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INSECURE IDENTITIES

UNACCOMPANIED MINORS AS REFUGEES IN HAMBURG

Abstract

This paper analyses the financial circumstances and social income of nearly one hundred unaccompanied minors who have come to Hamburg as refugees from various regions of Africa. It is based on extensive qualitative surveys, analysing their objective conditions of life and in particular their legal situation. A wide range of interview material and participative observations were used to obtain information on biographic courses and school and vocational careers of the young refugees over a period which extended to ten years in some cases, giving very detailed insights into their 'hidden lives'.

Fleeing, upheaval and coping

According to information from the Federal Agency for Migration and Refugees, some 30,000 asylum applications were submitted in Germany in 2009. Nearly half the applicants were less than 16 years old (45.9%), and one in five (22%) were in the 16-to-25 age group. So more than two thirds of the newly arrived refugees in Germany are children and young people. Based on statistics of the individual states and supplementary information from municipal authorities, it is estimated that there are between 5,000 and 10,000 under-age unaccompanied refugees in Germany, most of them in the big cities, especially Berlin, Dortmund, Frankfurt/Main and Hamburg.

Between 2000 and 2007, some one hundred adolescents and young adults from countries such as Sierra Leone, Togo, Somalia, Ethiopia, Guinea, Angola and Mozambique were interviewed several times on their educational perspectives, and their educational and vocational careers were reconstructed for the period since their arrival in Hamburg. In some cases we also accompanied them in their everyday activities in order to obtain detailed insights into their conditions of life. Some of these young people had only been in Hamburg for few months at the time of the first interview, but the majority had been living in our city for between two and five years. We have presented various results of the surveys in a number of German language publications (SCHROEDER et al. 2003; SCHROEDER and SEUKWA 2007; SEUKWA 2007).

We initially assumed in this project that the young refugees were exposed to insecurity in their subjective identities due to the loss of their home country, and due to their experiences in the course of fleeing; but we found that in fact what causes real problems for the young people is more the insecure status with respect to right to stay, and the comprehensive institutional exclusion of refugees in Germany. This article gives an overview of the legal and financial situation, and the social contacts of the young people, thereby presenting a wide-ranging even if somewhat depressing view of their "insecure identities".

Objective conditions of life and subjective assessments

For analysis of the life conditions of the young refugees interviewed, we concentrated on the legal situation, financial circumstances, and existing social network. For each of these aspects, we give a brief overview, and present individual life situations and subjective assessments by the young people on the basis of specific examples.

The Asylum Procedure Act (AsylVfG) stipulates that asylum procedure activities may also be applied to foreigners who have completed their 16th year of life (Section 12,1 AsylVfG). In fact this stipulation refers only to the classification of young refugees as fully capable of acting in their asylum procedures at the age of 16, but the Youth Offices and other authorities of many of the states of Germany, including Hamburg, derive from that stipulation the conclusion that the young people are capable of action in all respects related to matters of alien and asylum law. Young people with German nationality can benefit from youth status for purposes of care services and social support well beyond the age of majority, whereas young refugees tend to be subject to a reduction in the length of their youth status and the special youth support which is attached to it.

In the course of the interview, the young people were asked to give a subjective assessment of their legal situation and its influence on their motivation for education. The young people seem to be relatively *well informed* about German asylum and residence law, on the various regulations giving a right to stay, and on the consequences of the respective “stamp” for their opportunities to attend a school or obtain a work permit. On the other hand, they experience the asylum procedure, and particularly the decisions by the authorities on extension of their stay, as extremely *non-transparent*. The young people ask about the criteria applied by the authorities in making their decisions, and they are completely unable to say whether there are such criteria, or whether decision on them is made on purely subjective grounds in the respective authorities. Initially, the young people considered it self-evident that they would be permitted, or even required, to go to school on their arrival in Germany, but they soon realise that it is not possible in their own case. They have *learned* and *internalised* the fact that they are regarded by the German institutions not as “young people” but as “asylum seekers”.

