Accepted: 23 July 2020

DOI: 10.1111/chso.12415

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Constructions of 'the ageless' asylum seekers: An analysis of how age is understood among professionals working within the norwegian immigration authorities

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Abstract

This article explores how professionals within the Norwegian immigration authorities conceptualise age when doing non-medical age assessments. By using social constructivism, which challenges an ethnocentric quantifying understanding of age, we delve into how socially constructed perceptions of childhood and adulthood manifest in assessment practices and the implications of these. By examining how applicants' physical appearance, body language and life experience are used as an assessment basis, we argue that the ways age is conceptualised relate to Western ideas and ideals while overlooking other social and cultural backgrounds in which age is embedded.

KEYWORDS

age, age assessment, immigration, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers

INTRODUCTION

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which was incorporated into the Norwegian law in 2003, "a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (p. 4). In Norway, chronological and

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certified age marks the rights of and services for children. In few other instances, reaching the age of majority has more implications for the individual than in immigration law. Turning 18 is not only a defining moment for the granting or denial of asylum but also for the life conditions of the applicant, including living arrangements and access to education (UDI, n.d.-a). The last decade has brought a steep increase in young unaccompanied asylum seekers in Norway as well as widespread concerns that migrating adults pose as minors to exploit welfare systems (Gower, 2011). The Norwegian government has become more suspicious of asylum seekers who claim to be legal minors (see Ministry of Justice & Public Security, 2011), and has tightened the law. In 2009, the Norwegian authorities started to grant limited residency permits to unaccompanied minors between the ages of 16 and 18 when the only concern was a lack of proper care if returned to their country of origin (UDI, n.d.-b). These unaccompanied minor asylum seekers risk only receiving protection until they turn 18, when they are deported to their country of origin (NOAS, 2017). The removal of the so-called reasonable terms (*rimelighetsvilkår*) in 2016—that an applicant should have a network to return to when displaced—further lowered the judicial threshold for issuing limited residency permits (see UNHCR, 2019). As a result, fewer unaccompanied minors receive protection beyond the age of 18 years, particularly young male Afghans (NOAS, 2016).

Of paramount importance, then, is an applicant's age. In cases of uncertainty, Norwegian authorities have established procedures of age assessment to determine probable age. State-initiated age assessments consist of medical and non-medical assessments. Medical age assessments include x-rays of hand, carpus and, at times, teeth, and are perceived to be the most objective tools for assessing age (UDI, 2017). Supplementary non-medical age assessments are also used. In Norway, non-medical age assessments are based on perceptions of an applicant's physical appearance, maturity and psycho-social development (NOAS, 2016). These assessments are conducted by professionals working within the Norwegian immigration authorities. Non-medical assessments have met heavy criticism, and in the context of the UK, Cemlyn and Nye (2012) argue that.

> such assessments are affected by culturally based preconceptions about age-related behaviour, subjective judgement, management pressures to reduce costs associated with care of those assessed as under 18, and political and cultural constructions of asylum seekers. (p. 681)

In Norway, Lidén (2017) has pointed out that non-medical age assessments are too shallow; they rely too much on attributes such as physical appearance and behaviour, assessed during a brief period of time. She also stresses that as physical and social aspects vary between individuals, this may lead to wrong assessments.

Despite a steep increase in age assessments of unaccompanied minors in Norway, non-medical (as well as medical) age assessments as a phenomenon is largely ignored in academia, especially how concepts of age manifests in age assessments. To increase our knowledge about how age is conceptualised in age assessments, we explore how the bodies, behaviours and backgrounds of young asylum seekers are ascribed meaning and used as a measure to assess age in the context of the Norwegian immigration system. In this process, we draw on a case study, involving semi-structured interviews with four professionals in the Norwegian Immigration authorities. We use social constructionism, with an emphasis on social age, body and behaviour to tease out the implications on the outcomes of age assessment and asylum cases. The article contributes in challenging the hegemony that chronological perspectives on age have in the Norwegian immigration context and in western societies more generally.

