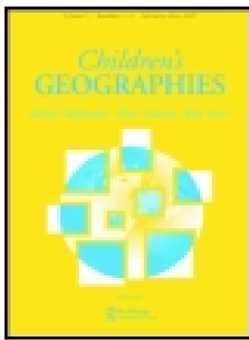

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Challenging the deportation regime: reflections on the research encounter with undocumented refugee children in Sweden

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the researcher's potential role and responsibility to facilitate undocumented refugee children's political voice and participation. The paper raises issues of the social status and position scholars give to children in research and epistemological concerns regarding the co-production of children's political assertions in the research encounter. Based on anthropological and participatory research with undocumented refugee children, the article shows that children were often withholding their suffering from family members and it was novel for children to talk openly about their situations with the researcher. However, as trusting relationships developed, children came to formulate and express a social critique of their undocumented situations. Based on children's accounts, the research project engaged with a range of public actors to promote critical dialogue around these children and contribute to societal practice. It is argued that children's lived rights and politics are properly acknowledged when researchers facilitate children's political engagements.

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Introduction

The article examines the ethnographic research encounter with children in undocumented migration who risk deportation. It responds to recent calls to take seriously children's everyday politics and lived rights (Skelton 2010; Lind 2017a; Karlsson 2019), arguing that a political analysis of children's accounts and experiences entails not only the researcher's ability to interpret children's actions in political terms, but also a responsibility to facilitate and contribute to them in public spheres (Spyrou 2011; Rogers, Carr, and Hickman 2018). The overall purpose of this article is thus to encourage scholars to not only acknowledge children's capacity for agency and political engagement in theory and analysis, but to be explicit about how this acknowledgement is addressed in moral and practical terms in the research encounter.

The article builds on ethnographic research with undocumented refugee children in Sweden in 2012–2014, showing that when children addressed a public and political audience rather than the researcher alone, children's narratives often changed from unarticulated or reserved outrage to explicit political protest. I argue that ethnographic research plays a role in co-producing children's political assertions (Boydell et al. 2017); that the social status and position scholars give to children in research effect children's agency; and that the researcher has moral responsibility to not only analyse and describe children's struggles, but provide opportunities in which they can be heard.

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I begin by positioning this article within literature on critical migration research and then shed light on scholarship on children's agency that direct attention to their lived rights and politics. After a methodological discussion, I show through ethnographic observations how children often hesitated to articulate their sense of injustice but came to do so as trust with the researcher unfolded. When addressing a public and political audience, however, children could readily express their protests and demanded political change. I then discuss the importance of acknowledging children's sense of agency and marginal position within the research itself and the researcher's role in bringing children's social status and position to the forefront in the ethnographic encounter.

Children in undocumented migration

Though Sweden is often upheld as a champion of children's rights with strong public institutions and respecting international law, children's rights to asylum are often negated in the interest of the sovereign to keep immigration numbers down (Lundberg and Lind 2017). In this way, children's asylum determination processes are at the heart of upholding the violent system of the 'deportation regime' – state practices aiming to separate out children who should be deported (Peutz and De Genova 2010; Lundberg and Lind 2017). 'Undocumented refugee children' in this article refers to rejected asylum seekers who reside unlawfully on the territory and hide from authorities to avoid deportation.[1] They were accompanied by their parents and had lived several years without contact with authorities and social welfare services, maintaining livelihoods through informal networks and labour. In Sweden, these children have rights to education and health care (Sweden 2012a; 2012b), yet they can be arrested by police and deported to their country of origin at any point in time. Together with their families, children live in fear that people around them will alert the authorities about their existence and children develop daily strategies to cope with these circumstances, such as appearing inconspicuous in everyday life (Wahlström Smith 2018). This social and political context has profound impact on children's sense of agency and mode-of-being in the world (Willen 2007). The atmosphere of fear generated by police enforcement measures severely limit children from overtly participating in society unless they – and their parents – are able to hide their undocumented status from outsiders. Previous research on children in undocumented migration shows ways in which 'deportability' – the constant threat of deportation, even if not immediate or acute (De Genova 2002) – effect children's lives and agency in different ways across global contexts (Wahlström Smith 2018; Lind 2017a; Allerton 2017; Mann 2010; Dreby 2015). Studies show that some undocumented migrant children live in extremely volatile situations (Mann 2010; Allerton 2017), with an acute sense of threat of discovery (Wahlström Smith 2018; Lind 2017a). In these situations children assert themselves with caution and strategy, often second-guessing the risk of exposure before acting in social situations. In other national contexts, the exclusion from rights can come suddenly when children reach adulthood or the family's economic circumstances change (Gonzales and Chavez 2012; Dreby 2015). Children can then participate in education and social activities like children around them. The studies above illustrate ways in which the sense of deportability and the deportation regime shapes children's everyday lives and agency across national contexts. But how can scholars be accountable to these child research participants in moral, ethical and epistemological terms? What are our scholarly responsibilities and possibilities in research contexts with politically marginalised children? I turn to these issues below.

