“I’ve Got Many Stories You Know”—Problematizing Silence Among Unaccompanied Migrant Girls

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Abstract

This paper presents a study on inhabited silence among unaccompanied female minors in Sweden. Silence among unaccompanied minors has often been explained by experienced trauma. Conversely, research also explains silence as a natural way of establishing autonomy during adolescence. By analyzing the narratives of 11 unaccompanied female minors, we aim to problematize and broaden the understanding of silence as a lack of communication. By using Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic capital, we analyze how hegemonic narratives on migration and integration influence how the girls in this study use silence in their everyday interactions. Our findings suggest that silence can be understood as both a rejection of these narratives and a strategy to preserve the girls’ integrity. We also demonstrate how these girls negotiate their linguistic capital in relation to embodiment and othering, thereby pushing boundaries of identity and what it means to be seen as Swedish. The paper concludes that silence itself speaks and shows that what is often perceived as a lack of communication can also be understood as a failure to listen.

Keywords Silence · Gender · Youth · Unaccompanied minors · Migration · Integration · Linguistic capital

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Introduction

Silence among unaccompanied minors often refers to their migrant status and has been explained by experienced trauma. Conversely, research also suggests that choosing to be silent is a natural part of adolescence as a way of establishing autonomy while growing up (Kohli, 2006). In this article, we focus on silence in the narratives of female unaccompanied refugee minors. Upon arrival in Sweden to seek a residence permit, they are in a situation where communication is crucial in many ways. For example, being able to convincingly relay their stories to the migration board will affect their chances of staying in Sweden. Furthermore, once granted a residence permit, creating and sustaining social networks in a new environment are also dependent on successful communication. Yet, previous research has shown that young refugees often remain silent about their lives and experiences (Kohli, 2006), and these girls, as a group and as individuals, are less likely to be heard in matters that concern them (Boutwell, 2015; Ekström, 2019; Taefi, 2009). For example, female minors' needs are less catered for compared to male minors as a consequence of being a less noticeable group (Socialstyrelsen, 2017). Kaukko and Wernesjö (2017) draw a similar conclusion, arguing that refugee girls, as a minority, are forced to adapt to a norm of young masculinity, with the consequence that they do not receive the support they need and have a right to.

Following Levin's encouragement to look beyond silence as a psychological trait (Levin, 2013), and instead focusing our analysis on the interaction between individual and structural levels, we aim to problematize an understanding of silence as just an absence of speech. This is done by using Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977a) to explore the inhabited meanings of silence in the narratives of unaccompanied female minors. Further, we aim to demonstrate how hegemonic narratives on migration lead to silence as a strategy, thus providing a deeper understanding of how and why the participants of this study sometimes chose to stay silent.

Background

Here, we begin by providing an overview of previous research on silence among refugee children. Specifically, we touch upon the common understanding of silence not only as a consequence of trauma but also as a manifestation of agency. Following Levin (2013), who argues that silence on an individual level is always in relation to hegemonic narratives, we then go on to problematize the hegemonic discourses conceptualizing "the refugee girl." The section is concluded with a brief description of the Swedish context in which this study is situated, focusing on the recent turns in Swedish migration law and the perception of Swedish language as a "key" to integration.

Previous Research on Silence Among Refugee Children

For a refugee, silence on an individual level is often described as a characteristic, psychologically linked to the individual through experience, rather than a phenomenon in itself (Levin, 2013). Indeed, silence can be a way of dealing with traumatic

experiences. Previous research among young refugees has often attributed silence to trauma caused before or during the migration. Such reticence can moreover be a protective strategy, also related to migration (Kohli, 2006). Furthermore, while (bad) memories do not simply go away, silence can be an active choice not to verbalize, and subsequently be forced to interact with, hurtful feelings (Levin, 2013). Kohli (2006) problematizes this perception of silence as a psychological response by demonstrating how silence among refugee minors observed by professionals, e.g., social workers, is dependent not only on the level of trust between the minor and the professional but also on what frames (legal and social) the minors try to fit into in their new country.

Looking at the relation between silence and secrecy, silence can also be understood as a manifestation of agency and independence (Levin, 2013; Taylor, 2016). Especially among adolescents who are transitioning from childhood to adulthood, silence and keeping secrets can be seen as a natural progression toward more independence (Finkenauer et al., 2002). Bengtsson and Fynbo (2018) also describe silence as a way to negotiate power in conversation. By refraining from answering or by giving short, non-exhaustive responses, a person can disturb power relations between the speakers. Silence can also be a non-verbal rejection of stated or implied meanings, or a rejection of stereotyping (Bengtsson & Fynbo, 2018).

