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Contextualizing Voice in Refugee Youth Research

A focus on a study of the digital media experiences of unaccompanied refugee minors

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In recent years, increased attention has been placed on the situations of unaccompanied refugee minors (URM) living in Europe, and current research regarding their perspectives and voices has begun to foster greater insight into their daily lives. Despite this, there is a great lack of contextualization and critical examination of the production and use of their voices in research. This paper attends to this gap in research by focusing on the micro to macro contexts which give rise to their voices – particularly emphasizing power relations – and by exploring the multiple features of voice. It argues that greater significance and meaning in their statements come from the contexts in which they were produced in, and less in the abstract or literalness of their words or silences. This is demonstrated by drawing upon evidence from a study that

was conducted with URM in Berlin, reflecting upon the methodological factors that were unique to conducting research with this group, and by addressing the larger discursive contexts in which their statements were situated in. Through this examination we uncover a greater range of possibilities for interpretations and meanings to their responses that could result into more comprehensive and fruitful insights into their lives. This paper advocates for greater reflexivity in research, which not only opens up more avenues of meanings and interpretations, but it can also help address issues of de-contextualization and misrepresentation of refugees, and can promote higher quality research

In den vergangenen Jahren wurde den Situationen der in Europa lebenden unbegleiteten minderjährigen Flüchtlinge mehr Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt. Die aktuelle Forschung über ihre Perspektiven und "Stimmen" hat begonnen größere Einblicke in ihren Alltag zu ermöglichen. Trotzdem gibt es einen großen Mangel an Kontextualisierung und kritischer Untersuchung der Produktion und Nutzung ihrer "Stimmen" in der Forschung. Dieser Artikel beschäftigt sich mit dieser Forschungslücke, indem er auf die Mikro-Makro-Zusammenhänge fokussiert, die diese Stimmen – vor allem in Bezug auf Machtbeziehungen – kontextualisieren. Dabei geht es um die Erforschung der vielfältigen Merkmale der Stimme(n) von Flüchtlingen. Der Beitrag argumentiert, dass den Aussagen der Flüchtlinge eine größere Signifikanz und Bedeutung durch eben diese Kontexte zukommt, in denen sie produziert wurden, und weniger durch die abstrakten oder wörtlichen Bedeutungen ihrer Wortverwendung. Dies zeigt sich auch anhand der Erkenntnisse einer Studie, die mit URM in Berlin durchgeführt wurde, in der die methodischen Faktoren reflektiert wurden, die für die Forschung mit dieser

Gruppe einzigartig waren. Auch in dieser Studie ging es um die größeren diskursiven Kontexte, in denen sich die Aussagen der Flüchtlinge befanden. In diesem Sinne versteht sich dieser Artikel als ein Plädoyer für größere Reflexivität in der Forschung, die dazu beitragen kann, Fragen der Dekontextualisierung und Falschdarstellung anzusprechen, um damit die Qualität der Flüchtlings-Forschung zu erhöhen.

1. Introduction

Unaccompanied refugee minors (URM) make up a small portion[1] of the refugee population and in recent years there has been a sharp increase in those traveling to Europe[2], particularly to Sweden and Germany, and increased attention has been placed on their living situations in Europe (BAMF, 2016, p. 20; Eurostat, 2016a; UNHCR, 2016, pp. 2–3, 44). Most of the existing research about URM focuses on psychological issues, adversity and victimhood, while research about their backgrounds, experiences, circumstances and most importantly, their voices and perspectives is small. In order to address this lack of research, a shift has begun and in 2011 the Nordic Network for Refugee Cooperation on Unaccompanied Minors (NordURM) was established in an effort to promote research, particularly from the child's perspective, and to establish a platform of information exchange (P. E. Hopkins & Hill, 2008, p. 258; Kohli, 2006, pp. 708–709; UNHCR, 2014, p. 4; Wernesjö, 2012, pp. 497, 499–500, 2014, pp. 11, 23–25, 56, 59). While this can foster greater insights and increase understanding of the lives of URM, there is no indication that much attention has been given yet to a more holistic and critical exploration, examination and contextualization of the production and use of their voices in research, therefore, this paper attempts to address this gap in research.

Several pieces of relevant literature regarding the full exploration, reflection and critique of using children's voices in research act as a starting point for this research. In Spyrou's (2011) work regarding the limited, multi-layered and non-normative characteristics of children's

voices, he promotes a critical and reflexive approach towards research that includes children's voices, which he says must account for power imbalances, as well as research and ideological contexts. In a follow up literature, he expands upon the characteristics of children's voices by focusing on the feature of silence as an aspect of voice. He illustrates through his own research with Cypriot children how research could become more productive by critically addressing the processes that give rise to their voices, which also include silences (Spyrou, 2015). Thomson's (2008) work on the voices of young people examines the numerous types of voices that are contained within each young individual, such as the *therapeutic* voice, the *pedagogic* voice and the *critical* voice.

Research which focuses more specifically on refugee youth voices include the work of Godin & Doná (2016), which problematize the de-contextualized, de-politicized, and homogenized representation of the voices of refugees in the media and academia. Their study with a group of Congolese refugee youth in the UK focused on how new forms of social media were utilized, which allowed for *self*-representation, thus, challenging conventional understandings of refugee voices, challenging mainstream politics of representation, and challenging power relationships from global to local levels. The work of Sigona (2014) reflects on existing debates around the notion of 'refugee voices', identifies various productions and consumptions of them, and includes the various power relations which surround them.

