



The Continuous Spatial Vulnerability of Undocumented Migrants: Connecting Experiences of “Displaceability” at Different Scales and Sites

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Abstract

Undocumented migrants often experience how their spatial vulnerability continues across their life trajectories through different forms of displacements in the form of forced migration, being at risk of deportation and being victims of gentrification or policies that make it difficult to find a stable housing situation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Sweden and the UK, the paper shows how weak the position of undocumented migrants is on the housing market through recently established policies in the UK which criminalizes the letting of housing to undocumented migrants and the practice of sharing address information between the social services and the border police in Sweden. This intervention argues that these policies that construct spatial vulnerabilities locally are connected to national and transnational policies of displacement globally and suggest that “displaceability”, the potential of being displaced, is a strategy for governing vulnerable groups at every scale where governing takes place. Consequently, this intervention suggests that displaceability can help us capture the universal, interconnected experience of spatial vulnerability shared by many differently positioned groups in the world who are susceptible to forced mobility or removal.



Keywords

Displacement; displaceability; undocumented migration; deportability; evictability

Introduction

As a student in the PhD-program on Migration, Urbanisation and Societal change (MUSA) at Malmö University I have learned the benefits of thinking about and using the concepts of migration and geography research simultaneously. One central concept in both these fields is “displacement”, a word used to describe several different but interrelated phenomena in regard to forced mobility or removal. In migration studies, “displaced persons” primarily relates to the experience of fleeing from armed conflict (UNESCO, 2018). In gentrification studies, displacement is often understood as the “involuntary dislocation of households from city neighborhoods as more affluent households compete with them for the desirable older housing stock” (LeGates & Hartman, 1982, 31).

In this intervention I draw on my research on undocumented migration to suggest that these and other kinds of displacements are interconnected as they are expressions of various forms of spatial vulnerability at different scales and sites. I then attempt to connect this suggestion with a discussion about the potential usefulness of the concept “displaceability”, which has been briefly introduced in a blog post by Oren Yiftachel (2018) (as part of the “MIT Displacement Research & Action Network blog symposium”). Yiftachel (2018) suggests that displaceability can be understood as “the susceptibility of people, groups and developments to be removed, expelled or prevented from exercising their right to the city”. This understanding of displacement, Yiftachel argues, would potentially open up for a “new critical conceptualization of the contemporary city”. I argue that the concept can help us even further if it is connected to larger issues of transnational migration, but it also has to be discussed in relation to similar concepts such as “evictability” (van Baar, 2016) and “deportability” (De Genova, 2002).

This paper builds upon empirical observations made during ethnographic fieldwork among undocumented migrants in Malmö, Sweden and Birmingham, UK between 2014 and 2017 where I interviewed children and parents and took part in activities of NGOs and support networks that these families regularly attended (for more details on my methodology see Lind, 2017b). In the UK it has become illegal for undocumented migrants to rent apartments and in Sweden the social services recently shared their address information with police authorities. Their extremely vulnerable position on the housing market often forces undocumented families to move to new apartments many times per year as they are constantly at risk of being evicted and thus are experiencing a state of “evictability” (van Baar, 2016). In my research, the participants highlighted how the continuous stress they felt in relation to their housing situation was one of the most significant aspects of their everyday lives of living in a state of constant fear of being deported, or in “deportability” (De

Genova, 2002). This paper focuses on how the spatial vulnerability undocumented migrants experience in their country of origin, especially in the case of people fleeing war or violence, continues in their host societies both through the constant threat of deportation and through the fact that most of them experience difficulties finding stability in their housing situation.

Deportability, Evictability and Spatial Vulnerability

In gentrification research, the position of undocumented migrants has been much neglected even though in the US, where much of this research takes place, the number of undocumented migrants is estimated to be 22.1 million people (Fazel-Zarandi, Feinstein, & Kaplan, 2018). However, recent studies have started to discuss the racialized character of gentrification processes and the way race, ethnicity and legal status intersect within them (Huse, 2018; Nelson, Trautman, & Nelson, 2015). In research on undocumented migration, the issue of housing security and its impact on wellbeing has been more thoroughly discussed (Burgers, 1998; Hall & Greenman, 2013; Yoshikawa & Kalil, 2011). In his seminal work, Nicholas De Genova argued that the creation of deportability by the state is productive in the sense that it makes possible an exploitable and unregulated workforce through the legal production of a “spatialized and typically racialized social condition for undocumented migrants” and “provides an apparatus for sustaining their vulnerability and tractability as workers” (De Genova, 2002, 439). Building on De Genova’s work, Huub van Baar suggests that the concept of deportability should be de-nationalised to enable an analysis that avoids methodological nationalism. Analysing the situation of Roma minorities in Europe, van Baar introduces the concept of “evictability”, which is defined as “the possibility of being removed from a sheltering place” (van Baar, 2016, 214). Van Baar suggests that “contemporary forms of displacement are not limited to practices that are based on a rigid or crystal-clear distinction of border crossers along the (imagined) lines of the nation-state, state actors or political entities such as the EU and of those of ‘(il-)legalized’ ‘migrants’ and ‘citizens’” but that the securitization of migration has affected also how minorities are being governed as “inferior, evictable, and exploitable ‘European citizens’” (van Baar, 2016, 214, 225). In this sense, evictability deconstructs binaries between irregular/regular migrants as well as non-citizens/citizens and captures not only spatial but also political, economic and juridical forms of displacement.

