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Re-conceptualising agency in migrant children from Central America and Mexico

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ABSTRACT

With child migration on the rise, there is a critical need to understand how migrant children express their agency. To date, popular narratives cast migrant children as either victims or criminals, an unhelpful binary that does little to further efforts to develop effective interventions to help migrant youth. Drawing from 32 in-depth interviews and participatory activities with Mexican and Central American children in Mexican youth immigration detention centres, this paper seeks to reconceptualise current understandings of migrant children's agency. In this paper, we explore how youth express their motivations, assert their will, develop pragmatic dependencies, employ strategic parroting and guard information to achieve their goals. We also examine how state and non-state actors both support and suppress young people's agency as they try to navigate their way to the U.S./Mexico border. In doing so, we argue for a more nuanced approach to child migrants' agency. A non-binary approach recognises the development of agency as a process, embracing children and young people's rights and vulnerabilities, while acknowledging their resiliencies, competencies, goals and strengths. We conclude by proposing a transdisciplinary research agenda to promote this non-binary approach.

KEYWORDS

Unaccompanied child; migration; agency; Central America; Mexico

Introduction

As the U.S. apprehends increasing numbers of children and youth along its border with Mexico, U.S. politicians and members of the public are ever more aware of the phenomenon of unaccompanied child migration – or minors migrating internationally without a legal guardian. In 2016, U.S. immigration enforcement apprehended almost 60,000 unaccompanied minors along the U.S./Mexico border from Guatemala (32%), El Salvador (29%), Mexico (20%) and Honduras (18%) (United States Customs and Border Protection (USCBP) 2016). As with any perceived 'crisis', policy-makers have scrambled to assign responsibility for the problem and the solution. Placing the blame squarely on 'bad' parents in Central America, both the U.S. and Central American administrations initiated

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campaigns imploring parents to stop ‘sending’ their children to the U.S. In 2014, President Barack Obama declared that, ‘Our message is absolutely don’t send your children unaccompanied on trains or through a bunch of smugglers’ (Dwyer 2014). The explicit assumption behind this response is that children lack agency when it comes to migration decisions. As White et al. (2011) have observed,

While it is certainly not accurate to claim that child migration has been completely overlooked in research and policy, ... the ways in which it is approached tend to be characterised by a number of selectivities and invisibilities ... [T]here is a tendency to emphasise migrant children’s neediness and difference. This means that migrant children’s agency and subjectivities are denied. (1160)

Recognising children’s agency in policy and in service delivery is vitally important. Ignoring young people’s agency can lead to problematic policy and a critical misdirection of resources, particularly when tied to a phenomenon such as migration. If, for example, an adolescent migrates based on personal motivations, asking parents not to send their children may have little effect. Without attention to, and an understanding of, children’s ability to control their own agency in the migration process, attempts to identify interventions and supports for potentially vulnerable migrant child populations will be limited. For unaccompanied migrant children, this is especially critical as increasing numbers of youth leave their homes in search of better futures and safety. The development and implementation of effective and appropriate policy responses and social services require an understanding and respect of young people’s agency in migration.

This study’s purpose is to explore the ways in which unaccompanied migrant children from Central America and Mexico express their agency, despite limitations they may face as marginalised youth. We draw from 32 in-depth interviews and participatory activities with Central American and Mexican children detained in Mexican immigration youth shelters during the summer of 2015. The article aims to identify and define the forms that this expression takes through thematic analysis of qualitative data. In doing so, we identify examples of young peoples’ agency that challenge dominant narratives surrounding youth capacities.

For the purposes of this research, we define *agency* as an individual’s intrinsic capacity for intentional behaviour developed within the individual’s environment(s) and subject to environmental influences. Contemporary theorists have attempted to lay aside structure-agency debates and instead understand these forces as a dialectic (Ahearn 2001; Archer 2003; Cote and Levine 2002). This interpretation bridges behavioural science theories, such as Self Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), that recognise the primacy of internal processes like reflective thought, and social science theories of the individual interacting with the environment. Our own definition follows in this new direction and reflects an understanding of the development and exercise of agency within childhood as a process that is influenced by the child, external actors and the environment – including natural, built and societal structures. We argue that children, not unlike adults, exercise their agency to varying degrees based upon a host of social, economic and environmental factors.

We commence with a brief review of current literature on children’s agency and migration. Next, we describe our study methodology in detail before we go on to

analyse the findings of our research with Central American and Mexican migrant youth. Finally, we discuss the relevance of these findings to policy development and future research.

