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Between Empowerment and Being Powerless: Separated Minors in Sweden

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Abstract

This article deals with post- migration experiences of separated minors with an emphasis on the encounter with Swedish society. The analyze is based on 34 interviews with 13 separated minors. Six are newly arrived (2008) and five arrived during the nineties. All of them where seeking asylum in Sweden. Two were refugees and they arrived earlier, one in 1943 and one in the end of the 70:ies. Their experiences of continuing their lives based on the past, while at the same time building a new life during a period of transition between different countries and between childhood and adulthood can be described as “a life on hold.” Arriving in a new country brings changes that they have not been able to anticipate. A prominent feature of several of the accounts is the feeling of being a stranger, both to one’s surroundings and to oneself.

Keywords: asylum-seekers, reception system, separated minors, Sweden

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Introduction

In this article we describe and analyze the migration experiences of 13 separated minors in Sweden as a part of international independent child migration. Six are newly arrived (2008) and five arrived during the nineties. All 11 were seeking asylum in Sweden. Two were refugees and they arrived earlier, one in 1943 and one in the end of the 70:ies. Separated minors means people less than 18 years old arriving in Sweden without a legal guardian. As the term is commonly used in Sweden we will also use it in this article. Separated minor does not necessarily mean that the child has arrived without the company of, for example, siblings, other relatives or acquaintances. The majority of those currently arriving in Sweden are young people between 15 and 18, and the vast majority is boys (www.migrationsverket.se). What many of these children and young people have in common is that they have been forced to flee because of war, violence and a lack of possibilities for the future in areas of conflict (cf. Ayotte 2000; Montgomery et. al. 2001; Thomas et. al. 2004; Kholi 2007).

Our aim is to emphasize the experiences of post- migration and the encounter with Swedish society and the conditions for continuing their lives based on the past, while at the same time building a new life during a period of transition between different countries and between childhood and adulthood.

Theory and conceptual framework

The experiences of the interviewed separated minors are shaped in an intersection of diverse conditions and contexts. To start with all 13 interviewees have experience of international migration. In order to understand and analyze experiences of migration, arriving and settle in Sweden we will use analytical terms common within transnational and postcolonial theory which capture important themes of the interviewees' accounts (Povrzanovic' 2001; Levitt and Glick – Shiller 2004). In the last two decades theories about transnationalism have added to or changed the way migration between different nations may be understood. Migration is far

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from as simple as leaving one nation to resettle in another, but also about different kinds of bonds and boundaries that shape experiences of transnationalism. Belonging to several transnational contexts becomes an issue and in this process it is not necessarily the nation which is most important to the individual. Within this context it is common that immigrants experience alienation, not because of loss of the origin country, but because of the experience of becoming an “immigrant”

Prominent, with titles such as “Out of place” and “No one home”, are experiences of dislocation, loss of family and house and lack of power of taking charge of one’s own life (Linger 2001, Said 1999). Being “dislocated” is then a consequence of the subordination the migrant might experience in many levels, starting a new life in a new country with no means and economical resources. Theories about transnationalism and dislocation are mostly developed from the perspective of adults (cf Mayall 2002). Therefore it is important to understand that structural conditions for migration, for example economical situation and legislation, give children possibilities and experiences different from adults in many aspects.

In this paper the special contexts and the structural conditions are the situation in Sweden and the juridical and social reception-system. It will be described through the experiences of the interviewed but also theorized. A characteristic of institutional fostering in Sweden is the ideology of “the liberated self”, which means “a person with the capacity to detach oneself from any particular standpoint or point of view, to step backwards, as it were, and view and judge that standpoint or point of view from the outside” (MacIntyre 1981). It is an ideal of becoming free to go your own way, making your own decisions and taking responsibility for your life choices. For separated minors, this fostering is regulated and governed by means of all the rules and routines of group residences, the Social Services’ routine forms on individual development plans, and by means of the pedagogy of schools, in particular that of the preparatory classes (cf. Gustafsson 2004; Fioretos 2009; Norström et. al 2010; Severinsson

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2010). Another characteristic of the reception in Sweden is that minors, irrespective of their age, are treated both socially and legally as children or as teenagers, if they are less than 18. In accordance with Swedish legislation and policy, school is an obligation until the age of 16 and normally continued until the age of 18. Work is part of spare time and minors rarely function as family providers in Sweden (cf. Söderlind och Engwall 2008).