The article is structured as follows: We present previous research and our theoretical framework before we move on to the methods and ethics of the case study. The empirical analysis is divided into

two sections. First, we explore how unaccompanied minors are constructed by professionals within the Norwegian Immigration authorities based on their bodies, body language, their narrated background and life experiences, and birth estimations. Second, we investigate how these constructions influence the credibility of the unaccompanied minors. Lastly, concluding reflections are provided.

THINKING IN SOCIAL RATHER THAN CHRONOLOGICAL TERMS

Social constructionism is a valuable theoretical and analytical tool when exploring interpretation and questioning the ´taken for grantedness´ of realities (Berger & Luckmann, 2000). This theoretical framework probes "how humans produce plural knowledge and meaning" (Hedlund, 2017, p. 157), which generates ´objective truths´ about phenomena (Berger & Luckmann, 2000). In the following analysis, we explore how social categories of childhood and adulthood are constructed without necessarily considering the context in which they are embedded in and moulded by (see Montgomery, 2009).

Perceiving childhood and adulthood as social constructions and exploring images of transitions and contradictions between the two enables us to see how they are "neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but it appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies" (James & Prout, 1997, p. 8). In a western context, ideas and ideals about contemporary childhoods are ideologically and legally conceptualised as a period spent within the family, in a house, in school and other suitable institutions, being dependent on parents or other caretakers (Engebrigtsen, 2012). These ideals have come to be perceived as universal (Boyden, 1997). However, Boyden (1997) argues that the idea of a universalised childhood based on western tradition and thought fall short. Perspectives on childhood and adulthood are rooted in socio-temporal spaces where social categories are experienced and interpreted differently. When exploring perceptions of children and childhoods, age as an analytical category becomes significant, as age relates to historical, political, biological, cultural, and social conditions (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). This is particularly evident in asylum practices when (western) ideas about the child and childhood are challenged (Crawley, 2011; Stretmo, 2010).

Quantification and the use of numbers mark modern states, as it enables governments to quantify, standardise, and administer complex realities and societies (Larsen & Røyrvik, 2017). Yet, as Larsen and Røyrvik (2017) note, although presented as such, numbers are not a neutral form of representation but rather shape the practices that they are intended to represent. An essential part of this is the dependency on chronological age as a paramount way of structuring society. Chronological age has come to determine access to the educational system, access to rights and services, the legal treatment of a person and, as mentioned, decisions in immigration cases in many places. Whereas chronological age offers a way to delineate and structure age and maturity, the idea of *social age* embraces more nuanced ways of perceiving the course of life. Understanding age in social terms can offer explanations to how biological human development and chronological age is ascribed meaning, dependent on the context in which it takes place (Clark-Kazak, 2013). Clark-Kazak (2009, 2013) and Laz (1998, 2003) have made efforts to theorise age inspired by gender research. Clark-Kazak (2009) argues that social age can analytically and practically be distinguished from biological development in the same way that (social) gender and (biological) sex can be:

> Just as it is no longer assumed that all women, due to their biology, have the same experiences and roles everywhere, similarly, the application of a 'universal' chronological age definition of childhood should not preclude a social age analysis to determine the differential experiences of children within a particular context (p. 1310).

In a similar way, Laz (1998, 2003) engages with gender theory, more specifically the idea of 'doing gender' (cf. West & Zimmerman, 1987), and proposes the concept of "Age as accomplished" (p. 88). She suggests that age is also something that one *does*. The ways in which we do age is shaped by normative understandings and expectations around how we are supposed to *act* our age. Age is thus "not natural or fixed, and it implies that age requires work, i.e. physical or mental effort" (Laz, 1998, p. 86). By accomplishing age, one makes age seem natural due to the (often) predictable ways of acting in interactions (Laz, 1998). This perspective encompasses how people internalise cultural norms and expectations regarding age and how they make use of these norms and expectations (Wohlmann, 2014).