Militant and activist research

Some researchers stress the political nature of conducting studies with undocumented children and argue that researchers are politically implicated in the field of inquiry (Sager 2016). De Genova holds that researchers have ethical responsibilities to critique their own 'complicities with the ongoing nationalisation of society' (De Genova 2013, 252). This can entail emphasising freedom of movement as a basic human entitlement and making the case that the deportation regime is a

'territorial expression of power' encroaching on that freedom and 'producing' irregularised migrants (De Genova, Garelli, and Tazzioli 2018). Migration research can thus either be complicit with the survival and reproduction of a globalised political order based on territorially-defined formations of state power or they can contribute to exposing this through 'militant research' (De Genova 2013). It is not clear, however, to what extent the militant research agenda is engaging with research participants and publics beyond academia to promote political change. Some scholars of undocumented migration detail how they take on dual positions as activists and researchers in these contexts. They attend demonstrations with participants, contribute to public opinion in news media, promote migrants' rights in policy-developments and human rights forums, and act as support persons to individual research respondents (Sager 2016; Lind 2017b). The co-construction of the research field knowledge is readily acknowledged as an integral part of these studies, including the importance of aligning oneself with the political struggles of participants. Though these engagements are clearly significant in terms of research benefits to undocumented migrants, and political and ethical responsibilities of the research, children's political agency and lived rights are treated as separate analytical issues (Lind 2017a, 2017b). Ways in which children's political agency is potentially co-constituted, reified and supported through the research encounter is not adequately discussed. I turn to this issue in more depth below in relation to recent scholarship attending to children's lived rights and politics.

Theorising the agency of children in politically volatile circumstances

'Agency' in this paper refers to children's actions that have some intentionality and purpose and is simultaneously embedded in social relations and regimes of power. The agent is not 'free' and 'unfettered' from social relations and can be nourished or stunted by the conditions in which they interact (Ortner 2006). Regarding children in politically vulnerable circumstances, it has been argued that scholars need to move forward from the sociological acknowledgment that children are active social agents to the questioning of varying degrees of children's participation and political status in society (Bordonaro 2012; Allerton 2016; Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007; Beazley et al. 2009). Several ethnographic studies have subsequently illustrated ways in which children's political agency 'comes about' in the everyday lives of politically marginalised children in the form of everyday resistance (Lind 2017a; Skelton 2010; Bordonaro 2012) and children's 'lived rights' (Karlsson 2019; Beazley et al. 2009). The criticisms of children's agency are disrupting the 'sociological hegemony' around children's personal agency, showing ways in which children identify and criticise what they perceive to be wrong or unjust in their everyday lives (Karlsson 2019; Lind 2017a). They also illustrate instances in which children are not able to assert themselves in particularly repressed situations (Allerton 2016). What is not clear in the studies is whether analytical shifts of taking children's politics more seriously imply radical changes to research practice, both regarding methodological approaches and in relation to how children's status can be raised by the research (Beazley et al. 2009). Without a discussion of what 'new' understandings of children's politics and agency entail for research practice, the critiques risk being reduced to uncovering hidden presupposition and deepening reflexivity (Sayer 2009; Alanen 2011). This is also the case for researchers that recognise the political nature of engaging in research on deportability and the deportation regime outlined above. I argue that researchers have a responsibility to not just radically oppose hegemony such as the deportation regime, but to use our own positions of relative power to strengthen children's agency and political engagements. Children in the present research experienced gross injustice and inequality and it was important to not just acknowledge this as 'expressions of children's agency', but to respect it and find ways to 'give back' to participants (Hugman, Pittaway, and Bartolomei 2011). This entailed *contributing* to children's agency by empowering them to articulate their 'hidden' accounts and, if the child thought it appropriate (and at no risk to the child), to disseminate their accounts to relevant public and political 'publics' (Rogers, Carr, and Hickman 2018). Below I turn to considerations of these issues for the research methodology and ethics.

