

Book review of Herz,
Marcus and Lalander,
Philip 2021. *Social Work,
Young Migrants and the
Act of Listening: Becoming
an Unaccompanied Child.*
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BOOK REVIEW

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Social work researchers Marcus Herz and Philip Lalander have written the most comprehensive and extensive work on the everyday life experiences of unaccompanied minors and youth in Sweden so far. Through focusing on the ordinary day-to-day experiences of their young participants, the authors challenge the dehumanization that the label of ‘unaccompanied minors’ produces and instead highlight this diversity in how young people caught in this categorization experience their life in Sweden. In their book, *Social Work, Young Migrants and the Act of Listening: Becoming an Unaccompanied Child*, they cover the time period shortly before, during, and a few years after ‘the long summer of migration’ when more than 35,000 (in 2015 only) unaccompanied minors applied for asylum in Sweden. As such, it is a major contribution to migration research in the way it captures this significant time period through the eyes of those who were at the center of attention at the time: unaccompanied minors themselves. Through listening closely and attentively to the 20 participating youth’s own narratives, Herz and Lalander manage to provide engaging and thoughtful insight into their experiences. The authors are thus firmly rooted in a tradition of critical social work that focuses on the lived experiences of subaltern groups and how society can be improved by listening to these groups’ experiences. In their book, Herz and Lalander bring together findings from their research about unaccompanied minors and youth in Sweden that have previously been published in several academic articles as well as in a Swedish monography called *Rörelser, gränser och liv* (Herz and Lalander 2019).

Throughout the empirical chapters, Herz and Lalander cover an impressive range of experiences and themes that make the everyday lives of unaccompanied minors accessible to a broader audience. As they engage in dialogue with their participants, the authors explore their everyday experiences, worries, and dreams. The chapters initially follow a straightforward chronology, starting with young people’s first encounters with Sweden and how the Swedish ‘borderland’ unfolds before them over the coming years. Then we follow how the minors encounter the Swedish reception system and how relationships develop, both in Sweden and transnationally with their families, and the negative effects the ‘system’ has on these relationships (Chapters

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3–4). Herz and Lalander's depiction of how the participants make use of and navigate social media and the internet to maintain transnational relationships (Chapter 5) is especially interesting and revealing as it unveils their participants' ambivalences toward the accessibility these technologies create. Here they also show the difficulties that some young people experience when relating to their families in their countries of origin, whose social world stays the same, while the young people's perceptions of the world change as they settle in Sweden. Later in the book, young people's plans for the future are discussed and how the political system makes reaching their goals more difficult (Chapter 6). The authors also dedicate the whole of Chapter 7 to the category of 'unaccompanied minors,' discussing it from a discursive perspective and the way that these discourses influence the everyday lives of their participants in very real ways. In the end, Herz and Lalander turn toward their own professional field of social work and discuss the participants' experiences of it (Chapters 8–9). Here, the diversity of experiences is again in focus as the authors reflect on what possibilities exist for a social work that listens in solidarity and ascribes human value to the young people instead of only reproducing and reaffirming repressive and dehumanizing policies and discourses.

To contextualize and make sense of this empirical work, Herz and Lalander provide a clear background of the political changes in Sweden around 2015/2016 that is useful reading for anyone who wants to get a summary of the country's reaction to the 'long summer of migration' (Chapter 1). The book's theoretical framework (Chapter 2) centers around a discussion about the power of the categorization of 'unaccompanied minors' and its impact on their participants, continuing the important work of Stretmo (2014) and Wernersjö (2014) in a Swedish context. Herz and Lalander draw mainly on the work of Sara Ahmed to make sense of the 'otherness' that unaccompanied minors are assigned. In these framing chapters, the authors also criticize some earlier research—that focuses primarily on psychology and 'integration'—for unintentionally contributing to the reproduction of the idea of 'unaccompanied minors' as a problematic category that understands these young people as primarily vulnerable, exposed, and different from other kinds of children. Although this criticism is very relevant, it would have been interesting if Herz and Lalander had engaged more directly with these current political debates. For example, they could have connected their findings with important current academic discussions that criticize mainstream integration research from a postcolonial perspective. Unaccompanied minors are central to political debates about integration in Sweden and these debates have also to a large extent led to more restrictive policies that have then made the situation of young migrants even more difficult. Some further discussion about this political context in relation to critical academic debates could have put the narratives and experiences of the participants in an even clearer light.

The methodological appendix is relatively short even though its position at the end of the book could make possible more in-depth reflections without disrupting the flow of the book. Certain comments made throughout the book about the fieldwork leave the reader asking for a more elaborate discussion on how questions about ethics were handled. At least two times, the authors are exemplarily transparent as they mention that participants stopped returning their calls and messages and that they do not know what happened to these participants from then on. In both cases, the researchers (and their colleagues within the research project) describe themselves as having been directly involved in certain aspects of the lives of these participants. A more extensive discussion about how the relationships developed and progressed between the researchers and the participants would have been

beneficial for the reader—not because these relationships seem problematic, but because many researchers struggle with these same issues and Herz and Lalander could potentially contribute with important insight based on how they navigated this difficult methodological question (cf. Djampour 2018).

Overall, I agree with Herz and Lalander's suggestion that by looking at how the highly politicized category of 'unaccompanied minors' is treated, we can learn something important about our societies. And if it was not clear to the reader before reading the book that the Swedish welfare state and asylum reception system are undergoing rapid changes, there should be no doubt about it after taking part in the young people's narratives captured sensibly by Herz and Lalander. As they write, many of the Swedish (often older) citizens who supported unaccompanied minors around and after 2015 became increasingly confused and outraged when they learned about the limitations of Swedish humanitarianism (which they previously assumed to be exceptional). In this book, the tragedies of young people's suffering in the hands of Swedish authorities and the scandal of the legislators' inability to provide a coherent and appropriate response to the issue of unaccompanied minors is described with great clarity. As such, the book is a valuable resource for academics, activists, and policy makers across the world that are looking for a detailed portrayal of how Swedish human rights 'exceptionalism' has been overruled by the heavy hand of state sovereignty as Sweden has become incorporated into widespread European hostilities towards migrant 'others.'

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