

Media Representations of Separated Child Migrants

From Dubs to Doubt

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes coverage of separated child migrants in three British tabloids between the introduction of the Dubs Amendment, which committed to relocating unaccompanied minors to the UK, and the demolition of the unofficial refugee camp in Calais. This camp has been a key symbol of Europe’s “migration crisis” and the subject of significant media attention in which unaccompanied children feature prominently. By considering the changes in tabloid coverage over this time period, this article highlights the increasing contestation of the authenticity of separated children as they began arriving in the UK under Dubs, concurrent with representations of “genuine” child migrants as innocent and vulnerable. We argue that attention to proximity can help account for changing discourses and that the media can simultaneously sustain contradictory views by preserving an essentialized view of “the child,” grounded in racialized, Eurocentric, and advanced capitalist norms. Together, these points raise questions about the political consequences of framing hospitality in the name of “the child.”

■ **KEYWORDS:** child migrants, humanitarianism, media, migration, representations of childhood, tabloids, unaccompanied minors

The image of Aylan Kurdi, the Kurdish-Syrian toddler who drowned in the Mediterranean while trying to reach Europe with his family, galvanized a palpable international outcry. This moment is often considered to be the time when the “horrific human costs” (Hall 2015) of the “migration crisis”¹ hit home for the European public. The widespread circulation of his photograph by global media outlets also provoked reactions from state leaders, with David Cameron, then prime minister of the UK, commenting: “As a father, I felt deeply moved by the sight of that young boy on a beach in Turkey” (Dathan 2015).

Simultaneously, negative references to the “flood” or “stream” of people on the move permeate media coverage and invoke a sense of losing control of national borders (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008), with migrants representing a “drain” on fiscal systems (Caviedes 2015). In these accounts, “the nation” is frequently presented in nostalgic and xenophobic terms, with migrants constituted as a threat to previously “great” countries: economically, culturally, and existentially. Migration has figured centrally in media framing of sociopolitical issues and political calls for strengthening nation states through increased securitization regimes and fortification of borders, from Brexit to Trump.

In considering these trends, two points become immediately evident: that the media not only describes events but shapes them (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009), and migrants



are represented in evocative and contradictory ways (Caviedes 2015; Dines et al. 2014; Vickers and Rutter 2016). Child migrants are a part of these representations, but also apart from them. While a growing body of scholarship in childhood studies highlights that children are not merely the “luggage” that accompanies adult migrants (Orellana et al. 2001), the social sciences as a whole have been slow to consider the status and experiences of child migrants (White et al. 2011), with only minimal attention being paid to their representations in the media. However, as the case of Aylan Kurdi illustrates, representations of child migrants, in both text and visuals, can be highly emotive and indeed motivating.

Given the power of the media to set agendas around immigration regimes and the significant implications this has for public opinion as well as migrants themselves, Erik Bleich, Irene Bloemraad, and Els de Graauw (2015) point to the unrealized potential of media analysis. They indicate the productivity of comparative media analysis, a call we take forward in the following article. Their point is largely a temporal-spatial one: analysis of coverage over time and place can help to illuminate the specificities of national milieus, the impact of world events, and context-specific relations of media production. Our article adds to this discussion by attending to the ways in which depictions of different social groups (e.g. children and adults) can contribute to our understandings of such coverage. This adds to an important tradition of such work that gives nuanced attention to intersections of gender, “race,” and religion in constituting certain refugees as the “proper” objects of humanitarian interventions (for recent examples, see Allsopp 2017; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016).

In the discussion that follows, we focus specifically on representations of “separated migrant children”² as covered in the British tabloids. Our starting point is the introduction of the 2016 “Dubs Amendment,” a high-profile addition to the 2016 Immigration Act in the UK. Introduced by Lord Dubs, a child refugee who escaped Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia on Britain’s *Kindertransport*, Section 67 was passed by parliament on 12 May 2016 after much debate. The amendment committed the secretary of state to relocating a specified number of unaccompanied minors from other countries in Europe to the UK. However, in February 2017, the then immigration minister announced that the government was halting the scheme. In advance of a legal challenge to this closure (which the state subsequently won), the government agreed to raise the number of separated children to be relocated under Dubs to 480.

Many of the children who came under Dubs had been living in the unofficial refugee camp in Calais, France, and our media analysis finishes with its demolition. The camp gained notoriety following a series of attempts by migrants to board ships and trucks bound for the UK in the late summer of 2014. The number of camp residents nearly quintupled in the subsequent two years and, amidst heated public debates linking economic recession, austerity policies, and migration (Anderson 2016; Caviedes 2015; Vickers and Rutter 2016), the camp emerged as the focus of “frenzied press coverage” (Reinisch 2015). It became “a key symbol of Europe’s migration crisis” (BBC 2016), in which separated child migrants featured prominently.