Related to the philosophy behind the reception-system in Sweden is power relations and the child's status in society. In research about children, they have often been conceptualized in terms similar to those of a minority group in society and thereby marginalized in several aspects, such as political influence, property and status. Being *a child* and also *an asylum seeker* might lead to double marginalization and subordination in relation to the majority (Keselman 2009:16). To the categories of being a child and an asylum seeker can be added the lack of language and factors of class and socioeconomic status. It is in this intersection between experiences from international migration, leaving home and from post - migration and the Swedish reception-system the narratives about *experiences* of post - migration are created in the interviews (cf. Frykman & Gilje 2003).

Method

The article is based on a total of 34 interviews held with 13 individuals who all have the experience of arriving in Sweden as separated minors. The 13 interviewees currently live in various parts of Sweden, and they were selected through contacts with various group residences, and with guardians *ad litem*. The interviews were conducted in a place of the interviewee's choice, at the group residence, in the person's home or at a café. Nine are boys/men and four are girls/women. The youngest one was 9 years old when she arrived in Sweden, while the oldest was just under 18. Today the oldest interviewee is in her early

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seventies, and the youngest has just turned 19. They originate from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Finland, Montenegro, Croatia, Iraq, Somalia and Uruguay.

The 13 interviewees arrived in Sweden at different times. The oldest participant came to Sweden during the 1940's from Finland, and the two youngest came in 2008, from Afghanistan and Eritrea respectively.

Eight of the 13 individuals were interviewed on three occasions within two years, and five on two occasions. Thus there has been time for the interviewees to develop and return to thoughts and previous narrations in follow up interviews. We chose this approach for ethical reasons. Our experience is that interviews, particularly those of autobiographical nature with people with migration and refugee experiences, might seem pleasant at the time, but a feeling of having said "too much" may develop afterwards. Follow up is therefore important.

The interviews are based on open, flexible questions, with the first interview being about how and why the person has come to Sweden, and about settling in a new country. The second interview was about identity and language, and the third returned to various themes from the two earlier interviews. This article grows out of data on a larger research project: *Behind closed doors - the impact of community interpreting according to legal security and integration with a special focus on the reception of separated asylum seeking children* (2008 – 2011).

The experiences of the interviewed persons have to be interpreted independently of each other and with the fact in mind that the children in our study have migrated from, and between, different countries and in different times. The political, economical, juridical and social conditions in Sweden have also changed over the years. Still, they have all experienced decisions of departure, migration and arriving in Sweden. These experiences might not be common in substance. They can be described rather as a sort of abstract topics, such as breaking up, leaving family, starting a new life in a new country and in addition to this,

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feelings of for example alienation, being alone, guilt, abandonment and freedom. By interviewing minors who are newly arrived, as well as adults looking back, our aim is to capture diverse but also common traits that can be distinguished from the individual narratives and also possible long term consequences. We will concentrate the following parts around the accounts from three separated children Aisha, Emanuel and Tariq. The experiences of the other ten will be used to fill in.

The reception of separated minors in Sweden

The Swedish reception of separated minors is based on the rights laid down in international agreements, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva and the asylum seekers' rights under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Geneva Convention.

Before 2006 it was the Migration Board that had responsibility for the separated children arriving in Sweden. Emanuel was 13 years old when he came to Sweden in 1991. His grandmother had put him on a plane in Eritrea and two days later he arrived at the airport in Stockholm. The grandmother's decision to send him to Europe, was against Emanuel's will. He had no understanding of the risks of being forced to do military service in Eritrea and at the time he was too young to understand that his grandmother sent him away in order to protect him. From the airport in Stockholm, he was first sent to a transit home. This housing, run by the Migration Board, was meant to be short term. After a month he was sent to a group residence. Since he was outspoken and difficult as a child, the staff at the residence decided that he would be better off living in a family home. Emanuel was sent to a family, and at first it was difficult living with them, but gradually it got better. He stayed in the family for four years until he started high school and moved to another city.

