

The Truth and Nothing but the Truth

Media Discourses on Body Data in Medical Age Assessments

Abstract

This article analyses the discursive power of the datafied body, using the example of medical age assessments on unaccompanied minors in Sweden from 2017. Focusing on mainstream media discourses, it aims to raise critical attention to the truth-effect of body data, and the impact of media discourse on how it is transmitted to the broader public. This becomes particularly striking in relation to a case where such data were being miscalculated and misused, in a human rights scandal Sweden has yet to deal with. Ultimately, I argue that this machinery, while turning bodies into data, carries the logic of a lie detector of sorts, wiping out self-attesting truth, and undermining relationality and trust. Through the articulation and amplification of such logics, media discourse helped confirm and legitimise the power abuse of a nation state towards a particularly vulnerable group in search of protection. Hence, I maintain that the overreliance on body data in the current migration regime must be critically discussed in relation to ethical sensibilities and the growing dehumanisation of displaced populations.

Keywords: body data, biometrics, migration, media discourse, medical age assessments

IN THE DIGITAL information society, the body is imagined as the locus of an individuals' true self; possible to read, scan, measure or count, and through this abstraction be transformed into data. While personality, singularity and judgement are increasingly described as nothing but predetermined code and mechanical operations, we are all readily available to be decrypted, with only the right technology at hand. Throughout society, machine learning technologies are thus implemented on all levels, specialised in calculating, i.e. face geometries, palm patterns and health data, in order to create knowledge about everything from attention spans, emotional stability and stress levels to credit worthiness. Still, while body data among majority populations in the democratic world is primarily used (at least at surface level) to increase the smoothness of everyday operations such as boarding an airplane or locking up a smartphone, they tend to have more far-reaching consequences for those most vulnerable, such as the poor, the marginalised or more generally, those who "have to prove their eligibility to certain social rights" (Fassin & d'Halluin 2005:597).

This is indeed the case when it comes to individuals in forced displacement claiming their right to protection within the bureaucratic machinery of international mobility, where we in recent years have seen a paradigmatic shift towards the body (e.g. Ajana

2010, 2013, 2015, 2021; Broeders & Dijstelbloem 2016; van der Ploeg & Pridmore 2016; FRA 2018; Chouliaraki & Gergiou 2019; Fog Olwig et al. 2020; Pfiefer 2021; Nalbandian 2022; Nalbandian & Dreher 2022; Helander 2023). Ever since the 1990s, digital representations of bodily characteristics, including DNA, fingerprints, voice, body temperature, bones and much more, are used to identify, verify, categorise, monetise and discipline migrants throughout the displacement cycle (Fog Olwig et al. 2020). Further, these biometric procedures are promoted by both industry and authorities as scientifically exact and neutral, and thus imagined to work in the best interests of both the system and the individual migrant. But, as we know, biometric technologies, due to data bias and uncritical implementation, may also serve as a means for automating inequalities across for example race, class and gender (e.g. Magnet 2011; O'Neil 2016; Eubanks 2018; Noble 2018; Benjamin 2019). Even when no such clear misuses are to be found, body data undeniably presents a highly simplified and flat version of the complex and multifaceted human being and their life. Critical data scholar Btihaj Ajana (2010:239) states with reference to colleague Kelly Gates, that biometric technologies in general:

are underpinned by scientific discourses and practices that tend to convert the subjective, and in many ways, profound dimensions of identity into hyper-empirical and objective programmatic Boolean operations of true/false, positive/negative. Their overarching aim is to purify, so to speak, the articulations of identity from ambivalence and instability while rendering them immune to the problems associated with “human fallibility”.

Ajana (2010:239) thus argues that one of the main tasks of the recent enforcement of biometric technologies within migration policy is this very “simplification of the meaning and function of identity”.

The discursive power of body data further comes from its imagined separation from the subjects themselves, in a kind of inverted Cartesian dualism, where the body is no longer regarded as the container of the soul, but the objective truth of the soul, independent of consciousness (Ajana 2010: 243–244). Body data is imagined to tap untainted information about human nature, possible to decode only by neutral laboratory- and/or machine-learning technologies. It thus, seemingly, bypasses the need for experts and professional judgement, as well as the self-attesting testimony of the individual. In consequence, if the biographical story was for long the main means by which to assess asylum cases, the shift towards biometric technologies has simultaneously implied a *turn away* from the life narrative (Ajana 2010). Within the operations of biometric technology, the discursive truth-effect of the body is combined with the powerful sociotechnical imaginaries about scientific, more-than-human agency, and the subject is deemed their deceitful opposite. This has certainly fed into the climate of scepticism against the asylum seeking subject, or what is commonly referred to as a “culture of disbelief”, embedded in the current asylum system in Europe and beyond (e.g. Hedlund 2016). Thus, as I will be arguing in this article, the informatisation of

the migrant body must be viewed in relation to the massive objectification of displaced populations so prominently featuring in contemporary European migration discourse. As more and more reliance is placed on automated and seemingly objective methods of identification, that essence of *being*, which inevitably escapes the datafied body, seems to be disappearing out of the picture together with relational and ethical sensibilities. Further, this discursive shift not only affects the internal workings of the migration system, but has broader implications on public attitudes, as these biometric operations are spread, interpreted and translated into media discourse.