As we will see in the analysis, immigrant authorities use physical appearance and body language to determine age. A social constructionist perspective on the body emphasises bodies' entanglement in complex social interaction and interpretation (Nettleton & Watson, 2002). The body is thus not merely a physical entity that is fixed in its expressions, but rather something that is perceived, constructed, invented, classified and represented (Prout, 2000). The body is a variable in social interaction (Nettleton & Watson, 2002), and Burroughs and Ehrenreich (1993) describe 'reading the social body' where.

> on the one hand, the encoded messages can be obvious and familiar, yet on the other hand, they may also reveal, through analysis, information and meaning regularly hidden from view. (p. 3)

Bodies constantly change through processes such as ageing or illness. This is particularly true for young people whose bodies alter even more quickly than those of adults, and where bodies are more prone to external assessment and control (James, 2000). Age norms may rub off on bodily practices with reference to how people view themselves and, thus, the perception of self is made visible through how people use their bodies (Laz, 1998; Wohlmann, 2014). Biological changes in puberty impact social relationships (Nettleton & Watson, 2002), and whereas small bodies tend to be perceived as innocent and vulnerable, adolescent bodies—male in particular—are often perceived as troublesome and dangerous (Ursin, 2016).

Bodies also have agentic potential (Fingerson, 2009), and through involvement in 'body work', we negotiate the presentation of our body, its actions and its appearance (James, 2000). Parr (2005) demonstrates how the body is a site for acts of resistance among young asylum seekers in Australia who engage in hunger strikes. Our bodies are managed by ourselves and others, and they shape and are shaped by the society in which we live in. These ways of management serve to structure the self and social relations (Nettleton & Watson, 2002). Bodies are central to power relations and sites of social control, surveillance, assessment and sanction (Fingerson, 2009; Nettleton & Watson, 2002). In the case of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, this entails the physical confinement in institutions, the medical assessments of bone structure, the non-medical assessment and the final case decisions. Parr (2005) argues that the regulation of the body in the immigration system is a cultural representation that conforms to the political production of the body. While the authorities territorialise the subjectivity of the applicants, the applicants are silenced.

The encounter between unaccompanied minors and immigration authorities in Europe and the US has also become a focal interest among scholars and advocates for asylum seeking children´s rights (e.g. Boyden & Hart, 2007; Engebrigtsen, 2003; Menjivar & Perreira, 2017). There is a small but growing body of literature that explores questions related to age and age assessments in asylum decision making (see Crawley, 2007; Gower, 2011; Hjern, Brendler-Lindqvist, & Norredam, 2011; Munir, 2017). Unaccompanied minors have, on the one hand, tended to challenge conventional norms regarding what it entails to be a (western) child (Crawley, 2011; Engebrigtsen, 2003), leading to suspicions concerning their status as legal minors. On the other hand, there has been a tendency to mobilise sympathy for child asylum seekers based on a depiction of childhood as universal, rooted

in traditional, western notions of children as innocent and vulnerable (McLaughlin, 2017). This polarised view on asylum-seeking youth—being a betwixt and between fixed category—is recognised in previous research, problematising the child–adult dichotomy as well as the representations of asylum-seeking youth in media and policy documents (Stretmo, 2010).

The professionals that work with asylum-seeking children and youth do their work in the nexus between the applicant's rights, the applicant's narrative, immigration rules and legislation, institutional guidelines, political pressure, culture and personal feelings and beliefs (see Eggebø, 2012; Liodden, 2016). The framework that they move within can be understood to shape their perceptions and rationalisations, which make them mediators of institutionalised knowledge converted into practices. According to Jubany (2011), professionals are 'trained to disbelief' and to detect lies in testimonies of applicants. This disbelief is often informed by stereotypical images and generalised ideas of people of diverse backgrounds, as, for instance, "all applicants from Africa are shy" (Jubany, 2011, p. 83). In his study on how credibility is constructed in decisions concerning unaccompanied minors, Hedlund (2017) finds that there tends to be scepticism towards the information presented by the minor if it lacks details. By studying policy documents in Norway and Sweden, Stretmo (2010) identifies three discourses describing unaccompanied minors—'the strategic minor', 'the traumatised child' and 'the anchor child'—which legitimise different actions. Authorities tend to draw upon predetermined assumptions when placing a minor into a category. For instance, the combination of the male gender and a certain nationality (Afghan, Somali or Iraqi) commonly results in perceiving the applicant to be posing as a minor to gain access to extended rights.