A study by Wernesjö (2014) focuses on the voices of unaccompanied refugee youth in relation to their sense of belonging in Sweden. One of the main aspects of her work has to do with the methodological aspects and drawbacks involved in bringing forth their perspectives and voices, and she demonstrated a critical reflection and analysis of her fieldwork. Although mainly focusing on professional social work with URM in Britain, Kohl (2006) examines the silences, and 'thick' and 'thin' stories of URM that they tell social workers, and the various ways that this is understood by practitioners despite what the 'truth' behind their stories may be.

This paper aims to expand upon the aforementioned existing research regarding voices in childhood, youth and refugee studies by particularly focusing on the contextual factors that are associated with their production and representation. An emphasis will be placed on exploration and critical reflection from the micro to macro contexts, including power relations, as well as addressing the various features and characteristics that make up their voices. I argue that greater significance and meaning in their statements and voices is found in the contexts in which they were produced in and less in the abstract or literalness of their words or silences.

This will be demonstrated by drawing upon evidence from a study that was carried out in early 2016 regarding the digital media experiences of a group of URM in Berlin and focusing on the methodological factors and issues that were associated with it (Trujillo, 2016). Simultaneously, this research will attend to the lack of voices and perspectives of URM in research, and it further contributes towards refugee youth research.

The first sections of this article will explain the preoccupation with and problematization of including children and youth voices in research, and then attention will be placed on issues behind refugee and refugee youth voices, including the circumstances surrounding their unique situations. The next section will thoroughly describe the methodological context of the study, will address preparations and considerations for conducting research with URM, and describe the fieldwork that was carried out. Then it will address the field issues and sensitive matters that arose and their connections to power relations and trust. The section after that will attempt to examine and holistically analyze an interview from the study and explore the various features of the interviewee's voice. Finally, I will discuss the ideas of how the interview exchange can be considered as a performance and the value behind a reflexive approach towards research, and then I will end with concluding thoughts towards more holistic and improved representations of refugee children and youth voices in research.

2. Young Voices in Research and their Production in Context

It has been claimed that the concept of children and youth voices – often considered to be silent in an adult-centered society - is one of the more important aspects of the new childhood and youth social studies. This is due in part to the aim of gaining deeper insights and improved understandings of their everyday lives, knowledge and perspectives, as well as gaining greater symmetry in adult-child relations. Failure to include their voices and perspectives in research may easily lead to misinterpretations and misrepresentations of them, as well as a perpetuation of structural issues in adult-child relations. Increasing emphasis has been placed on the researcher's acknowledgement of children's agency and their roles as social actors in research, where research with children instead of on them occurs. In this way, the researcher re-positions him or herself as a facilitator of dialogue whereby the voices and perspectives of young people can emerge, thus, they become the co-constructors of knowledge (Jan Mason & Hood, 2011, pp. 490–493; Spyrou, 2011, p. 151; Thomson, 2008, pp. 1, 6–7). Furthermore, from a rights based and social justice angle – particularly for marginalized groups – researching with children and youth and including their voices in research promotes their rights to expression and participation under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and for many social researchers and scientists, this means that young people have "a right to a view about, and in, research which concerns them." (Jan Mason & Hood, 2011, p. 494; Thomson, 2008, pp. 2–3)

Despite this entitlement, ethical obligation and preoccupation with using young people's voices in research, including them does not necessarily yield high quality, ethical, or valuable work. Different research methods and contextual factors can influence results and yield different responses to similar questions and subject matter. There is a growing concern that researchers are not problematizing the use of voice, not acknowledging its limits, and not reflecting critically enough on their *own* role in its production, reception and representation in research. The academic

community advocates for researchers to improve their awareness of the constraints and contextual factors which shape and produce children's voices (Spyrou, 2011, pp. 151–153, 157; Thomson, 2008, pp. 3, 6).

Apart from accessibility issues of children and young people not wanting to, or being incapable of speaking, other contributing contextual factors may be – but are not limited to – the use of language, researchers' own assumptions about young people, ongoing relevant discourses, institutional contexts and various power relations (Spyrou, 2011, pp. 151–152, 157). Within formal social contexts, such as an interview context, to be able to say what one thinks in the ways that one wants, is greatly dependent on three factors: *what* is being asked, *who* is asking (including *who* is present) and the *expectations* of the person(s) who asked, or the expactations of those involved in the process. Saying something to one person in one environment might not be the same thing that is being said to another person, in another setting, at another time. Power differentials connected to social characteristics such as gender, age, class, race, and sexuality can all construct and constrict social interactions and limit what is being said, how it's being heard, and how it's intended to be used (Freeman and Mathison as cited in Spyrou, 2011, p. 156; Thomson, 2008, p. 6).

According to Spyrou (2011, p. 159), using quotes from the voices and perspectives of children "can only serve its intended purpose when voices are fully situated in the discursive fields of power which produce them." For instance, an interview context is situated within even greater social, cultural, political and discursive contexts, therefore, power relations – when placed in their contexts – can impact what is being said and not said (ibid). Thomson (2008, p. 6) points out that understanding the influence of context on voice is of great significance to researchers because they must "work in the knowledge that what is said to them does not come from an 'authentic', fixed and stable voice". In this sense, statements and voices don't necessarily equate to 'truth', nor are they necessarily an authentic depiction of social reality. They are always formulated at a certain place and time, and are in response to certain questions and anticipated

responses (Mazzei and Jackson as cited in Spyrou, 2011, pp. 152, 154; Thomson, 2008, p. 6). Furthermore, and of equal significance is the exploration and understanding of the multiple layers of meanings behind voices, and the multiple features and characteristics that can constitute the notion and fullness of 'voice', such as verbalized words, discernable and indiscernible utterances, gaps and pauses, silences, and even laughter and body language (Spyrou, 2011, pp. 156–158, 2015).

