'I AM GOING TO EUROPE TOMORROW':
The Myth of the Anchor Child and the Decision to Flee in the Narratives of Unaccompanied Children

Abstract

The term 'anchor child' implicates that, to create future homes in another country, parents supposedly use their children by sending them on a mission as 'unaccompanied minors'. Since the term is sometimes used in public debate, our aim is to use elements of this stereotype to analyse and contrast it to the young people's own narratives. Through repeated interviews and observations with 23 unaccompanied children living in Sweden over the course of one year, this article provides complex narratives of the decision to escape, the rationality of the escape plan and the ways in which the young people reflect on possible future reunion with their families. Results show that their flight and its outcome is related to the young people's agency during a struggle for survival affected by current political and social contexts, making the tendency to interpret the children's situation through a 'Western' nuclear family rationality highly problematic.

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Introduction

I was at work, at dad's. And a friend called me. He told me: 'I'm going to Europe tomorrow'. I was like: 'Are you kidding? It isn't that easy!' He said: 'Yes, we've already decided to go, and we will go, do you want to tag along?' (Jamad)

The term 'anchor child' is sometimes used in the public debate to refer to children who have been sent to Europe, and in this case, Sweden, by their parents expecting them to seek asylum and residence permits. The stereotypical idea connected to the 'anchor child' is that the parents plan to use their children as 'anchors' that they can later join, thus becoming eligible for benefits from the receiving nation (Stretmo 2010, 2014). As Stretmo suggests, the term serves to discredit the motives of unaccompanied children: 'Seen as "anchor children" they are not to be understood as "orphans" nor as "refugees", but rather as "economic migrants" shipped away by their calculating parents hoping for a better life in the West on the grounds of family unification with the unaccompanied child' (Stretmo 2014: 102–103). It is a stereotyping term that portrays these young people and their families as suspicious – as a group not worthy of staying in Sweden. Further, the concept veils the ways in which the current social and political European context might affect choices, possibilities and plans for these children (cf. Jones & Teytelboym

2016). Together with other negative descriptions of 'unaccompanied minors', the myth of the 'anchor child' influences how people, politicians and journalists think about and describe these young people and their situation (Stretmo 2014).

One central feature of the term 'anchor child' is the role that is ascribed to the parents, who are portrayed as having arranged their child's journey. The introductory quote from a boy we call Jamad tells us another story. His escape was not a result of his parents' plans. They did not know that Jamad was leaving. Instead, it was a friend who had invited him to come along on the journey to escape the violence, danger and oppression in their home country. The quote originates from a narrative that was presented to us in our project titled '*Unaccompanied refugee children' in a hyper-interconnected world[1],* where we follow 23 young unaccompanied minors over a 2-year period through repeated interviews and observations, listening to their narratives about life. Although the term anchor child has been rightfully criticised and considered a myth (Lederer 2013, Werner-Lin et al. 2010), it is still spread among right-wing media and blogs, in mainstream media and in the general public debate (Sveriges Television 2012). The myths connected to the anchor child concept have sometimes been spread even by the Swedish authorities, as when migration authorities have described unaccompanied minors as having been sent to Sweden on a mission by their families (Integrationsverket 2003).

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Research on unaccompanied children has mainly focussed on psychosocial health issues, such as mental health (Derluyn & Broekaert 2007, Groark, Sclare & Raval 2011), the reception system (Wernesjö 2011, Stretmo 2014) and on human or children's rights (Lundberg 2011, Schiratzki 2000). Although research that includes the unaccompanied children's own voices and their agency has increased lately (cf. Wernesjö 2011), there remains a need for both their voices to be heard and their agency as active subjects to be recognised. Listening to their perspectives becomes particularly important since the anchor child myth and similar negative stereotypes are still being used and spread in media and politics when addressing unaccompanied children. In addition, listening to what they tell us about their lives provides a complex image of unaccompanied children, in which they become something else than traumatised, vulnerable and misrecognised victims used as tools controlled by their 'calculating parents' (cf. Marlowe 2010). By providing a complex image that has been generated through recurrent listening to what our informants have to say about themselves and their everyday life, we may be able to help them become recognised as individuals in their own right (Fraser 2000). Marlowe (2010: 188), also referring to Fraser, writes that '… when society views refugees more as ordinary people beyond the category of passive victim, there is a greater potential to see "them" as more like "us" and consequently as members of the community'.