In considering changes in tabloid coverage over time, we highlight the increasing contestation of the authenticity of separated children as they began arriving in the UK under Dubs, concurrent with representations of “genuine” child migrants as innocent and vulnerable. We argue that the media can simultaneously sustain contradictory views of separated children by preserving an essentialized view of the child, grounded in racialized, Eurocentric, and advanced capitalist norms. Together, these points raise questions about the political consequences of framing hospitality in the name of “the child.”

Child Migrants and Media Representations

Despite significant developments in migration studies, research, theory, and policy on migration have tended to remain in neoclassical and labor market frames (Arango 2004), taking the male breadwinner as their normative model and rendering children largely invisible (White et al. 2011). Where children have been included, they are often undifferentiated from other family members or treated as vulnerable and passive dependents. The assumption in much of this literature is that migration is fundamentally traumatic for children *because* they are children, rather than being traumatic as a consequence of the conditions and politicized precarity of such journeys. However, the taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning such research have been the subject of increasing critique. One such assumption is that the “ideal” childhood is geographically stable and operates within the boundaries of “protective” institutions such as schools and nurseries (Gillis 2011). In contrast, a burgeoning body of research points out that residential fixity is neither a historical nor a contemporary fact of childhood (Heidbrink 2014; see also Nail 2015 who points out that mobility and movement characterize human societies).

A common theme in this literature is that separated child migrants, in confounding the “idealized childhood,” are often caught between protectionist discourses and ones of delinquency (Crawley 2011; Doná and Veale 2011). The “innocent child” is not only constituted as being mobile through no fault of their own, but is essentialized as such: the impossible agentic subject. S/he is represented as requiring special protection because of ascribed characteristics as modernity’s “emotionally priceless” child (Zelizer 1994). “Saving” the innocent child is constructed first and foremost as the task of responsible citizen adults. A contrasting narrative runs in parallel: here the trope of the innocent child is reconstituted as the (“illegal”) migrant from which receiving countries must be protected. In part, the “threat” of separated children lies in their exteriority to dominant ideas about childhood in advanced capitalist countries, including the centrality of care, guidance, and socialization to adults’ understandings of their position in relation to and responsibilities for children (Bhabha 2004; Crawley 2011). Many immigration processes and policies contribute to the demonization of separated children, transforming them from the “at risk child” to “*the* risk” (Heidbrink 2014). In a study of girls moving from Zimbabwe to South Africa alone, humanitarian aid workers positioned them simultaneously as innocent and “at risk” because of their lone status but also as irresponsible and dangerous risk takers, because they “chose” to leave their homes and journey alone (Mahati and Palmary 2017).

Despite the increasing scholarship on child migrants and the fact that “children are the most photographed and now most videoed members of the human species. . .” (Gillis 2011: 121), surprisingly little systematic study has been done about representations of child migrants in the media. However, Patricia Holland’s (2004) seminal work argues convincingly that representations of children both reflect and produce ideas about (“un)ideal” childhoods through repetition of themes across temporal-spatial locations. Tropes of the deserving “innocent” and “dangerous” child are examples of how meanings become fixed through their ubiquity.

A common theme in media representations of adult migrants is the distinction between “deserving” recipients of humanitarian support and the “undeserving” Other subject to securitization measures. Both representations are possible, suggest Nick Dines and colleagues (2014: 439, our emphasis), because of the ways in which the media and the state mobilize the “*spectacle* of bare life.” They argue that states use this to justify their efforts to control and regulate migration for their national interests. Indeed, media coverage of migration has moral, political, and material consequences, including influencing public opinions, policy making, social relations, and subjectivities, albeit never in a teleological or unmediated way. For instance, Hajo

Boomgaarden and Rens Vliegthart (2007, 2009) reviewed national media coverage in the Netherlands and Germany and found that both the extent and tone of coverage of immigration issues led to increases in anti-migrant attitudes and support for anti-immigration political platforms, regardless of other contextual factors such as actual immigration rates and unemployment. As Alexander Caviedes (2015: 900) points out, “The more often the press mentions a particular issue and links it to a social ill, the more likely that issue is to be considered a ‘crisis’ meriting political action and resolution.”

The Sample

Any study of media coverage involves crucial decisions about the choice of sources, as the sample will have consequences deriving from differences in ownership, audience, distribution, and affiliation with political parties (Bleich, Bloemraad, and de Graauw 2015). Our sample includes the print versions of the three most read national British papers (National Readership Survey 2016), all of which are tabloids. *The Sun* has an estimated readership of 4,188,000. *The Daily Mail* follows at 3,354,000, and *The Daily Mirror* at 2,283,000. While broadsheets may have more serious and in-depth coverage, these tabloids have a potentially greater impact given their wider distribution. For instance, *The Telegraph* has the largest readership among broadsheets, but this is only marginally more than half of *The Daily Mirror*’s readership. The decision to focus on national media was about maximizing breadth. Further, local papers often pick up stories from news wires or national media sources (Bleich, Bloemraad, and de Graauw 2015).