Here I want to extend the discussions on deportability and evictability to thinking about the potential usefulness of viewing them as part of a more general phenomenon that relates to all different forms of spatial displacements that those positioned in deportability and/or evictability can experience along their life courses. Drawing on the experiences of undocumented migrants, I suggest various prolonged and connected experiences of displacement could be thought of in terms of *spatial vulnerability*. I draw on philosopher Catriona Mackenzie (2014) to argue for the usefulness of conceptualizing this phenomenon in terms of vulnerability. Mackenzie

has made a distinction between *inherent* vulnerability and *situational*¹ vulnerability. Inherent vulnerability is universal and stems from our embodiment whereas situational vulnerability relates to contextual conditions caused by external social, political and environmental factors. A subset to situational vulnerability is what Mackenzie calls *pathogenic* vulnerability, which refers to what is seen as morally problematic or unacceptable vulnerabilities, or “surplus vulnerabilities” (Anderson, 2014, 154), that need to be eliminated. Forced displacement because of armed conflicts, deportations and displacement through gentrification are all examples of spatial vulnerability that is situational and pathogenic, meaning that this vulnerability is not embodied but contextual and considered problematic by various actors.

Experiences of displacements are wide ranging and interconnected, and I suggest that research on all issues relating to different forms of spatial displacements would benefit from thinking about them as interconnected forms of spatial vulnerability to better understand how the governing of local and territorial presence as well as mobility can take place at various scales and sites through the creation of pathogenic vulnerabilities. Importantly, as van Baar (2016) highlights, this governing is not only enacted by state actors, but displacement can be the result of practices by landlords, housing corporations or other forms of private capital actors, as well as different actors involved in the complex conflicts that cause forced displacements.

In the following section I will discuss the experiences of undocumented migrants in Sweden and the UK and show how context specific, structurally created spatial vulnerability “haunts” them through practically every stage of their life trajectories. Drawing on these cases, I then discuss the potential usefulness of connecting displacements at different scales and at different sites through the overarching concept of displaceability as the general experience of spatial vulnerability through potentially being at risk of displacement.

Experiences of Spatial Vulnerability

Undocumented migrant families in Sweden and the UK have often been forcibly displaced from their countries of origin because of armed conflict or them being at risk of persecution or violence. In Sweden, all the undocumented families from Afghanistan I met during my fieldwork were later granted asylum because of the ongoing conflict in the region whereas all the families from Balkan countries were refused asylum even though they all strongly believed they had strong grounds for protection because of their individual experiences of violence and threats in their countries of origin and the lack of protection they experienced by the authorities there. Many undocumented migrants in the UK have also had their claims for asylum

¹ Sometimes “precarity” is used in a similar way as “situational vulnerability”. Clara Han interprets Judith Butler’s definition of the two terms as that “precarity is the differential distribution of a common human vulnerability” (Han, 2018) and in this way the two terms seem to be interchangeable. I use Mackenzie’s terminology here since I believe that it adds clarity to how different kinds of vulnerabilities can be conceptualized.

rejected, but a larger part of the undocumented population (compared to Sweden) end up in an irregular situation by overstaying their visas. Not all of these people apply for asylum to regulate their legal status; in the UK public discourse those who do are often talked about in derogatory terms as “bogus asylum seekers” (Vollmer, 2014). As many of these applicants originate from former colonies of the Commonwealth, the chances of having their individual claims of persecution recognized by the UK authorities are most often slim. Still, many of the participants I met in the UK claimed that it would be too dangerous for them to return to their country of origin and they saw no choice but to stay illegally in the UK.

In the host countries, undocumented migrants are not only susceptible to forced transnational displacement through deportation, but they are also often in an extremely vulnerable position on the housing market. Having to rely on second or third hand contracts, and/or having to share overcrowded apartments, many of the families and their children that I met were constantly looking for a more stable living situation. If they did find a place to live where the landlord offered a permanent contract this was still not enough to ensure permanency since many other factors played in to whether their living situation would work out long term. Thus, the question of housing is central to undocumented migrants and was perhaps the issue, apart from regularizing their legal status, that preoccupied my participants the most. It was highlighted by several participants during my research that the struggle to secure housing was the single most difficult issue they had to deal with in their everyday lives and the rent support the participants in Malmö received at the time from the social services were crucial for providing some security to their families.