In this article, our aim is to contribute to the academic discussion about unaccompanied minors, as well as their decision to flee and navigate in Europe, through listening to their voices and narrated perspectives. We use elements of the anchor child myth as points of reference to analyse our informants' complex narratives about their experiences of leaving families and homes behind and travelling to Sweden, as well as their thoughts about their families and possible reunions in Sweden.

The 'Anchor Child': A Concept for 'Othering'

We interpret the term 'anchor child' as a concept used in processes of 'othering'. According to Hall (1997), using stereotypes is equivalent to practising symbolic and epistemic power by distorting reality. In Hall's words, a stereotype:

> […] sets up a symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant', the 'normal' and the 'pathological', the 'acceptable' and 'the unacceptable', what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other', what is 'insider' or 'outsider', Us and Them. (1997: 258)

Consequently, we argue that a concept such as 'the anchor child' functions to stigmatise and 'othering' groups of people by creating differences between binary positions, between 'Us' and 'Them' (Hall 1997).

There is also a tendency to interpret the situation of unaccompanied children and their families as a sign of *family deviance*. Burman (2007) claims that in areas of the world often referred to as the 'West', there is a hegemonic and highly racialised and imperialistic understanding of what a family should be. This understanding stresses the supremacy of the nuclear family and is based on a mother-child-centred discourse for child development. Such a perspective on the family can also be used to legitimise hierarchies between groups of people, creating a division between 'us' and 'them'. According to Burman (2007:82), this hegemonic perspective has remained dominant through the firm position

of developmental psychology and its tendency to interpret child development as 'fixed, unilinear and timeless'. Thus, this interpretation of family and childhood implies that sending your child alone through Europe is bad parenting, based on the assumption that all children need their parents by their side, despite the fact that trying to keep your child alive seems like a rational choice while living in a war zone. Another aspect of the same 'Western' interpretation of familyhood is the objective of keeping the nuclear family intact. Stretmo (2010) points out that the concept of anchor child constructs the parents as opportunists and abusers, which differentiates them from a 'Western' family ideal. This ideal says that good parenthood takes place inside the nuclear family (cf. Burman 2007, Mattsson 2010), making it an ideal that 'fragmented' immigrant families, exposing their children to risks, have difficulties in meeting. Thus, the ideal of the nuclear family can be used to legitimise hierarchical ascribed differences between a proper, solid family, represented by 'us', and an improper, fragmented family, represented by 'them'.

According to Butler (2009), the lives of people who are 'othered' are ungrievable and considered less worthy than lives that can be grieved. The grievability of lives depends on how these lives are framed, i.e. how a particular life relates to 'specific ontologies of the subject' (Butler 2009: 3). Framing subjects in stereotypical ways – as 'others' – leads to a dehumanisation that can make their lives ungrievable. Consequently, reframing is an act performed to create new frames that allow ungrievable lives to become recognised as precarious and grievable (Butler 2009). Reframing means that the unaccompanied refugees become recognised as complex human beings and are not misrecognised as 'thin' stereotypical characters. Our ambition with this article is to contribute to such a reframing.

The Elements of the Anchor Child

> Because there are so few children who actually come here on their own initiative, there are those who want nothing else than to return. At the same time, this desire conflicts with their 'mission', which they feel they have been given by having been sent here (Integrationsverket 2003, our translation).

In this quote from Integrationsverket (the Department of Integration, the predecessor of today's Swedish Migration Agency), it is evident how the idea of anchor children has manifested itself in Swedish authority rhetoric. The myth of the anchor child includes the following three elements:

1. The claim that the children come to Sweden on their parents' initiative.
2. The idea that the parents have specific target destinations in mind for their children's journeys, such as Sweden.
3. The thought that they are supposedly on a mission that includes a conscious strategy to create conditions that will allow their family to follow.

In this article, we will use the connotative content of the myth as a point of reference for analysing and discussing the narratives provided by the young people participating in our study. Empirically, a few questions are connected to each one of these three elements. Element 1: How do they describe the decision to escape and from whom did they get the idea? Were their parents the key players in the decision-making? Based on their narratives, how can the decision-making be described? Element 2: How rational was the planning of

the journey following the decision to leave home? Was Sweden the planned final destination? Element 3: How do they reflect on reunion with their family? Do they see it as possible or desirable?