Considering a singular type of media focused our comparison on change over time while paying attention to possible differences in coverage across diverse political affiliations. *The Sun* and *The Mail* supported the Conservative Party in the 2015 elections while *The Daily Mirror* supported the Labour Party. While this could lead to the charge that our sample is “biased,” the primary focus of the analysis did not relate to differentiating between papers based on political orientations, although that was a potential line of analysis. More importantly, such “bias” reflects the news consumption of the British public and can therefore help to make sense of the broader discursive terrain surrounding separated migrant children. Moreover, viewpoints among supporters and members of the same political party are not homogenous, as the case of Brexit attests.

Articles for our analysis were sourced through LexisNexis for the period between 15 March and 30 October 2016, from just before the Dubs Amendment was initially tabled until just after the demolition of the unofficial refugee camp in Calais. We used the search string: (Calais) OR (“Lord Dubs” OR “Alfred Dubs” OR “Dubs Amendment”) AND (child! OR kid! OR boy! OR girl! OR “unaccompanied minor!"). After removing letters to the editor, duplicates, regional editions, and coverage that did not mention separated children specifically, the search generated full text from 120 articles (Table 1).

Table 1. British tabloid articles on separated child migrants.

Tabloid	March	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct	Total
<i>Mail</i>	1	6	8	3	2	7	9	39	75
<i>Sun</i>	0	3	2	0	1	2	3	26	37
<i>Mirror</i>	0	0	2	1	0	1	0	4	8
Total	1	9	12	4	3	10	12	69	120

It is worth making explicit the limitations of our sample: print rather than online, national rather than local, textual rather than visual, and traditional rather than social media. There are, for example, suggestions that traditional media influence is waning with the “death” of the print media alongside a democratization through social media. However, the tabloids discussed in this article have a readership in the millions and Nielsen and Schröder (2014) demonstrate that although social media is increasingly used as a supplement (e.g. for rapid recirculation) it is still used relatively less than mainstream media as a source of news. Whilst we recognize the power of the visual, as images of Aylan Kurdi demonstrate (Proitz 2018), and the way that textual and visual representations can both amplify and contradict text (Holland 2004), it was beyond the scope of this article to explore both. Accordingly, our argument is not that our chosen sample provides a “truer” representation of media or can stand in for all modes of representation, but simply that it can provide insights into the ways that language was mobilized over time in the selected tabloids.

Analyzing Text through Critical Discourse Analysis

We begin our analysis by charting the distribution of articles over time (see [Table 1](#)). Simple counts of frequency of coverage, as well as words, can be telling (Boomgaarden and Vliegenhart 2007). Our primary focus, however, is on close analysis of the valence of textual aspects of the articles and analyzing these in relation to the broader context in which these occurred. Recognizing that media representations are always partial and never a direct reflection of reality, they nonetheless refer to real people and real conditions, and certainly have real material consequences (Sayer 2000). Norman Fairclough (2003) captures this complexity through the notion of “dialectical interconnection,” where social reality is constituted by language, but not reducible to it. This requires both close textual analysis and an analysis of the broader “order of discourse” or what makes certain things seem not only allowable but the object of constant repetition, while others are rendered silent or un-hearable. Language (here the text of the articles) is a highly contextualized social practice embedded in relations of power, inequitable social positions, and exploitative material conditions, points that are central to our use of critical discourse analysis in this article.

We consider the framing of articles, starting with those evident in the existent literature: firstly, economic narratives focusing on costs, social class, and labor; and secondly, security narratives focusing on violence, crime, and borders (Caviedes 2015). To these we added two additional frames that emerged through our analysis. What we are calling a “humanitarian frame” references narratives of saving/rescuing and a moral language of duty and responsibility. The fourth, an “ontological frame,” captures preoccupations with questions of social categories. Our analysis highlights a set of polarized indicators: child *or* adult, refugee *or* economic migrant, and good *or* bad refugee. Within each frame, we consider the specific ways in which language was deployed, attending to the tone, metaphors, and symbols, to produce a reading of the stance and messages invoked by each tabloid in its changing representations of separated child migrants.

The use of such frames is not simply an analytic strategy. Interpretive frames are central to the ways that readers encounter texts. Butler (2016) makes the case that media frames which depict people as “floods” or “human shields” in the case of war, dehumanize; rendering “life” unrecognizable. Because media frames have already rendered them non-lives, threats, denials to basic needs for food and shelter, and even death become “ungrievable.” Yet, such frames are “wobbly,” shifting and changing, and are therefore an important site for investigation and critical intervention.

Representations of Separated Children

In this section, we review the tabloid coverage of separated migrant children. *The Daily Mail* had the largest number of articles: 75 in total. *The Sun* followed at 37 and *The Daily Mirror* at 8. Our discussion is divided into two time periods which are notably different in quantity and tenor.

March–September 2016

Coverage in all tabloids from March to September 2016 was dominated by a “humanitarian frame.” Here, separated child migrants were depicted in largely sympathetic terms, blameless for their state of affairs, with their “vulnerability” referred to repeatedly. Concern was evoked simply with the use of terms such as “refugee kids” (*The Sun*, 25 May 2016) and “youngsters from European refugee camps” (*The Mirror*, 1 May 2016). The co-presence of terms such as “migrant” and “child” alongside the colloquial use of “kids” and “youngsters” invites the reader’s sympathy in a context where “good” childhoods are equated with residential stability.

