This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Emotion, Space and Society*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Lind, J. (2019)
Sacrificing parents on the altar of children’s rights: Intergenerational struggles and rights in deportability
*Emotion, Space and Society*, 32: 100529
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.07.001

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mau:diva-1782
Children’s rights can often appear as one of the few tools that may have some validity and leverage in the political struggles of vulnerable groups in society. However, as I will show in this article, when state actors argue for children’s rights in the context of undocumented migration, they often try to make the case of the children stronger by accusing their parents of putting the children at risk. This notion of undocumented parents as being bad parents is implied in state actors’ arguments about how children should not have to suffer from the decisions of their parents. In this article, I will show how these arguments, that pit the positions of the children and their parents against each other, are not in tune with the experiences of undocumented children and their families themselves. While the state views the parents as putting their children at risk by ‘hiding’ them, the parents view the state as putting their children at risk by trying to deport them. Through ethnographic observations of the everyday lives of undocumented families in Malmö, Sweden and Birmingham, UK, I paint a contrasting picture to that of undocumentetness as bad parenting and instead show how the everyday struggles of undocumented children and their parents are interdependent and intergenerational as they protect the whole family together by doing all they can to avoid deportation. In doing so, this article contributes to discussions within critical migration research and critical children’s rights research about how the position and rights of undocumented migrant children can be understood.

The context of deportability in Sweden and the UK

Undocumented migration is a diverse phenomenon. Some migrants end up in an irregular situation after being refused asylum, others when their visas run out, and yet others as they enter a country illegally etc. Many children in the UK experience deportability, a state of being at constant risk of deportation (De Genova, 2002), without ever having migrated themselves since they were born in the host society to which their parents once migrated before their birth. These children are often unaware of their situation until later in life (Bloch,
and their chance for regularisation often increases the longer they stay in the country (see Finch, 2013). In Sweden, most undocumented children are refused asylum seekers and their routes to regularisation have been severely limited in recent years because of hardened asylum policies. Recent reports of an expected growth in the numbers of undocumented migrants as a consequence of the so called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 have led to increased calls from politicians on both sides of the political spectrum for tougher immigration policies rather than more protection for children (see Crouch, 2015).

In 2012, then Home Secretary Theresa May explained the government’s explicit aim to create a ‘hostile environment’ in the UK, which, according to Jonathan Price, is fundamentally about ‘denying basic rights and services to undocumented migrants’ (Price, 2014). The list of recent hostile policy initiatives in the UK is long. For example, the government making it illegal to let apartments and houses to undocumented migrants, the Home Office asking the health services to provide information on undocumented migrant patients and the Home Office asking banks to do immigration checks on millions of accounts to identify undocumented migrants (see Migrants’ Rights Network, 2018). Even though Swedish government representatives have not (yet) expressed themselves in terms of creating a hostile environment, recent developments are pointing in the same direction. In August 2017, the police in Southern Sweden raided a summer camp hosted by the Church of Sweden, and as a result arrested five undocumented families. In the following debate, the regional police argued that ‘there are no protected zones’ for undocumented migrants where police are not allowed to go in and arrest them (The Local, 2017). However, the Church and NGOs pointed out that traditional understandings of churches as sanctuaries, assessments of children’s best interests and the principle of proportionality arguably imply that such zones do in fact exist (Scott, 2017) and they have filed a complaint against the police to the Swedish Parliamentary Ombudsman.
The altar of children’s rights

In these grim circumstances, children’s rights are one of few resources available for undocumented families that enable them to receive limited state support in their everyday lives. Undocumented children in both the UK and Sweden are entitled to free primary health care and in Sweden also free secondary health care. They are also both entitled to free compulsory education. However, obstacles to actually accessing these entitlements are manifold (Sigona & Hughes, 2012; Sigvardsdotter, 2012). Additionally, undocumented children in both Malmö and Birmingham are entitled to a certain extent of monetary and housing support from the social services. In both cities, access to social support is based on similar understandings that children’s rights to survival are not dependent on their immigration status but that undocumented children’s actual residence in the city is what entitles them to the same basic support as all other children living there. In the UK, this is expressed in section 17 of the Children Act of 1989, which states that all children ‘in need’ are entitled to support (Project 17, 2013). The city of Malmö has, together with approximately a tenth of all municipalities in Sweden (Mattsson, 2018), interpreted the Social Services Act from 2001 as that the municipality has a duty to supply all people living ‘within its domain’ with emergency social support, including undocumented children (Nordling, 2017).