According to Levin (2013), silence on an individual level is always in relation to a societal context. Silencing processes on a micro level are enabled through hegemonic narratives on a macro level. Regarding migration, silence on an individual level, as we will argue later on, is influenced by hegemonic narratives of migration and integration that are dominant in a western and, for this study specifically, the Swedish context.

The Refugee Girl in Migration Discourse

The fact that migrant women who settle in the west face stereotyping due to a gendered and racialized process of differentiation has been well documented (Ålund, 1988; Karimi et al., 2019; Korteweg, 2017; Rahmath et al., 2016). Global political developments, in particular since the events of September 11, 2001, have contributed to deepening the chasm between what is perceived as western and non-western values and norms. This differentiation process has partly relied on discourses of gender to construct a western identity linked to values of democracy and gender equality (Boutwell, 2015; Keskinen, 2016; Korteweg, 2017). Further, European debates on so-called honour based violence (Carbin, 2010; Keskinen, 2016; Sanberg & Janssen, 2018) have constructed Muslim migrants as “the other,” and a presumed lack of gender equality in foreign cultures has contributed to a victimization and subsequent marginalization of migrant (Muslim) women (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Boutwell, 2015; Keskinen, 2016; Korteweg, 2017).

Female refugee minors are exposed to further discrimination (Taefi, 2009) and stereotyping (Boutwell, 2015) due to their age. Moreover, they risk falling in between juridical frameworks that discriminate against females within the group of children and children within the group of women (Taefi, 2009). However, while they are a vulnerable group, their victimization is rather due to a construct of their own (non-western) cultural roots as patriarchal and oppressive (Boutwell, 2015). The migrant *girl* risks being rendered voiceless and stripped of her agency, as a distorted understanding of her

“culture” is given prevalence over her own words (Ekström, 2019; Ekström et al., 2019). In Sweden, previous studies confirm this presumption of foreign culture(s) as incompatible with the host country’s norms and values (especially concerning gender equality) as well as the peculiar position of migrant girls (Carbin, 2010; Keskinen, 2016). Carbin (2010) argues that the “migrant girl” has come to represent an interference and a failure in the political discourse around what is perceived as core values of the Swedish integration policy, i.e., (gender) equality and multiculturalism.

Language as a “Key” to Integration

Korteweg (2017) argues that immigrant integration discourses erase belonging by focusing on, and pointing out, how certain people do not belong. The division between “native” and “immigrant” is upheld through formulations of social problems and subsequent policy approaches which, in themselves, come to reinforce this divide.

The use of language provides one example of such a problem and subsequent policy approach. Though Sweden, in reality, has long been a multilingual country (Hult, 2004), the Swedish language holds a prominent place compared to other languages and is closely linked to national identity and the prevailing image of what it means to be Swedish (Henry, 2016; Hult, 2004; Rosén & Bagga-Gupta, 2015). The standing of the Swedish language is continuously reinforced through public discourse and on an institutional level (Ringholm & Pagrotsky, 2005). In 2018, a broad political agreement was reached about introducing language qualifications for Swedish citizenship as well as an obligation for asylum seekers to study Swedish. The agreement also involves the possibility of tying migrants’ individual economic subsidiaries to attendance and results in Swedish language studies (Januariavtalet [The January Agreement], 2019). A study by Henry (2016) concludes that for migrants, learning to speak Swedish indeed promotes inclusion and buffers against othering, as it signals the “right attitude” according to normative expectations of migrants and official discourses of the Swedish language being a key to integration (Henry, 2016; Rosén & Bagga-Gupta, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

We have used the concept of inhabited or poetic silence to analyze the narratives of the girls who participated in the study. Levin (2013) encourages us to analyze silence among refugees on both the individual and societal levels, as silence is constructed in between these levels. Thus, in order to understand the interplay between structural discourses and individual acts of silence, we applied Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977a). This section explains the concept of inhabited silence and then proceeds to outline Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic capital.

Inhabited or Poetic Silence

We approach silence, inspired by Mazzei’s perspective of silence, as inhabited or what she calls “poetic silence” (Mazzei, 2003). Researchers such as Mazzei, Morison and Macleod (2014) and Bengtsson and Fynbo (2018) have problematized silence in relation to research methodology. However, we follow Mazzei’s insight that how we

understand silence, as researchers, is both a methodological, ontological, and epistemological question. In line with Merleau-Ponty's (1969) view of expression as a continuum of articulated speech, gestures, behavior, and silence, Mazzei argues that understanding silence as a complement to speech enables us to better grasp the full meaning behind what is being said or not said out loud. Silence, in this sense, is understood not only as a lack of speech but also as that which is being intentionally or unintentionally omitted, not said, or repressed in conversation. To that end, rather than dismissing silence as a lack of verbal interaction, focusing on inhabited silence is about gaining an understanding of the underlying meanings that are present *through* silence (Mazzei, 2007, 2003).