Unlike women refugees, who often become concatenated with the child figure, in what Cynthia Enloe (1991) provocatively refers to as the “womanandchild,” or male refugees who are often depicted as a faceless mass (Fiddian-Qasimiyeh 2016), separated child migrants were depicted in singular and solitary terms. Terms such as “lost” (*The Mail*, 3 August 2016) and “alone” (*The Mail*, 5 May 2016) were used. Deriving its force from the modern sacralization of the child figure and adult anxieties about children’s special need for protection, these terms added to the sense of precarity and urgency. What was meant by being “alone” was left largely unstated, an enthymeme of sorts, but seemed to imply being without parents. One consequence was that separated child migrants’ relationships with others, child or adult, receded or were largely invisible.

Several articles highlighted factors that compounded this essentialized vulnerability. For instance, *The Mail* suggested that separated child migrants were defenseless in part because they were “unable to speak English” (14 April 2016) and *The Mirror* used separated children in Calais as a quintessential metaphor for “rightlessness” (20 May 2016). The precarity of being “alone” was also amplified in the articles through its placement against depictions of life in the camp. *The Mail* wrote about “vulnerable, unaccompanied youngsters languishing in squalid conditions” (4 May 2016) and *The Sun* expressed “great concern for the estimated 700 children who live alone in the rat-infested camp without any parents” (28 August 2016). *The Mirror* framed concerns about living conditions in the Calais camp not only in terms of danger but also in regard to the lack of “place[s] to do the things kids should normally be doing” (21 August 2016).

Security frames were invoked in some articles during this period, however, as problems for, rather than caused by, separated child migrants and in contrast with depictions of adult male migrants (Caviedes 2015). Unaccompanied children were presented as being at risk of trafficking, but also threatened by dangerous crossings with smugglers, “gang culture” (*The Mail*, 5 May 2016), violence from adult migrants and French police, and radicalization by “Muslim extremists” (*The Sun*, 28 August 2016).

The Sun was the only tabloid that wrote about strengthening the UK border in response to separated migrant children. However, even this was expressed as a humanitarian effort to stop separated children from making “terrifying journeys” (31 July 2016) and to prevent them from enduring the dangerous conditions of the Calais camp. *The Mirror* was perhaps the only tabloid to imply that separated children were themselves risky. Here, however, the emphasis remained on external causal forces, as opposed to holding children themselves responsible: “They are tough because they have to be” (21 August 2016).

Overall, separated child migrants were largely represented as scared, “traumatised” (*The Mail*, 14 April 2016), and at risk of not having their “physical and emotional needs” met (*The Mirror*, 21 August 2016). While attention to ill-health and trauma as a consequence of migration may seem common-sensical today, this is a more contemporary way “to affirm refugees’ suffering and authenticity” and generate sympathy for their cause, following the model of wounded subjectivity that has become dominant in neoliberal, Anglo-American societies (Pupavac 2008: 278).

Hopes and “dreams” served a powerful and emotive motif. For example, *The Mail* printed a story about a separated child in Calais who was increasingly hopeless, with “no other dream” except for gaining asylum in Britain (5 May 2016). A story in *The Sun* about a separated child migrant who had been successfully fostered and “dreamt” about being a footballer provided a counterpoint (31 July 2016). The implication was that safety in the UK allowed for dreams to be born and an “ideal childhood” to be actualized. The bleakness depicted in the first example is not just an example of Dines and colleagues’ (2014) “spectacle” of bare life. But the loss of dreams is particularly moving given the pervasive treatment of children as *the* future. Indeed, the figure of the child has a long history of being bundled with “utopian optimism” as a “vehicle for our hopes for the future” (Jenkins 1998: 5). In this context, a child without dreams paints a particularly harrowing picture.

Unsurprisingly then, sympathetic depictions of this period were accompanied by a discourse of rescue, duty, and benevolence,³ particularly in *The Mail*. For instance, *The Mail*’s headline, “Church Leaders: Let the Refugee Children in Now,” issues a dramatic imperative full of urgency (11 May 2016). The reference to clergy elevates the issue of “saving” separated child migrants out of the political realm and into one of moral, even spiritual, duty. A separate article invoked similar demands in a moral register, arguing: “If Britain is to call itself civilized, we must take in children like him” (*The Mail*, 5 May 2016). This apparent opposition between the political and humanitarianism has a long and complicated history, Liisa Malkki (1996) points out. However, one of its consequences is to depoliticize migrants, and render refugees as universal victims rather than concrete historical actors.

The Mirror also used moral language, quoting MPs who called out “Shame” in response to refusals to “let in youngsters from European refugee camps” (1 May 2016). Reproaching the Conservative government was in keeping with their support for the opposition party. *The Mail* further critiqued the government’s “deplorable failure” in “saving” separated child migrants (26 July 2016). In celebrating David Cameron’s “U-Turn” and decision to allow the Dubs Amendment, *The Mail*’s headline shouted: “Victory for Compassion” (5 May 2016), and emphasized the tabloid’s own role in this achievement. *The Sun* likewise used moral language, depicting the government’s actions in humanitarian terms of “offer[ing] children a lifeline” (5 May 2016).