Hence, within this article, I will focus on media discourse produced in Sweden between 2015 and 2017, when medical age assessments (MAAs) were being discussed, and eventually implemented, in the handling of unaccompanied minors' asylum cases. Relying on body data such as x-rays and MRI-scanning of joints and teeth, medical exams produced values that could be fed into a matrix estimating the probability of an individual being above or under 18 years. These estimates were then to have pivotal influence on the decisions made about thousands of young applicants' destinies. I ask, *how was the pervasiveness of body datafication and scientific instrumentalisation – commonly assumed to settle uncertainty and provide more-than-human objectivity – represented by news media in these particular cases?* Using a Discursive-Historical Approach (Reisigl 2017) in search of underlying assumptions about truth, validity and righteousness, the overarching ambition of the article is to understand *how MAAs, as biometric technologies feeding on body data, are discursively represented to a larger public.* This article thus focuses on media discourse in context, as the events initially unfolded, in order to understand the larger ethical and political landscape. Though much has been written about these events even since 2017, due to the scandals that were gradually revealed, the limitation in search period is aimed at capturing discursive logics surrounding body data while the methods were still on the level of “something to come”, and just recently implemented. In that way, the ambition has been to seize both inherent connotations of body data as proof of identity in competition with other means of identification, and its discursive forcefulness as a political tool in the new migration regime that would follow.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt's writing about the loss of human rights for stateless and displaced populations and its interconnections with fascism, this article stresses the indispensable need for broader discussions about the ethical implications of “automated othering”. Focusing on discursive formations of the datafied body, I argue that these ways of promoting certainty (while in fact often flawed) serve to accomplish administrative goals in line with new anti-migration sentiments, and solidify imaginaries about deservingness in migration discourse. By focusing more specifically on the Swedish context, the article further aims to contribute with regional perspectives on the specificities of datafication, and the ways in which it can be understood as part of the puzzle in the major ideological changes the country has gone through over the past decade.

An ethical limit

It is hence difficult to ignore the exposure of displaced individuals to methods of datafication, in a system where migration is increasingly becoming “a transaction requiring migrants to exchange biometric and biographic data for access to resources or a jurisdiction” (Nalbandian 2022:2). However, it is *not* the ambition of this text to turn those displaced into objects of pity, but rather to, inspired by Ned Curthoys’s (2020:47) reading of Hannah Arendt, regard displacement as a theoretical perspective. Arendt warns about what forces might be set in motion by the very power nations states assume over stateless people and refugees, and it thus seems timely to recall her troubling meditation over modern mass statelessness in her essay “The Decline of the Nation State and the End of the Rights of Man” (1962). Here, she argues that the origin of WWII totalitarianism, and ultimately the persecution of the European Jewish population and other “unwanted groups”, lies within the logic of the modern nation state itself. Since human rights have become so intimately tied to citizenship, she says, those no longer belonging to such a community are no longer recognised as subjects of rights at all. “Only with a completely organized humanity” according to Arendt, “could the loss of home and political status become identical with expulsion from humanity altogether” (Arendt 1962:297). With the recent proof of history at the time of writing, she dispelled the idea of actually existing inborn and inalienable “human rights”, based on some kind of abstract qualities of “being human”.

The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all the other qualities and specific relationships – except that they were still human. The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human (Arendt 1962:299)

In consequence, statelessness confines people to a kind of purely private existence outside of civilization, without the right to have rights (Arendt 1962:300). It should be noted that within the new politics and ethics of the European border, migrating populations are ever more expelled into such an existence, not least through “neutral” practices such as biometric profiling, which position the individual within biological epistemologies deprived of biographical and emotional depth. This becomes an existence at the mercy of potential protection by the union due to matrixes of legitimacy, but whose death may as well go ungrieved (Chouliaraki & Georgiou 2019:18).

Thus, drawing on the narrative bioethics of Btihaj Ajana, and existential media studies (EMS), this article ultimately argues that our current time of interrelated crisis is indeed a “limit situation” (Lagerkvist 2022), not least in terms of democratic principles and international law. This is seen in the rapid spread of anti-migration discourse across western democracies, increasingly implemented through border practices where human

value is bracketed, such as detention centres, the outsourcing of responsibility to third-party countries and the legal unpredictability and uncertainty of the international right to asylum (e.g. Picum 2024; Civil Rights Defenders 2024). As democratic principles and liberal values such as equality, human rights and international solidarity are today openly questioned by world leaders and large segments of voting populations in the democratic world, in ways difficult to even imagine just a few decades ago, we certainly seem to have reached a limit – a limit where we, among other things, must reflect on how the ever-increasing datafication of our individual and collective lifeworlds affect ethical sensibilities.