Children's agency and migration

Reflecting on North American and European responses to unaccompanied child migrants, academics on both sides of the pond have noted a dichotomy in popular perceptions of migrant children. Pulling from Apollonian and Dionysian views of childhood (Jenks 1996; Valentine 1996), migrant children are often perceived as either victims or criminals (Boyden and Hart 2007; Crawley 2011; Denov and Bryan 2012; Doná and Veale 2011; Vacchiano and Jiménez 2012). These frames represent polar views of migrant children's agency. Within this dichotomy, children may be understood as victims who are forced or coerced into migration by a parent, a human trafficker or difficult personal situations. In these cases, children are denied agency and often treated as helpless pawns at the mercy of circumstances beyond their control. On the other hand, youth who willingly leave their countries to cross international borders without legal authorisation are often perceived as unlawful agents who will burden the system for tax-paying citizens. Unaccompanied child migration itself is consistently framed as a problem and rarely conceived as the child's solution to a personal problem.

The reality, of course, is much more complicated. For instance, it is unclear where to situate in this victim/criminal dichotomy the case of a 13-year-old girl who migrates willingly to flee gangs at home, who cooperates with human smugglers, who endures terrible suffering along the journey, who deceives immigration agents – all to reunite with her mother in the U.S. who she has not seen for six years. Does this child express the 'right' kind of agency, one that casts her as an innocent victim worthy of social aid? Or is her agency more ambiguous (Bordonaro and Payne 2012)? Furthermore, forcing children into this binary raises legal concerns surrounding the implications of protecting youth who competently express agency to meet their personal goals. While children's studies scholarship challenges and transcends a binary view of migrant children's agency (Laoire, Carpena-Méndez, and White 2016; Smith 2012; Spyrou and Christou 2014), researchers note the binary's persistence in European state responses to migrant children (Bordonaro 2012; Crawley 2011; Terrio 2008). This article observes and challenges the binary's continued relevance to the experiences of migrant children in North America.

We recognise that by acknowledging children's agency and competencies, there is a risk that they will no longer be viewed as vulnerable subjects worthy of international protection. Rather, they could be viewed as capable agents, accorded the same rights and responsibilities as adults, and negated special protections accorded to children. But being denied agency under law forces young people to turn to risky dependencies, to withhold information, or to engage in subversive acts that can place young people's lives in danger (Huijsmans 2012). Thus, we argue for a perspective that dismisses binary approaches to children's agency. Labelling children as either vulnerable victims or stigmatised outlaws cannot begin to capture the multiplicities of experiences migrant children face. Instead, we argue for a more nuanced approach that scales children's agencies and capabilities. We need to understand and appreciate the resourcefulness of youth, their strategic

agency, their search for safe spaces, their ability to subvert dominant norms, as well as instances when youth might use humour and mischief to achieve their goals (Jeffrey 2012). Simultaneously, we must also consider how youth agency becomes suppressed: how migrant children are robbed, detained, silenced, terrorised and deceived.

A non-binary approach to agency could recognise and embrace children and young people's rights and vulnerabilities, while acknowledging their resiliencies, competencies, goals and strengths. Moreover, it could take into account social and relational factors that underpin and shape migrant children's decision-making (Huijsmans 2012). As stated by Bordonaro and Payne (2012),

The way children and youth are made agents – but not fully so – makes it possible to 'save the children' but sidesteps important practical issues such as, for example, what is the relationship between agency, legal responsibility and the limits of individual freedom in society, and crucial questions associated with the legitimacy of social interventions. (369)

A focus on agency in migration is particularly relevant given current global rates of child and youth migration. In 2013, 34.8 million migrants under the age of 20 accounted for 11% of migration between developing and developed countries (Bhabha 2014). At the U.S./Mexico border, U.S. and Mexican immigration authorities continue apprehending record numbers of unaccompanied migrant children (Isacson 2016). While quantitative data on trends in child migration are inconsistent (Huijsmans 2011), there is a shared perception among some state agencies, researchers and non-profits that children from Latin America are increasingly emigrating, both with families and alone (Heidbrink 2014; Swanson and Torres 2016; Terrio 2015).

With financial, technical and infrastructural support from the U.S., Mexico has also stepped up its immigration enforcement (Swanson et al. 2015). While President Obama thanked Mexico for 'absorbing' refugees from Central America, the reality is that Mexico now apprehends more Central Americans than the U.S. (Domínguez Villegas and Rietig 2015). Most of these migrants are 'bounced' rather than 'absorbed'. In 2015, only 57 unaccompanied migrant children received refugee status in Mexico, 51 of these were from El Salvador and Honduras (COMAR 2016). During the same year, Mexico apprehended and deported over 18,000 unaccompanied migrant youth (Human Rights Watch 2016).