AGE ASSESSMENT IN THE LANDSCAPE OF NORWEGIAN IMMIGRATION AUTHORITIES

Young unaccompanied asylum seekers are considered an especially vulnerable group and in need of extended facilitation, with an emphasis on *the best interest of the child* (UNHCR, 1997). Norwegian authorities define unaccompanied minors as those who "are under the age of 18 years, come to Norway without your parents or others with parental responsibility and apply for protection (asylum)" (UDI, n.d.-a). As legal minors on Norwegian territory, they fall under the Norwegian welfare act (Ministry of Children & families, 2019). Norwegian immigration authorities administer the Immigration Act that protects people who are in need of protection (Vevstad, 2010). The administration is completed through several units that serve different purposes throughout an applicant's asylum-seeking process: The National Police Immigration Service (PU), the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) and the Immigration Appeal Board (UNE). PU is responsible for registering asylum seekers and investigating and determining identity and age. Their age assessment is temporary and based on their own judgements. UDI is a decisive organ that manages asylum applications, grants or refuses residence permits and conducts interviews with asylum seekers (UDI, n.d.-c). The professionals receive training regarding a country's cultural and social profile so that they better understand the conditions and backgrounds of the applicants when scrutinising their narratives. They order medical age assessment and conduct non-medical assessments. UNE manages asylum appeals. In appeals concerning age assessment, they rely on the prior assessment made by UDI, information from the applicant, evaluation done by the applicants' representatives and significant others (UNE, 2017).

Unaccompanied minors who arrive in Norway are diverse in terms of nationality, culture, religion and language. However, most unaccompanied minors in contemporary Norway come from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Syria (UDI, 2018a). In 2015, approximately 3,500 Afghans sought asylum as unaccompanied minors in Norway (UDI, n.d.-d). Most Afghans who seek asylum lack valid

documentation, as it is not custom to register births or issue passports in Afghanistan (see Norwegian Country of Origin information Centre, 2019). Some may have a *tazkera*, which is an Afghan identity paper, but this is seldom accepted as a valid identity paper in Norway. The Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre is responsible for collecting, analysing and presenting information about countries of origin to the Norwegian Immigration Authorities. They state that the *tazkera* is easy to forge and that it can be erroneous as a result of inconclusive information. As the *tazkera* is inadequate, official identification for young Afghan unaccompanied asylum seekers may never be established.

Uncertainties regarding the age of an increasing number of asylum seekers led the Norwegian Immigration authorities to start conducting age assessments as of 2009. As mentioned above, this practice is based on both medical and non-medical assessments. The former consists of various means, such as x-rays of wrist and teeth. Other countries use additional means to assess age medically, such as examinations of genitals and growth (NOAS, 2016). Medical age assessments are offered to those who are believed to be above 15 years when seeking asylum (UDI, 2018b) after the registration at PU. The medical age assessment is voluntary, but refusal may have implications for the applicant's credibility (UDI, 2018b). The medical age assessment has been heavily debated, ethically questioned (see Aynsley-Green et al., 2012) and criticised by several Norwegian stakeholders (see Aarseth & Tønsaker, 2018; Annexstad, 2010; NOAS, 2016).

Non-medical age assessments, the main focus of this article, draw on perceptions of an applicant's physical appearance, maturity and psycho-social development (see NOAS, 2016). Perceptions regarding an applicant's age are primarily sought from professionals in the immigration authorities but may also be retrieved from others who have a relation with the applicant, such as legal representatives, medical personnel, teachers and staff at immigration reception centres. Professionals working within the immigration authorities relate to a standard form with a variety of questions concerning an applicant being above or below 18. They must describe the reasons for their age evaluation by providing "examples on maturity, appearance and behaviour (i.e. interests, independence, how the applicant relates to rules and messages, how the applicant relates to people who are older/younger" (UDI, 2010). Non-medical age assessments have been contested because they conflict with the Norwegian Immigration Act and UN guidelines, as too much emphasis is put on the applicant's physical appearance instead of psycho-social development (NOAS, 2016, see also UNHCR, 1997).