Method

The empirical material we have used to try to understand the young people's rationale for escaping and seeking asylum in Sweden was gathered during an ongoing, qualitative long-term follow-up study in which we have repeatedly been meeting with 23 young 'unaccompanied' individuals over a 2-year period. At the time of writing, we have been following them for more than a year. We have met with all participants at least once a month, engaging in interviews, informal conversations and ethnographic observations. These recurrent meetings have given us opportunities to analyse both changes in their lives and the ways in which they have dealt with these changes.

We believe that building trust is of vital importance in creating a social encounter in which participants truly want to provide a 'thicker' narrative (Kohli 2006), i.e. a more complex and nuanced narrative than they would have if they had only met us once or if they had believed we represented the authorities. The importance of trust is stressed by Kohli (2006: 708), who, referring to Beek and Schofield (2004), writes that 'unaccompanied children' in long-term foster care are sometimes described as 'closed book children', meaning that they 'worry about safely talking to others'. We have noticed similar tendencies in our project. We have found that these are often related to experiences among the young migrants living in municipal and private facilities of being treated, by staff members, like children who fail to accommodate to a desired 'Swedishness' (Kaukko & Wernesjö 2016; Lalander & Raoof 2017). Such experiences create problems in communication and trust, resulting in a situation where residents provide staff members with 'thin' narratives (Kohli 2006) and reinforce staff–resident boundaries.

In our study, we have tried to overcome potential communication barriers through a long-term design and by repeatedly reflecting on how we relate to our participants and their narratives. Furthermore, our qualitative interviews have been relatively open, thereby providing the participants with the opportunity to decide when and how to talk about important themes. The fact that we met them so many times meant that we could wait to talk about sensitive issues such as close family members until they were ready for it. Some participants might spontaneously have talked about their flight or reunification, while 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.

All but two of the 23 participants have received a permanent residence permit in Sweden. They have lived in Sweden between 6 months and 5 years and are between 15 and 22 years of age. We have recruited young people with different backgrounds, living conditions and current life situations. In terms of gender, there are fewer 'unaccompanied' girls than boys arriving in Sweden, the approximate ratio being 1: 10 (Migrationsverket 2018). At the moment, we are following three girls, the number roughly corresponding to the proportion of girls entering Sweden unaccompanied by adults. In addition, the participants are representative in terms of origin (Afghans and Somalis were the largest groups arriving in Sweden; other countries represented are Ethiopia, Iran, Syria and Pakistan).

We have paid considerable attention to the ethical aspects of the study, especially since some of our informants live under 'vulnerable'

conditions that are partly determined by others, such as social workers, group home staff or other official agencies. It has been important to maintain and respect the trust that the young people have granted us. Informed consent was sought from all participants at the beginning of the study, and we have continuously asked for their consent during the study. All names are pseudonyms, and some of the participants decided themselves what pseudonym they wanted. We have chosen not to disclose age and background in order not to reveal too much information about the participants. At any point, the participants can end their participation in the project. Members of the research group have had regular meetings to discuss ethical considerations and dilemmas, with the goal of minimising the risk of the participants being harmed in any way.[2]

The interviews and observation notes have been transcribed in full, from digital recordings, by the authors. The transcribed material and written documents have been analysed on the basis of the anchor child elements outlined earlier. Drawing on qualitative analysis, we have searched for important themes and sub-themes (cf. Agar 1980) in the participants' narratives – themes that are related to the anchor child myth. As addressed in the Introduction section and in accordance with ethnographic research methods (Lalander 2015), we have searched for complexities rather than simple answers. We have interpreted what the participants have told us, namely, their narratives, as constructions of another type of explanation than that provided by the public stereotype of the anchor child. Because we have met the young people over time and thus have developed trust, we believe they have provided us with relatively 'thick' narratives (Kohli 2006), full of nuances and complexities. We also believe that these complexities comprise memory-based verbal constructions that correspond to what took place and how the informants were thinking and acting at the time. At the very least, they relate to us their interpretation of how and why they have acted in certain ways.