The explanations behind the increase in child migrants seeking refuge at the U.S./Mexico border vary (Human Rights Watch 2016; Schmidt and Somers 2014). As Menjívar and Perreira (2017) describe in their introduction to this special issue, regional violence and a lack of access to economic resources and basic social institutions lead to children's marginalisation in their home countries and the promotion of migration. One of the most disconcerting trends is increasing violence, particularly in Honduras and El Salvador, which currently vie for the world's highest homicide rate (Segura 2016; WOLA 2016). Youth are at particular risk of violence, as Central American gangs target young people for recruitment, blackmail or revenge. A UN High Commissioner for Refugees investigation of over 400 Mexican and Central American migrant children reported that 58% were forcibly displaced 'because they suffered or faced harms that indicated a potential or actual need for international protection' (Schmidt and Somers 2014, 6). Given these circumstances, many young people are taking matters into their own hands and fleeing for their lives.

Study methodology

This work derives from a larger mixed-methods study concerning the motivations and experiences of unaccompanied children migrating from Central America and Mexico to the U.S.. The authors led a bi-national, transdisciplinary study of children held in three government shelters along the U.S./Mexico border over a four-month period in 2015. Our team included four Ph.D. level researchers and four student research assistants. Four were Mexican native Spanish speakers and four were U.S.-based researchers proficient in Spanish. Seven researchers were female, and one was male.

Our methodology was child-centred, including qualitative interviews and a participatory workshop with children in the shelters, as well as a verbally administered survey with those repatriated from the U.S.¹ Additionally, we interviewed adult stakeholders in their respective work spaces in both Mexico and the U.S., including consular representatives, immigration officials, shelter directors and staff and legal advocates. This article draws primarily from qualitative interviews with Central American and Mexican unaccompanied minors, using an inductive process to develop agency codes rooted in children's perspectives. While our epistemological approach gives primacy to children's voices, all components of the design inform analysis. The remaining discussion of methodology focuses on our qualitative interviews with children.

This study's sample includes 32 interviews with unaccompanied children and youth, between 13 and 18 years of age (average age of 16), from Central America (El Salvador [7], Guatemala [4] and Honduras [14]) and Mexico (7). The sample includes 17 (or 53%) female participants. Only three participants from Mexico and one participant from Central America indicated an indigenous background. Participants likely underreported this demographic as it is a sensitive topic and the interview tool did not concentrate on this point.

This study's sample was both convenient and purposive in that we interviewed all verbally consenting adolescents between 13 and 17 years old² when detention authorities gave us permission to do so. Some sites withheld access to children suspected of criminal involvement (mostly boys); others held separate facilities for girls travelling with their own children to which the team did not receive access. To protect anonymity, participants selected their own pseudonyms.

We conducted 28 interviews in one-on-one settings, and four interviews in researcher pairs as part of the student researcher training process. When we were able to obtain both the facility's authorisation and the child's consent, we recorded the interviews (25). However, in instances where this was not an option, we drafted narrative summaries of the interviews (7). Interview recordings ranged in length from 23 to 150 minutes, with an average length of 48 minutes. Data collection methods were approved by the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board.

Interview guides for Central American and Mexican children were distinct, as the participants from Central America experienced detention by Mexican officials and the children from Mexico experienced detention and deportation by the U.S. Nevertheless, both tools included similar organisation and wording regarding the collection of information surrounding the decision for the child to migrate (e.g. whether the child claimed the decision was their own, their parents' or collectively reached), and the

child's motivations (including personal reasons for migration, choices during detention and future plans), support systems and journey.

Given variations in data collection and the exploratory nature of the research questions, we elected to apply thematic analysis. Iterative thematic analysis is well suited to data analysis that is collected through various strategies, as well as to exploration of emerging themes (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). Utilising NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International Pty Version 9, 2010), two of the authors coded 32 interviews while consulting on codebook refinement throughout the process. Coders used audio recordings of interviews and researchers' field notes to interpret ambiguous statements through triangulation (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012), and memoing to identify and balance biases throughout coding (Glaser 2004, 18). The other investigators reviewed and provided feedback prior to codebook finalisation. Through this process, seven themes emerged as directly related to the children's expression of agency (see Table 1). We utilised a saturation matrix to determine saturation of themes (Kerr, Nixon, and Wild 2010), the results of which indicated early saturation with respect to the standards established by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006).

Coders used exploratory frameworks to identify co-occurrence of themes (appearing together) and manual pile sorting to further explore relationships between themes – a combination of qualitative comparison techniques suggested by Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012). After identifying areas of co-occurrence in exploratory frameworks, coders then manually pile sorted textual data associated with each theme to confirm original coding and explore the context of co-occurrence. Miscoded text was recoded and co-occurrence was then re-assessed and interpreted among team members in consultation.