NORWEGIAN IMMIGRANT AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY

This article draws on a case study of the Norwegian immigration authorities, involving four qualitative interviews with employees working within the Norwegian Immigration Authorities. The overall project also involved interviews with professionals from non-governmental institutions and organisations, but as their background did not correspond to this article's focus, they are excluded from the forthcoming analysis. The four interviewees were employed at the National Police Immigration Service (PU), the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) and the Immigration Appeal Board (UNE). Their backgrounds vary from having hands-on experience with young unaccompanied asylum seekers through interviews to more administrative purposes such as handling case files.

As part of the recruitment process, an information letter about the research project was sent out electronically to the respective units, informing participants about the project's intention, the voluntary character of participation and the possibility to withdraw at any given stage. The interviews were semi-structured, following a predetermined list of questions (Willis, 2006). All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and anonymised to safeguard the anonymity of the participants. The quotes used in this article were translated from Norwegian to English. To assure that the original meaning

was not 'lost in translation' and as a means of quality assurance, the quotes were sent to the participants for verification. To anonymise the data, we use the tag 'employee' in the analysis without specifying their institutional affiliation. In addition, we use the term 'applicant' to refer to unaccompanied minors as they are treated and viewed as such by authorities until proven otherwise. The data obtained from the interviews were thematically analysed by developing codes with overarching labels, which resulted in different categories and subcategories. The project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

The small number of participants is a result of the institutions' apparent reluctance to assist in the recruitment process and encourage staff to participate in the project, possibly because these institutions are often criticised in public and academic debate (Liodden, 2016). Liodden (2016, p. 36) highlights more concretely that "It is not difficult to understand that an institution such as the UDI approaches research with wariness. There is hardly any other institution that receives as much criticism in the public debate". Our recruitment process resulted in three participants, one from each unit. A fourth participant from UDI was recruited through the snowball method. We wish to highlight that as the analysis is based on four qualitative interviews, our results need to be understood as tendencies rather than generalised 'truths' (see Platt, 1992) about Norwegian immigration authorities. However, participants tended to refer to a 'we' (understood as the collective within the organisation), which may mirror an institutional discourse. Additionally, we argue that the data do not lose its value, although it is small in size – it allows us to deeply explore the participants' statements, and as Crouch and McKenzie (2006, p. 493) suggest, "just one "case" can lead to new insights". We argue that our data are unique as it offer insight into a bureaucratic system where professionals' ways of working are rarely exposed (Jubany, 2011). This article provides an important entry point to start tapping into the ways in which the bodies, behaviours and backgrounds of unaccompanied minors are understood, interpreted and treated by immigration authorities.

The sensitivity of the topic was also palpable in the interview settings. For example, one participant said at one point, "I know what you're after". This has been found before; Eggebø (2012) also held interviews with employees in UDI and felt that she was perceived as representing the critical voice of the media. She points out that staff within immigration authorities "are challenged as ethical beings, perhaps more so than in other bureaucratic organizations" (p. 302). The delicacy and controversy of their work practice might have shaped the ways in which the participants acted in the interview setting and responded (see Thagaard, 2013).

WHEN BODIES BECOME SITES OF EVIDENCE

Norwegian Immigration authorities assess the physical attributes of an applicant, searching for indicators of age (NOAS, 2016). Size, voice, body hair and wrinkles are used as markers to identify someone as a child or an adult, as one participant described:

> Are there big hands, narrow shoulders in a way? One tries to see … at which stage [the applicant] is in the development. Is it like voice change or does [the applicant] have a fully developed deep voice and coarse beard growth, hand-wrinkles, right? [Then] it becomes difficult to say that you're 15,14 years, then they lean towards 18. (Employee 2)

