

Trapped in (in)visibility: contested intercorporeality in undocumented migrants' lives

The paper draws attention to contexts in which livelihood and residence opportunities to migrants without formal status are meager, specifically Nordic countries where policies towards undocumented persons have notably tightened. In such conditions, invisibility becomes a key characteristic of life. The paper introduces a broad conception of visibility that identifies different ways of seeing and being (un)seen, as part of embodied agency that turns intercorporeal at the presence of other people. Drawing from existing Nordic scholarship that we read through Helmuth Plessner's philosophical anthropology, we argue that in situations where *personhood* becomes challenged by forced (in)visibility, undocumented migrants are compelled to build and maintain a *façade* between their experienced self and social self. This allows them to manage to be seen yet not exposed, but often with dire consequences to their well-being and agency as persons.

Keywords: paperlessness; invisibility; embodiment; mask; Helmuth Plessner

Introduction

While reliable global estimates of the number of so-called irregular migrants are difficult to make, it is known that millions of migrants around the world lead undocumented lives (IOM 2019, 28). The term refers to migration situations in which people do not have a formal status in the country where they live and, typically, are not identified as legal residents in their local communities. What such a life means in practice includes notable geographical variation. While in some countries undocumented migrants find themselves in completely exceptional positions with regard the local population, in other places their life situations come close to those of underprivileged citizens and residents, some of whom also lack formal status. Especially in large European and US migrations hubs, as well as metropolitan cities like Cairo and Kuala Lumpur, ethnic communities and low-pay labour markets offer livelihood opportunities to people without formal status (e.g. Villegas 2010; Chauvin &

Garcés-Mascareñas 2014; Garcés-Mascareñas 2015; Pascucci 2016; Waite & Lewis 2017; Tungohan 2018; Simona Talani 2019; Conley 2020). In smaller cities, rural communities, and countries where the overall number of migrants is relatively low such socio-economic structures are weaker if existing at all (e.g. Faist 1995; Jørgensen & Meret 2012; Bendixsen 2018; Khosravi 2018; Karlsen 2020; Nikunen & Valtonen 2022).

The geographical contextualization of undocumented migration makes visible, first, that undocumented migrant populations can enmesh with local practices, histories and economies and thus become part of the diversifying unequal multicultural society, and secondly, that in societies with smaller migrant populations and less established histories of informal mobility, people without formal status often stick out as exceptions in all areas of life. As Hellgren (2014, 1178) notes in her comparative analysis between Spain and Sweden,

‘Lacking formal rights in a highly formalised society may lead to complete social exclusion, whereas there may be more channels for inclusion and participation when informal contacts and forms of employment are widespread. This points to an apparently paradoxical situation in which undocumented immigrants appear to be worse off in advanced welfare states, as it is more central for these societies to maintain strict control over access to their generous benefits (Faist 1995).’

In this paper, we draw attention to geographies of undocumented migration in places and situations in which migrants without formal status have narrow opportunities to lead their lives beyond the formal society. Specifically, our focus is on Nordic countries where the total number of undocumented migrants is relatively low, yet where migration policies have been tightened in recent years. In 2015, Finland introduced a

radically renewed policy frame that, among other things, abolished residence permits based on humanitarian protection and remarkably hindered opportunities to family reunification (Wahlbeck 2019). Concurrently, new restrictions were introduced in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden to limit opportunities for asylum seekers to enter or stay legally in the country (Bech et al. 2017).

These changes have led to narrowing livelihood and residence opportunities available to undocumented migrants both at the community level and in the society at large. Bluntly put, without access to the formal society given by a national social security code or identity number, those who are precariously included are only pushed deeper into the margins of the Nordic welfare society (Bendixsen 2018; Burrell & Schweyher 2021). They live under constant threat of being identified as undocumented, including the fear of detention and deportation.¹ In such conditions, invisibility becomes a key characteristic of life.