Background: Unaccompanied minors and medical age assessments in Sweden

During the migration wave in 2015, commonly referred to as “the migration crisis” in Europe, Sweden, like the rest of the union, received a large number of asylum seekers, initially overwhelming the country’s public institutions, while evoking large-scale civic engagement and support (Betänkande av utredningen om migrationsmottagandet (2015 [2017])). Researchers examining Swedish media reporting about the events during the autumn of 2015 have suggested that it can be regarded as a three-part narrative (Dahlgren 2016), where, towards the very beginning, the reporting as well as the political speeches were very much in line with the humanitarian framework, historically significant to Swedish self-identity (Dahlgren 2016; Emilsson 2018; Abdelhady 2020). According to such a frame, the situation was presented as a “*migration crisis*”, in terms of immense human suffering and the vulnerability of displaced populations in need of protection and solidarity. Newspapers also frequently reported about the overwhelming support among the general Swedish population, with volunteers filling the train platforms, waiting to help out with the reception of those newly arrived. However, in the next phase of the narrative, as migrants were arriving to Sweden in great numbers, the frame turned into a “*crisis for Sweden*”, in terms of overburdened administrative institutions and a situation increasingly “out of control”. Along with general and abrupt policy changes, which took Sweden from one of the most generous countries in the EU in terms of migration policy to the EU’s absolute minimum level, the framework of the narrative further changed to an enhanced focus on “*the need for policy changes*”. Along with these discursive shifts, which took place over a few intense months, forcibly displaced people became symbolically paired with symbols of the police and confinement, primarily depicted in relation to issues of national security, and visually composed of groups of unidentifiable people (Jovovic 2020:110). At this point, a social media counter discourse expressing suspicion towards the motives of some refugees, and in particular towards those stemming from Afghanistan, also found its way into mainstream media (Dahlgren 2016:390).

What was particular for the situation in Sweden in 2015 was that as many as 40% of the entire group of unaccompanied minors¹ seeking asylum in the EU during that year came to Sweden. This meant the arrival of an unprecedented number, 35,400 young individuals, among which roughly 70% originated from Afghanistan, many of whom lacked valid identification documents and passports² (Press release 87/2016). However, due to the special rights of children within the asylum process,³ it was regarded necessary for Swedish authorities to somehow verify the age of applicants. If it was not clear from ocular inspection that the applicant was younger than 18, the law text said that it was up to the applicant claiming to be a minor to, beyond reasonable doubt, prove their age (Migrationsöverdomstolen, 2014). But there were a lack of systematic procedures for assessing ages, leaving both applicants and case officers to a juridical grey-zone and undermining legal security (Farr 2017). The inherent ambivalence of the Afghani asylum cases had already constituted fertile ground for conspiracy theories to grow, theories which now bloomed (Elsrud 2023). The lack of systematic procedures also became politically charged, and opposition parties were vocally demanding the introduction of MAAs (e.g. Sveriges Riksdag 2015/16:523; Sveriges Riksdag 2015/16:746). However, this was not an uncontroversial issue at the time, and a lot of national and international debates were ongoing about the reliability and legal certainty of available methods (see e.g. Noll 2016). Nevertheless, in November 2015, the Swedish government, as they simultaneously launched a new temporary migration law seriously limiting the possibilities for asylum in Sweden, decided to “promptly” and in accordance with scientific state of the art, create a centralised system for MAAs.

It is a well-established fact since then that the method chosen by public authorities – an MRI scan of the knee – was invalidated and that the estimated margins of error officially given were based on serious miscalculations (Axelsson 2018; Bring & Rönnegård 2019; Dagens Medicin 2018; Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå 2018; Tamsen 2019;

1 As a legal category, the “unaccompanied child refugee” implies a migrant under the age of 18, who at the point of arrival is separated from both its parents or from other grown-ups who have taken on the role of parent, or who after arrival stands without such a guardian (Betänkande av utredningen om migrationsmottagandet 2015 [2017]:44). Unaccompanied minors are described in terms of their unique vulnerability and need of special protection within all stages of the displacement cycle.

2 In Afghanistan, few births are officially registered, and many lack identity documents. This is particularly common among rural areas and persecuted minorities who have commonly lived in exile elsewhere, often in Iran or Pakistan. Further, Afghani documents are not validated by the Swedish Migration Agency, due to the high level of corruption in Afghanistan (Eckerman 2021a). Hence, the entire group of unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan lacked the possibility to identify themselves.

3 In Sweden, the reception of unaccompanied minors implies, first of all, the kinds of rights that an applicant is entitled to during the asylum process (2 and 3 §§ LMA), such as access to health and dental care, school attendance and special secure housing, as well as a custodian. The Swedish Aliens Act (2005:716) Chapter 1 §10, also makes clear that decisions concerning children should be made with special consideration for their health and development as well as their best interests in general. In accordance with EU Regulation No. 604/2013, unaccompanied minors can apply for a visa in all EU states even if they have arrived in another European country first.

Tamsen & Monstad 2019; Eckerman 2021a, 2021b). After persistent protests from the research community and medical expertise, on both a national and international scale, the report on which the method choice was based was withdrawn and the National Board of Health and Welfare admitted that it relied on meta-analysis of incompatible studies, resulting in inadequate estimates. Hence, there was “substantial uncertainty about the true relationship between chronological age and the age indicators used” (Tamsen & Monstad 2019:615). Experts in forensic medicine and statistics were able to produce models that showed that the more probable error-rate for 17-year-old boys was 41%, rather than the 3% initially stated, and that approximately 33% of all male children that had been subjected to the procedure in 2017 had been “erroneously classified as adults” (ibid. 622).