Deciding to Leave Home

Muhammed: Well, it's dangerous for me. It's dangerous for me […] I have problems with Al-Shabab[3], they know me. They still want me to come back. A lot of times, they got [a hold] of my number, and I didn't answer. […] [Al-Shabab] turn to the families, mothers, everything. And they shoot behind their houses and then the military shoots back on the big father. Their families are dead; they don't think. It's something they've done to the boys. The boys don't think. No. Yes, I got… They gave me a couple of hours to think.

Interviewer: And then you left?

Muhammed: Yes, the same day I made my decision. […] I told [a friend], I'm afraid, I want to leave this place. He said: 'Me too, do you have any money?' I didn´t have any money, but I checked my father's pocket and found a hundred and twenty-five dollars. That was enough; I could buy a ticket to Ethiopia. […] I stayed there for six months, my family thought I was dead.

Interviewer: And then you left for Libya?

Muhammed: Yes, no. They called me, and my father called me and said: 'Come back, come back!' But I told him, 'I'm not coming back'. My mum helped me with money.

As previously described, the common understanding of unaccompanied 'anchor children' promotes the view that their escape to Sweden has been planned by their parents. However, when we listen to our participants' narratives, this is seldom the case. In Muhammed's statement, a few central themes emerge. 1. A local situation of violence and danger in which the militant group Al-Shabab tries to recruit new members/soldiers. Most of our informants have described similar types of violent local situations. 2. This situation, in which he feels 'afraid', prompts him to find a solution, and this solution becomes tangible when he interacts with friends who are planning to escape to Ethiopia. The theme 'friends helping each other' is presented in many of the stories we have heard. 3. The parents are not involved in the decision-making. Rather, they are kept in the dark about the plans.

There may be many reasons for not involving parents. In Muhammed's case, the 'secret' escape was most likely based on his desire to move as quickly as possible, not wanting to face his own doubts or risk being stopped by his parents. Muhammed explains how he even stole money from his father, possibly because he would not get money by asking for it. Jamad, another participant, tells us that he called a friend of his father, after leaving his home. He recalls:

> I told my father's friend I was leaving, he didn't believe me. He called me up asking me where I was after an hour or so. I answered: 'I'm on my way to Europe'. He told me he had not believed me and wished me good luck. I asked him to tell my father I had left.

According to many of our informants, parents were seldom involved in the decision-making. Maria and Mariam, two of the girls in our study, had to hide their escape from their parents because their parents had previously decided that they were to be married to older men. 4. The fourth theme in Muhammed's story is the speed of decision-making. In many stories, it is remarkable how fast things happen. Most informants had not been planning their flight over an extended period, rather the opposite. Leaving home seems to have followed upon sudden violent situations and the unexpected opportunity to depart with a group of people.

However, in some cases, the parents did play a central role in deciding where to go and where not to go. In Morteza's story, his mother gave him advice about the alternatives. Like many boys from Afghanistan, he left his country to work in Iran:

> Interviewer: But when you were in Iran, where did you want to go?
>
> Morteza: Nowhere,/…/I was supposed to go back to Afghanistan.
>
> Interviewer: Ok, how come you went [to Sweden]?
>
> Morteza: I wasn't supposed to come here. I was supposed to go back to Afghanistan, to my family. I was in contact before, when I was in Iran, and my family lived in [town]. I had been talking to my mother. I told [her], 'I have some money. I can return to Afghanistan', but my mother said: 'It's dangerous for you when you return, you can't come here, and you can't stay in Afghanistan'. I had problems [with a relative], he tried to find us, find me, to kill.

Morteza was partly influenced by his mother. It is obvious that she was thinking about her son's safety, rather than seeing him as someone to use for her own purposes when he had reached a safe harbour. The myth of the anchor child drains parents of their caring emotions, whereas Morteza expresses just the opposite when talking about his mother. Even when parents are involved, their involvement is much more complicated than what is signalled through the image of the anchor child. Solomon tells us that his mother was much more involved than his father was. He says, 'My dad didn't want me to [go]; he couldn't stop me and my mum'. Quite a few of our informants were involved in small alliances with their mothers while preparing for the escape from violence, local wars and risks. There may be planning involved in these types of alliances, but not in the sense of an 'anchor child plan'.

For some, it has been difficult to discuss and share their decision with their parents. Zahra tells us that the violent situation in her country of origin forced her to leave. After her father had been killed, her mother jailed, and her brothers abused by the police, her brothers fled the country. She recounts the following:

> When I got home after school and entered their room, they were not there. I found a note. They wrote: 'The police didn't catch us, we have left'. I don't know where they moved, but I hope to see them someday [again].