A growing literature has begun to address the ways in which undocumented migrants are negotiating regimes of visibility that, on the one hand, expose them to mediated hypervisibility, and on the other hand require careful tactics for securing social invisibility while working and participating in daily communities (e.g. Coutin 2005; Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas 2014; Leinonen & Toivanen 2014; Nordling et al. 2017; Khosravi 2018; Hammarstedt 2021; Nikunen & Valtonen 2022). This scholarship

¹ With this focus we do not intend to overlook meager life opportunities in places with more established undocumented migrant populations. We acknowledge that in countries such as Egypt, Malaysia, and Iran, where precarious migrant populations are largely mixed in the urban fabric with other (racialized) low-income inhabitants, and in the US where undocumented Latinx migrants form an intrinsic part of the country's economic structure as well as familial life, people may live under constant threat of being identified as undocumented and respectively carry the fear of deportation with them (e.g. Gonzales & Chavez 2012; Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas 2014; Becerra 2016). Yet we see that, regarding (*in*)visibility, there is a difference between more or less formalised societies that host small or large migrant populations.

has shown that the question of visibility is a common concern among undocumented migrants who need to hide their life situation from the authorities but often also from colleagues, friends, neighbours, and acquaintances unaware of their undocumented status (Holgersson 2011; DeBono et al. 2015; Bendixsen 2018; Sager 2018; Wahlström Smith 2018; Lind 2019). While some people have found strategic visibility a means for claiming their rights in the public, this has not removed the need for everyday invisibility for the great majority of undocumented persons (Sigvardsson 2012; Chauvin & Garcés-Mascreñas 2014).

Undocumented life is particularly challenging in ethnically homogeneous communities in dominantly white societies where non-white people are easily identified as the Other (Spathopoulou et al. 2020, 5). Furthermore, digital everyday life involves risks not only due to traces that one inevitably leaves on social media platforms, but also because ‘surveillance by platforms, peers, governments, officials, and potentially hostile groups’ is increasingly common (Nikunen & Valtonen 2022). The fear of exposure is burdensome for individuals and a source of stress in family life pushed to balance between risks and rewards related to social engagements and encounters in work, school and among friends (Lind 2019).

The question of (in)visibility has been shown to be more complex than the idea of hiding might suggest (Baird 2014). In some cases, hiding does mean literally being out of sight, remaining indoors or at home, as in the case of undocumented seasonal workers in rural Greece where their visible presence was tolerated by local residents while working on the fields, but not in the village after working hours (Kukreja 2021). In other situations, at stake may rather be ‘hiding in plain sight’, that is, an attempt to lead as “normal” life as possible so as not to attract unwanted attention to one’s person in social encounters (Wahlström Smith 2018). In the latter case invisibility is not a

matter of being unseen as such, but rather not being seen in one's *actual* life situation as an undocumented person (Bendixsen 2017).

The question of (in)visibility has also been linked explicitly to embodiment and especially the racialised migrant body that stands out (Guðjónsdóttir 2014; Leinonen & Toivanen 2014). As a lived reality, undocumentedness shapes the migrants' experiences of sociality and self, and makes them excessively conscious of their bodily appearance and posture (Willen 2007; Fassin 2011). Moreover, some migrants experience the constant fear of exposure as an 'ongoing "embodied" unease' or anxiety that has detrimental effects of their well-being' (Wahlström Smith 2018, 597; also Khosravi 2010; Holgersson 2011; Bridgen & Mainwaring 2016). Overall, the fact that undocumented migrants need to remain unnoticed even when appearing in public makes them conscious of their bodily being (Sager 2018).

Building on this insightful body of work, we wish to bridge different approaches to embodied undocumentedness and (in)visibility by leaning on Helmuth Plessner's (2019) philosophical anthropology, particularly his thought on embodiment as the medium of agency and the locus of our fundamental vulnerability as persons. In this regard, our aim is twofold. First, we wish to explore the notion of (in)visibility as an experienced and intersubjective dynamism that involves both seeing and being seen physically, but also the due recognition of one's social existence. These dimensions of (in)visibility enmesh in complex ways, and we wish to clarify some of the ways in which this comes to matter in the lives of undocumented migrants. Second, we aim to show that focus on embodiment is key to understanding how the need to conceal one's life from public view may come to harm a person. The risk is high, we contend, especially in protracted situations of undocumented life in hiding.