What is left unsaid, and how it is left unsaid, can reveal tensions, fears, power relations, or resistance. For example, silence can signify an inability to articulate thoughts on sensitive or difficult topics. In those cases, silence can be a strategy to avoid conflict, offending, or being judged by others or a strategy to protect oneself from further inquiry (Bengtsson & Fynbo, 2018; Kohli, 2006; Mazzei, 2003). Mazzei also discusses "strategic silence," in the sense that absence of articulated speech can convey meanings that for different reasons cannot be said aloud. For instance, when a speaker masks his or her true intent by saying something else (sometimes referred to as veiled silence) or leaving parts of the message unsaid (Morison & Macleod, 2014; Mazzei, 2007, 2003).

Additionally, Bengtsson and Fynbo (2018) argue that silence can be seen as a transformative manifestation of power, or resistance to power. By remaining silent, refusing to answer a question or confirm a statement, a person might challenge the power dynamic between speakers or change the direction of a conversation. Thus, silence can be understood as resistance toward anticipated acquiescence of power relations (Bengtsson & Fynbo, 2018). To understand the role and meaning of silence in interaction, attention must be paid to the power relations between speakers as well as the social structures infusing and supporting these relations (Bengtsson & Fynbo, 2018; Levin, 2013).

The Concept of Linguistic Capital

Bourdieu argued that every linguistic interaction is influenced by, and reproduces, the social structures that govern it (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1991). Language is understood both as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977b) and as an instrument of action, a means to an end; we use language to impose reception and influence the world around us. However, not everyone who wishes to be believed or obeyed will succeed in that endeavor. While we might think that successful communication is dependent on linguistic competence (grammar, pronunciation, etc.), Bourdieu argued that the efficacy of spoken language is dependent on the context, and the power relations in that context (Bourdieu, 1977a). This is well illustrated by Creese (2010), in a study on how linguistic capital is formed through social structures (in the case of Creese's study, particularly structures of race and gender as well as the history of British colonialism). The study exemplifies how correct English (in the grammatical sense) is categorically (mis)understood, depending on how the speaker is seen by the listener. Siziba (2014), drawing a similar conclusion, argues that depending on the social and geographical context, language becomes a marker for inclusion or exclusion. Speakers of marked

languages are by extension themselves marked (Siziba, 2014). In effect, accents and dialects become crucial forms of differentiation and, as pointed out by Creese, “an accepted rationale for discrimination” (Creese, 2010; p. 309). While blatant discrimination on the basis of race, or gender, is no longer acceptable in many societies (Riggins, 1997), the same underlying structures can be upheld by stigmatizing certain languages or accents (Creese, 2010; Siziba, 2014). The interconnectedness of symbolic capital means that by undermining a person’s linguistic capital, other capacities are undermined as well, resulting in increased difficulties for the speaker in making him or herself heard, believed, obeyed, etc. (Creese, 2010). In the context of Sweden, for example, fluency in Swedish means higher linguistic capital, while accented Swedish is a marker of non-belonging and a means for discrimination (Henry, 2016).

Bourdieu further argued that, subconsciously, linguistic strategies are oriented toward long-term gains on a structural level rather than immediate gains. For instance, being silent at a particular moment could prove to be a better strategy in the long run than speaking. Linguistic conduct, like social conduct, is learned through a selective reinforcement of the field, meaning that we adapt our speech, and our silence, according to the reception our words receive (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1977b).

Methodology

The empirical material in this study comprises semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 11 girls (aged 13–18) who arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied minors. Next, we will briefly describe how the interviews were conducted and how the data were analyzed.

Conducting the Interviews

The girls who participated in this study were found and contacted through the social services. Case workers in three municipalities were asked to inform their clients of the study and ask if they agreed to be contacted by a researcher. Fifteen girls agreed to be contacted, but in the end, 11 girls participated. Those who declined were not asked to give a reason for their decision; however, two of them referred to the stressful situation of waiting for asylum. Of the 11 girls who participated, seven were interviewed a second time between 9 months and 1 year later. For the subsequent interviews, one girl declined; moreover, we were unable to get in touch with three others. The purpose of this setup was to sort out themes that seemed important to the participants during the first interviews and focus on these themes in more detail during the subsequent interviews.