What stands out across the tabloids in March–September 2016 is a sympathetic depiction of separated child migrants as vulnerable innocents at risk and in need of rescue (a stance not without its problems, as we discuss below). However, the tenor of the coverage began to change in the first weeks of October 2016, both in frequency and tone, when more separated children began arriving in the UK under the Dubs Amendment.

October 2016

Despite differences between tabloids, October marked the pinnacle of coverage in *all* papers (see [Table 1](#)). The conditions and experiences of child migrants in Calais were not put on the public agenda by the tabloids with anywhere near the intensity of coverage of migrants coming to Britain as unaccompanied minors. It is significant that the increased frequency of coverage

came at a time when the actions of the British state and public had more direct consequences for child migrants. It has disturbing implications given that any coverage of migration issues has been shown to cause an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment and activity (Boomgaarden and Vliegthart 2007).

As Boomgaarden and Vliegthart (2009) point out in a later study, however, it is not just frequency but also tone of coverage that is crucial. In October 2016, coverage in both *The Mail* and *The Sun* shifted from a humanitarian frame to a primarily ontological frame. The word “child” began to appear in scare quotes by 18 October 2016, alongside references to separated child migrants’ appearance: their “stubble” (*The Mail*, 19 October 2016), “receding hairlines” (*The Sun*, 19 October 2016), “hairy arms” (*The Sun*, 24 October 2016), and “crow’s feet” (*The Sun*, 19 October 2016). Whilst this article does not present a visual analysis, it is worth noting that photographs were a powerful accompaniment to the text. The focus on physical attributes, as a way to contest the veracity of their status as children, drew its force from the assumption that the readership would categorize such characteristics as belonging to adult bodies. Indeed, the delineation of adults and children based on biological development or physical maturation is a practice with a long history. From the early twentieth-century child study movement to the contemporary popularization of normative developmental psychology, there is a hegemonic idea that the body develops in a linear and universal manner, regardless of sociocultural context.

It was not just physical characteristics to which these tabloids pointed, however. “So-called children” (*The Mail*, 27 October 2016) who had come from Calais were contrasted with “genuine” (*The Mail*, 22 October 2016) separated children, on the basis of assumptions about what children can and should do. Real children, the coverage suggested, were “kiddies wandering helpless and alone among predators in the Calais Jungle” (*The Sun*, 19 October 2016). A perceived incapacity defined “kiddies” in this account, with roots in contemporary Western common sense which treats adulthood, or more precisely rational Man, as analogous with capacity and adults as those who provide care and protection.

The tabloids did not just contrast “real children” in the Calais camp, or other refugee camps far from Britain, with those who had made it to the UK. Both held up Jewish refugee children who came on Britain’s *Kindertransport* during the Second World War as “genuine” child refugees. In contrast to the contemporary migrants whose childhood was in question, these Jewish refugees were depicted as migrating through no fault of their own and, notably, with the help of adults from receiving countries. Indeed, the ability to travel independently across numerous countries to get to the UK was also flagged up as a sign of adulthood: “So what are these enormous, prematurely aged children fleeing from? Why must they come here?” quipped one columnist (*The Mail*, 23 October 2016). While gender, culture, and religion are certainly significant to the ways in which people are distinguished, persecuted, and forced to migrate, framing certain migrants as the quintessential vulnerable victim not only served rhetorically to question the migrants in the coverage but called into question the entire Dubs scheme.

The October 2016 coverage took on a skeptical, even nasty tone, with facetious comments such as: “Some of the alleged under-18 migrants looked so old it was suggested a new charity be set up, called Shave The Children” (*The Sun*, 28 October 2016). Tongue-in-cheek headlines, drawing on assumptions about both physical and social attributes of adulthood, included: “Why are these ‘child refugees’ fleeing France? The bad coffee?” (*The Mail*, 23 October 2016) and “My, haven’t you grown!” (*The Sun*, 18 October 2016).

In tandem with this ontological framing, there was a sharp rise in security frames in which separated child migrants arriving in Britain were implicated. Both tabloids depicted these migrants as “hoodie” wearing (*The Mail*, 19 October 2016; *The Sun*, 24 October 2016) and employed puns about being tricked by a “child migrants’ cover-up” (*The Mail*, 21 October 2016; *The Sun*, 21

October 2016). These signifiers call up ideas about youth crime and anti-social behavior requiring social regulation (Hier et al. 2011) as well as abuses of the immigration system.

From March to September, coming to the UK by any means possible had been depicted as an understandable act promoted by a desperate situation. This changed in October 2016. Claims that child migrants were “sneaking” across the border (*The Sun*, 13 October 2016) or that they were “scam[ming]” (*The Mail*, 24 October 2016) and “lying” (*The Sun*, 24 October 2016) about their age began to build a picture of duplicity. A series of articles in *The Mail* included interviews with British foster parents, third sector workers, and other migrants in Calais to ostensibly confirm, through on-the-ground knowledge, the tabloids’ presentation of this “child migrant fiasco” (*The Mail*, 21 October 2016).