The paper proceeds so that we first introduce intercorporeality from the perspective of (in)visibility, capturing the dimension of mutuality in embodied encounters. We then turn to the dynamism of human embodiment through the prism of personhood, drawing from Plessner's (1975, 2018, 2019) philosophical anthropology. In particular, we seek to understand how diminished personhood is experienced in undocumented migrants' intercorporeal encounters through what we conceptualize as *façade* – a layer between experienced self and social self that many undocumented migrants are compelled to build. In the following section, we employ the Plessnerian analytical approach to identify responses that undocumented migrants have in situations where their personhood is challenged by forced (in)visibility. To this end we formed a corpus of previously conducted empirical studies that deal with undocumented migrants' experiences of (in)visibility and its embodied aspects in the Nordic context. Re-reading this scholarship allows us to both avoid 'over-researching' vulnerable individuals (Pascucci 2017) by means of 'non-extractive methodology' (Hassouneh 2022), and to analyse the consequences of the protracted condition of embodied (in)visibility for the undocumented migrants involved in these studies. In conclusion, we discuss how our theoretical approach may help making sense of undocumentedness as a lived condition in Nordic countries and beyond.

Intercorporeality and (in)visibility

While sighted humans see each other by simply keeping their eyes open, seeing is always also a social event.² Rather than a solitary perceptive act, or a unidirectional visual operation, seeing produces awareness of conjoined seeing and being seen or,

² While recognizing that 'sensorial encounters' include auditory, olfactory, and haptic elements (Shaker et al. 2021), in this article we focus solely on visibility.

what Stawarska (2006, 25) calls ‘the intercorporeal experience of reciprocity [...] in mutual visual attention.’ This dynamism goes largely unnoticed when we are seen and view people in mundane situations, exchange glances in sudden encounters, look away when feeling uncomfortable or scared, and sometimes end up staring at people when something extraordinary happens. While we are often aware of being seen and engage in purposive acts of looking, a large part of seeing occurs beyond conscious thought (Schuermann 2019).

The mutuality of seeing and being seen is most tangible in interactive relations between co-present individuals (Angus et al. 1991). However, this does not exhaust the sociality of vision, as public visibility constitutes a relation with the generalised *other*, mirroring one’s sense of self in the eyes of the others (Stawarska 2010). Mead (1934) formulates this as an intersubjective dynamism between one’s ‘me’ and ‘I’, where the former refers to the socially constituted self that the latter can become aware of in situationally variable ways (Häkli & Kallio 2014, 2018). In this sense, ‘a self constitutes consciousness of itself by what it is, was or seems to be in the eyes of the others, [and hence] concrete bodily visibility is the condition of social visibility’ (Schuermann 2019, 55). Public visibility, then, has a deep existential and moral significance for the constitution of one’s identity and interpersonal recognition (Honneth 1995, also Fuchs & De Jaegher 2009). This is why a deliberate non-recognition of a person who is physically present, by means of looking right through her and thus rendering her socially invisible, can be an injurious and humiliating act (Honneth 2001).

Importantly for our purposes, embodied existence in a socially constituted visual field is dynamic and never settled, which means that one’s sense of self is always potentially fragile when exposed to ‘the glare of the light of the public’ (Benhabib 2003, 216). In his classic treatise on the objectifying power of seeing, Sartre considers being

visible as an objectifying situation that inevitably leads to loss of self, or the ‘revelation of my being-as-object for the Other’ (Sartre 1992, 344). However, as Shuermann (2019) aptly points out, Sartre’s approach to seeing fails to capture its reciprocity that subjects *both* the seer *and* the seen to the same dynamic visual interplay, which neither can simply master as the “primary” subject.

Subscribing to Shuermann’s (2019) reading of Sartre, we propose embodiment as a prism through which to better understand seeing and being seen as an unsettled and thus potentially disrupting social dynamism which people, nevertheless, tend to navigate successfully. While embodiment has often been recognised as an important site of, and object for, vision, in most cases the focus has been on objectified rather than lived and experiencing body. To move beyond emphasis on the body as an object of social visibility, which it also is, in the next section we turn to Helmuth Plessner’s (2019) thought on human embodiment and its sociality seen in terms of personhood.