Table 1. Expression of agency-related codes, definitions and examples.

| Code | Description | Example |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Assertion | Child's active exertion of will or claiming of rights or entitlements | 'Upon capture she did talk to a female agent ... she had to disrobe for her, so they could check her for bruises and injuries. She refused to take her pants off because it made her uncomfortable.' (Excerpt from narrative summary, Luisa) |
| Fostering | Recognition or support of the child's agency by an actor or institution | Raul's cousins in the U.S. offering to help him find work upon his arrival |
| Guarding Information | Child's strategic withholding or release of personal information | Maite's claim to have shared details with interviewers that she withheld from migration authorities |
| Motivation | Child's expressed personal motivation for migration or another action | 'I planned on turning myself in to immigration so that, so that maybe they could send me to be with my mom.' (Cheri) |
| Pragmatic Dependency | Child's active choice to allow another's power over them to meet a goal or objective | Miquellonel's description of being detained by his guide for days in a 'safe house', in which he was completely dependent on his guide for basic needs and prohibited from going outside or making calls; he accepted these conditions as the terms under which he would reach the U.S. |
| Strategic Parroting | Child's acknowledged repetition of another's ideas | (Our coyote) told us 'when someone asks you (where you are from)' she told me, 'then you say you are from Veracruz or from wherever, but make it up.' (Kenia) |
| Suppression (of Agency) | Act of power by state or other authority with no deference to or against child's wishes | 'I had to sign something, but I did not understand what I signed.' (Daniela) |

Study results: unaccompanied migrant children's expressions of agency

Our analysis revealed that all interview participants shared two themes: *motivation* – which we define as a personal rationale for a decision or action, and *suppression* – which we consider to be an external limitation on agency (Table 1). While the frequency of these results may to a degree reflect the structure of the interview guides and prompts, which focus in part on decision-making and institutional processes, our data suggest that suppression of agency is a common environmental factor for migrant children both at home and abroad. In contrast, despite related interview prompts, *fostering* – defined as recognition or support of the child's agency by an individual or institution (Table 1) – counts conspicuously among the least represented themes in our data. In terms of observing the expression of agency, all participants exhibited *assertion* and/or one of its sub-forms: *pragmatic dependency*, *strategic parroting* or *guarding information* (Table 1).

Our analysis of the co-occurrence of themes informs the description of all seven codes presented here. Our examination of co-occurrence revealed additional environmental themes, some which may be regionally specific sub-forms of suppression (experiences of threat, abandonment and exclusion) and some that relate to the child's position within family structures and social networks (dependence, independence and interdependence). As this article focuses on analysis of the ways in which unaccompanied migrant children express agency, we focus here on agency-related codes. However, these socio/environmental context codes, which permeated situations of agency, informed our analysis throughout. In the final subheading of this section, we explore what we consider particularly salient observations of co-occurrence.

Motivation

Similar to what Schmidt and Somers observed in their study of unaccompanied migrant youth from the region (2014), participants revealed multiple and diverse motivations for migrating including family reunification, gang violence, persecution, domestic abuse, abandonment and educational and income opportunities, among others. We also noted that, despite being detained, the majority of children intended to try to migrate again once released.

Motivation, as an indicator of reflexive thought, served as a fundamental category of analysis throughout our interpretation of the data. The clearest expressions of motivation, both reflected the participant's ability to construct or personally identify with a reason for a given act, and specified that reason. We used this code as a tool to interpret otherwise ambiguous acts or comments as expressions of agency. In the section on 'assertion', we discuss specific examples where we leveraged an understanding of participants' motivations to distinguish between observations that could reflect either a participant's agency or suppression.

Suppression

The forms of suppression experienced by participants describe a migration process in which children transition through suppressive environments. Many migrant children leave their homes under conditions in which their agency is suppressed by family,

non-state, and in some instances state actors, to move through and towards states with cultures of institutionalised suppression of children's agency. Suppression at the hands of authorities outside their home countries was an experience common to all participants. Central American children travelling in Mexico spoke of repeated instances of extortion by federal agents, migration officials, and in some cases, soldiers at check points throughout their journey north. According to Jordan (16) from Guatemala, 'Almost all of them are corrupt. They all want money ... And if you don't have it, they catch you and deport you.'

Both Central American and Mexican participants related incidents in which they were denied their objective, detained against their will, forced to sign papers they did not understand, and deprived of contact with their families and/or their consulate by immigration officials. As Kenia (14), from El Salvador, relates, 'He (the Mexican immigration officer) told me ... we aren't going to let you pass to the other side ... sign it, just because. Anyway, even if you don't sign it, we are still going to send you back to your country.' Similarly, several Mexican children reported deceptive practices and being threatened with prolonged detention by USCBP officers if they did not sign papers (which our evidence suggests were most likely voluntary removal papers).