3. Young Voices in Refugee Research

Factors and constraints which shape young people's voices in research tend to become more prominent with amongst those who have problems communicating (Spyrou, 2011, p. 152) as well as those who are vulnerable and living on the fringes of society. URM are unique in that they constitute multiple disempowered and minority groups in society, as they fall into the categories of being children, refugees and unaccompanied. Moreover, they constitute a diverse group of young people who may have had gaps in education, traumatic past experiences – often with people of authority – and have also experienced a loss, separation and uprooting from previously established social networks and emotional relationships (P. Hopkins, 2008, pp. 37–38; Thomas & Byford, 2003, pp. 1400–1401; Wernesjö, 2012, p. 495). After URM arrive in a host country, their stresses do not end. They are faced with many new challenges such as the uncertainties of residence status and the asylum process, limited mobility, coping with the loss of family and peer networks, questioning identities, cultural and linguistic barriers and adjustments, as well as a new education system (Gifford & Wilding, 2013, p. 560). Yet, as any other teenager, this particular life stage towards adulthood is characterized by the need for guidance and support, but also independence and identity formation (Wernesjö, 2012, pp. 502–503). Therefore, URM exert agentic characteristics in playing actively social roles in shaping and being shaped by their experiences (P. E. Hopkins & Hill, 2008, p. 266).

Despite their life stage and unique circumstances which warrant a distinct need for protection, their perception, reception and care in host countries

varies greatly (Rose, 2016, p. 22). This sets the stage for the broader discursive contexts and power fields that they are situated in. In Wernesjö's (2014, p. 13) work on the voices of unaccompanied youth in Sweden, she recalled a debate between politicians, journalists and opinion-makers regarding a provision situation pertaining to URM, and how despite the liveliness of the debate, not one URM's voice was heard. She recalls,

"Looking at the debate, these children and young people seem to be a group that is frequently talked about, but they are rarely allowed, or enabled, to speak for themselves. In this form of representation, they become marginalised; their voices are not heard, their identities are reduced to stereotypes...".

The stereotypes that Wernesjö are concerned with, are reflective and representative of the social, cultural and political discursive contexts that are often connected to this population group, and it is in these discursive contexts that their voices are both silenced and produced (Spyrou, 2011, pp. 152–153).

Within the context of Germany, the perception, treatment and care of URM has been heavily debated, and an organisation called the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Minor Refugees (*Bundesfachverband unbegleitete minderjährige Flüchtlinge)* has heavily criticized shortcomings in the youth welfare services and education access to those over 15 years old (BUMF, 2013, pp. 2, 7). For example, due to recent steep increases in the amount of URM arriving in Germany, it was reported that at the end of 2015 and beginning of 2016, Berlin was at 120 per cent capacity and Bremen was over 400 per cent regarding the care and support of URM (BUMF, 2015 & 2016). Despite these criticisms and shortcomings, Germany considers URM to be a particularly vulnerable group with a distinct need for protection, and thus they receive special provisions and undergo a distinct asylum procedure that is different from other refugees (Müller, 2014, sec. Summary, p.10).

In conducting voice research on the perspectives and experiences of young people, such as URM, a space can be created for a potentially

improved and better understanding of them (Thomson, 2008, p. 6). As Kohli (2006, p. 708) points out, in attending to their voices we begin to see them as normal people driven by normal desires, which can contribute towards the breakdown of stereotypes. They are heterogeneous as a group (Godin & Doná, 2016, p. 68), exert autonomy over themselves, adapt in specific circumstances, and have socially active roles to play in their situations and experiences (White et al., 2011, p. 1164). Nevertheless, as power interferes with and negotiates all research processes (Spyrou, 2011, p. 154), refugee youth research is not exempt from this either.

Young refugees are situated within unique power structures and discourses that, amongst other things, determine: their refugee status, the public's perception of them, their perceptions of themselves, their institutional living situations, and the power dynamics between an interviewer and interviewee. All of which are factors that can greatly impact and influence the words and silences that refugees utter at any given time (Sigona, 2014, pp. 369–371, 378). Studies have shown that URM can be shy, worrisome and reluctant to talk to others, and remain silent about their past and feelings in case it interferes with their ongoing asylum application process and services they receive, or in case it impacts family members back home (Kohli, 2006, pp. 707–708, 714; Wernesjö, 2012, pp. 65–66).

Somewhat similarly to the concerns that researchers have to not problematizing and reflecting critically enough on children's voices in research, as seen in the previous section, are concerns that are being echoed by the refugee academic community regarding the de-contextualization and homogenization of the voices of refugees and refugee youth (Godin & Doná, 2016, pp. 60–62). It has even been argued that due to the interference of researchers, the individual or collective self-representation of refugees themselves becomes marginalized. Abstracting their voices in media and research from certain cultural, political and historical milieus could lead to what Malkki calls a 'silencing of refugees' (as cited in Godin & Doná, 2016, p. 61; Sigona, 2014, p. 370).