The interviews were conducted in Swedish, in English, or in the native language of the participants with the aid of an interpreter. All interviews were recorded, with the permission of the participants. The transcriptions were made in Swedish and English as spoken, and as closely to the recordings as possible, including notes on silent passages. Dialogue between the participants and interpreters was noted, and the first author also took notes regarding the atmosphere, tone of voice, and expressive body language during the interviews. In this article, quotes have been adjusted (grammatically) when translated from Swedish to English, to retain their original meaning (Oliver et al., 2005).

The Participants

The girls who participated in this study came from different countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East and had arrived in Sweden between 2014 and 2017. They described themselves as speakers of Somali (6), Dari (1), Arabic (3), and Kurdish (1). When the first interviews took place, they had lived in Sweden for between a few months up to two and a half years, and only two of them had received their residence permits. Two of the girls were currently placed in a residential care unit, and the others lived in foster care. Their reasons for migrating varied, as did their experiences of migration and their preconditions for building a new life in Sweden. Though legally considered to be unaccompanied minors, not all of them arrived in Sweden alone. Some had travelled in the company of siblings, and others had relatives or family friends waiting for them when they arrived. Despite their varied experiences and diverse backgrounds, however, they shared similar experiences of being newly immigrated, unaccompanied minors in Sweden.

The Use of Interpreters

Working with interpreters is sometimes necessary, especially in cross-cultural research, to over bridge linguistic and cultural distances. However, it raises some epistemological and methodological concerns (Edwards, 2013; Maryns, 2013) that will be briefly addressed before explaining our own approach in working with interpreters. First, there is the aspect of how meaning is conveyed through interpretation. Understanding language is about understanding the context in which words are spoken, as well as the culturally and historically infused meaning of the words (Taylor, 2016). Here, the interpreter can offer both linguistic and cultural competence (Berg, 2011). However, deontological aspects of how the interview is translated, namely first person direct translations, or third person retelling, have an impact on how meaning is conveyed between the speakers (Edwards, 2013; Maryns, 2013). Further, Maryns (2013) points to how structurally situated speech patterns, (un)familiarity with certain slang or terminology, experience in talking about sensitive matters, etc. can distort the exchange of meaning between the researcher and participants.

While interpreters are often presumed to work as a neutral instrument for communication, they might be influenced by their own experiences or have interests in how, for instance, a community or social group is perceived through research. They are also sensitive to the interpersonal relations that exist in the interview situation (Edwards, 2013).

From the perspective of the research participant, individual disclosure is dependent on interpersonal relations as well as context (Edwards, 2013; Ingvarsdotter et al., 2012; Maryns, 2013). In this study, the only time an interpreter was present in person was when the girl had been accompanied by the same interpreter before and she seemed to find some comfort in his presence. She explained that she regarded him as a role model of an immigrant who had “succeeded” in Sweden, something that gave her hope for her own situation. In contrast, Ingvarsdotter et al. (2012) demonstrate how interpreters might intimidate or discourage a research participant by emphasizing their different social standing or letting their own prejudices influence their interaction.

The choice of using an interpreter was left to the girls, who were also asked to specify any requests regarding preferred dialect, whether they preferred a female

interpreter, or if they wanted the interpreter to be present in the room or interpret via telephone. Despite our efforts to accommodate the girls' wishes, however, the quality of the interpretations varied. In some cases, it was clear that the girl and the interpreter did not fully understand each other.

All, except one, of the girls requested interpretation via telephone. We did not inquire about the reason for their choices, although one girl mentioned that she did not want the interpreter to see her face as she would then feel embarrassed in case they would meet each other again under different circumstances. Not having the interpreter present in the room both hindered and facilitated the dialogue. Also, not having a third person present helped the first author, who conducted the interviews, to form her own connection with the girls, focusing on their body language and facial expressions. However, it likely impeded the interpreter's translation for the very same reason.

In order to account for the complexity that might have been lost in translation during the first interviews, the second interviews were used to revisit previous discussions and give the girls the opportunity to explain or develop issues that had been said in the first interviews.

Only three participants declined interpretation aid for their first interview, while all of the second interviews were conducted in Swedish, sometimes with the support of English. However, even the participants who preferred the presence of an interpreter seemed eager to practice Swedish and could sometimes interject Swedish words into the conversation or respond to a question before the interpreter could translate. Some participants also chose to correct the interpreters when they felt their meaning was lost in the translation.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved beforehand by the ethical board at Linköping University in Sweden. Due to the girls' particular situation as newly arrived migrants and minors, we took extra care to ensure that they understood the purpose of the interview as well as their rights to participate or withdraw to the extent they were comfortable. A social worker provided the girls with a letter of consent in their preferred language and asked if they were willing to be contacted by a researcher. The first author then contacted them to give further explanations about the study and to obtain their oral consent to participate in an interview. Pseudonyms have been used for the participants to preserve their anonymity.

