



SESSION ABSTRACT

Going Beyond Victimhood in studies of Child Migration (Young Scholar's Forum)

Organizer: Rachel Lindsay (University of Cambridge)

E-Mail Address: ral78@cam.ac.uk

Abstract: This session asks how anthropologists might do justice to the complex personhood of their interlocutors when these are young children who have migrated overseas?

The media and academic discourse about child refugees and particularly those young people termed 'unaccompanied minors' (UNHCR 1994) overwhelmingly posits them as victims. On account of the numerous structural inequalities these young people face and the probable trauma they have experienced by crossing borders and dealing with authorities in a place they are 'unwelcome', is there any way to escape a victimizing discourse?

The discipline of anthropology with its ethnographic method potentially offers a way to go beyond the dominant 'victim' discourse about children who migrate yet without losing a grounding and understanding of the structural inequalities which impact the lives of these young people. This session, thus, calls for researchers who are working with child migrants and asks them to shed light on methodologies, analytics and ideas about going beyond a discourse of victimhood in our practice and writing. This session aims to shed light on the diversity of situations faced by those one calls 'child migrants' and explore the potential for anthropology to creatively account for complex personal subjectivity in its research with these young people.

SESSION SCHEDULE

Wednesday, September 28, 2022 | Slot 4 | Room 2

Rosalind Willi: Using a wellbeing lens to study children's mobilities

Julia Verbeek: The narrative of victimhood within the Austrian asylum system and its implications – with a focus on unaccompanied minors

Zdenka Sokolickova: "You know what, I'll fix it myself": Researching externalised responsibilities with child migrants to Longyearbyen, Svalbard

SESSION PAPERS

Using a wellbeing lens to study children's mobilities

Rosalind Willi

This contribution seeks to explore the wellbeing experiences of Syrian-Armenian children and their families who have moved to their historic and imagined 'homeland' Armenia as a result of the Syrian war. I will be reflecting on how the concept of 'wellbeing' (White, 2010; Phoenix, 2020) can be applied in contexts of (family) mobility, allowing children to explore what makes them feel good and 'do well' or not on their own terms, rather than focusing the research lens on narratives of war and displacement (Clacherty, 2006). Through visual and participatory methods, including play, draw-and-tell and photovoice which were used as per the preferences of the children, I investigate the wellbeing understandings and strategies of adaptation of children of various ages and gender (from 3 through to young people aged 20) as well as those of adults who are important in children's lives. The contribution is based on seven months of qualitative research in Yerevan, Armenia. I will be drawing on preliminary data analysis, seeing that this abstract is still being written from the field.

References:

- Clacherty, G. (2006). *The suitcase stories: refugee children reclaim their identities*. Double Storey Books, Cape Town.
- Phoenix, A. (2020). Childhood, wellbeing, and transnational migrant families: Conceptual and methodological issues. In M. Tiilikainen, M. Al-Sharmani, & S. Mustasaari (Eds.), *Wellbeing of Transnational Muslim Families. Marriage, Law and Gender*. (pp. 164–182). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315231976-10>
- White, S. C. (2010). Analysing wellbeing: A framework for development practice. *Development in Practice*, 20(2), 158–172.

The narrative of victimhood within the Austrian asylum system and its implications – with a focus on unaccompanied minors

Julia Verbeek

Research conducted amongst (former) unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan that sought asylum in Austria and with experts in this field showed the importance of conveying a narrative of victimhood, in order to obtain asylum or other residence permits. Asylum seekers, children included, have to present themselves in front of the

authorities as falling under the refugee definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which ascribes refugees with a notion of victimhood (Centlivres/Centlivres-Demont 1988).

What does this need to present oneself as a victim imply, especially for minors?

Experts on the Austrian asylum system critique the demand of proving oneself before the authorities after a difficult journey rooted in fear of death, especially when it comes to minors, as, like the research showed, telling one's (often) traumatic experiences in that context is emotionally exhausting for the narrators and can even reinforce such traumas. Furthermore, a child-friendly environment doesn't seem to be provided by the authorities in regards to the questionings within the asylum process. Reflections about this topic by (former) unaccompanied minor asylum seekers showed that presenting oneself as a victim made them feel reduced to exactly that.

Based on my research findings I will unfold in greater detail how the construction of the "victim-narrative" as a vital part in the asylum process takes place, how underaged asylum seekers respond and reflect upon that and what solutions were proposed (e.g., child-friendly interrogation settings and the deviation from narrow categories), concluding on how these can be adapted into anthropological work.

Julia Verbeek, BA (11742893). MA student at the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology & Departement of Religious Studies, University of Vienna

“You know what, I’ll fix it myself”: Researching externalized responsibilities with child migrants to Longyearbyen, Svalbard

Zdenka Sokolickova

Svalbard, an archipelago under Norwegian jurisdiction in the High Arctic, has a special territorial regime making migration both smooth and tricky for non-Norwegian child migrants. In my research on "teenagers without land" (2021-2022, Dept of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo), I was motivated by the willingness of my interlocutors and field assistants to share their stories and raise awareness, but also concerned how to avoid the victimising discourse. In Longyearbyen, offspring of migrants from Thailand, the Philippines, Russia, Ukraine, Nordic countries and beyond (in total almost 20 countries worldwide) struggle with language barrier, structural racism, hybrid identities, legal and bureaucratic maze, and limited access to education and social services (including e.g. health insurance). While the constraints of the place amplify their vulnerabilities, the ethnography points to externalised responsibilities, from national and local authorities devolved on the children's parents, but in practice carried out also by health workers, teachers and the children themselves. I will share ethical dilemmas encountered in the field and strategies used not to represent the children as migrant victims of globalisation and politics, but rather as resilient "fixers" navigating in the often unfavourable conditions. Documenting the struggles is no less important than giving voice to the teenagers' dreams about future they wish to shape themselves. The research generated a spin-off project in which we narrated the under-communicated topic through photography; we got funding for an exhibition in Longyearbyen (January 2022) and applied for support of another one in Oslo (planned in January 2023) to do political advocacy. I will discuss lessons learned from the sharing events, but also the challenge of telling a powerful story with myriads of nuances to diverse audiences: academics, politicians, journalists, and the people whose lifeworlds I explore. Where does the

anthropologist's responsibility lie when researching externalised responsibilities with child migrants?