Thus, attempts are being made to critically and productively address these issues and bring greater symmetry to power differentials. Similar to research methods and approaches that are aimed at working *with* children instead of *on* or *about* them, as discussed in the previous section, are the emerging approaches of researching *with* refugees instead of *on* or *about* them (Krause, 2017, pp. 19–21). This can constitute – amongst many other methods – their use of voices in research, collaboration on data collection and co-conceptualizing the research process in the field.

4. Methodological Context of the Study

In February 2016 research was conducted at a youth home for unaccompanied youth with migration backgrounds in Berlin. The home is situated in an urban city setting and offers conditions that facilitate orientation in a foreign country and culture, and fosters independent living. Two youth and seven URM were interviewed in order to explore their digital media access[3] situations, experiences and practices, and to uncover detailed accounts of their perspectives and voices on the matter. Findings revealed that smartphones and the Internet were living essentials for this group in terms of communicating, orientating to Germany and in re-building social networks. However, due to access limitations and restrictions, they largely engaged with digital media on their own using their very limited resources, sometimes displacing the purchase of other livings essentials such as food and clothes. Results further indicated the need for greater materials access support, the need for building digital literacy skills, and to need for promoting safe online practices (Trujillo, 2016).

Between June 2015 and February 2016, I visited the home seven times in connection to a prior project as well as this study, therefore, a working relationship and trust had been previously established with one of the youth care workers (the gatekeeper), which greatly facilitated access to the field for this study. This was a rather fortunate situation as obtaining field access in other studies with URM has been shown to be a very time

consuming and challenging process (Kutscher & Kreß, 2015, pp. 17–19; Wernesjö, 2014, pp. 58–60).

This section will briefly describe the study preparation and research design, fieldwork undertaken and data analysis. It will also include topics regarding: URM fieldwork considerations, power relations, the gatekeeper, participant selection process, interviews, language and interpreters. Although staff interviews were a part of the study, this article will only focus on the process pertaining to the URM participants.

4.1. Preparation, Considerations and Research Design

In conducting research with marginalized groups such as URM, it is crucial that preparation and careful planning take place, particularly regarding procedural and ethical factors. The very nature of their minority status as children and as refugees in adult-centered authoritative societies results in compounded power imbalances that are unique to their situation. Therefore, sensitive and appropriate measures should be taken in order to try and avoid causing distress and to achieve greater symmetry in these power differentials (P. Hopkins, 2008, p. 38; Mason & Hood, 2011, p. 493; Thomas & Byford, 2003).

The URM who participated in this study had been living in Germany between five and twelve months, and all except for one had moved beyond the asylum clearing phase[4]. The young interviewees consisted of three females and four males aged 16 to 17 years old, and they were from Afghanistan, Benin, Nigeria, Syria and Vietnam. Having unaccompanied females as part of a study is rare because the majority of URM are typically male (Eurostat, 2016b). Previous studies showed that female participants were very difficult to find or gain access to (Kutscher & Kreß, 2015, p. 19; Wernesjö, 2014, p. 61), therefore, the female voices and perspectives in this study undoubtedly contribute towards its uniqueness.

Thomas and Byford (2003, pp. 1401–1402) stress the importance of consultation with URM care givers, service providers and young people

where possible, therefore, a consultation meeting was undertaken with the gatekeeper. This allowed for the staff to support the young participants during the research process, and for considerations such as language, literacy, subject matter and social norms, particularly at the youth home, to be taken into account and prepared for (ibid). As the gatekeeper recruited participants, she emphasized the voluntary aspect of the research, and further stressed that they shouldn't participate for her sake. This type of informed consent is not only essential, but these assurances are very important as it has been reported that URM sometimes believe that participation in research activities could positively influence treatment by home staff and services they receive, or even their asylum application process (P. Hopkins, 2008, p. 40; Thomas & Byford, 2003, pp. 1401–1402).

Because part of the aims of this study were to uncover collective detailed accounts of the young participants experiences and individual perspectives, and due to time limitations, a qualitative investigation was undertaken in the form of one-time individual interviews[5]. All of the young participants shared a common bond and similar contextual conditions of being URM that lived at the same youth services home, therefore, the goal was to uncover their perspectives on some of their shared commonalities. Because of this, and due to little existing research on the contemporary phenomena of their access and use of digital media and the Internet, an exploratory case study[6] was chosen as the research design strategy (Kohlbacher, 2006, sec. 5.2; Stake, 1995, p. 64; Yin, 2009, pp. 2, 18, 50).

The selection of young interview candidates was biased towards those who had some degree of previous exposure to digital media. The gatekeeper selected candidates whom she considered to be most suitable based on language abilities, mental capacities, school and activity schedules, and amount of exposure to digital media. Strong critiques have been made about the role of gatekeepers, such as their contribution towards power differentials, or being strongly biased in the participant selection process and thus silencing the voices of those who are not

selected (Wernesjö, 2014, pp. 58–61). Nevertheless, as a care professional, their judgement regarding the protection of residents is of upmost importance, and this gatekeeper was a strong support for those who participated. In addition, she was a strong advocate of this study and was a crucial component towards its realization.