Zahra describes how she was threatened by a relative who demanded sex in return for helping her mother get out of prison. Eventually, the situation left her with no other choice but to flee just like her brothers had. Since their father was dead and their mother in prison, the children had no choice other than to decide on their own. However, Zahra tells us that she did visit her mother in prison and asked for her advice on what to do. Her mother told her to flee. Zahra left for Europe together with a younger cousin, whom she now calls her younger brother.

Having experienced severely exposed situations of violence and oppression, many young people in our study have felt the need to find a solution to their problems by going somewhere else, often quite urgently, within a few days' time. Although parents are sometimes involved in the planning and flight, they seem to do so with the interest of their child in mind rather than due to self-interest (cf. Marlowe 2010; Stretmo, 2010).

Sweden as the Target Destination?

> Interviewer: But, what did you do for all these years? That is, your childhood?
>
> Javad: I was on the road. I fled Afghanistan when I was nine. Nine, when I fled, started my first employment when I was ten.

Javad tells us that he was on the road for several years, working and providing for his family. In the public and political debate, it is easy to get the impression that people choose Sweden as the objective for their flight. Although some young people in our study decided to go to Sweden early on, the vast majority were travelling a bumpy road before ending up in Sweden. Amir is an exception to the pattern. When he set out, his destination was Sweden. Before leaving Iran, he knew he wanted to go there because some friends had told him Sweden was a safe country in which to live. Thus, his family in Afghanistan was not central in the decision-making. Many others made the decision after arriving in Europe, like Sami:

Interviewer: Did they [the parents] plan for you to seek asylum in Spain then, or?
Sami: Yes. I went there first, before I arrived in Sweden.

Interviewer: How long have you been in Europe?

Sami: Almost two years.

Interviewer: Okay, so you weren't in Spain for an especially long time.

Sami: No.

Interviewer: No, why did you end up in Sweden then?

Sami: Because [in Spain] it is not possible to be granted a residence permit. And then I called some of my friends; they told me it was better to move to Sweden. Because there it is possible to live. And that is when I decided to move to Sweden.

Although it can be argued that, to some extent, Sami's story corresponds to the myth of the 'anchor child' because his parents had sent him to Spain, it also shows how bumpy the road to final settlement can be. Sami had already entered Europe when he decided to continue to Sweden, following advice from friends. His initial plan was never to go to Sweden but to seek asylum in Spain. Aarash tells us a similar story in which he ended up in Germany, and only then did he decide to move on to Sweden. Thus, what these young people have in common is that Sweden was seldom their planned final destination before reaching Europe. Another example is provided by Adam:

He left Pakistan together with eleven friends and went to Greece. He stayed there for seven months in a self-made camp. He says, 'with cardboard boxes and stuff'. Out of twelve young people, it was only Adam who ended up in Sweden. Some of his friends now live in Switzerland, one of them lives in Australia (Observation notes).

Adam lived in Greece before moving along, and his friends are now scattered around the world, some ending up in Europe, others in Australia. Adam was the only one in the group of friends who ended up in Sweden. Although he has settled in Sweden, he is not sure that his journey will end here:

He is wondering whether or not he should move to Australia; his parents want him to go there. He is not sure but is considering it now. I ask why he has changed his mind since he previously told me he didn't want to go. He answers that he doesn't know, but that the difference now is that he at least considers it. He has a brother there that he does not have any contact with and another brother planning to move there because his wife lives there (Observation note).

Adam's parents are urging him to move to Australia, where both his brothers will probably settle. In Adam's case, Sweden never was, nor is now, the 'mission'. Still, he likes living in Sweden, and he believes he could have a good life here, but it is not what his parents want for him. Time will tell where Adam finally settles permanently.

Most of the participants had no idea that, one day, they would move to Sweden. However, some of them were advised to go to Sweden by people they met during their journey. Zahra, for instance, did not know she was in Sweden until she was shown a map pointing out where she was. Eddi knew of Sweden, but not that he would end up there.

Interviewer: Did you have any knowledge about Sweden before?

Eddi: Nothing. I could never imagine moving to Sweden ever in my life.