The language used conveyed a sense of the UK being overwhelmed by illegality, as in much of the securitized frames in coverage of adult male migrants (Caviedes 2015). Separated child migrants were no longer depicted as solitary figures requiring help, but as large faceless groups, such as in *The Sun*’s (19 October 2016) claim that “scores” more children were being brought into the UK and references to a “wave of transfers” (19 October 2016) of unaccompanied children under the “fast-track” system (19 October 2016).

Both tabloids presented the UK government in failing terms. The Home Office was critiqued for rejecting seemingly more accurate scientific methods for assessing age, including dental and wrist x-rays, and many references were made to a computerized facial assessment. Headlines gestured to slow or ineffective institutions: “Britain told of age scam in 2013” (*The Mail*, 24 October 2016) and “Age checks help spurned” (*The Sun*, 24 October 2016). Placed next to coverage about heated public debates over the age of separated child migrants, comments that the Home Office “refused” (*The Sun*, 21 October 2016) to carry out dental tests to ascertain age implied that such “scientific testing” was a rational and necessary response. In both tabloids, the government’s “refusal” was contrasted with seemingly questionable commitments to being “ethical” and “un-intrusive” (*The Sun*, 21 October 2016) as well as emotionally motivated decisions to allow migrants into the UK.

This was reinforced through discussion of age disputes: “The Home Office has admitted that last year two thirds of child refugees turned out to be adults” (*The Mail*, 20 October 2016). This misrepresentation of the figures, given that this was not a percentage of all separated child migrants only those children who were age assessed, insinuated a long-standing scam.

In the shift to more securitized frames, separated child migrants started to become “*the risk*” rather than “*at risk*.” Coverage directly attributed violent actions to these migrants, who were held responsible for the plight of “real children” (19 October 2016) left behind in Calais: “Children crying out for a new life in Britain are being elbowed out of the way by migrants twice their size” (*The Sun*, 19 October 2016). Their presence in the UK was represented not only as suspect but as a risk to British people: “12 Yr-Old Refugee we cared for was Jihadi, 21: Migrant foster mum’s horror” (*The Sun*, 23 October 2016). Headlines such as “Demolishing the jungle won’t stop us” (*The Mail*, 29 October 2016) created a sense of Britain under siege at its borders and a threat to its way of life.

There was also increasing use economic frames. In *The Mail* in particular, migrants in Calais (adult or child) were increasingly framed as “economic migrants” (*The Mail*, 20 October 2016), responding to the “lure of the UK” and its employment opportunities and “lavish benefits” (*The Mail*, 29 October 2016). Costs to local governments and taxpayers were emphasized in relation to everything from the “Calais clearout” (*The Mail*, 25 October 2016) and border patrols, to welfare and education provision for separated children, to deportations of migrants whose asylum claims were denied.

Together, these changing frames began to create a climate of “fear” (19 October 2016), to use *The Mail’s* words, where all separated child applicants seemed suspect. The moral discourse of the previous period remained. However, in October 2016, this was turned against separated child migrants who were framed as amoral, making a “mockery” (*The Sun*, 19 October 2016) out of Britain’s “generosity” (*The Sun*, 26 October 2016). Separated children were no longer presented as victims, instead “the British people” were, as exemplified by *The Mail’s* headline: “Yes, we must show pity—but is it being abused?” (19 October 2016).

Like the two other tabloids, the bulk of *The Mirror’s* articles fell in October 2016. Unlike the others, however, *The Mirror’s* articles remained largely within humanitarian frames even in October 2016, with child migrants being depicted as “vulnerable” (23 October 2016), “in danger” (26 October 2016), and deserving of Britain’s action to keep them safe, including by giving them “refuge” (26 October 2016). Representations did become more ontologically oriented, tackling the question of age assessment. However, the focus of the ontological frame was not primarily on the authenticity of the child migrants but on the state’s ineffectiveness. Authors critiqued the Conservative government for ‘snub[bing] expert help’ (24 October 2016) and leaving age assessments until just prior to the camp demolition. Differences between tabloids are not just about party affiliations but resonate with studies that have found that “right-leaning” papers have more consistently negative portrayals of minorities, and Muslims in particular, than “left-leaning” papers (Bleich, Stonebraker et al. 2015) such as *The Mirror*.