The narratives from undocumented families’ everyday lives, that this article presents, relate closely to their experiences of receiving monetary and housing support that is being provided on the basis of the rights of the children. Consequently, children’s rights offer a productive starting point for an analysis of the intergenerational aspects of undocumented families’ everyday experiences. At the same time, an intergenerational perspective can be employed for ‘a contextual approach’ to children’s rights, which Ann Quennerstedt (2013) calls for. Contextual approaches to children’s rights is an expression of what Didier Reynaert, Maria Bouverne-De-Bie and Stijn Vandeveld (2012) call critical children’s rights studies, which is
a relatively new area of research. They suggest that the dominant (non-critical) paradigmatic understanding of children’s rights today – which I refer to as ‘the altar of children’s rights’ – understand children’s rights as an ‘objective set of goals applicable for any context, and take the [Convention on the Rights of the Child] CRC as the key point of reference’. They argue that this is an approach that ‘does not sufficiently take account of the diversity of interpretations and meanings that children’s rights can have’ (Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie, & Vandevalde, 2012, p. 2). Critical children’s rights research moves beyond studies of ‘implementation-gaps’ of the CRC towards a study of ‘the underlying norms, values and logics that shape practices in children’s rights today’ (Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie, & Vandevalde, 2012, p. 166; see also Vandenhole et al., 2015). One such underlying norm or logic that I seek to engage with in this article is the ‘individualisation’ (Brown, 2004) of children’s rights (as well as human rights in general) and how they, if their ‘collective dimension’ is ignored, ‘risk to dichotomise social relations’ (Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie, & Vandevalde, 2012, p. 162-3). By re-contextualising the rights of undocumented children into their familial milieu I aim to initiate a discussion on the intergenerational character of children’s rights.

**Sacrificing parents**

What I mean when I say in the title that parents are being ‘sacrificed’ on the altar of children’s rights is that often when state actors aim to *strengthen* the arguments for undocumented children’s rights, parents are being put at fault. State representatives and institutions in Sweden and in the UK have argued (in accordance with the CRC, article 2) that children should not be discriminated against because of the immigration or residence status of the parents. The UK Supreme Court argued for example that an undocumented mother was ‘demonstrably irresponsible’ when she gave birth to another child ‘knowing that her immigration status was precarious’. Still, they argued, ‘the children were innocent of their
parents’ shortcomings’ and ‘a child is not to be held responsible for the moral failures of either of his parents’ (UK Supreme Court, 2011, §8, §35). In Sweden, the language of a 2010 Swedish Government Official Report (SOU) that proposed the legislation on undocumented children’s right to education, which came into force in 2013, implies a sense of responsibility on the parents for putting the children in a difficult situation: ‘Children who are staying in the country without permission have most often not chosen their situation themselves. Instead, it is the actions of the parents that have led to the often difficult situation of the children’ (SOU 2010:5, my translation). Similar and even more bluntly patronising language towards parents can be found in other SOUs and propositions:

The assessment of the best interests of the child, in relation to the Aliens Act, must not be given such an extended meaning that being a child in itself becomes a criterion of its own for leave to remain. If that were the case, it would be tempting [for parents] to use children in situations where the wish to migrate is strong, but the reasons for being granted asylum are not strong enough. This can be a factor in cases when children are hidden [by their parents] from the migration authorities. (Regeringen, 1997, my translation and emphasis)

The latter message was also expressed in 2013 by the former conservative minister of migration Tobias Billström in different words as he described undocumented parents as taking their children as ‘hostages’ (see Sager, 2014). In the debate in Sweden about children with pervasive withdrawal syndrome (so called ‘apathetic children’) during the 2000s, parents were (with no scientific basis) accused in an SOU of manipulating their children psychologically and even poisoning them with chemical substances to make them seem ‘apathetic’ (SOU 2006:49). Recently, another SOU highlighted the hardships of undocumented families, and suggested that it could actually be considered a ‘humane intervention’ to try and catch these families as a way to ‘help them get their lives in order,
even if it can lead to deportation’ (SOU 2017:93, my translation). As I will show, this last quote is a clear example of how antithetical the perspectives of the state and the families themselves are on their situation. In the next section I present the theoretical framework of intergenerationality, ‘motherwork’ and familial political agency that helps me analyse the families’ experiences of enacting shifting generational positions in stressful and violent emotional geographies, which I then build upon when I argue in the conclusion for an intergenerational perspective on children’s rights.