Another participant stated: "…you see it in their appearance, the[ir] way of being, they might have grey hair" (Employee 1). Although bodies and physical appearance is connected to human biology, how we ascribe meaning to biological features is socially and culturally situated. The meaning ascribed to the

bodies and physical appearances of applicants seems to correspond to a developmental understanding of how a body should look at a given age, where grey hair, beard growth and deepened voice are 'bodily betrayals' (cf. Featherstone, Hepworth, & Turner, 1991) and adult markers. Despite modern paediatrics' fascination with growth and development from birth to puberty, and the invention of the developmental curve of the 'normal child' (Armstrong, 1983), comprehensive medical reviews reveal that the timing and pace of pubertal development varies significantly, depending on a wide range of personal, social and environmental factors (e.g. Currie, 2019; Walvoord, 2010). Among the factors that contribute to earlier puberty are proximal social determinants related to chronic stress in personal life.

Normative assumptions not only about physical development but also body language were imperative in the employees' assessments: "are [they] gangly like a teenager who's not fully grown" (Employee 2). Having gangly body language is commonly perceived as a trait of being an adolescent in western societies (Laz, 2003), thus, evidence of being under 18 years of age. However, as Adelman and Ruggi (2016) suggest, "different cultures and societies make use of the body, moulding and 'educating' it in ways that become fundamental to social relations" (p. 908). Ideas of maturity and age vary across time and place, and styles of walking, talking and gestures are influenced by our upbringing (Nettleton & Watson, 2002). The body is thus contextually perceived, constructed, invented, classified and represented (Prout, 2000). As James (2000) underscores, as young bodies alter quickly, they are also prone to external assessment and control (see also Fingerson, 2009). In their assessment, the professionals draw on western, ethnocentric understandings of the body language of adolescents. They universalise young people's bodily development, disconnecting it from the applicants' socio-cultural background (Jenks, 2005).

In addition to markers associated with puberty, the participants interpreted the applicants' bodies according to size, situating them along a spectrum between 'at risk' and 'risky':

> I had some Eritrean boys that I registered that said they were 16. This was in 2015 when we had the rush, and it could be that they were 16, but they were so tiny. I adjusted their age down to below 14 or below 15 because I worried that they would be bullied together with the big boys [if] we sent them to the unaccompanied minor reception centres. (Employee 1)

Although the boys in question said that they were 16 years, the employee wanted to protect them from possible bullying by older boys. As Aitken (2005) asserts, "Children are excluded from many moral judgements because they are embodied by discourses that foist a child-centred pedagogy on a socially constructed innocence" (p. 67). The symbolic meaning of a small body can lead to protective measures as young people may be positioned differently in the moral order, where physical immaturity induces sentiments and protectionism (Ursin, 2016). This also reveals how professionals' perceptions of the body can be more decisive in assessments than the applicants' statements (Kobelinsky, 2019).

Applicants' bodies and body language were at times perceived as manipulation: "Some nationalities sit and crouch together because they make themselves look small and defenceless. It's a body language *they use on us*" (Employee 1, emphasis added). The participant emphasised the agentic potential of bodies (Fingerson, 2009) and understood the body language of some applicants as 'body work' (James, 2000), using their bodies as a medium of communication (cf. Parr, 2005) to be perceived as young and vulnerable. However, rather than suggesting the agentic potential of the body, quotes like these reveal the importance on unearthing how the body is understood socially and situated in a power nexus. As bodies are sites of social control, surveillance and sanction (Fingerson, 2009; Nettleton & Watson, 2002), the surveillant (professionals) interpret and make decisions on behalf of the embodied (Aitken, 2005) and territorialise their subjectivity (Parr, 2005).

DOING AGE THE 'RIGHT' WAY

The professionals also assess applicants' life experiences and background to determine chronological age. In this process, they use the previously mentioned reports to understand applicants' geographical, historical, cultural and social backgrounds. These reports are often ambiguous and uncertain (Liodden, 2016). One participant described how they interpreted the life experiences of an applicant who had been a farmer in his home country:

> [Applicants] from some nationalities pretend to be minors because they are short, but this one talked like a grown man who had responsibilities, and I understand that as a 17-year-old you may have responsibility for your family too, but he talked with such an authority … he appeared to be a grown man with responsibilities who have had responsibilities for many years. (Employee 1)