Analyzing the Data

We began our analysis by listening to the recordings, taking in both the speech and the girls' tone of voice, as well as the rhythm of interaction including silent passages and the first authors' participation. Thereafter, we read through all the transcripts to get a general sense of the data, i.e., a bird's-eye view (Malterud, 2012), before the transcripts were coded, using NVivo 12, and then sorted the data into recurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When we first began our analysis, we used an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), that is, we did not start out with a ready-formed research question; instead, we used a reflexive familiarization with theories and data. This approach enabled us to be open toward a broad spectrum of themes as well as new

theoretical conceptions (*ibid.*). Silence, as a theme, was not something given; rather, it was a result of analyzing both explicit and latent content connected to other themes such as integration, friendship, loneliness, the asylum process, and religion. After the second interviews, the procedure was repeated, and the themes were more closely investigated with the aim of capturing the participant's perspectives and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Malterud, 2012). For the purpose of this article, narratives about silence and language were explored by paying attention to the situations and circumstances in which participants reported silence, with whom silence occurred, and how it was understood by the participants (see Lavery, 2003). We found that silence was present in two categories: the silence during the interview and the silence present in their stories, e.g., their descriptions of how they became silent or did not respond to others. In accordance with Bourdieu, we have used the concept of fields to frame the different situations described in the interviews.

Results

The findings of this study are presented in three themes. We begin by focusing on how silence was invoked as a strategy depending on the different fields of interaction in which the girls partake as newly arrived immigrants. From there, we demonstrate how the girls' linguistic capital, as a form of embodied capital, was affected by who they are, rather than what they said or how they spoke. The section ends by presenting some examples of how the girls found different strategies to counter the hegemonic narratives that influence their linguistic capital on an individual level.

Silence in Different Fields of Interaction

Having newly arrived in Sweden, the girls in this study had to enter a number of new, linguistic fields (Bourdieu, 1977a). Furthermore, due to their status as unaccompanied minors, they were also introduced to specific fields through interviews or formal meetings with different authorities. Through the invitation to partake in a research interview, we invited them to yet another field—an equivocal situation where formality, manifested through letters of consent, met the informality of the physical setting of a friendly conversation. Although we strove to establish a relaxed and confiding dialogue with the young women, the conversational flow during the first phase was often halting, and the interviews frequently reverted into a question and answer structure with few elaborations. It was clear that, for most of the girls, the overall insecurity of their situation and their lack of experience (or perhaps their understanding of), the research interview influenced how they approached our conversations and how much information they wanted to divulge. In the very first of our interviews, the following exchange took place:

First author: Did you come to Sweden alone?

Ifrah: Yes [...]

First author: All by yourself?

Ifrah: Yes [...]

The answers here were given in a terse voice and with an air of finality. We can look at the inhabited silence in the quote and, drawing on the experience from Bengtsson and Fynbo (2018), deduce that this affirmative answer (given twice) relayed an unwillingness to go any further into the subject that is brought up. The unsaid, in this conversation, conveys a lot of information. First, the topic of how Ifrah arrived in Sweden is (at least partly) off limits in the interview. It also conveys a lack of trust regarding the researcher (despite the “insurance” of informed consent and research ethics). In hindsight, we also realized that the question posed might be very similar to those asked in meetings with the migration authorities. This brings us back to the use of silence as a protective strategy (Kohli, 2006). By carefully managing her own story, Ifrah could adapt to the narrow frames of Swedish migration law. In that sense, silence might be more suitable for long-term gains, both in direct consequences such as acquiring a residence permit, but also in managing her linguistic capital by not jeopardizing her social position. Ifrah did not know how her words would be received and what consequences might result from any disclosure on her part. She did not know if her words carried any weight, but it is likely that she felt at a disadvantage.

A few girls conveyed stories of feeling unsettled in new arenas and not knowing how their words would be received and interpreted. They described being asked to share their stories repeatedly with different officials, not always understanding the purpose or consequences of their disclosure. One of the girls, Parwana (18), described asking both her social worker and her legal guardian about the setting of the research interview before accepting the invitation. In a way, she found a strategy for familiarizing herself with the field, and thus evaluating her own linguistic capital, before entering it.