**Intergenerationality, motherwork and familial political agency**

There is no fixed definition of ‘intergenerationality’. Rather, the term highlights the intersecting character of different understandings of the concept of generation as life stages, birth cohort membership and positions within a family structure (Vanderbeck and Worth, 2015). Earlier research on intergenerationality and migration has focussed primarily on parent-child relationships in the US context. Cecilia Menjívar, Leisy J. Abrego, and Leah C. Schmalzbauer (2016) highlight the complexity of intergenerational relationships in mixed-status families, where one child may be a citizen and others not, and how legal status disrupts ordinary forms of generational orderings (see also Abrego, 2016; Foner & Dreby, 2011; Menjívar & Abrego, 2009). Deborah Boehm (2012) describes the actions of immigrant children and their parents as ‘embedded’ and Laura E. Enriquez highlights one consequence of this in mixed-status families where US citizen children are negatively affected by sanctions towards their undocumented parents, experiencing what she calls ‘multigenerational punishment’ (Enriquez, 2015). In relation to this, Jodi Berger Cardoso and colleagues (2018) show how shifting intergenerational positions in undocumented families sometimes make children take on increased responsibilities to protect their parents and families from deportation. However, in some cases this made parents in mixed-status families feel disempowered when children took advantage of the reversed generational power structures
that came with them being citizens and their parents not (see Ayón, 2016; Lykes, Brabeck, & Hunter, 2013; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Not all prolific research on the situation of undocumented children and families connect with scholarly debates around generation or intergenerationality as a complex, wide-reaching concept even though they discuss issues that relate to parent-child relationships (see Dreby, 2015; Gonzales, 2016; Sigona & Hughes, 2012). Overall, research about undocumented families has primarily been concerned with issues such as the health, coping strategies and development of children (see Hainmueller et al., 2017; Wahlström Smith, 2018; Yoshikawa, 2011). In Sweden and the UK, mixed-status families are not as common as in the US, since children of non-citizens do not immediately become citizens of the host country through their capacity of being born inside the territory (jus soli) as they do in the US. During my fieldwork all family members of the same family had a shared immigration status. This paper brings questions regarding intergenerationality and undocumented family life out of the US context and beyond discussions on mixed-status families. Also, this paper contributes to earlier research by connecting a discussion on intergenerationality with debates on children’s rights in the context of undocumented migration.

In the following section I wish to further develop our understanding of the intergenerational character of the everyday lives of undocumented migrants by drawing on the feminist concept of ‘motherwork’ (Collins, 1994; Sager, 2014) to theorize parental practices in deportability. Patricia Hill Collins argued in the early 1990s that discussions on motherhood were lacking perspectives of race and class and suggested using ‘motherwork’ as a concept that ‘challenges social constructions of work and family as separate spheres’ and highlights ‘racial ethnic mothers’ struggles’ that ‘involves collaborating to empower mothers and children within structures that oppress’ (Collins, 1994, p. 47, 56, 62). Later research on migrant mothers have emphasised the importance of their care and cultural work for how ‘racialised citizenship can
be challenged’ (Erel & Reynolds, 2018) by ‘transcending boundaries of the private, public and the nation’ (Longman, De Graeve, & Brouckaert, 2013) and have analysed migrant women’s mothering as a citizenship practice or ‘acts’ of citizenship (Brouckaert & Longman, 2018; Erel, 2011). Sager develops Hill Collin’s conceptualisation of motherwork further to understand parenting and mothering as ‘situated practices in the intersections between class, gender, nation, “race”/ethnicity and, in a migration context, also citizenship/leave to remain’ (Sager, 2014, p. 75, my translation). The concept of motherwork draws on the experiences of mothers but can be practiced by the whole family in the everyday life of deportability, according to Sager, and can open up our understanding of parenting in this situation as a potential for survival and resistance.

Research on undocumented families have emphasised the gendered aspects of immigration enforcement where fathers for example are often more at risk of deportation as they are more vulnerable to immigration raids at workplaces (Doering-White et al., 2016; Menjívar et al., 2016). Among the families I met during my research, the gendered aspects of parental positions were not significantly different, rather, what I want to show here is how parental practices were shared by all members of the families. ‘Parentwork’ could potentially be a more precise word to describe the phenomenon while also avoiding gendered connotations, but I chose here to use ‘motherwork’ to evade conceptual confusion and to connect with the feminist literature that has highlighted the plight of mother’s unrecognized domestic and emotional labour throughout history.