Consequently, it was devastating to all of them when the border police in southern Sweden in late 2016 for the first time asked the social services for address information of undocumented migrants in Malmö – information that had been collected to make possible the provision of rent support on the basis of the rights of the children in these families. The border police suggested that these increased efforts to deport undocumented migrants were the result of direct orders from the government and their radical shift towards more restrictive and repressive migration policies after the so called “refugee crisis” in 2015 (Mikkelsen, 2016). Several of the families I was in contact with in Malmö were on the list of names of “searched-for undocumented migrants” that the police sent to the social services. As a result, most of the families immediately moved out of the apartments they were living in at the time and for which they had often fought hard to find. Some had to stay in a homelessness shelter for several days with small children since they could not trust the social services and their offer of emergency housing. One of the children I met in Malmö, a 16-year-old boy expressed how his spatial vulnerability affected him in the following words: “I am Albanian but I was born in Greece and I do not live anywhere. You cannot say that I live in Sweden because perhaps tomorrow I am not sure where I live, since I have been living in so many different places.”

Another family in Malmö had been living in the same place for a couple of years and managed to keep this address secret from the migration authorities.

However, the school and social workers knew about their house so when the family was refused asylum again for the second time (after having waited four years since their last application was rejected) they moved houses out of fear that their address information, or information about where their child went to school, would somehow be shared with the migration authorities. The role of the quality of schools for families' choices of where to locate oneself is hard to overestimate (Dobson & Stillwell, 2000). For undocumented migrants, this factor is amplified since a well-functioning school environment can be one of few safe spaces in undocumented children's lives. The experience of having to change housing often meant that many families that I met in both countries were constantly struggling to limit the impact this could have on their children's ability to safely attend school.

In Birmingham, UK, a couple and their 7-year-old daughter had been housed by a local housing organization while they were avoiding the authorities and preparing a new asylum claim. Once they were back "in the system" the organization helped them approach the social services who had a duty to assist the family with social housing. The parents were well prepared for this and understood that the housing organization needed to make space for those who were not eligible for housing support, but once they were relocated to an apartment by the council, the mother told me how they had been much better off at the housing organization. At the organization there was a real sense of support and community whereas she felt that the social services were constantly causing them problems and applying for asylum was in many ways more stressful than living as undocumented migrants since they were now more in direct contact with the effects of the "hostile environment" (Price, 2014) policies of the UK government. For several of the families in the UK, moving house interacted with change of status (Lind, 2017a) as they were provided with some sort of social housing once they submitted a new application for regularization. The mother told me about how stressful it had been to approach the authorities again: "Yesterday it was me and my inhalers" she said, "I was really short on breath".

Migrants in the UK are subjected to various hostile policies expressed through an increased pathological, spatial vulnerability created by the authorities. Many who had been living in an undocumented situation but entered the system again in the attempt to be regularized were offered housing far from the areas where they had established themselves and found a place for their children in school. For certain groups monetary support was put on so called "Azure cards" (see Carnet, Blanchard, & Ellis, 2014) that they could only use at specific supermarkets, often located several kilometres away, even if they had a local store in their neighbourhood. Asylum seekers have also been forced to travel to specific Home Office locations in cities far away from where they live to sign in regularly, even if there is such an office in the city/town they live in.

The structural construction of pathological spatial vulnerability for undocumented migrants and migrants in general, as expressed through the above examples, is made specifically clear if we look at the "Right to Rent" policy, put in

place in the UK around 2014. During my fieldwork, the UK government rolled out a pilot project of introducing a rule that made it illegal for landlords to let housing to undocumented migrants. The policy puts responsibility on landlords to check the immigration status of potential tenants, introducing heavy fines for those who break the rules (Crawford, Leahy, & McKee, 2016). This makes the policy different from most other aspects of the “hostile environment”, since it relies on private citizens and not state agencies to conduct the controls of migrant’s legal status – something that is not always easy to do even for experienced migration lawyers (which was also highlighted in a critical report from the Residential Landlords Association, see Simcock, 2017).

The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants conducted a survey among more than 300 landlords and letting agents which showed that 51% of landlords surveyed said that the scheme would make them less likely to consider letting to foreign nationals (JCWI, 2017). The UK parliament’s own Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, David Bolt presented “An inspection of the ‘Right to Rent’ scheme” in early 2018 and concluded that it “is yet to demonstrate its worth as a tool to encourage immigration compliance (the number of voluntary returns has fallen)” (Bolt, 2018, 7). Bolt also pointed out that after three years there had not been any evaluation on the potential racial discriminatory effects of the policy, or the exploitation and homelessness it may have contributed to. Sharon Leahy, Kim McKee and Joe Crawford (2018) show how these policies amplify the precarious position of migrants and ethnic minority groups in general. They argue that the shared vulnerability of these groups caused by this policy is intensified as power is moved into “the hands of agents from the private rented sector to make decisions on the viability of renters’ claims to belong” (Leahy, McKee, & Crawford, 2018, 608; see also Lukes, de Noronha, & Finney, 2018).