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In 2006 an enactment came into effect that stipulated a joint responsibility for the reception of separated minors between Sweden's municipal authorities and county councils, together with the National Migration Board and the National Board of Health and Welfare. Since then, the Migration Board is responsible for examining the minor's asylum application, for matters related to assistance and matters related to returning home (SFS 2994:137). Furthermore, the Migration Board is responsible for signing agreements with municipal authorities governing the reception of separated minors. The responsibilities of the County Council include offering healthcare and dental care to the same extent as to other young people in Sweden. Confidentiality is observed between the different authorities, meaning that authorities at different levels do not share information with each other.

Aisha left a big city in Eritrea in 2008 and upon arrival in Sweden she was first placed in a transit home. The stay at the transit home should be short term and the Migration Board should refer the minor to a municipal authority as soon as possible. After six months Aisha was sent to a group residence run by the municipal authority. The municipal authority that accepts separated minors is compensated for the cost and is responsible for ensuring that the minor receives the support and help stipulated in the Social Services Act. Among other things, the municipal authority is obliged to investigate the needs of the minor and to decide on a suitable place to live. This could mean one of the group residences run by the municipal authority, a family home, or sometimes staying with a relative. As the processing of a minor's asylum application should normally take place within three months, the accommodation is meant to be short term, even though in practice young people may live at a group residence for more than two years.

Aisha stayed at the group residence for almost two years, and then she moved to an apartment nearby. This apartment is connected to the activities at the residence, and even if she lives alone she has the possibility to get help and advice from the staff there.

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When Tariq arrived in Sweden in 2008 he was in bad shape. His flight from Afghanistan had taken several months and he came to Sweden hiding under a truck. He was sent to a transit home, but he found it difficult to relate to the other minors living there. After three months he was appointed a family home. The move to the family was not according to his will, but the staff thought that this was for the best.

The municipal authority is required to appoint a guardian *ad litem* for the young person, who is responsible for their personal situation up to the age of 18. She or he has no duty to support the child financially.

When Aisha and Tariq was granted a residence permit, the municipal authority was responsible for the long-term planning of their continued upbringing and to provide them with the prerequisites for integrating into Swedish society (Norström and Gustafsson 2010).

Migrant minors are governed by different rules and laws than adults. Separated asylum seeking children are placed in custody under the same laws and conditions as Swedish children without a guardian *ad litem* or who need to be placed in custody for their own protection (Social Services Act 2001:453). Many live with relatives or in specially approved family homes. Whatever the situation, the child is subject to adults, guardian *ad litem*s and residence staff who all, to varying degrees, want to influence and foster.

Breaking up

Aisha fled Ethiopia together with her mother and two younger brothers in 2008. Along the way an opportunity came at short notice for just a couple of people to get seats on an airplane to Europe. At that point her mother chose to send the two oldest children, and with no further explanation she put them on the plane to Sweden. Aisha was taken by surprise when she understood that she and her brother were leaving alone without their mother. “*She was our safety. She was everything to us*”, Aisha says. At that time Aisha was 15 years old and her

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brother was 13. *“At first I was angry with her, but now I can see that she sacrificed everything to rescue us”*. Aisha has not been in contact with her mother since that day two years ago.

Not knowing why he was sent away remains one of the big questions even today to Emanuel. He knows that his grandmother sold something valuable in order to send him to Europe. He was 13 years old, when he was put on a plane, not having any idea of where he was going. Arriving in Sweden in 1988, he did not know where he was. He saw a sign at the airport *“Welcome to Sweden”* and he did not know anything about Sweden. Emanuel describes it as frightful to arrive in a country he never heard of or *“never even thought of before”*. A feeling of loneliness and abandonment grew strong within him. Still today, he says, he has to live with this feeling of abandonment.