More extreme instances of suppression included physical deprivation (e.g. detention without attention to basic needs), abuse (both physical and verbal) and threats (e.g. of prolonged detention and/or criminal prosecution). Though examples of institutional suppression were the most pervasive, due perhaps to the interviewers' focus on institutional processes, participants experienced similar forms of suppression by actors in their home countries as well as by non-state actors they encountered along the way.

Participants described some forms of suppression by non-state actors in connection to their own decision to migrate and/or fear of return (e.g. intimidation by gangs, discrimination against the indigenous). Kenia recalled deciding to migrate with the support of her mother in the U.S., after sustained threats by female gang member classmates who brought guns to school:

I studied in the morning shift and some of the afternoon girls entered (school) and started threatening the morning shift girls – first the third graders and then the rest of us. They told us that if we didn't give them money they would kill us.

Detention also proved a notable form of suppression of children's agency. Even participants who experienced relatively extreme forms of agency suppression at home or at the hands of law enforcement still commented on the suppression occurring within detention facilities. Oswaldo (16), who fled blood-feud based intimidation in Honduras and witnessed corruption in Mexico en route to the U.S., reflected on the effects of being detained. Frustrated with both the lack of physical activity and the latitude to move freely, he explained, 'You get very bored, because sometimes you're not accustomed to being inside. [At home] you just spend time in the fields only coming inside at night. You're not inside the house. I'm not accustomed to remaining seated ...' Jordan from Guatemala reported similar sentiments,

I feel sad because I'm locked up. We only have a tiny room here. You only walk, sit, watch TV. You get bored. Me, I'm not one of those who people who enjoys watching TV every day. Me, I like to get outside into the countryside and breathe the air.

Jessica (17), on the other hand, noted that her life in the shelter was similar to her life in Honduras where she spent most of the time locked up indoors because of threats she and her family received from the same people who murdered her father.

Fostering

While suppression permeates children's experiences of migration, participants related relatively scant experiences of *fostering*. Investigation tools included prompts related to potential points and sources of fostering throughout the journey (e.g. Are there any organisations or individuals back home who could assist you? Did anyone assist you throughout your journey?), and more specifically within state institutions (e.g. When you were detained, did they ask you if you needed help, or wanted to speak to your consulate?). In contrast to instances of suppression, those of fostering appeared situated outside of state structures. Participants most commonly described fostering as occurring within family or social networks. For example, some described family and friends offering not only financial and technical support for planning their journeys but assistance in pursuing their goals once in the U.S., such as a place to live while attending school, or help finding work. Not all families and guardians supported the child's plans to migrate. A few participants reported feelings of encouragement or relief when they received permission to migrate despite parental misgivings. Seventeen-year-old Salvadoran Elizabeth explained her negotiation with her mother:

My mom was not on board [with my plans to migrate] ... because, as she said, 'I won't see you anymore.' ... But I told her, 'Mom ... it's my future, because there (in the U.S.) thank God, there is more of a future. There is more work. And that's why (I want to go),' ... and in the end she told me, 'Yes, it is your decision. I'll support you.'

Participants who reported initial apprehension on the part of their parents and guardians in supporting their decision to leave home also described threats to their safety and well-being in their community of origin. It may be that families assess the risks of migration as secondary to the endemic risks in their communities. However, there may also be culturally grounded explanations for the support of youth's motivations. As has now been widely accepted, childhood is a social construction that varies across socio-economic, cultural and geographic contexts (Aries 1962; Holloway and Valentine 2000; James and Prout 1997; Oswell 2013). Behavioural and social science researchers have found parental support of choice in pre-adolescent children in Mexico and Central America to be a culturally normative practice that benefits the child's development as well as the reproduction of societal values (Dreby 2007; Mosier and Rogoff 2003). Both of these plausible explanations for parental support of child migration (concern for immediate harm and/or cultural norms) challenge state perceptions of bad parents.

Outside of family structure, participants' accounts of fostering included stories of modelling and encouragement from peers as well as receiving opportunities and resources from non-state actors in order to continue their journey. Lorena, a 16-year-old from Honduras, received employment as a cook at a community-run shelter for migrants after she was robbed of all of her money in Mexico. Her capacity to earn money and her ability to use her cooking skills gave her a sense of pride. Reflecting on her future plans after detention, she mentioned returning to the shelter (presumably on another trip North). In another example, 15-year-old Maite described being kicked off a bus by Mexican

immigration in middle of the night with her travel group in Veracruz, Mexico. A Mexican woman who found them generously fed and housed the group of six Guatemalans for a week without charge while they waited for their *coyote*, or guide, to make alternative arrangements.