Personhood as embodied existence: roles, the mask and the façade

Helmuth Plessner’s (1975, 2018, 2019) philosophical anthropology has recently started to attract growing interest across the social sciences, boosted by the long-expected translation of his major works into English (e.g. Ernste 2004; Krüger 2010; De Mul 2014; Honenberger 2015; Dobeson 2018). Plessner’s large corpus is a meticulously argued and complex body of thought, in which we focus here mostly on his original thinking about human embodiment (also Häkli and Kallio 2021).

In Plessner’s (2019, 272) words, every human being ‘is a body, is in its body, and at the same time outside its body as the perspective, from which it is both’. He terms the two interrelated aspects of human embodiment as the body object (*Körper*) and lived body (*Leib*) that form a duality, occasionally given to consciousness by the

human capacity to reflexivity. With clear parallels to the idea of social visibility as an unsettled and potentially unsettling condition, he considers the *Körper/Leib* duality as an unresolved dynamism in human corporeal existence. We cannot but have our bodies as objects, and live subjectively as bodies, without the possibility to settle their interrelationship once and for all.

Yet, what Plessner calls *personhood* is the relatively unproblematic mode of being that holds in balance these modalities of embodiment in a shared world where ‘all that is human encounters each other’ (Plessner 2019, 283). This balance is always provisional and it sustains the *Körper/Leib* duality rather than lapsing it into unity. Affording a variety of resources to human agency, it designates an empowering condition: the capacity of humans to act and relate with others ‘in the mode of being-each-other’ (Plessner 2019, 283). With many parallels to Merleau-Ponty’s (1962/2002) phenomenology of the body, Plessner’s thought differs precisely in its insistence on the importance of how humans, as persons, perform and accomplish the duality of corporeal and lived body (Krüger 2010).

Importantly, the dynamism between the body object (*Körper*) and the lived body (*Leib*) can occasionally be unsettled with the consequence that the reconciliation between having a body and being one ‘meets with difficulties’, and we become aware of our ‘relation to the body’ (Plessner 1970, 37). This may happen, for example, when our routines are unexpectedly interrupted, or we need to suddenly engage in an unaccustomed activity, or we get pushed out of balance for some other reason. Sarah Willen’s (2007, 9) research with undocumented migrants in Israel offers an illuminating example. One of her research participants describes an intimidating situation as follows:

‘So I’m talking to my friend, who’s also [undocumented], and over her shoulder I can see cops in gray uniforms. I’m waving my hand as I talk, but

as soon as I see them I stop what I'm saying and keep waving my hand. I can't stop waving my hand. So I say to my friend, "My hand is moving by itself". Otherwise I stayed completely frozen until the cops left'.

In such an event, what occurs is a disruptive cut between the subjective and objective body that calls into question one's personhood and weakens one's capacity to agency by causing excessive self-consciousness and/or by directing undue attention to one's physical body.

Human embodied existence is inseparably intertwined with the social world (*Mitwelt*) in which a person lives (Plessner 2019). In *The Limits of Community* Plessner (1999) addresses the socially embedded vulnerability inherent in personhood through the notion of "roles" with which humans are able to protect their intimacy 'from the troubling closeness of other actors of social life' (Chrobak 2021, 43). The notion is based on the premise that, as persons leading socially visible lives and capable of holding in balance our corporeal and lived body, we need to retain a distance between our experienced self and social self – who we are to ourselves and how we appear to others as embodied subjects. These are two dimensions of Plessner's intercorporeal person, neither of which is "authentic", as Chrobak (ibid.) portrays: 'The human presents themselves not only to one's social surroundings but also to themselves.' (see also Vatter & de Leeuw 2019).³

The means by which we do the distancing between our experienced and social self is conceptualised by Plessner as "the mask", pointing directly at the intimate