Methods

This article is part of a larger study on the existential ethics of body data in international mobility, mainly drawing on in-depth interviews with asylum seeking youth who have gone through MAAs. However, in this article, the focus has rather been on the surrounding context through media discourse. The material primarily consists of articles from Sweden’s four major newspapers, *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, found on the Swedish news database Retriever, using the search criteria “medicinsk åldersutredning” (medical age investigation) and “medicinsk ålderbedömning” (medical age assessment). The articles analysed were published between 2015 – when discussions about MAAs started to reach public discourse – and 2017 – when they were being introduced. After removing non-relevant search results, the material consisted of 218 articles, including news stories, editorial material and debate pieces. More than half of the material stems from *Svenska Dagbladet*, which has been the – by far – most active arena for debates surrounding MAAs, both initially in terms of lobbying for its implementation, and later in terms of critical investigation. The analysis also draws on a vast number of official documents on the topic, stemming from involved public authorities and the political sector. Further, an overview of the headlines from all national news articles including the above-mentioned search criteria during two particular dates in 2017, have been used for analysis.

Analysis of the material engaged critical discourse analysis (CDA), focusing on the ways in which discourses “structure, enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power abuse (dominance) in society” (van Dijk 2015:2). The CDA approach, hence, distinguishes itself as explicitly political in its pronounced attention to social–power abuse, and its enactment within political and social contexts through text and talk. In line with the discourse-historical approach (DHA) in CDA, “discourse” should thus not be regarded as isolated semantic units, but rather as argued by Reisigl and Wodak (2015:583):

as a complex of interrelated context-dependent semiotic acts (in the sense of semiotic tokens) that are situated within specific fields of social action and belong to conventionalized genres and subgenres (in the sense of semiotic types). They are socially constituted, socially constitutive, and related to a macro-topic. They are linked to argumentation about validity claims, such as truth and normative validity, involving several social actors who have different points of view.

In this article, I am hence tracing a number of discursive strategies considered within the DHA as reoccurring components of discourse, in particular when it comes to the articulation of racist ideology (ibid). First of all, this includes the active integration of the broader sociopolitical and historical context surrounding the events in 2015-2017, when aiming to interpret the media discourse about MAAs on unaccompanied minors. Further, the analysis focuses on *nominations* and *predications*, implying the discursive construction and characterisation of social actors, processes and objects involved (e.g. as ingroup/outgroup, personalisation/depersonalisation, stereotypes etc.). It also involves *argumentative* and *persuading* elements, in particular regarding what is constructed as valid, true and taken for granted. And finally, *intensifying* and *mitigating* strategies, serving to emphasise or downplay the significance of events and elements (Reisigl & Wodak 2008). Semantic segments that are particularly tackled are headlines and leads due to their power to define and emphasise the texts' preferred meaning, as well as editorials and op-ed articles, where control over the text and context by publishers becomes particularly clear, and "repeated political or media discourse about similar events, and via specific discourse moves of generalization, [...] may condition the generalization and abstraction of specific mental models to more general structures of knowledge and ideology" (Reisigl & Wodak 2015:473). While the analysis is mainly structured according to overarching tendencies and themes within the larger corpus of articles, discursive strategies are highlighted and discussed throughout with reference to more specific illustrative text segments.

A discursive struggle over the migrant body

During the time of the migration wave in Sweden 2015, the question about how to deal with the assessments of unaccompanied minors' asylum cases became highly politicised early on, with the opposition party to the right and the far-right populist party demanding the implementation of MAAs. In fact, there had been a directive ever since 2012 from *the National Board of Health and Welfare*, that the age of unaccompanied minors *was supposed* to be assessed through dental x-ray and an x-ray of the wrist combined with examination by a paediatrician (Eckerman 2021a:155). However, all the involved professional parties of the chosen methods, i.e. *The Swedish Bar Association*, *The Swedish Paediatric Association* as well as *The Swedish Dental Association* had taken a stance against them (Ahlstrand 2015; Hjern & Asher 2015; Svenska Barnläkarföreningen 2015; Sveriges Advokatsamfund 2015). Hence, it was near impossible to find doctors or dentists in Sweden who were willing to perform the examinations at the time. But

as the number of unaccompanied minors registered in Sweden quadrupled in 2015, the pressure for a viable solution for standardised age estimates grew exponentially and the political opposition and debaters brought the discussion about MAAs to public attention.

Competing world views

In all of the newspapers analysed for this study, numerous medical and legal experts condemned the use of MAAs during the time leading up to its implementation. Paediatrician Bengt Erik Ginsburg, for example states that there is in fact no such thing as “medical age”, and that physical and psychosocial maturity must be regarded first hand when deciding on a young individuals’ need for protection (Ginsburg 2015). The president of the *Swedish Society of Medicine’s* delegation for medical ethics was further quoted in an interview in *Dagens Nyheter*, saying that there “are no ways to assess an exact age medically”, but that, for example, the United Kingdom uses a method that rather pays attention to social maturity (Ahlstrand 2015). Similarly, Elisabeth Dahlin, the Secretary-General for *Save the Children International*, in an interview in *Expressen*, refers to the possibility of doing a multidisciplinary assessment using both medical and social examinations, interviews and paediatric experts (Kvarnkullen, Lapidus, Salihu, Johansson & Okpu 2016). In *Svenska Dagbladet*, one professor in dental medicine, and two professors in paediatrics come together in a debate piece saying that no available method for MAAs of young individuals on the verge of 18 had the precision demanded by rule of law and medical ethics (Klingberg, Asher & Hjern 2015).