4.2. Fieldwork

All of the interviews were conducted at the youth home and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes depending on how much the interviewees were willing and available to talk, and depending on how many questions were asked. At the onset of each interview encounter I held a casual introductory dialog describing myself, the interpreters (when present), and consent forms were talked about and signed. During this step, aspects of the study were discussed related to research aims, complete voluntary participation, and anonymity, and it was also explained that respondents could pose their own questions or end the interview at any time. This is a form of voice and agency expression where they can exercise a certain level of control over the research process (Krause, 2017, p. 16). Moreover, this step of informed consent is essential from a rights based perspective, and is vital as it aids in facilitating dialogue, and establishing trust, and it was followed in compliance with the ethical considerations for conducting research with children, refugees and URM (Alderson, Morrow, & Barnardo's, 2004, sec. 8; P. Hopkins, 2008, p. 40; Krause, 2017, p. 16; Jan Mason & Hood, 2011, p. 493; Thomas & Byford, 2003).

Interview questions were set up in a semi-structured format with a mixture of closed and open questions where diversions could be taken, and the questions acted as a guide to facilitate a casually guided conversation while focusing on listening (Einarsdóttir, 2007, p. 200; Yin, 2009, p. 106). Researching children and young people's Internet use could cross into discoveries of private uses, such as, chatting, flirting, pornography, or anything else considered private, therefore, this also warrants consideration from an ethical perspective (Livingstone, 2003, p.

158). The interview guide was cross referenced according to an individual interview topic guide that is specifically aimed at interviewing young people about digital and online related topics[7] (EU Kids Online, 2013). In line with ethical considerations on research with URM, questions were roughly set up within each category to discuss the present first, before asking questions about the immediate or distant past, as this has the potential to lower potential emotional issues related to flight or the home country (P. Hopkins, 2008, p. 40). One particular participant chose not to answer certain questions several times throughout the interview, and during all of the interviews if it ever appeared that the conversation or mood was getting too uncomfortable for them or myself I tried to switch interview questions or topics in order to avoid distress. In his work with URM, Hopkins (ibid) emphasizes the importance of paying attention to body language, having empathy and creating an overall social awareness during the interview exchange.

The interviews were conducted in five different languages of Arabic, French, Turkish, German and English with the help of university student interpreters, and interviews were all digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions included emphasized words, sounds, non-verbal communication, body language, pauses and hesitations in speech. In an effort to ensure accuracy during transcription and wherever translation was a concern, certain parts of interviews were confidentially proofed by native speaking colleagues. Translating can often pose a risk of meanings being lost in translation, however, every effort was made to translate text as accurately as possible.

Due to the wide range of language abilities of the participants, interpreters were present during seven out of nine of the interviews, with one interpreter present in each of those interviews. Every effort was made ahead of time to decipher the language skills and preferences of the interviewees, however, this was not always possible and proved to be one of the biggest challenges. Therefore, participant language preferences were largely unknown or assumed. This resulted in many instances where interviews were conducted partially or minimally with the

support of interpreters because many of the young interviewees had a strong desire to speak German or English as much as they could. As a result, it was difficult at times to fully understand them, and likewise for them to understand me. I often re-worded questions or gave examples to facilitate the understanding process, and the language barriers also sometimes kept me from delving deeper or covering certain topics and questions at all. In the subsequent section, I will demonstrate how the presence of an interpreter influenced the interview setting and results.

Each interview ended with a de-brief where participants were given a chance to pose additional comments or questions, which many of them did. This de-brief contributes towards children and young people's comfort and emotional support during the interview process (Clark, 2005, p. 493; Thomas & Byford, 2003, p. 1402) and is also reflective of voice expression.

For the study I aligned myself with Mayring's (2000) content analysis approach where I focused on analyzing the text, and also with Stake's (1995, pp. 71, 74), direct interpretation approach for case studies. With Stake's approach, my analysis began at the beginning of the interview process and continued throughout the remainder of analysis. In this type of *interpretive* analysis, I took both my participant's and my interpretations into account in attempting to make sense and determine the meanings of responses (J. Mason, 2002, p. 149). I then further aligned myself with a *reflexive* approach that Flick (2006, pp. 14, 16 chapter 4) describes as taking into account the researcher's communication, actions, observations and reflections, which form part of their interpretations. In reflexivity, the researcher is a part of the data, becomes part of the process of knowledge production, examines the relationship that the researcher(s) has with the participants and adresses ethical issues that arise as a result (ibid).

5. Field Issues and Sensitivities Around Power Relations and Trust

In conducting research with URM, building the trust of gatekeepers and participants is extremely beneficial, as explained in a previous section, and researchers would argue that it is in fact crucial (Thomas & Byford, 2003, p. 1402), particularly as URM may have had high exposure to authoritative environments of distrust in their past (Krause, 2017, p. 12). Having had worked on a project at the same youth home prior to this study, myself and two of the interpreters had previously established a rapport with the gatekeeper and two of the young interviewees. This greatly contributed towards the gatekeeper's advocacy of the study and it impacted how she recruited candidates. In her attempt to balance out power differentials, she stressed to them during recruitment that my colleagues and I were of a 'younger' age, and that we were not connected to the authorities or immigration services. Due to the numerous interviews that the residents were required to attend at the immigration offices, meeting with authorities – particularly for interviews – instilled great anxiety in them. It was explicitly explained during the consultation meeting with the gatekeeper not to use the word 'interview' with the participants as it had a very formal and negative connotation associated with it for all of the residents. This is similar with what McWilliam et al. (2009, p. 70) describe in how children sometimes view a research interview as an 'interrogation', thus, affecting their responses.