Assertion

For the purposes of this research, we consider *assertion* to be a child's active expression of will or claiming of rights or entitlements (Table 1). In cases in which participants expressed an unambiguous motivation and decision to migrate, virtually any act related towards that end could be viewed as an assertion of agency, including risky actions (e.g. to cross borders), measures to mitigate known risks of migration (e.g. birth control as a pre-emptive measure against pregnancy by rape), acceding to the authority of others (by accepting loans or paying bribes at check points), and suffering inconveniences and hardships. As Oswaldo attests, 'Sometimes for fear of being caught by migration, you decide to suffer hunger in the brush.'

Other examples of assertion appear in direct response to instances of suppression, such as a child's request to speak to her consulate when detained. Strikingly, such examples can take the form of correcting authorities or speaking truth to power. Evelin, a seven-month pregnant, 15-year-old Honduran girl, asserted her agency in the course of her interview by respectfully, yet firmly, restating her position when the researcher's attempts at active listening did not accurately summarise her situation and perspective. Participants even invoked rights-based rhetoric while speaking truth to power as exhibited by Maria, a 17-year-old girl from Mexico, who refused to be handcuffed by immigration authorities. 'They had already put handcuffs on me, and I told him that they shouldn't have put those on me: I am a minor! ... Before I left (home), I learned what my rights were.' Maria goes on to describe how she informed other youth in her group of their rights and encouraged them to refuse handcuffs, an example of how migrant youth might foster agency in one another by example or encouragement.

Hidden assertions: pragmatic dependence, strategic parroting and guarding information

Some expressions of agency exhibited by migrant children are less overt, such as those we term *pragmatic dependence*, *strategic parroting* and *guarding information*. While still forms of asserting control within the limitations of their environment, these three sub-forms of assertion are embedded in actions of compliance and communication to a degree that masks their provenance in the migrant child's volition. In distinguishing these acts as variations of assertion, an understanding of the child's motivation is essential. For example, a migrant child's repetition of a script or commitment of an act suggested or prescribed by an authority, such as a guide or parent, might be described as parroting. On the surface, when a child repeats a story or follows a path in accordance with instructions they were given, it may appear to evidence the absence of agency. For younger children, with limited capability to form and express their motivation, parroting may indeed flag an instance in which a migrant child is being controlled (e.g. trafficked). However, we contend that several adolescents

in this study employed strategic parroting (rather than simply passively following directions) as they decided when to perform the script or act; and they improvised accordingly and often successfully. Jessica describes her guide's instructions for passing through the many checkpoints she would have to cross in Mexico to get to the U.S. He instructed her to present the documents she was given and an invented back story about being Mexican herself. 'Sixteen migration checkpoints and not one of them detained me, because I showed my papers perfectly', she attests. Her pride in compliance with this action does not resonate as a puerile desire to appease the authorities around her. Rather, in consideration of her ability to reason, clearly demonstrated within the interview, her *strategic parroting* reflects ownership of an action directly tied to her expressed personal motivation for migration.

Pragmatic dependency is another form of assertion that could be perceived as suppression without an understanding of the individual child's motivation. Migrant children enter into a state of pragmatic dependency when they seek out and/or allow the authority of another over them with the understanding that doing so is an effective means of achieving their goal. Within the migration process, the clearest examples of this phenomenon involve children submitting their physical safety or freedom to guides. Seventeen-year-old Salvadoran Joshua's reasoning for contracting a guide and his plan to submit himself to U.S. immigration officials exhibit this form of assertion:

They (the guides) were going to get me across the river and they were going to leave me where the border patrol passes so that the border patrol would apprehend me and take me to immigration, and from there my uncle would have to pay, I don't know, a bond so that they would let me go free ...

Here it is clear that Joshua's decision to trust his physical safety to his *coyotes* was predicated on their ability to get him across the river; and his intent to submit himself to U.S. authorities was a means to reunifying with his uncle and release into the country.

Still, pragmatic dependency involves children and youth making calculated risks that may pay off or may place them in harm's way. Migrant children may approach coyotes as trusted guides, with the power to help them achieve their purpose (Hernández Hernández 2016). If they are lucky, this trust may end up being rewarded. Jessica describes her coyote as 'hospitable. He fed us, he even bought us clothes because he gave us shoes ... And he rented us a hotel. In other words, we didn't suffer on account of (our guide)'. Other participants ended up paying a price. Maria explained how a guide once used her as bait, instructing her to cross back and forth across the river to draw the attention of border patrol away from other clients. 'You can say he used me badly', she explained. Still, misplaced trust can lead to more serious consequences. Luisa (14) from Honduras described a 'horrible' segment of her guided journey in which she was packed in the back of truck with 30 other people. They travelled in a standing position for 15 hours in extreme heat with no food or water. This type of situation, perhaps viewed by both guide and client as a necessary strategy for avoiding detection, clearly could have ended in tragedy. Jordan (16) did experience tragedy. The truck he was packed into the back of crashed; the truck flipped and rolled and 10 of his fellow passengers and friends died. He lost his backpack and all of his possessions during the accident. He stated 'I

had to go three days without eating, without drinking. We put containers out in the rain to collect water and we drank from those.'