However, there were several others arguing for the urgent need to implement a solution based on medical data, making it seem like the *only* viable option of certainty. These were though, most commonly, not medical experts (with one very vocal exception) but rather debaters, journalists and politicians. At this point, a conflict seemingly arose between the state of the art within professional communities on the one hand, and a politically driven ambition to implement much more restrictive migration policies on the other. The then spokesperson of migration for the oppositional Moderate Party went public several times demanding, among other things, that Sweden “put one’s house in order”, under the headline “M [The Moderate Party] demands that child migrants have their age assessed” (Tidningarnas telegrafbyrå 2015) in order to “separate grownups that claim to be children from actual children” (Pirttisalo 2015). Three local Moderate politicians similarly wrote about the topic in a debate article with the headline “Sweden must be able to do medical age assessments” (Flechter, Gripestam, Reichenberg & Mossberg 2016), hence making the issue primarily a question about political will. The medical experts cautioning against MAAs were called “the loud and politicized group of paediatricians” (Andersson 2015) by some debaters, and editorials claimed that “authorities and politicians have disregarded the problem that unaccompanied [minors] lie about their age” (Kjöllér 2016). Ivar Arpi, conservative opinion leader, wrote in an editorial piece in SvD that:

It is possible to judge if someone is lying about their age, but in Sweden, very few age assessments are being done [...] [But] the relationship between Sweden and a newly arrived migrant needs to be based on facts. Medical age assessments are thus necessary (Arpi 2015).

Looking at the strategies being used in this discursive struggle over meaning, it is clear through the *argumentative* and *persuading* elements of the texts that the different interpretative communities depend on two competing versions of what is real and objectively true. While medical and legal experts rely on the weight of their professional identity and knowledge both in terms of what is deemed possible and ethically viable, those arguing for the implementation of MAAs largely refer to what is being done in an often unspecified elsewhere.

In Europe at the time, EU rules did allow for MAAs to be carried out when needed by member states, but did not stipulate what situations or methods were justified (Roscam Abbing 2011:15). Hence, *The Study Group on Forensic Age Diagnostics* (AG-FAD), consisting of 130 researchers from 16 different countries, had been developing guidelines for MAAs since the year 2000 (Tamsen & Mostad 2019:613-614; Eckerman 2021a:154). Among their recommendations, certain forms of x-rays were preferred, in combination with physical examinations of e.g. sexual maturity, and the general consistency of x-ray results with “the organism as a whole”. They further pointed out the need for – but overall lack of – population-specific reference studies due to the impact of socioeconomic factors on body growth and development (Schmelting et al. 2008). But there was also much debate on the topic internationally, with critics both emphasising the prevailing imprecision of available methods, and that margins of error were often not properly considered in the weight given to medical estimates. Several European organisations for healthcare professionals had thus recommended their members not to take part in MAAs (e.g. Sauer, Nicholson & Neubauer 2016). Also, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2015) underlined that MAAs should never be used as routine procedure, and must always be part of a more comprehensive and multidisciplinary assessment, while the *European Union Agency for Asylum* (EASO 2013), stressed that all other forms of proof must be regarded *before* turning to MAAs.

However, the complexity of the problem is rarely mentioned in the argumentation from debaters arguing for MAAs in Swedish newspapers, and the assessments are framed as straightforward true-or-false operations. *Lexically*, MAAs are continuously associated with words like “objectivity” (Mörnstad 2015; Arpi 2015), “facts” (Arpi 2015), and “realism” (Lönnqvist 2016; 2015-11-25). Further, they are by many public opinion builders, politicians and journalists described as “age tests” (e.g. Wager 2016; ”Skynda på med ålderstester, Morgan” 2016; ”Ålderstest är bra för barn” 2015), “age controls” (e.g. Åkesson 2016; Drevinger 2016; Danielsson 2016), and “age determination” (e.g. Pettersson Ohlsén 2016; Flechter, Gripestam, Reichenberg & Mossberg 2016; Ahlstrand 2015). All these false synonyms add to the idea of body data being nothing less than pure evidence, perfectly able by themselves to tell all there is to say on the matter in a discrete, argumentative manoeuvre. The two opposing camps in

the debate hence describe two diametrically different realities. One, where there are no reliable methods for MAAs, and hence a need for multidisciplinary procedures, and another where there are, without doubt, readily available methods, that are not only the *solitary* option if not wanting to decide on age purely based on guesses, but objective, factual and “scientifically proven” (Wager 2016). It is also clear that for those agitating for MAAs, the narrative, and the self-proclaimed experience of the individual applicant has no general value as “evidence”, and that in the light of body data, no alternative methods seem valid or required. This attitude is much in line with the general shift towards the body, described by Ajana, implying a turning away from the narrative.