Despite these types of attempts at appeasing the minds of young interviewees, researchers are often viewed as authority figures, particularly to URM. Regardless of what had been communicated to the participants of this study who had never met myself and the interpreters before, we were relatively strangers to them, and potentially perceived as 'outsiders' in relation to their daily lives at the residential home (Clark, 2005, p. 39; P. Hopkins, 2008, p. 40; Wernesjö, 2014, p. 56). This could account for the reason that the interviews with those particular respondents were amongst the shortest and least vocal in comparison to the other interviews with those who we had previously established a

rapport with. The latter interviews were generally longer, more relaxed, as the participants were much more talkative and disclosed more information, although, language abilities and the amount of time living in Germany could also have been contributing factors.

For Amira, a 16-year-old girl from Syria who I had not previously met, being audio recorded and remaining anonymous was concerning for her despite the step of informed consent where her anonymity had been guaranteed. In the following exchange, we see through the gaps in her voice and her calculated responses that she was clearly conflicted when discussing the topic of frequency of contact with her family using the WhatsApp digital communication platform:

Lisa: [...] and every day, [WhatsApp contact] with your family?

Amira: No (...) because it's difficult (..) for my mother, because she (..) mm not good Internet. But eh hmm, (...) every two days (..), or eh 3 days. (...)

Lisa: And/

Amira: But, these answers are se/ secret, yeah? [She's looks down at the recording device.]

It is not uncommon for URM to maintain a 'functional distrust' and 'functional silence' for survival, and out of security concernsfor the impact that their interviews may have on family members back home, potentially sparking concerns that "their families would be traced and put at risk in some way" (Kohli, 2006, pp. 712, 714). Moreover, this interaction may suggest the multilayered and interconnected nature of discussing digital media related topics in combination with using them as interview recording tools. After this encounter, which I presumed could have potentially caused Amira some distress, an additional exchange with the gatekeeper was held where I further encouraged emotional support for the participants.

6. Examining Voice in Context: The Example of Maya

In taking a closer look at the various characteristics that make up voice, such as silence, I came across what Spyrou (2015, pp. 6–7) describes as *wavering silences,* which are "silences that are partial, uncertain, ambiguous, and undecided, and hence, they waver back and forth from concealment to disclosure." This is an indication that the respondent has not completely committed to the extent of disclosure of information, which may partially depend on the interviewer's skills in facilitating dialogue (ibid), as well as the interview setting, including who else is present. I use the following example as a demonstration of this. Here, I describe two parts of the same interview with a 16-year-old Syrian girl, Maya, where a shift in power occurred during the interview due to the incoming presence of a male university student Syrian interpreter who had arrived late. Prior to his arrival, I held the first ten minutes of the interview in English, as Maya's comprehension was limited but conversational, and she knew from my English that I too had a migration background like she did, albeit a 'western' migration background that may still indicate an asymmetry of power as seen from a (post)colonial perspective (Marmo as cited in Krause, 2017, p. 19), but nonetheless, a migration background. Although Maya and I had never met before we only had a brief time alone together, she appeared to have spoken somewhat openly, a bit critically and somewhat sorrowfully. She was the only URM participant who had not moved beyond the asylum clearing phase, therefore, her state supported funds were drastically less in comparison to her peers at the home. Here I ask her about her thoughts regarding paying for the Internet for her smartphone:

Lisa: What do you think about it [paying for internet?]

Maya: Yeah [drops hand on table, looks down] I don't know (..) and ehh. (...) There is not (...) good for me because eh I am girl and I should buy something like (...) clothes, you know, like make-up, (..) but I can't.

Lisa: Right, mhm.

Maya: [drops hand on table] Yeah, normally (...) I should do it [buy Internet], but so, we don't have money here. [...] Because (..) ehm I don't have Jugendamt [youth welfare] here, (...) I'm here from 6 month or 7 and I don't have anything [...] all person here have Jugendamt [youth welfare] and have eh (..) some person to take care of them. (..) Me, no.

What we immediately see are numerous pauses, gaps and changes in body language which all constitute Maya's response just as much as her spoken words. While pauses may be reflective of a language deficiency, they are also characteristics of silence, which could indicate a sense of discomfort and reflection on delicate subject matter. Furthermore, saying "I don't know" and then continuing to disclose information that she does in fact know, suggests uncertainty in her voice (Spyrou, 2015, pp. 5, 7–8). As Maya willingly continued to explain her situation, she connected it to something that I, as a female interviewer, might understand when she said, "I should buy something like (...) clothes, you know, like make-up." The "you know" may suggest that I understand what she is talking about because I am a female, and this relates to what Alderson (2000, p. 254) refers to as shared common experiences between participants and researchers that aid in moving beyond the constraints of power in relations.

In her response, Maya even further elaborated on her circumstances in the youth welfare institution, and she appeared to critically reflect upon her position and lack in comparison to her peers. Here, her voice appears multifaceted and constitutes what Thomson (2008, pp. 4–5) calls a *critical* voice, where she challenges her status quo, and a *therapeutic* voice, where she discusses difficult situations and experiences in safe spaces. In using these voices, Maya is exerting her agency and perhaps trying to change or gain control over a situation (Spyrou, 2015, p. 8). Moreover, by confronting someone like myself with 'power', i.e. the interviewer, the voices Maya used tend to imply a desire for political or social change and exhibited the potential for creating new alliances (ibid).