Silence can be a conscious strategy of navigating in a foreign field where the speaker perceives her linguistic capital as insufficient. By not complying with a request for information, the conversation could be steered away from sensitive subjects without having to actually leave the situation. Hence, it allowed the participant the opportunity to experience a new field which could increase her linguistic capital for the future. There are, however, situations where silence is less of a working strategy. Ifrah provides another example, illustrating the impact of a linguistic field on situations similar to the research interview. During our first interview, she expressed a deep concern about her pending residence permit application. She was worried that she had not been able to present her story to her lawyer coherently. When asked to elaborate, she began by describing the presence of the interpreter. She was fairly fluent in Swedish herself as well as in English, and she sometimes felt that the interpreter did not translate what she meant correctly. When asked whether she believed she actually needed an interpreter, she answered¹:

Yes, he [the interpreter] must [be present]. Because he [the lawyer], he will ask questions about your...home country, or why you came to Sweden, how you came to Sweden, who helps you, everything. So you must speak the truth! You must say it, what happened. So... it was hard [...] I could not. I could nothing [...] [With Nomi] we had no interpreter, we only spoke Swedish and English, so

¹ Nomi in this quote is a facilitator employed by the social services.

it was really easy to tell everything. But I could not tell my lawyer everything. And I don't know if I can tell everything to the migration board. (Ifrah 16, first interview)

Here, in a few words, Ifrah painted a contrasting image of different fields of interaction. On the one hand, the easy exchange with Nomi was where she felt heard and could open up about her experiences, using English and Swedish as she felt comfortable. On the other hand, the compelling, institutional meeting with her lawyer was where she could not relate the same information even though she knew the importance of providing a full account. Interestingly, Ifrah does not explain the need for an interpreter by suggesting she is not able to express herself in Swedish. On the contrary, she admits that she was able to "tell everything" to Nomi. The reason for using an interpreter was more about being in an official situation that demands a certain kind of linguistic conduct. In the situation with her lawyer, however, where Ifrah herself was the reason for the meeting, her linguistic capital was overshadowed by the (unfamiliar) institutionalized setting of the meeting and her marginalized position as a young refugee with an uncertain legal status. The characteristics of the field and the presence of the interpreter enforce the discrepancy of symbolic capital between Ifrah and the adult professionals in the meeting. In a sense, they emphasize her lack of linguistic capital, signaling an incapacity to make herself heard on her own.

The Embodiment of Linguistic Capital

Having the higher linguistic capital grants the privilege of assigning responsibility (and blame) for successful communication (Bourdieu, 1977c). To this end, an unwillingness to listen can be masked as a failure to communicate (Creese, 2010; Siziba, 2014). A few girls explained they had a hard time connecting with Swedes because their Swedish was "not so good." Still, they could do their second interviews in Swedish, without an interpreter, and had little trouble expressing complicated sentiments or giving thorough descriptions when they wanted to. Some of them were also fluent in English, and when they could not find the right words in Swedish, they easily switched to English. Nonetheless, they described themselves as not having sufficient language skills, or at least not sufficient enough to make native-speaking friends. Contradicting themselves by explaining—in Swedish—that they were impeded by lack of fluency, they seemed to have internalized a view of themselves as blocked by language barriers. This language barrier, which is a two-way obstacle, was constructed as an individual problem, and unsuccessful communication was easily blamed on those with lower linguistic capital, e.g., those seen as foreign (Creese, 2010). The following quote by Leah (13) illustrates this. In the interview, she complained about critical questions from her peers at school. She then explained that she usually met these questions with silence. At first, Leah explained her choice to turn to silence because of her lack of proficiency in Swedish, suggesting that she had trouble finding the right words for a proper

explanation. However, when asked whether she felt that explaining herself was important, she answered:

Eh, sometimes. There are many people who don't understand anything. That's why I don't want to explain [...] You know they ask, ask about Islam and such. For example, they ask me 'Why do you wear the hijab?' Then, when you want to answer, they won't listen. (Leah 13, first interview)

Being a newly arrived immigrant, a girl, and a Muslim, Leah's words were dismissed, and she felt she was not heard. Her social positioning was framed by the questions she was asked, not out of curiosity but as a way of drawing attention to her non-belonging. In his theory on linguistic capital, Bourdieu (1977a) emphasized the reciprocity of linguistic exchange. Linguistic capital needs to be recognized by the receiver, who has a choice of listening and understanding what is being conveyed. Leah's quote demonstrates how this understanding is detached from the language itself (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) and instead constructed through her social position. Leah's strategy was to cut the conversation short and stop responding. In the interview, she continued her explanation by stating: "I like myself, that's why," indicating that silence also helps her to protect her own self-image and identity, by refusing to be picked on. Still, her silence in the face of these critical questions also speaks of her understanding of her own lack of linguistic capital. Ascribing a failure to communicate to her lack of fluency in Swedish, she places the responsibility of communication on herself rather than on the people with whom she spoke. However, when her attempts to offer an explanation to her peers did nothing to prevent the bullying, her silence could be seen as a way to communicate a non-acceptance and a rejection to being seen as "the other." Still, othering is what limits her ability to make herself heard in the first place. In the interview, Leah reflected on the position she believed migrants, and in particular Muslims, have in the Swedish society, explaining that, as they were a minority, native Swedes were often suspicious of them.