Sager further describes how activists in their 20s and 30s in Malmö, who opened up their homes to undocumented unaccompanied minors, found themselves suddenly in the position of parenting teenagers (which further highlights how intergenerational relationships are not limited to the family). While the actions of these activists are often understood as political, Sager argues that undocumented migrant’s own parental practices are not in the same way
understood as acts of resistance, but are instead made invisible in the same way as the emotional labour of mostly mothers are made invisible in the patriarchy. Furthermore, Sager argues that the parenting of undocumented parents is not only made invisible but often stigmatized through narratives of failing parental responsibility, which has also been highlighted above. Similarly, Eithne Luibhéid argues that when migrants are being designated ‘illegal’ they, at the same time, ‘become constructed as having caused their own vulnerability and exploitability’ (Luibhéid, 2013, p. 2). In contrast, Sager describes the (what I would call intergenerational) motherwork of undocumented parents as well as activists as a ‘building of alternative rooms, communities and routes to social rights’; practices that have subversive potential to disrupt sovereign power (2014, p. 80, my translation).

I suggest that we could understand the parental practices, or motherwork, of undocumented parents as them being their own humanitarian agents, who care for their children when state support is lacking. The parents’ humanitarian agency is expressed as they protect their children from deportation and try to keep the family together by avoiding their own deportation, all for the well-being and future of the children. Motherwork then, understood as unrecognized parental practices of care, or humanitarian agency, is arguably an expression of parental political agency. However, as I will show later, motherwork can also be enacted by children and consequently, as Kirsi Pauliina Kallio puts it, ‘political agency’ is an ‘intergenerational human condition’ (Kallio, 2015). In this special issue, Kallio develops an understanding of the concept of ‘familial political agency’ and argues that this concept helps understand how ‘political agency is developed and practiced subjectively and through sharing, leaning on emotional bonds and affective relations’ (Kallio, forthcoming). To apply an analytical lens of familial political agency is to acknowledge the interdependency of children’s (Lind, 2017a) and parent’s political agency. While agency has been a centrepiece concept for childhood studies in the last decades, ‘a curious effect of viewing children as
independent “agents” has commonly been to efface the intergenerational relationships that not only constitute childhoods, but construct experiences of age-itself” as Peter Kraftl points out (2013). Recent debates on children’s agency have thus developed relational approaches to reconceptualise agency in childhood studies (Esser, 2016) highlighting the interdependence between children and adults ‘yielding a structural understanding of reciprocity’ (Wihstutz, 2016). Eberhard Raithelhuber offers a relational definition of agency where it ‘can be seen as a realised, situated and permuted capacity, which can be accomplished through the combination of various interconnected “persons” and “things”’ (Raithelhuber, 2016). In this sense, familial political agency is expressed through what is enacted at different generational positions (Vanderbeck, 2007). As I will show, both children and parents enact motherwork and know about and feel the effects of deportability. Therefore, I find it useful to connect discussions on intergenerationality and motherwork, defined as unrecognised emotional labour or ‘humanitarian agency’, to understand how families contest the position of deportability and express political agency together while doing so.

**Methodology**

For this study I conducted ethnographic fieldwork among undocumented families in Malmö, Sweden and Birmingham, UK between 2014 and 2017. I interviewed parents in 12 families in Sweden and 16 families in the UK who were, or had at some point experienced being, in an irregular situation, meaning that they were absconing from a deportation order. I conducted interviews and participant observation with children in 12 of these families, 6 in each country. The fieldwork drew upon the ‘activist research’ approach (Hale, 2008) where my political standpoint as a researcher aligned with the struggles of the participants, which arguably
enabled an ethically sound and empirically rich knowledge production of increased validity\(^1\).

This research joins recent shifts in children’s rights research by adapting a ‘bottom-up approach’ of children’s rights (Vandenhole et al., 2015), where I attempt to show the families’ own perspectives on the role of the parents and the whole family in relation to the rights of the children and the support this entitles the children to. In Sweden the parents originated from Afghanistan, Albania and Kosovo and in the UK the parents originated mainly from former colonies such as Jamaica, Nigeria and India. Participants’ countries of origin mainly mattered in my study in relation to how the migration authorities in Sweden and the UK perceived the families’ situation in each country of origin and what consequences that had for their chance of being granted asylum. However, in the UK some families, primarily from Jamaica, never claimed asylum. In Sweden almost all the participants from Afghanistan have been granted asylum at the time of writing whereas 6 out of 8 of the participating families, or at least part of the families, from Albania and Kosovo were deported during 2016 and 2017, but of which some have also returned again on a visiting visa or working permit.

