers. They take on enormous responsibilities concerning food, clothes, washing, doing all the things as adults. We have to let them know that 'You also have to be a child', so we work on that because, no, they are not adults. We will always go and look at the relationship between them. Who is giving the care? Only the oldest one? Maybe yes. If we do not know, we will try to get somebody to assume responsibility for taking care of the youngest one. And we can tell the younger sibling, 'Oh, you can take your clothes and put them there', and so the older one does not need to do that. Small things, and then bigger and bigger [responsibilities], because they both have to be kids. They are in the centre for children, not adults." (Sandra, semi-structured interview, August 2016).

This short excerpt from an interview with a social worker opens up for an understand-

ing of the category of the unaccompanied through notions of childhood in Danish welfare institutions and shows how the generational dimension plays a role. Sandra explains how being an unaccompanied minor implies being a child and how a child ought to behave according to the life stage fixed to this category. Childhood, or the state of "being a kid", in Sandra's understanding – which by extension is also that of Danish welfare institutions generally – is one in which individuals should not take on excessive responsibilities, especially in relation to their siblings. This is not acceptable, as it could be harmful for the oldest sibling to take on such a heavy responsibility for caring for his younger sibling, and this abnormality needs to be changed: "We work on that".

Western perceptions of childhood are at play when the child is understood as someone who needs to be taken care of, but also allowed to develop as an individual. This understanding is predicated on the notion of the individual as a basic social entity that needs to develop an individual identity (Olwig 2006). The oldest sibling should realize himself as an individual and limit his role as the older brother. This Western understanding of childhood, as James, Jenks and Prout (1998: 66) have noted, is predicated on isolating the person as an individual and downplaying the generational dimension in the understanding of who an individual is. Wasid, however, understands himself in relation to his family (presence or absence), as does the young refugee Sandra refers to, whose sense of self seems to be relational to his role as carer for his brother.

Gullestad (1997) explored notions of childhood as part of a larger project on constructions of self and society in a Norwegian context. In her analysis, she compared the narratives of two Norwegian women while

they were growing up, the older woman having been raised in the 1920s, the younger one in the 1970s. Gullestad's analysis shows a shift in perceptions of childhood. While the older woman described the importance of children 'being of use', the younger woman emphasized the significance of 'being oneself' as a child. The contemporary construction of childhood, Gullestad argues, means removing duties and responsibilities from children "because they are not adults" and replacing them with an ideal childhood in which children ought to be safe, happy and protected (Boyden 1990). The welfare state similarly argues for the right of young refugees to be children (again), and thus it takes away responsibilities attributed to adults. It wants the young refugee to be a child again: "They are both kids".

This shift in perceptions of children and childhood from 'being of use' to 'being oneself' is also present in Sandra's narrative. By removing the older brother's responsibility for his youngest sibling and asking the latter to begin 'taking care of his clothes', the welfare state wants to provide a space for the oldest brother to 'develop himself'. Paradoxically, by expecting the older brother, who has been acting like an adult, to become a child again, Sandra seems to believe in the possibility of reverting the older brother to a previous life stage and thus questions the unilinear, rigid nature of life stages. The welfare state focuses on the oldest brother's vulnerability, caused by him taking on too much responsibility; this, however, could also be understood as him being resourceful. The dichotomy of being either vulnerable or agentive is not real but categorically constructed; both the older and younger brothers are agentive and vulnerable, but at different scales in their everyday lives.

The extended presence of the welfare state in the everyday lives of young refugees

raises questions concerning how to move forward in order to help them better. The fixity of the categories does not allow those at the boundaries to 'be themselves' in ways consistent with their own understandings of themselves and their ontological being. If the categories of unaccompanied minor and adult asylum-seeker were to permit a transitional period reflective of the social realities of these young refugees, it would allow young refugees like Rahim both to continue an education and to begin working, so that their resourcefulness as young boys could be recognized. This in turn might enable them to develop a sense of belonging that would place them in a better position to integrate in a place that could become home.

Conclusion

This article has focused on a group of refugees who have received little attention, despite their growing significance in Denmark and Europe. The number of young people who leave their places of origin on their own has been increasing and will continue to do so. I have explored the category of unaccompanied minor to open up discussion of the notions of age – both chronological and relational – and childhood embedded within this category that influences what kinds of lives these young refugees can develop.

I have shown that there exists a tension between the rigidity of a legal structure that is guided by chronological age and the fluidity with which young refugees understand themselves. Young refugees' understandings of who they are are relational, primarily with respect to their family, but also, as I have shown, to the categories in which they are placed. This affects how they understand themselves and their present and potential future lives in Denmark. There is power in classifying and constructing concepts. As

Bourdieu noted: “Classification by age (but also by sex and class...) always means imposing limits and producing an order to which each person must keep, keeping himself in place” (Bourdieu 1993: 94).

Unfolding the category of unaccompanied minor also led to an examination of the construction of life stages, such as that of childhood. Life stages in the West are edified through the establishment of chronological age. Chronological age and the life stage of childhood are thus central to understanding what lies within the unmalleable legal category of unaccompanied minor. By analysing young refugees’ narratives, I have explored how they make sense of themselves relationally with regard to the realities in which they exist in – both the reality of being separated

from their families, and of being part of the Danish refugee and asylum system – and the reality of having a family, present or absent, that plays a vital role in their self-understandings. The findings suggest that a relational approach allows for a better understanding of these young people’s situations and senses of self beyond the rigidity of the categories of the asylum and refugee system. For young refugees who find themselves on the boundaries of the legal category of unaccompanied minor, a continuum approach that recognizes the blurring of such categories in everyday life and that is able to appreciate the co-existence of agency and vulnerability would offer more holistic support to the young refugees’ quest to belong in Denmark.

Notes

¹ I also spent considerable time with the girls, since, as a female anthropologist, I was allowed into their private spheres more easily.

² Cf. Whyte (2009) for a comprehensive ethnography of single men living in asylum centres in Denmark.

³ Once they turn 18, young refugees lose the right to have a legal guardian, however, as was common with several of my informants the relationship goes beyond the official time.

⁴ Johnson-Hanks (2002) worked with the notion of ‘vital conjunctures’, whereby life stages can be understood as experiential knots where potential futures can open up to a range of identities that can be claimed and can open up to imagined futures. This is a temporary configuration of possible change that carries both uncertainty and potential.

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