In sum, the coverage from March to September showed a fairly coherent narrative and tone across the tabloids. Separated child migrants were represented in sympathetic and humanitarian terms, as vulnerable innocents at risk and in need of rescue. When migrants began arriving on the shores of the UK under the Dubs Amendment in October 2016, coverage increased and shifted almost immediately into what we have called an ontological frame. In *The Mail* and *The Sun* this took a xenophobic and fear-mongering tone dressed up in tongue-in-cheek jokes. This group of migrants was transformed into imposters intent on duping the Home Office, abusing British generosity, and threatening citizen-families and their way of life, no longer recognized as having “grievable” lives (Butler 2016). As such, the more familiar framing of migration in both security and economic narratives became evident. In contrast, *The Mirror* continued its more sympathetic coverage even into October 2016. However, the tabloid has a smaller readership and only four articles during this period, meaning that fewer counter-discourses overall were available to tabloid readers. Throughout both periods, however, all three tabloids maintained a conviction that “genuine,” innocent children were at risk as a result of migration.

The Troubles of and with “Separated Child Migrants”

There are four points that we wish to make based on the data presented above. To begin, we suggest that considering changes in tabloid coverage over time can help explain why representations of separated child migrants changed so dramatically. When separated child migrants were in Calais, they were treated as vulnerable and worthy of support and rescue. The spectacle of distant suffering, argues Luc Boltanski (1999), is powerful in that it evokes empathy from the audience, but this is pity for an empty figure, one that can be easily filled by any number of similarly suffering individuals. Here Audrey Macklin (2005: 367) is also instructive, arguing that migrants living in far-off refugee camps are often constituted as “deserving,” both because of their distance and because they do not challenge capitalist states’ management of migration in their own interest through categorizing, selection, and bordering.

When separated child migrants began arriving in the UK under the Dubs Amendment, however, they were no longer able to be subsumed in iconic representations of the *distant* vulnerable child. The complexity of their flesh and blood presence threatened the very basis of the idealized “victim.” It is, however, important to clarify here that this was more a spectacle of, rather than intimate, proximity. Most people in the UK had no direct contact with separated children coming under Dubs given the small numbers relocated under the scheme. However, this specter of proximity certainly made it more difficult to place responsibility on others for their predicament and care, as in previous coverage which blamed France for neglecting these very same migrants. Here, querying the “child” status of this group of migrants dovetailed with the interests of the British state in reducing social expenditure and provision in an austerity climate.

Our second point is that representations of separated children as vulnerable and in need of saving or, in contrast, as a risk and a problem to British society and institutions for reasons of both security and cost are not as incommensurate as they seem. To begin, all the coverage took for granted that there is a clear line between who is a child and who is an adult, if only we find the “right” way to assess that (e.g. x-rays, interviews, etc.). Yet, as sociologists of childhood have persuasively argued, a child is not something that we can identify via a set of externally imposed attributes that map onto some sort of immutable trans-group essence. Instead, childhood can be understood as a social location in which certain individuals are positioned and act from, which iteratively constitutes “the child” (Alanen 2011). Making recourse to the body and chronological age, as the tabloids did, reflects the rising “legal fetishism” (Vitterbo 2012) of age as a marker of childhood as well as developmental and racialized notions of the child body (Hopkins and Hill 2010).

Because childhood is one of the last bastions of essentialism, Cindi Katz (2008: 8) points out that “when it comes to children, we seem able to see them as innocent, as unformed, as savage, as ‘good’ or as vulnerable without historicizing, locating, or specifying their much more complicated unstable and contingent subjectivity.” In following her argument, we can see that across the tabloid coverage there were a set of unexamined assumptions about children grounded in the particularities of Eurocentric and advanced capitalist norms. These include the idealization of childhood as a time of sedentariness, nurtured within the protective arms of the (nuclear) family and various state institutions, away from the dangers of the “adult world.” This variously took the form of invocations for recovering lost childhoods, as in *The Mirror*’s coverage, or denying that someone is a child because they trespass sacrosanct ideas about childhood, as in the other tabloids.

The conflation of childhood with vulnerability and separated child migrants with victimhood, even when framed in humanitarian terms, is troubling, and not only because these ascriptions cannot fully capture the complexity of any real human being. Treating children as innocent victims, and purporting to work in their “best interests,” has typically worked against their interests, status, and well-being (Gordon 2008). Indeed, a rescue rhetoric, argues Lila Abu-Lughod (2002: 789), “depend[s] on and reinforces a sense of superiority by Westerners” and to this we would add adult paternalism, with echoes of colonial missionaries and middle-class “child saving” movements of the early twentieth century. It turns upon narratives of individual suffering, the “spectacle of bare life” (Dines et al. 2014), which can deflect attention from the political and economic roots of contemporary migratory flows. Further, it reduces questions of responsibility and support to the good will of a rescuer, who can easily withdraw support. Indeed, *The Mail* made an about-face in late October, modulating its support for Dubs and arguing that it was intended only for the “youngest and most vulnerable children” (25 October 2016).

Thirdly, the consequence of reproducing an essentialized view of “the child,” based on a narrow frame of normative ascriptions, is that it becomes a relatively simple act to deny someone the status of child, with significant consequences for people who have been displaced or dispossessed. Representing migrants in ontological, economic, and securitized terms served to dehumanize, creating interpretative frames whereby their struggles and existential needs as precarious human lives were no longer recognized as such (Butler 2016). In the case of tabloid coverage, age contestations served to discursively render *all* those claiming to be separated child migrants as suspect, while simultaneously proclaiming a commitment to protecting “innocent children.”