Tariq tells us that he did not take part in the decision to leave Afghanistan in 2008, but that he was well aware that it was very difficult to live there. He does not know how much his family paid to have him smuggled out. Tariq’s account is of a very difficult flight through several countries. It is an experience shared by many of those who come to Sweden from Asian and African countries (cf. *In the best interest of the child* 2010). It is a journey that encompasses the fear of discovery and imprisonment, and experiences of violence, abuse, physical pain and anguish. Tariq describes how he lost track of time and space during his flight, and the difficulties of having to depend on different smugglers along the way. When he came to Greece the smuggler left him behind without money. He worked as a dishwasher for nine months in Athens in order to save money. Tariq says that he liked living in Greece, that the people were nice to him, but that his possibilities to study and build a future there were minimal. From others he heard about Sweden, and decided to go. But he could not leave until a Greek citizen helped smuggle him out. Tariq explains how he was hiding under a truck between Italy and Sweden without any idea of when and where it would arrive. His body ached from the uncomfortable sitting position he was in, but he could not change it. He says

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he cannot believe that he did this and that it feels like very long ago, like a totally different life. For two years he did not have contact with his mother, but today they talk once a week on the phone.

Only a few of the interviewees fled straight from their home country to Sweden. The others either left with their families first, or made their own way to Sweden via a number of countries. The children thus have transnational experiences (cf. Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004:1003). The migration was not about the simple goal of getting to Sweden, but about a series of different decisions that were made along the way, by others or in interaction with others, e.g. smugglers or local citizens, as indicated by Tariq.

Changing identities

Most interviews deal with experiences of arriving in Sweden. Tariq explains, “*Nobody wanted to talk to me. Everyone seemed afraid of me*”. He also describes how he was hungry and wanted food when he arrived in Sweden. He was given sandwiches and actually thought they were strange. He had never seen sandwiches before. It may seem a small detail, but in fact several interviewees describe the very same thing, that they were hungry and were given sandwiches. The surprise at the sandwiches shows how they suddenly realized that they were approaching a society which was different from what they were used to. On one level it is perfectly obvious that this should be so, but at the same time it is a question of very profound experiences. In meeting with the new society they became aware of themselves.

Aisha and Emanuel, in particular, delve deeply into these feelings of dislocation and changing identities. Aisha describes how the Aisha she left behind in the city of several million inhabitants where she grew up, spoke another language, had a family, and knew what she wanted and how she was going to get it. She explains how she used to look to the future with confidence. Today she is most often a “*Swedish-speaking Aisha*” who isn’t “*Aisha Aisha*”, she says. Perhaps it is the same kind of experience that makes Aisha ask the

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interviewer searchingly “*can you see where I am from?*” She receives a question in return: “*Does it matter?*” At this, Aisha shrugs her shoulders, but says that no-one can see that she is Ethiopian, instead people think she is Somali or Arab. This also amounts to a loss of identity or a reduction, since all the things that makes Aisha Aisha, e.g., her language and her having grown up in a big city, are not perceived by people around her. Instead, they see something else, something that, for most of the time, has no meaning to Aisha.

Looking back on these experiences, Emanuel, who is over thirty today, says that his migration experiences makes “*me an immigrant*”. It is a feeling he has lived with all these years in Sweden. Even when he first spoke to the border police, when he was registered as an asylum seeker, something happened with his identity. His name was misspelled and it has never been possible to correct this mistake. Emanuel almost seems to be asking “*why?*” when he describes this. Almost on a daily basis, people around him remind him of his position as an “immigrant”, by not greeting him or even telling him to “go home”.

But where is home? Where does he belong? Like Aisha, and the others we have interviewed, Emanuel carries a great sorrow, his separation from his family. The separation was very hard for him, and in retrospect he can see that it was one of the reasons he was aggressive and very difficult to deal with during his first years in Sweden. He simply did not want to be here.

Aisha, who still has not found her mother, describes how these changes force her to learn to be a new person, and how this can be hard even if it also brings many possibilities. She describes how she, like most newly arrived minors, attended a preparatory class in which Swedish was the main subject. Every day she felt she was losing knowledge in all the subjects she had previously studied. When she left Ethiopia she was just about to finish upper secondary education and apply for University. In Sweden she had to start all over again, and within an education system that is different from what she was used to. In some aspects

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she feels that she was “older” in her home country as she was ready to apply for University and now she is attending preparatory classes. At the same time, she explains, if staying in Ethiopia she would have had the opportunity to rely on her mother’s advice for much longer. Taking decisions relying only on herself is tough.