The research encounter with undocumented refugee children

The project rationale and participants

This article is based on anthropological research examining children's experiences of 'deportability' and 'daily strategies' in response to their situations in Sweden (Wahlström Smith 2018). Inspired by participatory and action research, the study rationale was to explore ways in which it was possible to 'give back' to the study participants and the study population, such as informing policy and practice and contribute to social and political change (Hugman, Pittaway, and Bartolomei 2011; Rogers, Carr, and Hickman 2018). It also sought to pay special attention to children's participatory status by involving undocumented refugees as active partners in the research process (Hugman, Bartolomei, and Pittaway 2011). Participatory involvement in research ranges on a spectrum from consulting participants on the project rationale on one hand and drawing on respondents as equal partners in the entire research process on the other (Rogers, Carr, and Hickman 2018). In this project, four participating families were consulted on the project rationale, aims and methodology in the beginning of the research. This yielded crucial information on the safety and security of individuals, including how to meet up in ways that would not expose them or draw unwanted attention towards them. Some respondents also expressed the view that the research must be mutually beneficial to them during the course of the study (and not to other individuals in some distant future as a result of academic research dissemination). In the project, these issues came to constitute the following: To collect a catalogue list of daily situations in which the undocumented families feared risks of exposure and to engage in dialogue with relevant stakeholders around these risks. The risks centred on situations in medical and health institutions' waiting rooms in which undocumented migrants were required to show formal identification. Secondly, the project provided fun spaces for children in which to play games, watch films, run around and be loud. This was important since both parents and children talked about living in overcrowded spaces and in which they tried to draw as little attention from neighbours to themselves as possible. These activities were also instrumental in the beginning of the research to get to know each other build trust. Third, the project engaged with a wider public beyond academia both with and without children's and families' participation. This is further described in the section on engagements with wider audiences at the end of the paper.

I conducted ethnographic field work among children living in west Sweden between September 2012 and July 2013 and intermittently in 2014. Research participants were accessed through voluntary and informal networks and were recruited during the entire fieldwork period. The participating children and parents/guardians were informed about the aim of the research, that their participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time, and that their anonymity was safeguarded. In cases where children were under 15 years of age, I asked for both children's and parents'/guardians' informed consent. In other cases, when the child was 15 years of age or older, I asked only for the child's informed consent.

The participants include nine families, 29 individuals in total, of whom 19 were children between 6 and 17 years of age. There were eight girls and 11 boys. Ten participants were parents or guardians. Research participants came from Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. During fieldwork, the families had lived in Sweden between three to eight years. Over time, I built up case studies of 10 children whom I followed up in greater depth. I stayed in contact with these individuals during the whole fieldwork period, visiting their homes several times. There were 53 interviews in total (46 child interviews and seven parent interviews) in separate sets. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were recorded when participants gave consent, and transcribed verbatim. In most cases, the research participants preferred not to be recorded on tape. Detailed notes were then taken during the interview and transcribed as closely as possible afterwards. All respondents in this paper reported fluency and comfort in spoken Swedish and did not require interpreters. The initial inclusion criteria were children who were accompanied

by their parents and had overstayed their right to remain in Sweden and the EU following a 'return decision' by the Swedish Migration Agency (Sweden 2005). However, since participants' migration status changed over time, rigid reliance on formal categorisation became redundant during fieldwork (Bakewell 2008). At the point of first contact, all participating children lived as undocumented migrants. The policy at the time allowed refugees to file a 'new' asylum application after four years of living undocumented. Since fieldwork took place over a relatively long period of time, some families ended their time as undocumented migrants (after a four year period) during the research, to seek asylum again.