This participant determined that the applicant was an adult due to his previous experiences and responsibilities. In this lies an implicit assumption of childhood being a period of school, play and leisure, spared of work duties and responsibilities, resembling contemporary western middle-class childhood (Engebrigtsen, 2003). However, research shows that many children in Afghanistan share responsibilities with older family members and contribute to household chores, farming and family economy (see Kantor & Hozyainova, 2008; O'Leary et al., 2018). The participant's interpretation draws on an understanding of education as formal schooling rather than learning through labour in family contexts and local communities, as common in many non-western societies (Abebe & Bessell, 2011). Children who spend their childhood participating in formal and informal labour or in other ways deviate from stereotypical (western) images of childhood can be understood as 'unchildlike children': acting with "independence, autonomy and self-interest that is irreconcilable with the nature of childhood" (Aitken, 2001, p. 123), also recognised in the following statement:

> Reflecting upon what kind of responsibility they have had in their home country … to examine that they have been considered to be adults in their family back home … can be an indicator of which age span one belongs to. (Employee 4)

Responsibility is used as a measure where certain types of responsibilities equal adulthood. When applicants have had responsibilities that are seen as 'unchildlike' in a western society, their age is adjusted up. The naturalisation of standardised developing scales to measure children's 'normalities' based on their skills, behaviour and assumptions about competencies in different ages is limiting (Jenks, 2005) as competence is 'a slippery idea' rooted in cultural context (Archard, 1993).

Another participant explained how the educational background of an applicant is relevant when assessing age:

> Some have been lucky to attend school [and] they often have a good idea of when they were born. They might even have a birth date, and if it is obvious from the person I speak with that they *understand their own situation*, are able to reflect and answer my questions in *a good way*, then you know right away that the person has attended school. And when they explain their schooling like first, second, third [grade] and up, and add 'I was born at that point, from first to third grade I lived there and then we moved there'. Then it's very easy to make [a decision] based on the applicant's explanation, it's *so credible* with that type of explanation. (Employee 2, emphasis added)

This suggests that when applicants explain their own life trajectory chronologically, then this resonates with the knowledge system of professionals (Herlihy, Gleeson, & Turner, 2010). A western-style school system with grades and a chronological time structure echoes with their socio-cultural and institutional understandings, and as such, the applicant is seen as trustworthy. This confirms findings from an earlier study illustrating that applicants who are formally educated tend to be perceived as more reflective and credible (Jubany, 2017). The participants expressed scepticism towards alternative ways of calculating birth dates, rejecting non-western rationalities of time, such as accounts of family members or notes in personal Korans:

> Some Afghans know exactly when they're born. It might have to do with social class and where they have lived … but culturally we notice that … those we encounter do not know their birth date. Then one might question. 'How do you know when you're born?' 'It was told to me before I left, it's in [my] Koran'. (Employee 4)

The applicants' knowledge is connected to their background and what type of cultural knowledge the professionals expect of them. As Jubany (2017) suggests, "applicants´ country of origin prompts officers to unravel a whole set of characteristics that members of that country are believed to share, which influences how officers will interpret each aspect of their claim" (pp. 156–157). One participant asked: "how does your mother know how old you are if she didn't give birth in a hospital, but in the countryside in Afghanistan where they don't really care so much about the calendar?" (Employee 2). In this lies a dismissal of sources of birth timing based on human knowledge and memory, more commonly available for many Afghans than official birth registration and school enrolment.

Our case study confirms the findings of Stretmo (2010) that applicants are looked upon with ambiguity and distrust based on their origin. Proposing the wrong age was not perceived as a result of ignorance or having been misinformed, but as a conscious move to access certain rights and services.