They see very clearly the *fundamental conflict* between the institutional goals of the educational system and those of the authorities. In the educational system their experience is that they are taking part in programmes and offerings designed to prepare them for integration into German society (learning German, getting their school certificates, vocational training); but in the asylum procedure and at the foreigners’ authority their experience is that every effort is made to prevent this integration. Education takes *time*, and the Authority does not give them time – another inconsistency which they often mention (cf. also BREKKE 2004).

The *financial resources* available are enough to meet their basic needs – but not more than that. Asylum seekers in Germany receive support to pay for the costs of everyday life (“social benefit”) at a rate which is 25% lower than for German nationals. The explanation given for this disadvantage for refugees is that the financial and social burdens are too great, with the increasing number of asylum seekers and in the context of German unification, so it would no longer be acceptable to give asylum seekers the same conditions as German nationals

receiving social benefits. An additional reason mentioned is that, compared with German nationals, asylum seekers have less requirement for information and communication, and that typically they do not have costs for participation in cultural life (cf. CLASSEN 2000). Since 1 January 2006, single adult asylum seekers receive EUR 224.97 per month. If they are given benefits in kind, they receive only monthly pocket money of EUR 40.90.

As shown in the relevant comments in the interviews, some of the young people see receipt of social benefits as a kind of dependence, as a form of being determined and controlled by others, or as a humiliation. They cannot understand why they should be on benefits although they are young and capable of working to earn their own living. Social benefits also permit only very limited participation in youth-specific leisure activities (going to a cinema, discotheque, pub), so it also severely limits their opportunities for making social contacts. Our impression is that the young people are very much less concerned with the material problems caused by limited financial resources, but rather they experience humiliation from the symbolic factors linked with it.

The questions on *social contacts* produced the most extensive answers, particularly with respect to friends. Only two of the young people said that they had not yet found any friends since their arrival in Hamburg. More than one third of them said they had exclusively African friends, and over a quarter said they had both African and German friends. In the group of those who said they had *only African friends*, one of the reasons mentioned was *language problems*, which made it hard to make contact with Germans – the refugees did not have enough knowledge of German, and the Germans they meet often cannot speak English or French. And even more often, these young people meet with *rejection* from the German population, which they describe as not tolerant, and not open to them. Others report that they have *no opportunities* to make contact with Germans. At school there are only Africans (or foreigners), and it is difficult for them to get into German clubs and associations. The life situations and problems of German youngsters and young refugees are very different, and that means they have very *different expectations* of what friends are for. *Prejudices* are mentioned, acting as barriers to the creation of friendships – some parents of young Germans would object to such friendships, or they would regard young people from Africa as criminal and would therefore avoid them. Some of the young people have *withdrawn* into the African Community and reject contact with Germans.

There is a more positive tone in the comments of those young people who say they have *both African and German friends*. But there are also problems in these clique relationships – friendships break up due to *deportations* or frequent *change of address*, there are *language problems* or *rejection* by German parents. But there is also emphasis of the fact that it is important to make contact with Germans, to learn their language and to adapt to their ways. Some of the young people report that they have a *multi-cultural circle of friends*. Mostly they met their friends in multi-national learning groups at school or in language courses.

One third of respondents report that they regularly participate in the programmes of a sports club, a political group or a religious community. Most mentions were participation in community life of the mosque associations, and two young women reported that they were members of an African Christian church

community. Playing football is important for the young men. Four of them have found clubs in Hamburg, and play football there; five young men report that they looked for clubs, but their search was unsuccessful, so they were now playing in informal groups with other Africans.

Various problems were mentioned making it at least more difficult for young people to join a club or a community group – some of them say they *lack the time* for it, for example they could not go to Friday prayers at the mosque because they had to work during that time; or they could not participate regularly in training at the football club because they had other things they needed to get done. Some say they are *not motivated* for regular participation because of their lack of security in residence status, or because they are so taken up with their own personal problems. Others say they do not have the money for it.