Connecting Experiences of “Displaceability”

The examples above show how spatial vulnerability on the housing market for undocumented migrants is produced through direct forms of governing in the UK, by making illegal to let apartments to undocumented migrants, and more indirect forms of governing in Sweden, by sharing of undocumented migrants’ address information between the social services and the border police. The “Right to Rent” policy is a specifically clear example of how hostile policies towards undocumented migrants are expressed through spatial “vulnerabilisation”, or the creation of pathological vulnerability as a form of governing (Lind, 2019). I argue that it is necessary to analyse this spatial vulnerability on the housing market as connected to the spatial vulnerability many of these same people have experienced as they have been forcibly removed from their countries of origin because of armed conflict or them being at risk of persecution and violence, as well as their ongoing experience of living in a state of deportability. By connecting these forms of displacements, we can see how in western liberal states and regions (such as the EU) as well as in conflict-torn countries and regions from where refugees originate,

spatial vulnerabilisation is a tactic and a result of policies and practices by those in power at all sites at various scales simultaneously.

In this intervention I further suggest that these different forms of displacements could be better understood through the concept of “displaceability”, which I propose could be used as an overarching concept to capture the broader experiences of spatial vulnerabilisation shared by many different groups who are continuously living with an over-shadowing threat of *potential* displacement. This paper points towards experiences of displaceability that undocumented migrants often experience both in their country of origin and in their host societies (as well as when they are transiting between these two sites). The concept of displaceability has the potential of connecting research areas, such as, for example, forced migration studies, studies on undocumented migration and gentrification studies. Migration researcher Stephen C. Lubkemann de-couples displacement from forced migration suggesting that displacement should be defined as “a disruption of key life projects (especially those involved with the navigation of the expected social life course), that is caused by an imposed interruption of the established baseline socio-spatial management strategies upon which those projects are premised” (Lubkemann, 2008, 468). This perspective of the “diffusing” of displacement is also important to bring into a discussion about displaceability; it does not necessarily imply the actual potential dislocation of a person but can also encompass the potential of losing a sense of home. The constant fear of having to change apartments or being deported is also detrimental to undocumented migrants’ (and not the least children’s) ability to make oneself feel at home. This is arguably a sought-after effect of most governing through displaceability (see Lind, 2019).

De Genova and van Baar have both highlighted the broader socioeconomic and political contexts of contemporary mobilities and how relationships between capital and labour, and the maintenance of a racialised and precarious workforce tend to be made invisible through processes involved in the creation and reproduction of deportability and evictability. Displaceability involves these processes too, but further includes experiences of forced displacement resulting from persecution and protracted violence. This connection is the main reason why I suggest that displaceability is a useful addition to the conceptual toolbox of migration and gentrification studies as well as any other subject area in the social sciences that engages with different forms of displacements.

Finally, a discussion on displaceability needs to connect also to migrant’s responses to potential spatial vulnerabilities so that people at risk of being displaced are not positioned as only vulnerable, passive agents without capacity to affect one’s situation. People at risk of displacement are often the ones who take action in relation to their situation and become politically engaged as a result of the politicisation of their current context (for an example of how this also relates to children, see Lind, 2017a). In this paper however I have chosen to focus on the structural limitations and threats to the self-chosen emplacement of groups positioned as vulnerable to enable a discussion of how these various threats are connected and continuous on

different scales. Future research and debates are welcomed to discuss the potentially agentic characteristics of displaceability.

Conclusion

The examples in this paper are limited in scope and do not represent a comprehensive list of experiences that could be categorised as expressions of “displaceability”. More research is needed to establish which additional phenomena the concept potentially could help us understand better. However, my main reason for suggesting that this neologism could be useful is that I believe that research more generally would benefit from looking into how policies and practices that construct spatial vulnerabilities locally are connected to national and transnational policies and practices that construct them globally. The concept could help to capture the spatial character of the experiences of vulnerablised groups: their potential displacement and being denied of a sense of home are central techniques through which vulnerablised groups are being governed globally today. I suggest that *spatial vulnerability* and *displaceability* as concepts could potentially be useful as “new keywords” for “rethinking the conceptual and discursive categories that govern borders, migration, and asylum” (New Keywords Collective, 2016), and to talk about how vulnerable groups are governed continuously and simultaneously at various scales and at various sites.

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