Strategies for Countering Hegemonic Narratives

Most of the girls had been exposed to some kind of xenophobic harassment since coming to Sweden. The comments they received, notably about their religion and culture, together with suggestions to take off their hijabs or even convert to Christianity, can be seen as manifestations of a hegemonic narrative, where coming to Sweden was supposed to "liberate" them from foreign oppression (see Boutwell, 2015; Keskinen, 2016). During the course of the interviews, it became clear that most of the girls chose to remain silent instead of talking back or reaching out to others when bothered by something or by someone. As described previously, they often stated language difficulties as the primary explanation for silence, but when asked to elaborate, other explanations surfaced. These explanations always related to who they were or how they believed others saw them. For example, one of the girls, Hibaaq (17) who suffered from stress-related symptoms like headaches, stress-induced sleep deprivation, and anxiety, would not confide in those around her, like her friends or foster care guardians.

She first explained that she could not convey her problems well enough in Swedish but then added:

Of course, people can sense that I have problems and maybe they pity me, but I don't want them to know either. (Hibaaq, 17, first interview)

Her quote can be compared to what Ifrah described when opening up about what had happened to her in her homeland.

[T]here are lots of problems [...] What happened in my homeland. Or, what happened to me [...] I've never talked about my whole life because I couldn't. Yeah. It's so bad and... so I don't want to... I just want to forget, and live, and do good things [...] I've talked to [my mother's friend]. She knows almost... everything. But she just tells me that all, or almost all refugees that come to Sweden have problems. And there are people who have more problems, 'more than you.' (Ifrah 16, second interview)

From previous research on silence among refugees (Kohli, 2006; Levin, 2013), Ifrah's quote can be interpreted as a wish to leave past trauma behind. Silence, as Levin (2013) explains, can be an attempt to discard unwanted memories in order to move forward, which is clearly what Ifrah wanted. Yet, she spoke to her mother's friend about her experiences. When opening up, she was, however, told that her situation was not unique—for a refugee—rather, there were other people who were worse off.

What is interesting here is that, as Ifrah is grouped together with other refugees, her own experiences become almost irrelevant. Compared to other Swedish teenagers, her experiences would probably have stood out and caused more concern. This points to what Levin describes as hegemonic narratives of migration. Both the perception of refugees, as a group with a certain kind of common problems, and their relationship with the mainstream society of Sweden are influenced by hegemonic narratives on global migration and Sweden as a receiving nation. What is silently conveyed in the quotes by both Hibaaq and Ifrah was a concern not to conform to an image of vulnerability or to appear as a burden on the Swedish society. The quotes also illustrate how their social position as refugees devalues their linguistic capital in the broader context of their new society. As Ifrah's experience was no longer unique and therefore of no particular value, her linguistic capital was also devalued. Neither Ifrah nor Hibaaq held any particular positions among their group, and their specific experiences were not recognized but instead drowned among others as they became parts of a social category. Hibaaq knew that she could not keep her problems a secret, but she did not want to confirm their existence by talking about them out loud, which in the long run would emphasize her otherness and alienate her from the normative citizens, thus further weakening her linguistic capital. Similarly, Ifrah was told that her problems were expected, but not enough to bring to anyone else's attention. The silence was both an acquiescence to a dominant narrative on refugees in Sweden and a strategy against it. We do not read acceptance into Ifrah's and Hibaaq's silence but rather rejection of how they are framed, as part of a stereotyped group. It can also be understood as a conscious strategy of not letting a social category, which others have assigned them to, to overshadow their own specific experiences by opening up for careless interpretation.

An example of a more outspoken resistance toward the hegemonic narrative on migration comes from Jamilah (17). During our interview, she often situated herself as an intermediary between what she described as her native culture and the mainstream society. Jamilah had been interviewed before in the capacity of being an unaccompanied minor. She had talked about her experiences in a setting with other youths, which had perhaps strengthened her view of herself as a spokesperson and also given her experience with different kinds of interview situations. Like most of the other girls in this study, she had experienced xenophobic comments from other Swedes. In the interview, she gave examples of discussions she had engaged in about religion and migration. She saw herself as being a representative of a group, though not in the capacity of being a refugee in general, but rather due to her specific experiences of being unaccompanied, female, Muslim, and from her particular cultural background. Like Leah, she pointed to Muslims being a minority in Sweden, and native Swedes being skeptical about what they did not understand. From that conclusion, she did not believe silence to be a useful strategy. She explained:

This is important for people to know. Ehm... more information. If I'm quiet and I don't say anything, maybe the world would be... nothing would happen. Mm... But maybe, if I'm known or if I become, ehm... someone else. You know, for example, when I came here I had no education. Maybe I will end up in university or [with] education. I can talk about myself, who I am or what's it like to come to Sweden. It's better when all the Swedes know what I've done. Yeah. And it's really hard for girls [from my country] to come to another country, alone, get their families to come, and get an education, take responsibility, it's really hard for girls [...] I can explain, I understand everything, what it's like. (Jamilah 17, second interview)

The quote illustrates how Jamilah, while being secure in her own experiences, was aware that she might not have sufficient linguistic capital to properly gain reception when sharing her experiences. Through the interview, she conveyed an urgency to speak out, notably in stating that if she did not, then “nothing would happen.” Against Jamilah's experiences, however, stands a hegemonic narrative, portraying Sweden as a nation of equality and her own cultural background as a source of oppression. In the quote, she talks about “being known” or “becoming someone,” signaling that the person she is now is not enough to evoke the proper attention of her audience when sharing her perspective. In contrast to hegemonic narratives, Jamilah emphasizes the “real” experience. She offers to explain the complex challenges of migration and resettlement from the perspective of a migrant girl, as she has lived them. At the end of the second interview, she said:

Call me and ask, or if you want more information... I've got many stories you know [...] Religion, unaccompanied [minors], woman, young, living here, the language, the culture, yeah. It's another life that I come from. (Jamilah 17, second interview)

Again, presenting herself as having a unique understanding and knowledge, she saw her otherness as a strength, a source of linguistic capital, rather than a weakness. Putting

emphasis on the reciprocity of communication, she, much like Leah, refused to be at the unconditional disposal of others. Her final words in the interview also suggest a shifting of responsibility for integration dialogue from the individual back to a community level. Hence, she demonstrates that silence may be a consequence of the structural and societal ways in which these girls are muted, a response to an inference that their speech is unwise or unwanted. In fact, these girls have many stories to tell if we are prepared to listen, and can share their knowledge if such constraints are removed.

Conclusion

In this article, we have looked at silence in the stories of young, unaccompanied female minors. Similar to previous research, we found these girls' inclinations toward silence to have many, and layered, explanations. Following Levin (2013), we looked at silence as a phenomenon in itself rather than a psychological trait linked to traumatic experiences. We also demonstrated the value of understanding silence as inhabited, as it enables a broader analysis of lived experiences as they are told through both articulated speech and silent subtexts.

On an individual level and in line with the overview by Kohli (2006), our study showed examples of silence as a conscious strategy to cope with difficult experiences and safeguarding integrity. Some of the girls explained their silence by a longing to forget and move on. Some expressed a wish to keep secrets about themselves in order to avoid being judged or stereotyped, as discussed by Bengtsson and Fynbo (2018). Our study also shows that, among the interviewed girls, there has been a will to tell their stories: to open up about hardships and share their firsthand experiences of what it is like for girls to migrate and resettle in a new country. Still, when they speak, they are faced with stereotyping, or they are not listened to. Returning to Levin's analysis that silencing processes on individual levels are enabled through discourses on societal levels (Levin, 2013), our analysis also suggests that these lived experiences often come to stand against the hegemonic narratives that portray "migrants" as a collective of "others," and migrant girls as victims rather than agents, with little room for individual voices to be heard. The discourse around Swedish language as a barrier and a key to integration, for example, is mirrored in the girls' own explanations of why they are not able to be heard. Nevertheless, the girls also reflect on their social position as being the real obstacle rather than their level of Swedish proficiency.

Using Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital, we argue that the hegemonic narratives that construct these girls as victims of their own culture, while obscuring the discrimination they face in Sweden, devalue their linguistic capital in relation to those narratives. Language is embodied, and the meaning of speech can be understood differently depending on a person's structural position. It is not how they speak, but who they are, that matters. This is something the girls are equally aware of and is manifested in how they argue that they must become "someone" in order to be heard.

Once again, silence is not simply what remains when there is nothing left to say. It is imperative for both professionals and researchers to listen and not dismiss silence as

just the absence of speech. Doing so reinforces predominant social structures of victimization and marginalization. By applying the concept of inhabited silence, it is evident how the girls' choices regarding silence challenge the power dynamics of hegemonic narratives, in interactions on individual levels. It demonstrates a non-compliance with both national and international hegemonic stories of migration, (gendered) oppression, and victimization. The girls are pushing back against stereotypes and discrimination by refusing to explain themselves and instead offering to explain their perspectives—if we care to listen.

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