Aisha, Emanuel and Tariq say they feel like “*strangers*” in Sweden. This is both because they are perceived as migrants by other people, and because they have to learn to be “a whole person” in a new context. For them, life in Sweden means learning to be an adult while for others, of the same age, it is about becoming a child. Some of the interviewees were established breadwinners in their home countries and had poor schooling, if any. In Sweden they are students attending school, learning to read and write in Swedish. Feelings of dislocation are therefore both a consequence of the experiences of becoming an “immigrant” and becoming a “child” in a Swedish context.

Without property

An important factor which affects migrants’ possibilities and freedom of choice is the fact that they do not own anything. This might be even more so if the migrant is a child. All of the interviewees, including those who come from well-off circumstances, describe how they came to Sweden empty-handed. Once in Sweden, they receive limited financial support during the asylum and reception periods.

Before our first interview with Ramatullah he had been shopping with a friend. He showed us a pair of new jeans and said that they had cost USD 57. The guardian *ad litem*, who was present at the interview, thought that it was expensive. Ramatullah pointed out that for the last four months he only had one pair of jeans and that he really needed a new pair. Tariq was similarly criticized by staff at the group residence when he went out and bought Armani perfume for USD 71 when he had received his first student aid payment. Both

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Ramatullah's and Tariq's purchases indicate something central about young people's situation and scope for integration. Clothes, perfume, and appearance are important markers of belonging, and for these young people it is both about belonging in the new country and being identified as "OK" among girls and boys their age. The young people are given a sum of money each month, intended towards clothes shopping and other needs. It is up to the young people to organize this themselves, but they are not allowed to spend it on just anything. At most residences there is a "clothing list" of what the wardrobe should contain, and it has happened more than once that staff and guardians *ad litem*, just like in the example above, have expressed that the clothes shouldn't be too expensive. Tariq says: *According to my guardian ad litem clothes preferably should be bought second hand or on sale.*

Emanuel describes his sense of powerlessness in front of the staff when he had saved money for a TV set. He brought up his wish with the residence staff, who did not understand at all. What was he going to do with his own TV? There was already a shared TV at the residence. And how he had got money for it, they asked. As if that was not enough, the interpreter also began to meddle at this point. Installing a TV was very difficult and would imply extra costs for installing extra power points and antenna sockets in the room. Emanuel longed for the freedom of watching what he wanted when he wanted to.

Irrespective of whether life in Sweden, with the financial support it brings, translates into an improvement on what the separated minors were used to or vice versa, the money does not go far in the society they are now living in. That limits their consumption. It also explains the concerns of Ramathulla's and Tariq's guardians *ad litem*. All of the things newcomers are "given" upon arrival in Sweden create possibilities as well as limitations.

Tariq talks a lot about the possibility of getting an education. The way he grew up, with a father who supported the family through trade and business activities, he had no opportunity to pursue studies. Here he does. Very goal-oriented, he describes how he is first going to

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master Swedish and move out of the preparatory class, then apply for a special upper secondary program, and then go on to University. By contrast, Ibrahim, who wants to continue working and to support himself, feels trapped by the system in which he has to attend preparatory class at school every day. He feels as if he is just sitting out the time.

Aisha says that quite soon after having begun the preparation program for upper secondary school that is offered to new arrivals, she realized that she would be losing both time and the possibility to deepen her knowledge in other subjects than Swedish. She therefore asked her teacher and her guardian *ad litem* if she could apply for the International Baccalaureate (IB), an international upper secondary program taught entirely in English. After some discussion, the teacher and guardian *ad litem* both said no. They regarded it as more important that she learned Swedish, and that she should stay where she was. Aisha then made an agreement with them whereby she would do the entrance exams to the IB, and if she passed she would be allowed to begin on the IB.

Ramatullah's purchase of a new pair of jeans, Emanuel's dream of a TV set on his own, Ibrahim's wish to work and support himself, Tariq's goal-oriented education plan and Aisha's attempt to change the preparation program for upper secondary school are disparate events and examples. And yet they are all about young people's own choices, life objectives and wishes to become integrated and build themselves a future. In the new country there are possibilities to do and realize things both in the short and the long term. But there are also structures that limit these possibilities – in part these have to do with finances, and in part with basic values about taking responsibility for one's own life.