This doubt, indeed suspicion, needs to be understood within the larger context of the UK’s immigration regime, which has experienced over a decade of exclusionary changes, largely aimed at decreasing asylum applications and the costs of asylum support in an age of austerity. The logic, points out Bridget Anderson (2016), is that of “protecting our own,” a claim that projects a sort of “fantasy citizenship” within a caring state in a climate where impoverished people—whether migrants or citizens—remain impoverished, and citizenship does not guarantee equality. On the one hand, separated child migrants are largely protected from exclusionary measures, given the duty of care catalyzed by the UK’s commitments as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. On the other hand, the tensions that emerge between systems of care and restrictive immigration regimes mean that separated child migrants’ status as children often comes into question, resulting in denials of their rights and violations of their well-being (Chase 2013). This tension is illustrative of the irreconcilable contradiction that lies at the heart of liberal democracies between a commitment to universal equality and a context where rights are both *de facto* and *de jure* limited by territorial, political, legal, and economic borders (Nail 2016).

The “Other” of this essentialized child is the essentialized adult. Rendering adults and children as separate groups, with fundamentally dissimilar needs, has the consequence of obscuring, even undercutting, the possibilities for solidarity within migrant communities. Yet networks of care and sociality are crucial to navigating and surviving migration journeys and settlement (Ryan 2011; Crafter and Rosen forthcoming). And, in so far as children in the UK remain legally and economically dependent on adults well into their second decade of life—a social rather than natural fact—their well-being is jeopardized by the conditions of precarity that older kin are forced to endure.

Constituting some social groups as particularly “deserving” migrants (e.g. children) creates an undeserving Other (e.g. adults). Rooting deservingness in ascribed victimhood and a particular subject position forces this identity upon children, for to be otherwise is to risk losing their rights. At the same time, the precarity facing adult migrants is denied or belittled. Further, “deservingness” itself can be undercut, such as when separated child migrants do not meet with expectations about who a child is and should be.

Our final point circles back to the beginning of the article to confirm the importance of nuanced and intersectional analysis to help make sense of media representations of migration. Much of the social science literature investigating migration focuses on supporting or contesting the assertion that a security frame has become pre-eminent in contradistinction to previously dominant economic frames (Caviedes 2015). What this article has shown is that dominant representational frames do not just change in relation to geopolitical events, such as the increasing securitization of immigration regimes, acts of individual and state terrorism, or economic recession. Dominant frames also shift in relation to the specific groups of migrants being discussed, which we have demonstrated here in relation to separated child migrants. The epistemological

consequence of neglecting this complexity is that our understandings of the ways in which the media operates and produces ideas about migrants are limited. The consequences are also political: as social scientists, we can fall into the trap of perpetuating a homogenizing discourse which lumps all migrants into a large and undifferentiated group, reproducing much of the symbolic violence that migrants encounter more broadly in receiving countries.

Conclusion

Tracing the representations of separated child migrants in three British tabloids over a seven-month period in 2016 has highlighted the ways in which child migrants are trapped in competing narratives of protection and threat. By taking into consideration changing coverage over time, we have demonstrated that attention to proximity can help to account for changing discourses whereby the closer migrant children were to Britain, the more their status was subject to contestation. More fundamentally, we have suggested that essentialization of “the child” based on racialized, advanced capitalist, and Eurocentric idealizations underpins much of the coverage and serves to justify divisions of migrants into categories of deserving vulnerable child and un-deserving adult migrant, with significant political consequences.

Ultimately, we point to the fragility of hospitality when framed as a humanitarian response to particularized “Others.” This immediately renders some migrants as less deserving, even as “ungrievable” lives. Given the temporal and geopolitical dynamism of social categories, the “deserving” can very quickly be reconstituted, either by shifting the nature of membership or shifting the delineation of what is considered deserving. As a result, we suggest that calling for refuge for separated child migrants may achieve necessary support and hospitality in the short term, but as a strategy to ensure social and economic justice for all, this is a problematic place to both begin and finish our efforts.

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NOTES

1. This is more aptly understood as a “crisis confronting migrants” (Anderson 2016).
2. We use terminology advisedly. Our use of the term “migrant” brackets off questions of legal status and the legitimacy of claims about the “forced” nature of mobility. We use the term “separated,” as opposed to “unaccompanied” or “independent,” which are maintained in much policy discourse. “Separated” children are typically understood as those who migrate without their primary caregiver, but who may be “accompanied” by other kin and non-kin adults and children. The term also highlights the ongoing nature of transnational relationships. However, “separated” is problematic in so far as it assumes kin-based parent–child networks as primary, while research on child mobility is suggestive of the non-kin relationships children form on migration journeys (Crafter and Rosen forthcoming). Finally, as the issue of “age assessment” in immigration regimes makes clear, who constitutes a “child” is the subject of extensive contestation.
3. The only exception was a 14 April *Mail* article, which employed securitization and economic frames.

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