I performed what has been described as a ‘cross-national comparative ethnography’ (Jørgensen, 2015) but the limited sample does not allow for broader generalisations on the nature of deportability as it emerges in the different national contexts. However, by drawing on two ethnographic studies constructed to be as similar as possible I have experienced some of the benefits promised by comparative methods of seeing the particularities of both contexts more clearly by juxtaposing them against each other (see Bloemraad, 2013). Sweden and the UK have similar legislations in relation to undocumented migrants but they also have important differences in the social-historical developments that have shaped the way

\(^1\) For an extended account of my ‘activist’ methodology, including delimitation of participants and reflections on how ethics in this kind of research can become a method in itself, see Lind (2017b).
migration policies are being formed today. In this way they make up an interesting comparison for understanding the norms and values that shape state approaches to undocumented migration and what impact migration policies have for the everyday lives of undocumented migrants.

The context of Malmö was chosen because of its long history as an entry point for migration into Sweden and a site of migrant struggles (see Nordling, Sager, & Söderman, 2017). Birmingham was chosen as the comparative context, primarily since it, just like Malmö in Sweden, is the third largest metropolitan area in the UK (ESPON, 2007) and both cities are known for their diverse population and as sites of undocumented migration. Another aspect of choosing Birmingham was the extremely generous support I received from the Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS) at University of Birmingham as they introduced me to their large network among actors doing migrant support work in the city. This support was crucial for making possible the ethnographic approach in collaboration with NGOs and support networks that I had planned to employ over a time period of just six months. In Malmö, being my city of residence, I had the possibility to develop relationships with activists and support workers over a longer time.

**Parents’ sacrifice**

I want to begin the following analysis of my ethnographic material by highlighting how the parents’ and the children’s experiences were the opposite of the state’s discourse on their situation. As I stated in the introduction: The state viewed the parents as putting their children at risk by ‘hiding’ them, but the parents viewed the state as putting their children at risk by trying to deport them. Even though the background and migration histories of the parents differed, they all sacrificed their own life-plans and futures for their children. As I formulated the above observations into an interview-question of how the parents felt about being positioned by the state as bad parents, the looks the parents gave me made it feel like a stupid
question. One father in Malmö, Ivan from Kosovo, replied with a rhetorical question: ‘Wanting to protect your family is a crime?’ Tony in Malmö, with a similar background, expressed another aspect of his sacrifice for his children, saying: ‘My best years were wasted on living clandestinely […] I have spent 15 years in this hell. Is that not enough? Do I need to turn mad to be allowed to stay?’ Another mother from Kosovo, Selena, agreed: ‘My life does not interest me that much, it is all about the children.’ This observation is in line with earlier research on migrant families where parents emphasise that their migration is driven by a strong wish to do what is best for their children (Boehm, 2012, ch. 6).

Many of the parents (in the UK) who had overstayed their visiting visas did not fear for their lives if they would return to their country of origin, while the asylum seekers (in both countries) in most cases did so. Several of the parents in Birmingham talked about how they might have returned to their country of origin if it were not for the children, who in many cases had been born in the UK and had never been to their parents’ countries of origin. Mickie, from Zambia, for example worried that his children would practically become stateless if they returned since they would have difficulties receiving any birth certificates there.

The children also defended the actions of their parents. 13-year-old Frans in Malmö, said that he is not angry at his parents. He understands them. ‘No-one would have stayed there with the problem we had’, he said. Similarly, Niklas, a 16-year old in Malmö, explained to me how he thinks about his situation and the actions of his parents.

Niklas: I am thankful for the social support, I have a right to receive money to survive. If you help the children I will help my parents. It is not the parents’ fault. […] I understand, because they did it for me, not for themselves.
Also, 14-year-old Nadine in Malmö, had nothing bad to say about her mother, ‘my mother think about what is best for me and I would have done the same thing as she if I would have been in her situation,’ she said. The decision to stay was not only that of the parents, it was also a decision made by the children. Nadine’s mother, Golnaz, described how if she would have told her daughter that they needed to return to Afghanistan, the daughter would have refused. It would not have been possible to convince the daughter to go back. Thus, the children acknowledged the sacrifices their parents had made, and kept making. None of the families recognized themselves in the State’s arguments that suggest undocumented parents are putting their children at risk and are bad parents.