Despite Maya potentially having felt 'safe' in a one-on-one interview with myself as a female interviewer, this 'safety net' seemed to have somewhat

unraveled upon the arrival of the Syrian male youth interpreter. Maya's demeanor shifted and her responses appeared to have been shorter, less descriptive and contradictory, which may further suggest hesitation regarding the subject matter and the interview setting. In attempting to gage her foundational knowledge about the Internet and smartphones, I asked Maya about her use of them in Syria.

***Lisa:** [...] did you use a smartphone in Syria (...)?

Maya: [drops hand on table] Hhm-m [shakes head No]

Lisa: And Internet?

Maya: [silence, shakes head No]

Lisa: Ok eh, so just when you got here [in Berlin], you bought your smartphone?

Maya: Yeah.

* via the interpreter

Notice here pauses and the same body language of dropping her hand on the table that also appeared in the previous example, which may indicate that asking Maya about her digital media use in Syria were also uncomfortable questions, however, this time she chooses not to elaborate further as she had done in the earlier interaction and interview setting. Here, we now see simple "no" responses that manifested as simple head shakes and utterances, which may suggest a 'silence' on the topic. While, in this example, my final question regarding Maya's only purchase of a smartphone in Berlin could be seen as a leading question, her simple "yeah" response, could again indicate hesitation, resistance and a decision not to elaborate further on the subject matter.

In a follow-up attempt to explore Maya's digital media understandings at a later stage of the interview and as my final question, we see a response that alludes to contradiction on this subject matter:

***Lisa:** Is there anything else about computers, Internet, smartphones, that you would like to learn [know] more about [...], or do you have any concerns?

***Maya:** Ehh no, I already know a lot about computers and smartphones. [interview ends]

* via the interpreter

What we see in this interaction is Maya's way of willingly – and without hesitation – reposition her knowledge on the topic ("I already know a lot about computers and smartphones"). This reframing may suggest a contradiction between Maya's first statement, that she had never used Internet or smartphones in Syria and this response where now she knows "a lot about computers and smartphones." Is this a contradictory statement, perhaps suggesting Maya's 'true' wealth of past experiences with digital media, or is it another way of swiftly avoiding and ending further discussion on the topic, especially because the interview was ending? Perhaps Maya was simply relieved that the interview was coming to an end, and felt more relaxed in speaking her 'truth'. Perhaps she just wanted to reposition herself as being rather knowledgeable about digital media in front of university researchers. Naturally these are some of my impressions, interpretations and reflections filtered through my subjective lens as a researcher. Despite what the truth may be, Maya's final statement breaks her pattern of hesitation and discomfort which had previously been demonstrated by simple one-word responses, pauses, shifts in body language and head shakes.

Upon reflection and examination of the entire interview as whole, there appears to have been wavering differences between more and less disclosure from Maya within the two different interview settings, albeit with different closed and open questions. It is in Maya's varying degrees of disclosure that we can attempt to analyze and make sense of her statments and silences, as well as her relationship to digital media and to the broader institutional, cultural, social and political surrounding discourses (Spyrou, 2015, p. 11). What we see is that the first part of the

interview contained a one-on-one female-to-female exchange, and then a shift in power dynamics occurred due to a new two-on-one interaction with a young man from the same country as Maya. How differently would her responses have been in the second half of the interview if the interpreter had not been present?

Perhaps they could have been similar or completely different, and while there could be various interpretations of her responses, what we do know are the contextually related facts connected to them. Perhaps the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011 (Al-Saqaf, 2016, pp. 43–44) may have impacted the level of trust between Maya and the interpreter, and this could be connected to what Chester (2001, p. 165) describes when he says, "the interpreter may in fact come from another ethnic, religious, cultural or political group that may hold views opposite to that of the child." Social and cultural gender relations may have also influenced the power dynamics, trust and the amount of information that was disclosed to myself and the interpreter. In modern Syrian history, females have played important roles in society, for example, regarding the economy and education, however, patriarchal order and traditional gender norms and ideologies strongly exist that become even more prominent during times of war (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016, pp. 7–10).

The interview questions and subject matter of digital media use in Syria may also have played a part in the responses and partial silences created by Maya. Since the early 2000s, Internet use in Syria has been highly controlled and under heavy government surveillance, resulting in severe forms of repression and punishment of citizens (Al-Saqaf, 2016). Furthermore, all of these factors that gave rise to Maya's statements are situated within refugee discourses and those regarding unaccompanied minors in the German youth welfare system. The entire interview contexts and the social, cultural and political discursive contexts, which all factor into the interview exchange (Spyrou, 2011, pp. 152, 155–156), warrant critical reflection, and thus, should be taken into account when representing Maya's voice.

7. The Interview as a Performance and Addressing Reflexivity

In the research encounter, results – particularly *intentional* results – that include partial or whole silences, body language, laughter, and so on, are produced and reasons exist behind what is generated. It has even been argued by Narin et al, that these reasons are indicative of the intuitions of power relations (as cited in Spyrou, 2015, p. 9), therefore, this exchange can be seen as a sort of performance, presentation, or representation of a 'truth'. It is in this performance that requires careful listening to *what* is said and not said, and *how* it is said and not said (Mazzei as cited in Spyrou, 2011, p. 157, 2015, pp. 8–9, 13). According to Spyrou (ibid), when "we refuse to allow voices to simply stand for the truth and we engage in a more rigorous and thorough analysis which takes into account not just the voiced but also the silent, the unclear and incoherent, the perplexing and the contradictory", the potential for a more complex, distinct, multidimensional and productive story can be told and explored (Mazzei as cited in Spyrou, 2015, p. 8). It could even be argued that the 'truth' behind voices may be somewhat irrelevant, in comparison to the contextual factors and discourses in which it was produced in.