> We know that it's not common to know when one is born in Afghanistan. Surprisingly many are very determined on when they [were] born, and they want to explain that they have celebrated birthdays, and then I think, 'well yeah, but it's not custom in Afghanistan to celebrate birthdays'. (Employee 2)

In her discussion on the ´genuine refugee´, Akin (2019) illuminates how "the *truth* of asylum defines and delimits what accounts are counted as *true* when presented by asylum seekers" (p. 24, emphasis original). Similarly, Spotti (2018) suggests that in order to be perceived as an legitimate asylum seeker, the way applicants speak should be in line with "administrative prescriptive accounts of what someone should say and how someone should name things in order to give proof of identity" (p. 69). In our study, there seems to be a hegemonic ´truth´ about applicants originating from Afghanistan, affecting their credibility regarding age claims and consequently their asylum case. Phrasings like '*we know*' (as seen in the quote above) indicate that there is a shared understanding of who has ´legitimate´ knowledge regarding an applicant's age (see also Danstrøm & Whyte, 2019).

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In this article, we have presented empirical data from a case study of Norwegian immigration authorities, exploring how professionals conceptualise age when doing non-medical age assessments of asylum seekers and how this conceptualisation affects applicants´ credibility. By using a theoretical framework that challenges an ethnocentric quantifying understanding of age, we argue that the ways

age is conceptualised and used in age assessments overlooks other social and cultural backgrounds in which age is embedded. Additionally, we identify a parallel between ´numerical chronology´ and ´Western´, making this the standard that professionals rely on in their assessments. This is evident in several ways. First, the physical appearance of the applicants seems to be interpreted through predetermined and generalised notions of development from childhood to adulthood, despite the fact that timing and pace of development depend on various personal, social and environmental factors (Currie, 2019; Walvoord, 2010). Second, the body language of applicants is also often understood through an ethnocentric lens, where certain moves and behaviours are attributed to specific life course stages (i.e. gangly body language is associated with teenagers), yet body language is not universal; it is deeply embedded in socio-cultural contexts and understandings (cf. Laz, 1998). Third, the narrated life experiences of the applicants are compared to western and middle-class ways of living with regard to family relations, school enrolment and absence of work duties and other responsibilities. This rests upon hegemonic notions of childhood, overlooking the infinite ways of growing up, which vary across gender, class, culture, geographic location and so on. Fourth, the applicants' ways of dating birth are set up against western modes of thinking about the life course chronologically, from birth registering to school grades. Other ways of relating to time and structuring life are ignored or depreciated. This shows how the quantification of age (vs. social age) is not a neutral reference mark but shape society in fundamental ways (cf. Larsen & Røyrvik, 2017).

The bodies of asylum applicants are at the core of the power nexus in which the authorities are the surveillants and the applicants are the observed. As such, applicants' bodies become objectified through the power that authorities have to define their bodily expressions and size. Their bodies become sites of social control, surveillance, assessment and sanction. As Parr (2005) found, our study reveals that while authorities determine the 'truth' about applicants, the applicants are silenced. The worldviews and knowledge system of the immigration authorities are presented and perceived as valid, neutral, objective and universal while the knowledge systems and personal experiences of the applicants are commonly rejected. Information about the applicants' country of origin is used as a means to check credibility, despite the fact that the Norwegian Country of Origin information Centre has been reported to be biased and unclear (Liodden, 2016). In some instances, this information seems to conjure stereotypical portraits of how applicants are supposed to act and what they ought to know.

The study shows that the applicants' life narratives need to be relatable to the professionals' worldviews to be seen as credible. When applicants resonate with their westernised, middle-class ideal—someone who has formal education, is literate, reflective and well-articulated—their stories become believable. In fact, in some instances ´knowing´ becomes an obstacle for applicants, as seen in relation to Afghans who are expected to be ignorant in terms of their age: life experience in terms of work and responsibilities is seen as something that does not belong to childhood and this is used as a way of discrediting some applicants' childhoods as likely. The fact that the voices of the applicants disappear into a deadlock of professionals' institutional and ethnocentric knowledge and power hinders valid evaluation of asylum cases. This not only leads to the question about the consequences of such practices at the fore but also what the rationalities and motifs behind the practices are.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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How to cite this article: Sørsveen AT, Ursin M. Constructions of 'the ageless' asylum seekers: An analysis of how age is understood among professionals working within the norwegian immigration authorities. *Child Soc*. 2021;35:198–212. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12415