**Shifting intergenerational positions in deportability**

The overall message of the parents was that they want papers so that they can work and take care of their families. They do not want social financial assistance, but it is a last resort for them as a way to be able to give their children a more ‘normal’ everyday life. A father from Kosovo, Tony, emphasised that he thinks Malmö is a good city since it, in comparison to most other Swedish cities, gives social financial assistance to undocumented children. The option for many would be to steal, he thought. But he was frustrated by the life he was left to live in limbo as an adult, and he did not think there was any answer to this paradox: ‘But what is the point when life is hell anyway and you have to wait for 15 years and are still not allowed to stay?’

In Birmingham many participants were also getting temporary support from the Social Services through Section 17. Mickie, a father of three, was expressing similar resentment towards the system and not receiving the papers he needed to be able to work and live in the UK. He said: ‘I don’t want to live on benefits. They have stopped me from being able to provide for my children and that is not my fault, they are blaming the victim.’ Here the conflict between the state and the parents are clearly played out and the paradoxical ‘solution’
to their situation that the state offers the parents. All parents in both countries were clear on their suggestion for a solution: give us the papers we need so that we can work and provide for our children in safety.

Motherwork in deportability consists to a large degree of navigating an impenetrable immigration system so that the parents can get the papers they need to be allowed to stay and work so that they can protect and provide for their family. Many of the parents I met in both Sweden and UK who had been refused asylum were spending a lot of their time watching the news or searching for information on the internet that could be used to strengthen their asylum case. Especially in the UK, parents often sounded like immigration lawyers in training as they explained the most recent application they had filed with the immigration authorities. In both countries the parents carried around large folders – sometimes even cardboard boxes – with their documentation as lawyers consistently needed to see all the papers they had to be able to assess their cases. Much of the parent’s time and energy went into getting hold of letters and certificates from medical doctors, schools and other institutions that would support their cases. Some of the parents, in both countries, expressed that after a while they felt that people were getting tired of them and they became more and more ashamed and afraid to ask for additional help. The interpretation skills and general know-how of bureaucratic functions of older children were central in this legal struggle. As a consequence, children also performed ‘motherwork’ for the benefit of the whole family as they supported their parents in resolving their legal cases.

Child-interpreters are one example of children’s capacity for agency that stems from an intergenerational interdependence where the parents are responsible for the family’s wellbeing, but are also dependent on their children to help them fulfil this task. As brokers and interpreters, children are made aware of ‘adult’ issues that they usually are not involved in (see Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001;
Weisskirch, 2017). Nadine in Malmö often interpreted for her mother and at an asylum interview with the Swedish Migration Agency the interpreter was of such low quality that Nadine had to intervene and tell the migration officer that ‘my mother did not mean it that way, she meant it this way’. Then the officer told the interpreter to leave and Nadine interpreted for the rest of the meeting. This interview resulted in a long awaited positive decision on their asylum application, and it is possible that Nadine’s intervention had an impact on the migration officer’s final decision.

Wouter Vandenhole and colleagues define the shifting intergenerational positions of undocumented children interpreting for their parents as an ‘intergenerational rupture’ (Vandenhole et al., 2011) and a ‘parentification’ of the children who take on responsibilities for their families. The shifting intergenerational positions in the context of deportability is highlighted by looking at the example of Niklas, who discussed how he took on different subject positions in relation to different people. He lived with his mother and 10-year-old brother in Malmö, while his father was travelling around and only sporadically got in touch with the family.

Niklas: I have to be a dad, I have to be a man, I have to be a child – I change all the time. With my brother I am a dad and a child. With my mother I have to be a man. When dad comes, then I can be a child again. I am thinking, ‘How did it happen that I have to be everything?’ It makes me sad when I think about it.

In a similar vein, Nadine described her relationship with her mother and how she sometimes had to take the position of ‘the mother’.

Nadine: Since I was 12, 13, 14 years old I started to take responsibility for our shared economy. I have received child allowance. If I wanted to buy a shirt we save up, we agree on it. We make a compromise. I have learnt that word in school
from this book I am reading. I have a test on that word tomorrow. So I get to take care of a lot. I get to show her things on the computer, so we switch place, I get to be the mother sometimes. I feel that I have to take more responsibility. Show her the new school she is going to for Swedish classes. I get to help her with her homework. It is starting to be the other way around. […] You learn from each other.

Both Niklas and Nadine are taking on shifting familial positions depending on what the situation requires from them. This shows how parental practices is not something that only parents can perform, but rather are performed by parents and children together with the aim of fulfilling the needs of the whole family.