The urgent need for data

Towards the end of November 2015, Swedish migration policy took a U-turn and a renewed directive for MAAs of unaccompanied minors were one of three actions taken. *The National Board of Health and Welfare* was given the task of performing a systematic overview of current available methods (Socialdepartementet S2016/04832/FS) and the *Swedish National Board of Forensic Medicine* (Rättsmedicinalverket, hereafter RMV) was told to promptly and in accordance with scientific state of the art, create a centralised system for MAAs (Tamsen 2019). In April 2016, the results of their revision were presented in a report that concluded that many of the current methods for MAAs were indeed too unreliable, but that a new method using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the upper part of the knee had “potential” to be more precise. However, the method was principally untested and the board thus recommended a larger pilot study. At the time, there were only six studies completed, among which only two were relevant, with merely a handful of participants in relevant ages (Tamsen 2019). The report quickly met harsh critique from the medical community, due to investigators’ lack of expertise in the field; disregard of large segments of previous research; and the fact that it reached a conclusion that was in significant ways completely contrary to international expertise at the time, such as the recommendations from AGFAD (Tamsen 2019).

Nevertheless, in the newspapers, the tone is optimistic after the release of the report. In an editorial in *Dagens Nyheter*, the journalist seems mesmerised by the promising new method, likely to be both “inexpensive” and “legally secure”. Among the “potential drawbacks” of the method is, however, according to the journalist, the situation that “we don’t really know yet how reliable the method is” (“Ledare: Ett rejält kliv i rätt riktning”, 2016). The right-leaning publications are more impatient though, and the need for a pilot study is presented as a political failure, since the solution is needed sooner rather than later. Hence, even though experts from the *National Board of Health and Welfare* are quoted in *Expressen* saying that “We must do a pilot-study. We need more data [...] To do such a study takes at least half a year”, the journalist still points out in the same article that “it is *technically* possibly to start using the method already in the autumn” (Jakobson 2016, emphasis added). Only two days later, an editorial in the same newspaper states that:

It's a shame that there is no time for a comprehensive pilot study before the magnetic resonance imaging starts. But in a situation where many unaccompanied [minors] cannot prove their acclaimed age with identity documents, the state must do their best with what they have ("Skynda på med ålderstester, Morgan" 2016).

Once again, this way of reasoning gives the impression that there are no other ways of assessing age, such as multidisciplinary methods combining psychosocial aspects, sexual maturity, expert testimonies and official documentation from e.g. schools or other authorities in the home country. In effect, while all public documents from Afghanistan had been deemed not trustworthy by the Migration Board at the time, due to the high levels of corruption in the country, an unvalidated medical procedure was regarded trustworthy enough. Also, then minister of migration, Morgan Johansson, is quoted in *Svenska Dagbladet* saying that "I hope to be able to shorten the time, both when it comes to the pilot study and the evaluation" (Kudo 2016), and debate articles are published urging that "Medical age assessments must start now" (Mörnstad & Zeba 2016). It is remarkable to note how both politicians and journalists are here openly arguing for disregarding the need for validation of an untested method that is to have life defining repercussions for those involved, and that the unknown reliability of the method is only a "potential drawback" of an otherwise promising technology. Even if not verified, the method *will* turn these unruly bodies into data that *can* be used in a systematic manner in the bureaucratic apparatus, regardless of whether the data itself is systematically collected. It is this urgently desired formula; this promise of order and structure, that seems to drive the history of events forward, as the government, just months afterwards, announced the launching of the method – without further testing.

The naive nation state and the bogus migrant

So, who are the social actors involved in these events according to the discursive structures of the newspapers? Looking at the *nomination* and *predication* strategies actively used, a central actor is the imagined Swedish "we", which is variously embraced or ridiculed, largely depending on the political colour of the publication. Thus, among more left/centrist publications and debaters, the decision to implement MAAs, as well as the new methods introduced, are commonly discussed according to the three-part narrative found in previous research, where restrictive police measures are regarded as an unfortunate, but necessary and responsible step to take in a crisis situation (Dahlgren 2016). According to such a framework, the moral integrity of the Swedish nation state remains intact due to the generosity shown so far, why "we" have now deserved a "breathing space". However, among the right leaning publications and debaters, the Swedish "we" comes forth as an outdated and duped "other", which is now being defeated by crude reality. The day after the decision to implement MAAs was announced, *Expressen* thus writes in an editorial "Welcome realism. On Tuesday, Stefan Löfven [then Prime minister] announced that Sweden will reintroduce medical age assessments of unaccompanied minors", but the fact that "naivety has been treated

as a virtue has had serious impact” on the migration system (“Ålderstest är bra för barn” 2015). The picture of a Swedish migration system that up until now had been hopelessly candid and unsuspecting is reoccurring. Parliamentary politician Staffan Danielsson from the Central Party viciously attacks the sitting government and its institutions in several debate articles on the matter, saying that “the Migration Board has not taken their public responsibility, long and naively letting unaccompanied minors decide about their own age” (Danielsson 2016a) and “consistently accepted the applicants’ own claims” (Danielsson 2016b). This is interesting, considering what was well known among researchers at the time, who had observed a deep seated “culture of disbelief” as characteristic of the ways unaccompanied minors were approached by the authorities. A study of the key credibility principles used by Migration Agency case-officers in Sweden in these kinds of cases, for example, indicated that “the children were so consistently questioned that it appears as if even the humanitarian aspects of their claims are diminished” (Hedlund 2016:80). But according to political debaters, up until now in Sweden,

as good as everyone who has claimed to be a child has been accepted by the Migration Agency as children, received asylum and insurance number as children, received benefits as children and been placed in housing with children (Danielsson 2016c).