Interviewer: Had you ever heard of Sweden?

Eddi: Well, we did, in school in Afghanistan that is, study some on these Scandinavian countries kind of. That was like… well, you studied Sweden, Norway, Denmark and some. So, I knew what Sweden was, kind of. […] However, I never thought I would move to Sweden. It was kind of a spur of the moment thing, decide, or you're screwed. If I had stayed in Spain, they would have sent me back to Afghanistan.

For Eddi, Sweden was something he had read about in school. It was not the journey's end until he ended up there. Xavi tells us how he left Italy where he wanted to live because people urged him to move on so that he could get a residence permit and because of the difficult situation in Italy at the time. He had no knowledge of Sweden, except for one thing.

Interviewer: And then you left for Europe. Did you know you were going to Sweden or was it a coincidence?

Xavi: Well, actually it was a coincidence; it was Zlatan [Ibrahimović, Swedish soccer player].

Interviewer: [laughing] Really? Is that so?

Xavi: Yes, I only knew Zlatan from Sweden. I was going to Italy; I thought it was beautiful there, it is hot. It is very beautiful there. So, I thought 'we will stay here', [but it was] a giant disaster [Refers to how he perceived the situation for newly arrived migrants in Italy].

These narratives show that there rarely seems to be a straight trajectory from the informants' place of origin to Sweden. Sweden is often not part of the plan. Instead, Sweden as a destination is often the result of coincidences following rumours and tales of other people's experiences or just a pit stop on the way elsewhere. The informants' journeys commonly progress through different stages; they make stops on the way, work and save up money to keep travelling until they find a possible safe harbour. In addition, it is evident that their journeys are strongly influenced by the European political climate and legal framework. For instance, the Dublin Regulation, which stipulates the obligation to seek asylum in the first arrival country in the European Union, restricts possibilities to seek and be granted asylum in the country of your choice (Jones & Teytelboym 2016). Perhaps somewhat paradoxically for our informants, these regulations often force them to keep travelling between European countries without being able to seek asylum or to request help from authorities, since that would entail the risk of them being sent back to their country of arrival. For some of them, staying hidden from authorities until being able to seek asylum in Sweden again became the last possible hope for asylum in Europe.

Family and Reunification

Almost everyone participating in the study stressed their longing for and the importance of their families, although there were some differences in the ways they described the character of the contacts between family members and expectations of possible future family reunification. Further, it is important to emphasise that the concept of family differs from person to person. Some informants talk almost exclusively about their biological family, while others include their 'new' family, such as foster parents or friends. Many long for family, friends or other important people they have had to leave behind. This longing sometimes contributes to feelings of loneliness (Herz & Lalander 2017). According to Yusuf, his longing for his parents, whom he has not seen since 2007, has been difficult to handle. He tells us, 'Think about it. You have left your family when you are thirteen, twelve years, imagine that loneliness'. He expresses that his loneliness and longing for his family have remained in his emotions from when he was much younger than he is at the time of the interview. This longing for and worrying about parents or siblings may manifest itself in efforts to get them to come to Sweden. Morteza speaks openly about missing his family and friends in Afghanistan.

> Sometimes, I think so much because… I feel alone you know. I am alone here. That's right; I am alone. I don't know anyone. I don't have my family [here]. I miss my family. For instance, how I know my friends, my friends in Afghanistan. I've missed a lot of people I knew in Afghanistan or Iran. Sometimes I think about. It's always hard when you're alone. (Morteza)

Morteza had lost contact with his family and had unsuccessfully tried to find them. Eventually, he could find his 15-year-old brother. He helped him to come to Sweden, and his brother now resides here.

Another aspect related to loneliness and longing for family is how well schools and local accommodation solutions answer to the needs of young people. Sometimes, the 'system' creates challenges for them, thus increasing their longing and feelings of being lonely (Herz & Lalander 2017). Reuniting with one's family can be seen as a solution to a situation in which the new home cannot fulfil the need for respect and close ties.