This point, that chronological age is less relevant than intergenerational positionings, is also highlighted through two examples of families I met in Malmö. One family consisted of two 19-year-old parents, Alma and Donald, with a new-born baby, the other consisted of two middle-aged parents with three daughters, 19, 11 and 0,5 years old, where the 19-year-old, Lina, was the designated interpreter of her father. In all these cases, age is less relevant than the positions of the different people in relation to each other as families. The 19-year-olds were positioned mainly in relation to, in Alma and Donald’s case, them having a child, and in Lina’s case, her being the daughter of her parents. Alma and Donald were escaping from problematic family situations in their country of origin, whereas Lina was doing everything for and with her parents. She had a good relationship with her parents and they took responsibility together as a family. Her wish was to be a doctor; then she could help herself and the whole family: ‘I will do everything so that we can have a good life. If we get something good, everyone should get something good – we are a family.’ Hence, the interdependent character of family life in deportability is expressed through the interchanging positions of children and their parents.
Stress as intergenerational affect through knowledge-sharing

The emotional geographies of undocumented migrants have been explored in a number of studies. Alice Bloch (2013) shows how the fear of being deported and the fear of what would happen on return to the country of origin influences decisions and permeates the everyday lives of refused asylum seekers in the UK; a fear that also has psychological effects such as panic attacks and nightmares. Similarly, according to a study conducted in Sweden by Åsa Wahlström Smith (2018), refused asylum seeking children in an irregular situation are in constant preparedness, without break, towards various threats. In school, for example, undocumented children develop different strategies for how to avoid talking about their legal status with their friends, and sometimes the threat intensifies when more acute or alarming situations occur, as when someone is knocking on their door or they think the police are following them (Wahlström Smith, 2018).

In line with the findings of earlier research, the overall emotional experience of the hostile environment the children as well as the parents in my study expressed was that of an ever-present stress in everyday life. ‘Stress’ is spelled the same both in English and Swedish and it is the word that the participants most often used to express their regular emotional state of being. Stress appears to be the fundamental effect of the pressure of having an unresolved immigration relationship with the sovereign state. This stress of living with precarious immigration status has manifested itself physically for many of the parents through everything from increased acne, which made a mother in Birmingham, Julia, avoid seeing friends because of the shame she felt about her appearance, to developing schizophrenia, as a mother, Mina, in Malmö had experienced since arriving in Sweden. Alice in Malmö, was grateful that her son was still only three years old. But even though the child did not understand the situation, she experienced that he could feel that their parents were stressed. When she cried he sometimes asked her ‘why are you sad?’ She could still lie to him and he...
would believe her ‘but when there is stress in the family he feels it’, she said. Similarly, Tony in Malmö described children’s emotions as ‘magnets’; they feel everything the parents send out. Research has also shown that unborn babies are affected by the stress caused by their mothers’ deportability (Reardon, 2017).

The everyday life of the families centred much on managing stress and psychological illness and the children were a source of worry and anxiety for the parents as they started to ask more questions about their situation the older they get. But the children were also a source of joy and relief. At one occasion I was discussing immigration issues with Tony at a family gathering at an NGO in Malmö and he was getting more and more upset. But suddenly his six-year-old son, Mikael, came up from behind and asked his father to play with him, joking and smiling to convince him to come, and Tony’s face quickly lit up as he started laughing and cuddling with his child. Such mundane everyday affective interactions between parents and their children may seem a banal observation, but I argue they are central to an understanding of the intergenerational experience of living in an irregular situation. The importance of the children for the sanity of the parents was also highlighted by Arash in Malmö, a father from Afghanistan, who said: ‘The stress – every hour, every second is killing me, because I have small children and a wife and I am fully responsible for my family’. He told me that he had decided four times that he would commit suicide since he thought that if he died perhaps the rest of the family would get leave to remain on humanitarian grounds. ‘But then when I thought about my little girl, when she laughs with me, then I could not do it,’ he said.