In the suppressive environments of apprehension and detention, the gated release and withholding, or *guarding of information*, within an interview may itself be considered an expression of agency. In these situations, participants have a reason to suspect authorities and a limited span of control over their options for release. The silencing power of suppression is reflected in Maite's description of being interviewed by immigration authorities. She expressed her lack of confidence in them by saying, '... I began to tell them my life story – well, not everything. Not everything like I've been telling you. I was angry'. She goes on to say how she did not feel like she could trust the border patrol agents.

While it is difficult to detect the withholding of information in a cross-sectional study, our interviews and interactions with youth document contradictions between what children share with authorities and with perceived allies. Researcher notes on an interview with Scarlet (15), from Honduras, exemplify how participants may reveal motivations in stages once trust is established in the interview, and even then may withhold information. While Scarlet initially declared that she was migrating to the U.S. to work and help her family, she later described her fear to return because of an abusive boyfriend. She explained how, 'He threatened to cut off my head if I see another boy', and that he had tried to kidnap her on two occasions. Yet, she withheld this information from the Mexican authorities because she did not want to be considered a candidate for asylum in Mexico. Rather, she preferred to return to Honduras for a short visit with her family before making another attempt to reach the U.S.

While guarding information may serve the migrant child well in some instances, within state custody it can place the child in the pathway of dangerous situations. Access to affirmative immigration processes and protections in most instances requires children to disclose personal information regarding their situation and motivations, especially those stemming from fear or abuse. This system can disenfranchise children who are motivated by fear and have experienced suppression. For example, when asked why she attempted her journey to the U.S., Evelin (seven months pregnant) replied, 'That would be because the father of (my baby) told me he was going to rip her out of me – so I came (North).' She went on to explain that,

we can't denounce him (to the police) because he is connected to bad people, and he said that if we stick him in jail, he will kill everyone And now since I left he went to threaten my parents and said that if I return they are going to kill me and my daughter.

When the researcher interviewed Evelin, she was on the verge of deportation back to Honduras. Given her credible fear, the researcher asked her whether she had told the Mexican officials about her fear and asked for protection. Evelin explained, 'No, I didn't say anything because I was afraid [...] that is I was afraid to tell (the Mexican official), because sometimes I get nervous.' Evelin's response may reflect an instance of guarding information, a subtle expression of agency made at the intersection of a threat and suppression (i.e. detention). Her subsequent return to Honduras illustrates the potential danger posed by forms of suppression that limit a migrant child's expression of agency to less overt forms, such as guarding information.

Increased vulnerability at the co-occurrence of assertion and suppression

Participants exhibited signs of emotional distress and fatigue when relating instances of co-occurrence of assertion and suppression. In explaining apprehension and detention as a huge disappointment, Oswaldo explains:

You become depressed, you mourn. Look, you go so many days suffering from hunger, freezing, suffering from thirst. But you're so excited; you're going north. It doesn't matter that you're suffering from the cold, hunger, nothing matters. You're excited; you're going to the United States. (Then) they grab you, and in that moment, (when) immigration grabs you, you know that it was for nothing. [...] You get disappointed because (despite) so much effort you didn't make it there. You get really depressed, right? It is sad, like something that you made an effort to achieve... a challenge you want to conquer. And boom, suddenly they descend on you, something happened and now you can't do it.

Even participants with a demonstrated sense of agency and capacity for assertion, like Maria, described being worn down to the point of complacency in the face of persistent suppression.

I asked them (US immigration) if I could use the telephone to call my relatives, they told me no, that they couldn't make calls [...] I told them, 'it's that my family doesn't know anything about me (where I am)', I told him 'most importantly my mom', and he told me 'hmm, tell your mom that if she wants you, she should come here.' I told him, 'ok, I'll tell her after, but I have to call her (first)'. He said, 'No, here you can't talk (to anyone); when you are in Mexican immigration, they will call your parents.' I told him, 'fine'. I stood there and then they took my finger prints, documents, photographs, and that was it ...

The experience of defeat is perhaps one of the mechanisms by which consistently suppressive environments may limit children's exercise of agency to the most internal processes and hidden assertions. The effect in turn may expose child migrants to further risk as our findings on hidden forms of assertion have revealed. This situation clearly counters any objectives the state may hold in terms of child protection. Moreover, children's resort to hidden assertions may lead to additional societal costs.