And if the Swedish nation state is constructed by critical voices as irresponsible and naive, the unaccompanied minors are in the same move assigned the role of a mischievous outgroup, likely to take advantage and deceive unsuspecting others. The unaccompanied minor now becomes, as has been argued elsewhere (Lems, Oester & Strasser 2020), a “crisis figure”. This is a child who is discursively positioned in between childhood and adulthood, as someone who is losing their innocence, and thus takes central stage in the ongoing contestation over the legitimate refugee subject.

During 2017, when the new MAAs were put into practice, 9617 males and 337 females were subjected to the procedure, among which an overwhelming majority were deemed above 18 (Tamsen & Mostad 2019). Already after hardly more than a month, when approximately 600 individuals had gone through assessments, RMV decided to send out a press release with the results, where more than 8 out of 10 of those examined had been assessed as 18 or older. When reporting on this news, *Aftonbladet* is the one newspaper among the four analysed, who seemed to have an ambition to contextualise the results. Their headline reads “Three out of four *who have been tested* are above 18 [emphasis added]” and already in the ingress, a representative from the Migration Agency is quoted as saying that “If all unaccompanied minors had been tested, then the majority would likely have been under 18”. The process leader from RMV is further quoted stating that MAAs have “a margin of error, and especially if the person who is being tested is close to the 18-year limit”. The article is commented on by a columnist urging readers to put the results into context, and to remember that only a small minority of the group of unaccompanied minors, i.e. those who have not been able to convince the Migration Agency

about their age, are in fact sent for MAAs (up until then, 4200 individuals out of the 45,000 who had come to Sweden over the past three years, according to Svensson 2017). Looking at the headlines of all Swedish news articles reporting on the results across the two days following their release, there were several examples of similar attempts to keep a sober tone, and to contextualise results in terms of margins of error and the limited group of individuals who had been tested. However, while alt-right publications use an openly hostile tone, many mainstream outlets across the country also use highly misleading *nomination strategies* in their discursive framing of the press release. Several, for example, conflate the group of tested individuals with the larger group of unaccompanied minors, such as “Many young asylum seekers were above 18” (“Många unga asylsökande var över 18 år” 2017), “Three out of four unaccompanied minors assessed as adults” (Olsson 2017 [this headline was eventually changed due to being “misleading”]), or “Test shows: Asylum seekers older than they have claimed” (Swahn 2017). By taking the body data from a small non-representative part and conflating it with the whole, such discursive moves make it look like these numbers are generalisable over the entire group of “asylum seekers” and in particular “unaccompanied minors”. The way the content of the press release is presented in these regards, amplified and *intensified* in media discourse, should be viewed in relation to the ethical analysis of MAAs in the asylum process, commissioned by the *Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare* before its implementation. Here, the authors raised serious concern about how MAAs could affect public attitudes towards asylum seekers. The ethical analysts stated that there are potential long-term effects worthy of consideration, since such assessments, “if widely or frequently practised, could be interpreted as suggesting that asylum seekers as a group, or more generally the ethnic groups to which they belong, are not to be trusted” (Malmqvist, Furberg & Sandman 2018:815). As such, they could intensify discriminatory and racist views in society.

The ways in which the results of the body data are turned into suspicion against the group of unaccompanied minors through media discourse can be most clearly seen in some highly problematic *predication strategies* to be found in the headline of mainstream news outlets in relation to RMV's press release, such as “Three out of four lied about their age: “Most of the age tested asylum seekers did not say the truth”” (Jakobson & Micu 2017), “First results show: Three out of four unaccompanied minors lied about their age” (Karlsson 2017). The day of the release of the results, *Expressen* publishes a news article with the ingress:

An overwhelming majority among the 581 young asylum seekers who have gone through a medical age assessment is above 18. New results from the Swedish National Board of Forensic Medicine indicates that they are not telling the truth about their age. SD-leader [Sweden Democrats] Jimmie Åkesson now demands that the controls become mandatory: Results from the Swedish National Board of Forensic Medicine prove the naïve attitude of others, and simultaneously provoke the question about how many have already received asylum on inadequate grounds? (Micu & Jakobson 2017)

The editorial piece of the same newspaper the following day carries the headline “The lies about age are witness to a breakdown”, and the author states that:

A reasonable conclusion is, hence, that a considerable number of those seeking asylum as unaccompanied minors, are in fact adults. [...] But it is not the lies of the unaccompanied minors that are most upsetting, but the lies that have dominated the Swedish public. (“Lögnerna om ålder visar på ett haveri” 2017)

Here, we can repeatedly see how the idea about the bogus migrant is positioned in relation to the naive nation state. In many of these articles, the natural authority of the MAA results come with such ease it almost makes them uninteresting. The results have simply served to prove – beyond doubt – what the rational voices were already claiming all along, namely the indispensable need for protectionist and restrictive migration politics. It is hence clear that even if the launching of the method had been accompanied by information about (however miscalculated) margins of error, and even if representatives from RMV occasionally were careful about mentioning that the results are only estimates, the discursive subtext of the datafied body seems to be that of objective and scientific proof. Hence, when the body is turned into data, the very operation in itself seems to have an overwhelming truth effect. In SvD, conservative opinion leader Ivar Arpi writes in an editorial with the headline “No, grown-up men are not unaccompanied minors” that:

96 percent lied about their age [...] The age assessments that are being done now should have been done long ago, if so 35,000 alleged unaccompanied minors would likely not have come to Sweden in 2015 (Arpi 2017).