Methodology and ethics

The research used standard ethnographic research techniques and thematic analysis, including long-term fieldwork, participant observation, interviewing and informal conversation. It also used creative research tools such as digital story-telling (Lenette, Cox, and Brough 2015; Boydell et al. 2017), task-based activities (Punch 2002), and children's photography (Jörgensen and Sullivan 2010). The purpose of using a range of research techniques was to adjust the methods to the individual child's preferred way of expressing themselves, and seeking in different ways to inspire and 'empower' the child to articulate their own analysis of their situation. This entailed being attentive to children's sense of agency. After months of engaging with children individually, it appeared that some had a heavily stunted sense of agency, whilst others were crying out for political change, and/or welcoming the opportunity to communicate their circumstances to a general and/or political audience. Increased social and political visibility for these children could also entail increased risk of deportation (Lind 2017a). Thus, many months of exploring the political context, children's social worlds and agency preceded subsequent collaborations with child agencies, and presenting children's letter and digital stories to diverse audiences.

The study obtained ethical approval from the regional ethical review board. It adhered to the core ethical principles for research ethics used in anthropology (AAA 2012). The latter ethics statement was a particularly helpful guideline and point of reference during the course of the study and in the publication of the material. Though some principles cited in the statement are standard in research ethics (to do no harm; to be open and honest about the work; obtain informed consent; ensure anonymity), the AAA statement is explicit about the dilemmas anthropologists often confront and that are likely to arise from the intimacies that are an integral part of its methodology. Moreover, in researching issues that involve aspects of public policy and in instances when collaboration with child rights organisations and others take place, the AAA statement points out the necessity of weighing competing ethical obligations to affected parties, and as far as possible, prioritising the vulnerable members of the study population. To be in a good position to judge what the above issues entailed in this particular setting, I maintained continuous dialogues with both adults and children regarding their notions of ethical conduct in the research (Hugman, Bartolomei, and Pittaway 2011), such as the most inconspicuous manner in which to meet, what kinds of issues could be discussed and what should be avoided. In collecting data, I did not press for identifying details around a person, the trajectory into undocumented migration, life history events or significant historical events and places if respondents did not volunteer them. Similarly, in presenting the research material, I have omitted and/or altered identifying details and descriptions around individual respondents. I chose children's pseudonyms and asked for the children's approval of them. I turn next to findings on children's emerging social critiques of their situations and how these accounts differed in relation to the different audiences children addressed.

Communicating with the powers that be

In an interview with Mia, an 11-year-old girl who had lived in hiding with intermittent periods of seeking asylum since she was five, she insisted that she was 'mostly calm', 'not afraid' and 'not

worried' about her situation. On the one hand, she reported symptoms such as headache, nausea, and stomach ache, and related these to frightening events such as seeing the police near their home, or coming home to a raided and searched flat (which belonged to someone else who was dealing drugs). Yet, she was adamant that her life was pretty much under control. 'If it happens', she said (and she never let the word *deportation* leave her mouth), 'Mum and dad say we will be alright. We will come back and start again. Besides, we already did that once'. I was puzzled by her stoicism but gathered that she was engaging in self-preservation and perhaps thought it destructive to protest too much about the circumstances of 'illegality' and 'deportability' (De Punch 2002). I had known Mia and her family for four months and knew that they had undergone considerable suffering and distress. The family lived in constant fear of deportation and seemed to have embodied this fear as a 'mode-of-being in the world' (Willen 2007, 16). The children employed tactics and strategies to 'hide in plain sight' as they went about their everyday lives (Wahlström Smith 2018). Mia and her siblings constantly told white lies to peers as to why they would not go to the local library (they feared having to present their civic registration number to get a library card), participate in school photographs, and why their names were not on the class register. Mia's mother had told me about the family's deportation six years previously; she described this as degrading and executed without authorisation by their country of origin. Once returned, the parents found life impossible, fearing that the father, a war-crime witness in the Serbia-Kosovo war, would be 'taken out' like many before him (see Ristic 2016). During the months I knew them, I observed also how the undocumented refugee children tended to protect their siblings, parents and even myself, by not revealing the full extent of their pain. This was something I only glimpsed occasionally. This concern to protect others was at the back of my mind, when I asked Mia if she would consider writing a letter to those in political power in Sweden to tell them what it is like to live in hiding. This caught Mia's interest and she set about it straight away. Half an hour later, she presented a 251-word letter addressed to the then Swedish Prime Minister and the Crown Princess Victoria. Her choice of the princess as a representation of power was not entirely arbitrary. At an event recorded on the front page of the local newspaper, she had met the princess in her home town and given her a bouquet of flowers. This was done with full police security; her parents, knowing of her unauthorised status, must have appreciated the irony. An excerpt of her letter reads:

> To Fredrik Reinfeldt and Viktoria,
>
> Hi, I am a girl who is 11 years old and I go to school. I have been in Sweden since I was five. Why is it me? … I want to live like everyone else. Could it become a rule that everyone in hiding can live ordinarily and be free and not afraid of the police … who walk about town and other places. I don't want to experience things that I don't want to experience. I don't want to go around being worried and afraid. I try to be calm and not upset. I don't want to live like this. PLEASE CAN YOU LISTEN TO ME. CAN YOU LISTEN TO ME AND TRY TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. I WANT TO LIVE ORDINARILY. Thank you if you listened to me and please try to do something about it.

Mia's letter can be analysed in relation to ways in which children articulate their own politics (Karlsson 2019; Lind 2017a; Skelton 2010). Though she had told me she was mostly calm and not worried, in the letter, Mia seemed to be fully aware of her contradictory position in relation to the 'deportation regime' – the state power to deport her family and condemn them to a life her parents feared above everything. It seemed the shift in Mia's narration came about as I asked her to voice her concern to persons of the public and in political power. She was then motivated to move beyond her 'official' point of view which served to protect others around her from her suffering, to expose her privately held social critique in the hope that it would effect some kind of change. Given the strong wording of Mia's letter, I asked her if she wanted me to send it to the Prime Minister and the Crown Princess and she said she did. Mia later got a reply from the Prime Minister's secretary, thanking Mia for her letter and saying that it was the Migration Agency's and not the Prime Minister's decision of who got to stay in Sweden, but that the Prime Minister recognised the hardship in Mia's situation. The family later included Mia's letter in their subsequent asylum

application. It seemed to me that the dialogic exchange with Mia, and my probing her to present her view to persons in power, enabled Mia to formulate aloud her social critique and protest. The political impact and effect of the letter was small, but through it Mia emerged with a stronger sense of agency and self-representation.

Though a generalisation could not always be made, children's self-expressions were seemingly affected by at least five different conditions. First, the level of trust I had built with the children; second, the order of the child among siblings in the family. Younger siblings sometimes found it easier to protest about their situations overtly, while the oldest child in the family often appeared concerned about protecting the other family members from his or her anger and sadness. Third, the relative stability of their life at the time of the interview: some children did not want to talk at all or not reveal much about themselves until their situation had become more stable. Forth, how children and their parents talked about the undocumented situation at home seemingly affected how they talked about it in the research; and finally, as in the case of Mia, when children were invited to present their stories to a public and/or political audience, they were motivated to present a particular version of their lives in deportability. Using tools such as participatory photo interviews were useful for finding ways of talking to children about their situations (Jörgensen and Sullivan 2010). I asked children to take photographs of things that made them feel happy, sad, angry and safe. Ali, a 17-year-old boy, and the oldest child in the family, did not want to photographs things that made him feel angry and sad. Rather, he took photographs of places where he had met his girlfriend for the first time. It was only when Ali and his family had received residence permits that he would talk to me about his feelings during those years in hiding. He said: 'It is horrible to see your family suffer like that and not be able to do anything about it'. It had been important to not probe Ali's sense of protest and the political aspects of his agency in the beginning of my contact with him, but to wait until his situation had become secure and stable. It was thus important to be sensitive to children's sense of agency and self-expression at particular moments in time, to not risk marginalising children in the research encounter (James 2007).