The violent nature of immigration control is felt by the whole family as an intergenerational, fundamentally affective, experience. These feelings, most explicitly expressed as stress, are then managed through the emotional labour, which Nicky James defines as ‘the labour involved in dealing with other peoples’ feelings’ (James, 1989), of both the parents and the
children. But much of the motherwork the parents do is focused on making sure the children
are not affected by this stress, and one strategy that some of the parents applied was to try
hard to keep their children away from knowing too much. Karen in Birmingham said that her
child did not know much about their immigration status. ‘It is the adults stuff,’ she said ‘the
kids are not supposed to worry about it. I cry when he has gone to bed.’ I tried to talk with 14-
year-old Sunayah in Birmingham about what she knew about the family’s problems without
going into detail about what I knew (see Lind, 2017a), and she said that she was glad that the
parents did not talk to her about it. ‘I think I would be more stressed out if I knew. It would
just add extra worry and they want me to concentrate on my school more than that thing,
because I can’t do anything about it, that is why.’ However, later during my fieldwork her
father, Fadi, showed her a text that I had written about their situation.

Fadi: She is a responsible girl. She knows everything but does not say anything. I
can feel that she wants to pretend that she doesn’t know. If she starts discussing I
do not have an answer. If I say I’m homeless she might be depressed […] I gave
her that text because we are stressed and our behaviour has changed. Maybe it
would make her understand why we are stressed, maybe that was in the back of
my head when I gave it to her.

Julia in Birmingham also ended up sharing a lot of information with her 12-year-old daughter
Loreana. Not because she wanted to but as she said: ‘We live in such a compact space so she
will hear and listen. She is not stupid, she will know. I do not want to lie to her, this is her
country so she should know what is going on.’ Diana in Birmingham, also 12 years old,
talked about her ambivalence towards her talking about immigration issues with her mother:
‘I do want to know about our status, but at the same time I do not want to know. I do not want
to bother about it. It makes it weird when you know stuff.’ Both the children and their parents
work hard to manage, or avoid being affected by, the emotional violence that the hostile
society provides. Enduring stress is necessary for the families to make everyday life work. In this sense, the intergenerational motherwork of navigating the violently emotional geographies of deportability becomes expressions of everyday familial political agency.

Conclusion - Intergenerational struggles and rights in deportability

In this article I have drawn out the tension between how state actors frame parenthood in an irregular situation as ‘bad parenting’ and the experiences of undocumented children and their parents’ everyday lives. That tension points to a political process important to understanding the contemporary situation of undocumented migrant families. The few resources that these families can draw upon for support from the host society derive primarily from legal provisions based on the deservingness and rights of the children. But the needs and struggles of the families are intergenerational, meaning that they are deeply connected and interdependent on every level, practically and emotionally. Parents as well as their children enact shifting intergenerational positions of care and responsibility through ‘motherwork’; a kind of emotional labour unrecognized by the state. The intensively emotional geographies of deportability that are imposed through living in societies hostile towards undocumented migrants express themselves through a constant stress and fear of deportation and are shared by the whole family. The stress of parents influences even younger children who at an early age start to understand that deportability is the root cause of this stress.

In the same way as the gendered, unpaid work performed by mothers in everyday family life is not recognized by the patriarchy, similar work among undocumented parents and children is being done which is not recognized by the state. Sager (2014) analyses the parental practices of undocumented migrants as motherwork and suggests that the parents are to a limited extent able to suspend the exclusionary effects of deportability, as trying to create ‘a kind of (temporary and limited) citizenship for their children’ (Sager, 2014, my translation). These practices, she argues, can be interpreted as subversive in relation to the state’s attempt
to regulate migration. In my research, the unrecognized motherwork of undocumented parents, both mothers and fathers, expressed itself through the parents acting as, what I call, their own ‘humanitarian agents’ responsible for caring for the children when state support to the deserving, rights-bearing children is limited by the notion of the deportable migrant child. This humanitarian agency is expressed through motherwork and all these practices of both parents and their children, which contest the image of the parents as putting their children at risk, can be understood as familial political agency. Put in other words: Intergenerational parental practices, or motherwork, in an irregular situation are expressions of ‘activism’ or contestations against state understandings of undocumented parenthood as bad parenting through everyday life politics.

State actors argue for undocumented children’s rights through ‘sacrificing’ parents on ‘the altar of children’s rights’ at the same time as the parents themselves sacrifice their lives for their children’s rights. Children’s rights are often seen as one of few available resources to draw upon when doing activist work for undocumented families. But by putting all the emphasis on individual children’s rights, and neglecting their intergenerational context, we run a risk of marginalising the human rights of both children as well as adults. The intergenerational experiences and struggles of these families make it productive to think about children’s rights from an intergenerational perspective. In this sense, future research on both childhood and parenthood, as well as practice, policy and activist work for migrant rights, could benefit from an approach of further contextualising the intergenerational aspect of rights, by analysing the (lack of) rights of parents in the light of the (extended) rights of their children and vice versa.
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