It is clear from what the young African refugees say about their social relations that they are very much subject to *structural segregation* – their contacts with the family and networks of relatives have broken down due to the situation in their country of origin. Their life situation in Hamburg and the associated limitations and problems (language, money, uncertainty, worries) are more of a problem, preventing them from making and cultivating social contacts. In addition, the young Africans are often only together with each other, particularly at schools and in the other educational programmes, due to organisational arrangements (setting up classes for foreigners), or they are with other young migrants; this kind of structural arrangement also reduces their chances of getting to know young Germans. And on the part of German society too, it seems to be very exceptional that efforts are made to establish contact with the young refugees.

What is a refugee?

To be a “refugee” is not a personality characteristic, and it is not the individual decision made in the country of origin to leave that country which makes people refugees (even if asylum law refers to this), but rather legal recognition of status as a refugee – and this is generally effected in the country where they arrive. What is decisive is not the intentional act of fleeing in order to get away from repressive structures, but rather the decisions made in the migration policy of the country where they arrive.

By understanding refugees as a product of institutional action, we are not only referring to their legal status, but also understand the status of refugee as a *moral career*, in keeping with GOFFMAN (1973, 1975). Goffman’s argumentation may be summarised briefly as follows: There is no such thing as “normal” relations between normal people and stigmatised people (who include people with physical disabilities, the mentally ill, delinquents, criminals and prostitutes) because no such tolerance and acceptance can be expected on the part of normal people, and cannot be proved. So the stigmatised persons have to learn and apply a whole series of techniques of adaptation and expression of behaviour in order to gain social recognition. One of the central techniques is to accept the attribution of having a damaged identity. So the condition is a public acknowledgement of being damaged, and thus being a victim – a victim of fate in the case of people with disabilities, a victim of circumstances in the case of social deviants, a victim of their own

inadequacies (delinquents) or, as in our context, a victim of state repression in the case of refugees.

As has already been described, legal proof of being a victim is the basis of identity as a refugee – the moral career of the refugee begins with allocation to relevant institutions of the host society. To put it in Goffman's terms, they have to learn and practise techniques of coping with their damaged identity. So the viewpoint would be excessively restricted if we were to see the insecure identities of young Africans in Hamburg merely in the context of the impact of fleeing from their countries of origin. It is rather the case that being in the hands of the social institutions of the host society creates the framework which causes the break, with respect to the dimension of identity. The biographical developments and life histories of the young refugees, their languages and their cultural practices, their knowledge and values, their wishes and needs, are all reduced in the institutional actions of the host society to the status of refugee.

The interview material shows that the young people have learned what they are supposed to learn, and what they have to learn, related to the goals of institutional action – the institutional arrangement of the asylum procedure is very efficient to make it clear to the young people that they are endeavouring to obtain the granting of a legal status which is of existential importance to them and decisive for opportunities or limits of organising their personal life. And the institutional grouping of labour administration, educational institutions and youth service give the impression of being rational and functional, because they are 'arranged' in such a way that the young people are constantly given the message that they are refugees. Schooling, vocational training and work permit are refused to them on the grounds of legal status, or access to these things is made difficult.

The young people have realised this situation, as can be seen from their statements – they understand the social ideas that are associated with refugees by the institutional actions which they are faced with in their everyday lives. They have gone through the fundamental learning experience which Goffman says stigmatised people have to make in a moral career, in terms of their difficult situation and their self-assessment. When they arrived in Hamburg, many of the young people we talked to had only very vague ideas about German society and its general assumptions about refugees, and at first many of them were not able to grasp the consequences for their own lives. But these are precisely the 'hidden agenda' of the host society that they learn particularly fast – unreserved integration of the young refugees into Hamburg urban society is not wanted.

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