

Governing the unaccompanied child

Media, policy and practice

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Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsavhandling i sociologi vid institutionen för sociologi och arbetsvetenskap, Göteborgs universitet, som med tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsnämnden läggs fram fredagen den 5 september 2014 kl. 10.15 i sal Sappören, Sprängkullsgatan 25, Göteborg.

Abstract

Through three different case studies, this thesis analyzes how unaccompanied minors are constructed and governed as a specific group of refugees in Norway and Sweden.

The first study investigates the Norwegian and Swedish media debate from 2000-2008 by examining how incidences of so-called “missing unaccompanied children” were highlighted on the media agenda. Part of this has also been to analyze the specific official actions taken by Norwegian and Swedish authorities. The second study analyzes how unaccompanied minors were framed in a more broad selection of Norwegian and Swedish official policy between 2000-2010 by looking at how unaccompanied children and youngsters were singled out as subjects of knowledge, and the actions and practices that legitimized these constructions.

These two case studies demonstrate that unaccompanied minors have been similarly problematized in Norway and Sweden, hence making similar changes in mode of conduct legitimate. They were sometimes singled out as vulnerable children or child victims, but concurrently also as possible strategic migrants (adults trying to pass as children, problematic youngsters, etc.). This poses different types of threats to the asylum system, thus justifying care-oriented amid control-oriented strategies in their regard.

The third case study analyzes how a selection of caregivers (i.e., officials and support staff) talk about their work with unaccompanied youngsters and children, and describes how 10 youngsters give meaning to their experiences of being categorized as unaccompanied. The caregivers held a repertoire of various constructions that clearly connect to many of the official or public narrations. Sometimes unaccompanied minors are framed as respectable exceptions to other problem categories, and at other times as problematic youngsters in need of compensatory pedagogics in order to overcome specific shortcomings. These caregivers, plus the media and national policy, further frame unaccompanied minors as specific rights holders due to their positioning as “any other child”, therefore legitimizing softer and more care-oriented strategies.

The interviews with the 10 youngsters illustrate how they try to re-position themselves as positive exceptions to the official images of strategic or problematic youngsters highlighted in the media, policy and practice.

This study identifies a discourse where a lot of consensus and agreement on problematizations coexist in Norwegian and Swedish policy, public narratives, and in how people in the micro context talk and make sense of unaccompanied minors.

Keywords: unaccompanied children and minors, forced migration, Governmentality, programs of governing, discourse, media and policy analysis, inter-sectionality, comparative methods