Further emphasising the sense of having disclosed the true nature about the entire group of unaccompanied minors, both the far-right populist Swedish Democrats and the Moderate Party publicly demand “tests” of *all* unaccompanied minors, and some local party factions even discuss the possibility of prosecuting those who have “cheated” (Moreno 2017). Hence, the result clearly leads many public voices to assume that those who have been assessed as 18 or above have been deceitful. However, what is for example not being mentioned by the press release, is that among the 447 out of 581 cases, where the applicant had been assessed as 18 or above, as many as 243 had specified 1999 as their year of birth and were, according to their own claims, about to turn 18 the same year (Rogberg 2017). Due to the fact that most of them had waited for approximately two years to have their cases opened, 23 individuals had even turned 18 according to their self-proclaimed age. And while information such as year of birth was not available to RMV who did the assessments, it was readily available to the Migration Board who had ordered them. However, when confronted by journalists, who soon started to investigate the circumstances surrounding the MAAs, the Director of Communication rejected all responsibility, saying that “It would be very strange to come to another public authority and ask that authority to take responsibility for how

media, and political representatives choose to use and create public opinion around a result” (Rogberg 2017).

On the one hand, this is telling of the immense lack of care in the communication about the results on behalf of RMV and the Migration Agency when dealing with such a vulnerable group, who had already at this point become a target of intense public suspicion. But on the other hand, it is perhaps even more telling of the way in which body data seemed to inherently turn against the subject, as in the language of a lie detector. Besides, all of those who had already willingly said that they were 18 or more, and who were added to the statistics, we today also know that approximately 33% of the male children subjected to the MAAs that year were likely incorrectly classified as adults (Tamsen & Monstad 2019). However, and this is important, even if the methods *would* have worked in accordance with what they said they could do, the results would *still* be nothing more than estimates, and the fact would have remained that to this day, there are still no available methods that can establish an exact chronological age based on medical evidence. But in large parts of the media discourse during these events, complexities such as error-rates and the absence of population-specific standards obviously got lost in the translation of body data into media discourse, as though the discursive power of the data, by its mere existence, resists ambivalence.

Final discussion: Data epistemologies and dehumanisation

During the rapid shift towards stricter migration policies in Sweden following the migration wave in 2015, news media obviously became a scene for an intense, discursive struggle between traditional liberal values and new conservative attitudes that would come to change Swedish self-identity from then on. Within this discursive struggle, the group of unaccompanied minors turned into a crisis figure, and their self-proclaimed ages became a politically charged issue. As such, MAAs took on the significance of a litmus test for the validity of the different political camps. Hence, it is probably difficult to overestimate its impact on the larger renegotiation of public attitudes taking place throughout this particular period. Even if the MAAs have been debated, questioned and critiqued since then, both nationally and internationally, by legal and medical experts as well as human rights observers (Eckerman 2021a), the fact remains that they are still in use, and that the public report meant to investigate malpractice and responsibility during the period 2015–2017 was recently shut down by the new Moderate-led Government (Trysell 2023). Looking at my own interviews with those who went through the MAAs in 2017, it is also clear that even if results of the assessments were proven to rely on miscalculated estimates, the truth-effect of the body data remains in public memory, since so many of them are still met with suspicion and hostility in their everyday lives (Tudorforthcoming). Within a situation marked by administrative challenges and ethical complexity, the MAAs, in line with Ajana’s argument, turned into Boolean true/false operations, through which, something as feasible as data and numbers could be produced. This urgently needed formula trumped the requirement for legal and scientific validity, which can be seen in the active argumentation among

debaters and journalists in the material, particularly in the disregard for a need for pilot studies. Within this discursive struggle, news media assisted the political actors in translating body data into objective and scientifically solid proof material, with the ability to decide on vulnerability, ethics and the legitimate migrant subject. As such, media discourses helped undo ethical dilemmas of deservingness in migration policy, while simultaneously unleashing reservoirs of racialised hate and suspicion towards those deemed undeserving.

The implementation of an untested and under-validated method to produce support of vital importance for asylum processes of unaccompanied children must be regarded in relation to the extent to which migrant populations, colonised subjects and other vulnerable groups have functioned as test beds for modern science throughout history (Ajana 2013). Also, more specifically, technologies for identification, such as fingerprinting and current biometric systems, were first tested on people with the “fewest rights”, before being more broadly implemented throughout society (Ajana 2021:474-475). So, while the question may be asked about how it is possible that such an insensitive treatment could be possible towards a group, generally described as particularly vulnerable and in need of special protection throughout the entire displacement cycle, perhaps the question should rather be posed the other way around: against *whom else* but those most exposed, lacking all forms of legal status and authority in the world, could such a treatment be possible? As such, the case study discussed in this article seems like a cautioning echo from Hannah Arendt, about the ways in which the nation state and its policing agencies could become increasingly oppressive due to the power they assume over stateless people and refugees (Curthoys 2020:38). Hence, in conclusion, this article hopes to have articulated the need for a broader discussion on the effects of these hyper-empirical epistemologies on ethical sensibilities and the dismantling of the right to asylum in contemporary Sweden and beyond.

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