When detained by local police with his smugglers for a trafficking violation, Raul (16), from Mexico, may have been eligible for a special visa as a witness to his smugglers' parallel drug trafficking. However, he chose not to disclose what he knew to local police. The police did not explain the potential significance of his cooperation with investigations, questioned him in the presence of his smugglers, and left him handcuffed to a chair for hours before turning him over to immigration authorities. Raul's guarding of information within this suppressive environment not only denied him an opportunity for legal protections, but denied law enforcement an asset. If the authorities had recognised both his vulnerability and his agency, rather than treating him as a criminal, they may have found a way to protect a child and apprehend true criminals within the confines of the law. In this regard, we find institutional denial of children's agency self-defeating. These results are consistent with Huijsmans's (2012) findings that, counter-intuitively, institutional migration processes increase the vulnerability of children emigrating from Laos by suppressing their agency.

Conclusions

While the results of this study have limitations including the cross-sectional nature of the project, the relatively small sample size and the institutional restrictions on the sampling process, it nevertheless contributes to the growing body of research on the agency of marginalised youth in developing countries and regions of conflict (Azaola 2012; Hutchins 2011; Lee 2016). We find that migrant children from Central America and Mexico express agency through their motivations and multiple forms of assertions. They express this agency within socio-environmental contexts of the regions that they originate from and move through. At present, these contexts include various threats from other agents and the environment. Migrant children navigate these precarious contexts, while state actors implement policies and procedures that actively suppress the child's agency. The construct of these suppressive policies and institutions is predicated on assumptions that run counter to our understanding of the development of agency as a continuous process. Denied agency under law, young people turn to risky dependencies and subtler forms of agency expressions such as withholding information and subversive acts that can endanger their well-being and lives.

These exploratory findings indicate both a need for further transdisciplinary research on the agency of migrant children and the utility of such research to public policy development. Study results point to three areas of investigation that invite further research, specifically: the emotional and behavioural impacts of the experiences of agency suppression and fostering on migrant children; the influence of migrant children's role within their familial and social structures on their expression of agency; and the effects of regional environmental factors on their agency. These topics span social and behavioural science domains, requiring collaborative transdisciplinary research in order to inform public policy.

The observed negative impacts of agency suppression on participants' affect and behaviour suggest a need for further study from a behavioural science perspective. Recent behavioural health studies have identified risks associated with the experience of living as an immigrant in an industrialised society as well as risk factors associated with Latino/a youth populations (Aisenberg et al. 2007; Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas, and Spitznagel 2007; Gulbas et al. 2016). Future research directions should build on this related work with the aim of informing social work and psychology practitioners as well as public policy decision makers.

State suppression of the migrant children's agency may be done under the guise of protection, or of the state actor assuming that the children are not developmentally capable of making a decision in their own best interest. As Aitken and Herman (2009) observe, legal frameworks based on adults assuming responsibility for children are predicated on an understanding that denying agency is the cost of providing protection. In the case of migrant children, however, this study indicates that denial of the child's agency, or suppression, leads to the state's failure to protect the child.

Our findings call for a paradigm shift in policy formulation, by which migration institutions and processes foster children's agency to discourage risk-taking behaviour for the mutual benefit of child and society. The potential power of institutions fostering children's agency is demonstrated in Hlatshwayo and Vally's (2014) assessment of community-wide benefits derived from school systems' procedures that foster the agency of migrant youth. In Europe, analysts have begun to identify and recommend

the policies of member states that promote children's participation and consideration of their perspectives in immigration courts (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2014; Kanics et al. 2010). This interest reflects a demand within the policy sector for information on how best to intervene in child migration cases. With the projected continued increase in global child migration, it can be inferred that this demand will continue to grow.

Drawing from our evidence, we conclude that binary views of children's agency lead to an institutionalised suppression of children and young people. This suppression of children's agency reflects society's categorical view towards agency, and appears to limit the migrant child's exercise of agency to internal processes and subversive acts that often place the child in peril and counter societal objectives. The danger of more industrialised nations (especially in Europe and North America) continuing to embrace the tired victim/criminal dichotomy in the wake of perceived child refugee/migrant emergencies is that it perpetuates social structures that ultimately harm children. This phenomenon is evident in media coverage of systemic failures in the receipt of unaccompanied child migrants by destination countries (Nelson 2016; Siegel McIntyre 2014). In light of the growing numbers of child refugees and migrants in both Europe and the Americas, it is urgent that we gain a nuanced understanding of children's agency in order to develop effective policies that both protect the best interest of the child and the state.

Notes

1. All Mexican participants were apprehended in the U.S. and deported to Mexico. All Central American participants were apprehended and detained in Mexico, prior to attempting to cross the U.S. border.
2. Sampling criteria specified children under the age of 18 years. One participant turned 18 in the shelter, days before being interviewed. We included her as an exception. Most of the interview related to her recent experiences as a minor, except for the few questions related to her future plans.

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