In analyzing and reflecting on an interview exchange as a whole, we better uphold and preserve the unity of the research interaction, and this opens the doorway for differentiating, making sense of and finding meaning behind the more contradictory, inconsistent, complex, indiscernible and undisclosed aspects of young people's voices. By reflecting upon and further examining these aspects, we not only attempt to make more sense of children and young people, but we also avoid labeling their identities as fixed and stable, and their words (and silences) as literal, authentic, or as lacking knowledge. Furthermore, this reflection entails examining ourselves as researchers in the research process, and our own interpretations, meanings and categories that we use to organize and make sense of data. Communication is a multidirectional exchange, therefore, part of this equation entails *who* is listening to *what* and *how*. Reflexive analysis on the part of the researcher opens up and highlights

other avenues of interpretations, just as I demonstrated in the previous section, by exploring other social, cultural and political factors connected to the production of the interviewee's voice, as well as the production of my analysis (Flick, 2006, p. 14; J. Mason, 2002, p. 54; Spyrou, 2011, pp. 157–158, 2015, pp. 8, 11–13).

8. Concluding Thoughts

This article has critically examined and reflected upon the contexts in which the voices of unaccompanied refugee minors (URM) are produced in, and explored the multifaceted and multi-layered features and characteristics of their voices, which include silences. In drawing upon evidence from a study with URM, it was demonstrated that a door can be opened for uncovering more meaningful, interconnected and complex stories behind their statements. Their voices were contextualized by situating them within the smaller interview setting accounting for the associated methodological factors and power dynamics, and then expanding out to the more broad institutional, cultural, social and political discourses which gave rise to their responses. In this way, we could see that the relevance to their statements lied more in the interview setting and discursive contexts as opposed to the literalness of their words and silences.

Context is king, and when researchers can account for this, as well as critically reflect upon their own role as 'data' in the research process and situate themselves in this and the broader discursive contexts, then research can be elevated to a higher level of quality (Spyrou, 2011, p. 162). Moreover, in the case of refugee research, researchers contribute towards addressing the issues of misrepresentation of refugee voices in research (Godin & Doná, 2016) and its associated ethical research concerns, which can ultimately foster even greater reductions in power differentials.

While the strength of this research article can be seen in the inclusion of female URM voices, it can also be a limitation as well. Further areas of investigation could include a holistic and comprehensive analysis of

interview interactions of both male and female participants and a comparison analysis between the two. Perhaps this type of examination could uncover even greater insights into social, cultural and gender related discursive contexts and power fields that give rise to their statements.

This paper contributes to the concern regarding the de-contextualization and lack of critical reflection regarding the production and use of voices in childhood and refugee research by focusing on a unique and marginalized population: unaccompanied refugee minors. It addresses the ongoing preoccupation with young voices in research in the new sociology of childhood studies, and further attends to the gap in research that includes the voices, experiences and perspectives of URM, especially the nearly non-existent voices of female URM. In this way, it further increases understanding of the plight of a group who is rarely, if ever, heard in refugee studies (Kutscher & Kreß, 2015, p. 19; Wernesjö, 2014, p. 61), and advocates for more holistic approaches in research.

This can aid in elevating the level of research – particularly with this group – to a higher standard, which may ultimately provide even more comprehensive and productive insights into their daily lives. Furthermore, this research has contributed towards investigating digital media use by young people, and has raised potential issues regarding the investigation of this particular subject matter with young refugees.

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Footnotes

[1] In 2015, there were 98,400 new URM applicants, and they made up 5 per cent of *all* new refugee applicants. This was the highest amount ever on record for the UNHCR (2016, pp. 2–3).

[2] Of the applications lodged worldwide by URM, the majority have been filed in Europe, and in recent years, Sweden and Germany combined have consistently received over half of these.

[3] In this research, digital media refers to the Internet, computers, mobile phones and corresponding software applications. In addition, the words 'mobile phones', 'mobile devices', 'phones' and 'smartphones' are used interchangeably, although this may have impacted results.

[4] In some states in Germany, the Youth Welfare Office (*Jugendamt*) carries out the 'clearing procedure'. This determines if an asylum application will be lodged, or if family re-unification is possible, or if the application for a residence permit (*Aufenthaltserlaubnis*) will be made on humanitarian grounds, which ultimately determines the provisions received (ECRE, 2015, p. 42).

[5] Individual interviews are also appropriate incase sensitive topics arise and for young interviewees who are less articulate and less confident contributing in a group environment (Clark, 2005, p. 493; Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008, p. 292).

[6] Due to very nature of a case study, results can not yield generalizations to populations, however, they can be generalizable to the case at hand or similar cases (Stake, 1978; Yin, 2009, p. 15).

[7] As requested by the source, the citation should read that this research "draws on the work of the 'EU Kids Online' network funded by the EC (DG Information Society) Safer Internet Programme (project code SIP-KEP-321803); see www.eukidsonline.net"

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