Magnus, a 9-year old boy, had not talked openly about being undocumented with outsiders/strangers before. With his parents, it seemed the conversation revolved mostly about the things he *must not* do and say to others. For Magnus, 'hidden' was an unsayable word, closely connected to keeping the secrets of his real name, home address and migration status. He could not make himself say the word 'hidden' aloud and found it shocking that I talked openly about it in a group with children. After one of the first group discussions, his mother told me about his reactions. He had told her: 'Mum, you know to the h-word. How long will we have to wait?' After the first few meetings, Magnus chose to withdraw from the group interviews. He told his mother he had blisters in his mouth which made it difficult for him to speak. I took this to mean that Magnus wanted to withdraw from participating in the study and did not follow him up after that. However, Magnus' silence should not be regarded as a lack of agency and 'voice', but rather sheds light on the difficulty to talk openly about sensitive issues that are surrounded by secrecy and taboo (see James 2007; Allerton 2016). In context, children's silences spoke volumes of the precarious situation they faced (Spyrou 2016; Chase 2010).

When aliens abducted the migration agency's staff

In 2014, the funder of the research project approached me with the idea to create digital stories with undocumented refugee children. Children were to create short films themselves via tablet computer programs and would show their drawings with a voice-over. The films were to portray undocumented refugee children's situation in their own words and be published on the organisation's website if the children consented. The communications officer of the organisation had connections with the Swedish Child Ombudsman and it was, therefore, possible to send the films to the Ombudsman during the days of the workshop. As it happened, the Ombudsman was deeply moved by the films, and sent a recorded video response to the children the next day that all participants at the workshop watched together. At that time, I had a strong sense that this gave proper recognition

and respect to children's own stories, in a similar way to research on digital stories and photo voice created with young people experiencing psychosis and lone refugee young people (Boydell et al. 2017; Lenette, Cox, and Brough 2015; Rogers, Carr, and Hickman 2018). The participating children at the workshop were told that their accounts could be viewed by the general public as well as persons in decision-making and political positions. This information influenced children's narratives in different ways. It was not so much that the digital storytelling gave children 'a voice' (James 2007) because as I show below, this they already had. It was rather that the project provided the children with the possibility to be heard and represent themselves directly in a political arena (Lenette, Cox, and Brough 2015).

Four children participated in the workshop. They were Vidar 10, Sara 13, Kristin 15, and Ali, 17 years old. Ali was the only participant that I knew prior to the workshop. I had pointed out ethical problems to the organisation in asking new participants to come to a one-off event, as this raised issues of trust and not least because it had taken me a very long time to find ways to discuss the topic of being undocumented with children, especially the younger ones. However, the teenage children were more forthcoming and at ease to talk to about the purpose of the workshop, particularly after overcoming the initial moments of awkwardness. At the time of the workshop, I had known Ali for two years and he and his family had received permanent residence on the grounds of particular distressing circumstances (to do with the length of time the children had lived in Sweden, not on the grounds of political protection). At the workshop, Ali was able to talk about his situation with the other children who were still in hiding. He encouraged them to not give up and to keep up their hope. He created a short film in which he reflected back on his childhood in war-torn Iraq, his life in hiding in which his father 'worked day and night to feed us, and mum never bought anything for herself'. Now, having received his permanent residence status, the first thing he wanted to do was to buy a bed for his mother, because 'she had never had one'.

Sara and Kristin, who were sisters, created short films that explained in a straightforward and almost pedagogical way what it was like to live in hiding. They talked about going to the Swedish Migration Agency and receiving the message that they 'were Dublin'.[2] They talked about what it was like to live with no money, to go hungry, to be exploited in the informal labour market, and live in overcrowded spaces and fearing ticket controllers on the local transport systems. Sara narrated how she was forced to work to contribute economically to family life and to be treated in demeaning ways by her employers. They talked about the injustice in which they would not be granted political asylum because they did not flee from a war zone, but that returning to their country of origin would still mean returning to a death sentence because their parents were political and religious dissidents.