> After one or two months, if things don't get better I am going to move, my custodian tells me that if the school is not better after the summer, he will find me a place in town. If it doesn't get any better I will move, but maybe my family will come here as well, Inshallah (if Allah wants), and I will be able to switch schools. If my family arrives, I don't have to wait for [new] accommodation. My family might be living in town, and I will be able to go to school [there]. I could wait until the summer has passed or until my family comes. (Adel)

Adel wants to switch schools and move to town because things are not working out for him where he currently lives. One possible solution to his problems would be for his family to come to Sweden, and instead, he could reside with them. Adel's family later arrived in Sweden, and the family did reunite. Some of the young people express a desire to get their family to move to Sweden but have been unable to find a solution.

> I have tried in Sweden, but ahhh.. I've tried for a long time but, and then, they are in Somalia, they are not allowed to travel here […] So, I've tried for eight months, it wasn't possible. […] They

[the authorities] said no, you are old enough, and you can take care of yourself. (Hassan)

Hassan tells us how hard it can be to reunite with your family. Rules and regulations, and in Hassan's case his age, being over eighteen, lead to restrictions that are more or less impossible to overcome. Consequently, many of the young people in our study miss their families and want to be able to reunite with them.

However, this is not true for everyone. It is equally common to express reservations about families travelling to Sweden. Eddi's story exemplifies this situation. While wanting his family to come, Eddi is well aware of the difficulties caused by bureaucracy, laws and regulations. He told us at the first interview that he was busy filling out an application for 'family reunification'. He described how it takes at least a year and a half to get a decision. A year later, in February 2016, he had almost given up. By then, the rules for reunification had toughened, as had other asylum laws in Sweden. Instead, he was investigating the possibilities for his family to migrate to Canada while he remained in Sweden. If they could live in Canada, he would not have to live with constant worries about their well-being in Afghanistan. Another reason for expressing doubts may be that things have changed since they last saw each other, which is exemplified in this statement from Yusuf:

> Interviewer: But, would you not like them to come to Sweden then?
>
> Yusuf: Yes, but it won't work. It's kind of hard.
>
> Interviewer: Your mother has remarried too.
>
> Yusuf: Yes, after my father's, after my father passed away.

Like Yusuf, Chuhan describes how his relationship with his family has changed since they last saw each other. In Yusuf's case, his mother has remarried. For Chuhan, it is his brother who has changed. He found his brother after 5 years of being apart, only to discover that he did not know Chuhan as 'a brother' any longer, as Chuhan puts it. Family relations can change over time, and reunification may no longer be a priority. Others cannot find their family at all, as in Zahra's case:

> I don't know. I think of all sides; I don't know. If I see someone from there, from my region, maybe he will be able to help me. Apart from that, no one helps me. But, one day I'll have to find my family [voice thickens]. It's hard; it's hard to find someone to help me.

Completely losing contact with your family makes the prospect of reuniting very uncertain. Zahra has tried to find someone who can help her find her family, but it is difficult when there are no old contacts through which to start a search. In addition, there are those who have not expressed the wish to reunite, at least not in Sweden. Adam's parents urge him to move to his brothers in Australia, and it seems more likely they will reunite there than in Sweden. However, Adam would rather remain in Sweden, although he has started to consider moving. For Adeib, it is the arduous journey to Sweden that makes him unsure whether it would be a good idea for his parents to travel to Sweden.

> In the beginning, I thought maybe I could help them, like that. I went to the Migration office and sat down with a woman talking

about it [reunification]. Then they said, 'you can't really, you are allowed to stay, but your parents and your family can't come to Sweden'. Or, 'you can't do it, you can't tell them to come here. They can, of course, come here, but you can't do anything'. But then I thought about all the difficulties we had during our journey to Sweden. You really have a tough time; it's not that easy to just leave like that. It's hard. And then to have a family with you, if you're alone it's easier. We were young guys. Two-three of us, but in a family, there is probably two or three under the age of ten. So, it's hard to travel with them.

From the perspective of a 'Western' hegemonic family ideal, childhood is preferably taking place inside the nuclear family (Burman 2007), implicating a supposed wish to re-establish a 'shattered' family. On the one hand, the hope of family reunification is perhaps the one component of the anchor child stereotype that connects to the lived experience of the informants. Many of the participants talk about their family and friends with longing in their voices, and with hope to be able to see them again one day. On the other hand, this longing does not imply that they will be able to do so, or that it is a realistic plan for the future. Some see considerable difficulties in allowing their family to make the journey to Sweden. For others, their families, as well as themselves, have moved on in life with new relationships and new future goals. A few do not have a family to reunite with or are not aware of where such a reunion might take place. During our recurrent interviews, it is also possible to see that conversations about the topic of family reunification change over time in relation to current government policies regarding family reunification (cf. Jones & Teytelboym 2016). Sweden toughened its family immigration law in 2015, requiring that families provide for their own subsistence (Regeringen 2015). This law has left some participants with very little hope of family reunification in the future.