Between empowerment and being powerless

In the description of the reception system we explained how the ideology of the “the liberated self” dominates within the Swedish reception of separated minor, the social care

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system/legislation and education system/legislation. This ideology is a generous “idea”, but in practice it might be limiting and even hegemonic since it is shaped in a special historical context; rarely described or reflected upon by those who practices it; nor open for other, rivalry ideologies.

The practice following the ideology of “the liberated self” comes across in the accounts of the interviewees as limited. Several of the interviews articulate the experience that not all kinds of free choices or all kinds of responsibilities are accepted. It is experienced as a paradox by for example Emanuel, Aisha and Tariq that those around them encouraged them to take responsibility for themselves and their situation. However, at the same time, they feel that they have limited influence on making choices or acting independently. Emanuel says about his feelings 20 years ago: *I felt stuck in a square system*. Aisha uses almost the same word about her experiences right now. She adds: *Now my life is on hold*.

While they have some opportunity to shape their future, they are at the same time limited by the practices that aim to protect and foster them. For the child it might be difficult sometimes to understand if this is protection, care or control and subordination.

Tariq who had a hard time as he arrived in Sweden before he settled in a family home explains that the people around him - social workers, the family home, teachers, investigators at the Swedish migration board etc - never listened to his wishes and see him as “an animal”. He believes that he was even silenced by the interpreters. He says:

They think that we come from a bad country, and therefore people assume that we don't know or understand anything, that we're only interested in eating and sleeping. They see us as merchandise, an easy business you can make money from.

The quotation illustrates a feeling of not just becoming an immigrant and a child and therefore taken care of, but also of subordination because of ethnocentric and stereotypical ideas and

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values among the people who work within the reception system. Although this might be seen differently from their perspective, it is a strong and influential feeling.

Leena who came to Sweden more than 60 years ago still describes how she was reduced from being Leena to “*the Finnish little war child*”. This was a categorization that came with subordination. Being Finnish was not as good as being Swedish. At the same time she could not understand why or explain it, but she could feel it, just as Tariq does. The feeling of subordination might mean that the possibilities of acting as a “liberated self” are limited until the power relation have changed and Tariq, Leena and the others start to feel as treated as truly equals in the new society.

Discussion

Initially we discussed that theories about experiences of migration processes, “dislocation”, transnationalism within social and cultural theory are mostly developed from adult perspectives. In this article we have described the main parts of the structural conditions for separated minors arriving in Sweden, such as the reception system and legislation. These structural conditions are important to analyze in order to understand the experiences of the interviewed migrant children.

In Sweden, separated young people are given some opportunities, and freedom of choice. Still, there are obstacles in the form of structural limitations in e.g. finances and accommodation/ideas of fostering/views on human nature. The young people are aware of their position as such they feel marginalized on several levels – migrant, asylum seeker, child etc.

The feeling of being in limbo can be seen as a key to the way the separated minors describe their situation (cf Brekke 2010, Norström 2004). Arriving in a new country brings changes that they could not really anticipate. In addition to the difficult times and the trauma

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that most of these children have been through as a result of their experiences of war, conflict and flight, being an “immigrant” is a shock. A prominent feature of several of the accounts is precisely this feeling of being a stranger, both to one’s surroundings and to oneself. The analysis of the interviews shows that feelings of dislocation are strong emotions that people carry throughout their lives. Emanuel and others among them, who came in the nineties and before, state that these feelings are still influential in their every-day life.

In the reception of these children, it is important to understand the existential aspects of migrating as a minor. Lack of power is experienced as a consequence of lack of property and other resources. Paradoxically lack of power is also emanating from the experience of being taken care of, within a care and protection system that on one hand encourages freedom of choice and independence as it is formed by the ideal of “the liberated self”. On the other hand, the same ideal does not trust the separated minors as capable of such a capacity of independence and responsibility (yet). These kinds of experiences are important to incorporate within the development of tools to support the children so that they can move ahead, develop their potential and avoid having their life on hold for too long.

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