It was, however, less straightforward to discuss being undocumented with Vidar who was younger than the other children. When one of the facilitators of the workshop asked Vidar, what life without papers entailed, he answered the question in literal terms: 'It means you can't participate in math at school'. The facilitator was puzzled about the reply and worried that if she further pushed the issue, she would open up a topic Vidar had not previously discussed with anyone before. She was concerned that the topic was not talked about in the home and it could be disconcerting for Vidar to discuss an issue he was not used to talk about, or perhaps knew little about. The facilitator asked Vidar's mother, who was waiting in a different room, what Vidar actually knew about their situation and how they talked about it at home. 'Oh, he doesn't know anything', his mother replied. 'He doesn't really understand the situation. But you can talk to him. That is not a problem'. The facilitator asked me for advice and I sat down to talk to Vidar. I asked him what he enjoyed doing. He said he liked watching films, karate films and action movies. I asked him if he liked reading books, and he said he liked a particular children's crime book series. I suggested to Vidar that he himself and his life was a bit like a crime story, in which he was the secret spy with many secrets that children around him did not know much about. Vidar showed interest in this idea, and started to construct a story to the short film. It went as follows:

> Once upon a time many people worked in one large building. There was a leader there and sometimes the staff got papers that they gave to the leader that he read. … The papers were very important. They said if children were allowed to stay in Sweden or not. But some aliens had taken over the Migration Agency. They had imprisoned the staff in the cellar. The secret agents Sam, Bruce, Sparky and Jacky went to the Migration Agency to catch the leader and release the imprisoned staff. There was a fight, a smoke screen bomb which made everyone dizzy, and the secret agents asked the leader: 'Where is the Migration Agency people?' The leader said they were in the cellar. Those who helped the leader with the papers and such took the exit door and ran out. They took their rocket and returned to the planet they had come from. The Migration Agency people were rescued. The leader was arrested by the police and put on prison, but he was release after a few years. In the end everyone got to stay there in Sweden and have fun.

Parents were often astounded at such accounts, especially in situations where they thought their children knew little or nothing about the realities of being undocumented. Parents often avoided telling their children the full story of the harsh and often life-threatening situations they had left behind and the associated risks with being deported, especially to children below 8 years of age or so. At the same time, children often held back their own responses to their parents' silences and partial explanations, attempting to protect their parents from knowing that they did indeed understand, and that the situation caused them much fear and sadness. These can be read as examples in which there is too much at stake for children to assert themselves (Allerton 2016). I suggest that in Vidar's case, he expressed a social and political critique in symbolic terms, and in which the double-natured life he led was apparent to him. He was an 'ordinary' child who liked reading children's books other 10-year olds might also enjoy, yet he also made a comment on personhood and alienation (literally and figuratively). I suggest his film asks: who are the moral persons belonging to the Swedish nation state? His reasoning in the film seems to be: surely no political leadership can be so misguided and evil that they intentionally deport children to a life their parents fear for them above living in dire poverty, exploitation and fear? Therefore, something has gone wrong, and it may be the abduction of the 'proper' Migration Agency staff by aliens. His story-telling also sheds light on his unfailing belief in the goodness of mankind – that the current migration control and deportation regime is one big mistake and nightmare, a nightmare that will one day dissolve.

Engagements with the wider public

Inspired by participatory and action research, the research project engaged with wider audiences beyond academia. This included engaging in critical discussions with the National Agency for Education during the development of a guideline to schools on how to deal with children in undocumented situations (National Agency for Education 2015). Ali, one of the older children in the study who had received permanent residence status by that time, participated in this consultation. The project further engaged in a hearing about undocumented migrant children hosted by UNICEF Sweden, in which a range of governmental and non-governmental agency participated; it contributed to Swedish Save the Children's good practice guide to social services on undocumented children's rights and treatment. Findings were widely disseminated in interviews on national and local radio, in national and local newspapers; to child rights and undocumented migrants' voluntary organisations, and at conferences attended by children's rights practitioners, government agencies and politicians.[3]

The project also facilitated the contact between children in the study and a script writers who had heard about the research project and expressed the desire to create a community and forum theatre with children in undocumented migration. Prior to facilitating the contact, however, there was elaborate discussion about ethical and security implications with the theatre project, after which I asked for parents' permission to facilitate the contact. Though the theatre project was out of the remit of the research project itself, I participated in numerous audience discussions after play performances, hosted by the play writers. The play reached an audience of several hundreds of people and was performed in the larger cities in Sweden. Approximately one year after it was first created, Sam and his family received permanent residency in Sweden. Sam later performed the play at theatres also in France.