Conclusion

While the myth of the anchor child frames 'unaccompanied minors' as victims or tools of a rational, strategic, exploiting family, the narratives of the young people consist of a far more complex and pressing reality, emphasising high degrees of independent individual agency. In this article, we have provided a multifaceted picture of the motives and decision-making that preceded the young asylum seekers' flight to Europe and Sweden.

On the one hand, it might be argued that to a limited extent, there may be a correspondence between the stereotype and aspects of the participants' narratives, for instance when some participants de facto want to, and plan for, a reunification with their families in Sweden. Their narratives could thus, somewhat ironically, be argued to partly overlap with the idea of keeping the nuclear family intact. On the other hand, their stories are far more complex than this element of the anchor child myth. The complexity is, for instance, evident in the way relationships and goals change over time, or through the doubt that many of the participants experience at the thought of their families having to go through the same journey they once had to make. Another unmistakable feature found in the young people's narratives is that *the current political and social context* in Europe has played a significant role in their escape, travel plans and plans for the future (cf. Jones & Teytelboym, 2016). For instance, it is clear that the rules and regulations that condition the opportunities to enter and seek asylum in the European Union affect the itineraries and the available final destinations, as well as future possibilities of reunification.

Another part of the stereotype is the 'economic migrant' and, thus, *an alleged economic rationality among parents*. However, our results indicate that an economic rationality is seldom the incentive triggering the escape. This finding is supported by the fact that most of the young people in our study had been separated from their families and had been on the run long before arriving in Sweden, thus lacking the intent to leave their families to exploit the Swedish 'system'. The rationality of these young people is not primarily based on economic needs but a struggle for security and survival.

Trying to interpret the situation of unaccompanied children and their biological families through *a Western rationality* whereby the ideal of the nuclear family is central is decidedly problematic. While certainly most of the young informants would like to reunite with their parents and siblings, suggesting a longing for a 'nuclear family' existence, the situation for these young people is a lot more complex. Approaching unaccompanied children solely from a nuclear family ideal perspective does not take into account the ways in which the families were organised prior to migration. A nuclear family existence may not have been an option. For instance, as is the case for many of the participants in this study, the family may already have been shattered by deaths, war, poverty or violence or may have been organised by other ideals and values.

A stereotype such as the anchor child *conceals the differences between people*. In our study, the young people all have different histories, often characterised by death, threats and violence, still, nevertheless, unique. Some might have been abandoned because of war, others because of poverty and some have just left for Europe to find a safe place to live free from threats and violence. Not only do they have unique experiences, but they also have different views on their possible futures. They have expressed different dreams and goals, for instance, through the varying approaches they have taken to family reunification.

Finally, many of the statements presented here show that emotions and concerns for other people play a dominant role in the young people's stories, as exemplified by the mothers who, without economic motives, helped their children escape in the hope of providing them with a safe future. The statements also reveal the longing that urges the informants to keep searching for their lost families. Through listening to their statements over time and providing opportunities for 'thick' narratives (cf. Kohli 2006), thus contributing to what Butler (2009) calls *reframing*, it becomes unavoidable to contradict the myth of the anchor child and to create possibilities for their lives to be reframed as complex and as worthy of care and compassion. This higher degree of complexity blurs the distinctions between 'them' and 'us' and, thus, creates a potential to see 'them' as more like 'us', and vice versa, and as members and agents within their Swedish communities (Marlowe 2010, Fraser 2000)[4].

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Notes

1. The study was conducted from 2015 until 2017 in Southern Sweden. The study is being financed by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE).
2. The study has been examined and approved by the ethical review board in Lund (reg. no. 2014/482).
3. Al-Shabab is a militant, Islamic organisation.
4. We would like to express our thanks to the young people who shared their experiences, to our co-workers in the project, Paula Aracena and Dawan Raoof, to Karen Williams and Torun Elsrud, who helped us with our written English, and to the anonymous reviewers and editors who helped us improve the article.

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