It is difficult to ascertain the impact of these research engagements (Rogers, Carr, and Hickman 2018), but it enabled a discussion with relevant actors of the ways in which institutions and individuals in contact with undocumented children could improve children's access to rights by, for example, respecting their right to privacy and secret identity (one of the recommendations in the National Agency for Education guideline and guide to social service case workers). To public audiences, it provided a human face to a hidden and marginal population, the personal stories of which is little known. Children's digital stories and photographs and the research report continues to be disseminated by Children's Welfare Foundation Sweden and informs policy and practice developments.

Discussion

The aim of this paper has been to examine the research encounter with undocumented refugee children to consider, first, what it may mean to take children's marginal social position – and capacity for agency – seriously in relation to the research encounter. Second, it examined ways in which researchers can take moral responsibility for their own politics and to transfer it into practice (Morris-Roberts 2001).

Findings illustrate that children's utterances emerge with particular audiences in mind and are co-constituted in the research encounter. In Bakhtin's (1953/1986, 95) words 'An essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is its quality of being directed to someone, its addressivity … the utterance has both an author and an addressee'. In conversations with the researcher, children came to articulate their social critique over time as our relationship unfolded. They were used to withholding their suffering and pain to family members in order to not burdening them. To articulate this in the research encounter was largely novel to children and they took some time to assess whether it was appropriate to do so and in what way. Furthermore, as I carried out participant observations with children in their homes and on outings, they did not need to described and explained that they lived in overcrowded houses and carried themselves with discretion and trepidation as they walked outside their homes. In contrast, when children addressed a political and public audience, their utterances were often focused and immediate on delivering this core message: 'This is how it is like to be undocumented, please listen and do something about it'. However, this message could also come about in symbolic terms, such as in the story of aliens who have abducted Migration Agency staff.

In the present ethnographic example, collaboration with a child rights organisation facilitated ways in which research findings could be presented to a diverse audience, but also to carefully elicit the nature of the child's political analysis and respond to the desire to present it beyond the immediate research encounter. Not every child wanted to 'speak their truth to power', often because their particular situation was too difficult and they felt uncomfortable to impart their personal stories. Silent and 'hidden' accounts serve the important purpose of protecting parents and siblings from additional distress. The individual child's own self-preservation may depend on maintaining status quo and not formulating and uttering suffering until external circumstances are more certain and predictable. There are thus clear limitations to the ability of research to contribute to children's agency, self-representation and political participation. For some children, however, the ethnographic encounter facilitated an opportunity to reflect and formulate a social critique and to present it to a wider audience, including direct communication with the Child Ombudsman. In such cases, the nature of that critique seemed to be a desperate cry for change and in the relative powerful position of an adult, citizen researcher, offering children to act on this wish constituted a political and moral responsibility. Yet, intervening demands careful prior examination of the political context in which both children and the research project is situated (Dennis 2009; Griffin 1991). In some political settings, sending a child's letter to the Prime Minister or posting digital stories on the internet, could put undocumented migrants at heightened risk to be deported. In that case, it may be possible to act on a more local level, such as communicating only with organisations that already work in the children's interest, or inform international networks and organisations. Though ethnographic researchers may

do this as activists (see for example, Lind 2017a), it is not clear how they conceive of children's status when such actions are taken (or not taken) and why children's agency and status is not explicitly acknowledged as co-constituted through the research. This has been the aim of the present article and to show that under certain conditions, the research encounter can strengthen children's agency and support them in being political actors.

Notes

1. There are different pathways into undocumented migration, such as persons who overstay their visa or cross the international border without seeking residence permit or asylum. Undocumented migrants refer here to this larger group who may not have applied for asylum initially.
2. Meaning that they were to be sent to the first country in the EU in which they had applied for asylum, according to the 'Dublin regulation'. Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council.
3. For example, the Child Rights days conference hosted by the Children's Welfare Foundation Sweden, and Almedalen week conference.

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