³ Many of Plessner's works remain available only in German, including *Conditio Humana* (Plessner 1983) and *Anthropologie der Sinne* that we draw from through other scholars. They are included in the collection of his texts published in 1983 with title *Gesammelte Schriften*.

connection between human embodiment and social visibility. He emphasises that the mask is not a tactical element that ‘can be removed to reveal the real, but rather like the face, which conceals by revealing’ (Shuermann 2019, 157). That is, in unchallenged circumstances we do not actively mask or unmask ourselves; it happens intuitively as part of our social lives (or ‘games’ as in Chrobak 2021, 43, cf. Ortner 1996). Ernste (2014) further underlines the political character of this dynamism. It is through the mask that ‘the human being experiences himself as possibly equal to others, as part of a shared “we”-world’ (Ernste 2014, 252). Simply put: ‘In order to function in public life, [a person] needs the equipment of a mask that hides his interiority, but at the same time enables him to interact with his environment.’ (Hengstmengel 2014, 290).

Yet, in situations where we cannot appear socially as the persons who we are, the mask loses its capacity to cohere the two facets of the self and a need for different kind of role-building emerges. In queer studies, scholars have paid attention to tactics that people use for hiding their gendered and sexual subjectivities through performed heteronormative identities, revealing social contexts where personhood can become painfully contested (e.g. Ngidi et al. 2020). This is often also the case in an undocumented life that narrows down considerably the options people have for being socially visible. Reading *Conditio Humana*, Chrobak (2021, 45) describes such situations as ‘excessive encroachment of what belongs to the social realm into the domain of human [where] the human is perceived only as a component of a larger functional whole: as a functionary of the system’. This means that the self may become subordinated by the role built for the community, leading to ‘more rigid behaviour and in restraining authentic expression of the subject’ (ibid.). The loss of personhood is then registered as an imbalance between lived and corporeal body, through what Csordas (1993) calls ‘somatic modes of attention’ – an embodied stress experience of being

excessively conscious of both self and one's physical body.

While the fragility of the *Leib/Körper* balance is usually concealed for those who are able to lead their lives as full persons, for undocumented migrants it is common to experience disruptions in their sense of self (Villegas 2010; Fassin 2011; DeBono et al. 2015). To be seen yet not exposed, undocumented migrants are forced to appear through specific roles that do not allow them social visibility as the persons who they are. This is precisely the pathological condition that we identify from the situation of paperlessness. Instead of upholding the protective distance between intimacy and the social realm through the mask, those who can only appear to others as someone's who they are *not*, are deemed to building what we term as "the façade" between their experienced self and the social self that no longer comfortably sit with each other. In Magyar-Haas' (2014, 278) words, 'possibilities to disguise and to draw artificial boundaries [...] allow for the protection of one's own dignity and integrity'. As aptly described by a participant in Wahlström Smith's (2018, 597) study, such role taking feels like wearing 'clothes you cannot take off'.

In the next section we illustrate the challenges of (in)visibility that undocumented migrants have in their social lives particularly in the more formalised Nordic societies that offer fewer possibilities for navigating socially and economically without legal status. Our analysis is based on previously conducted empirical studies on embodied experiences of (in)visibility among undocumented migrants in Sweden, Norway and Finland. For this purpose, we searched studies systematically from the Scopus database and complemented the findings by searching thoroughly the Google Scholar database.⁴

⁴ We first searched for studies using the following search terms applied to title, keywords, abstract, or body of text: (embodi*) AND (visib*) AND (undocum*) OR (irreg*) OR (paperles*) AND (swed*) OR (norw*) OR (finl*) OR (denm*) OR (icel*). The search terms were given in the form understood by Scopus and Google Scholar databases and the searches

We are interested in the ways in which people seek to respond to the challenges of paperlessness by building a façade where, in other circumstances, they might lead their lives as persons capable of balancing their intimate and social existence. We also pay attention to how these challenges are experienced bodily through somatic modes of attention that centre on one's overbalanced consciousness of being embodied (Csordas 1993).

Visual regimes in/of undocumented life

In the book *Presenting the Absent: An Account of Undocumentedness in Sweden*, Erika Sigvardsson (2012) provides a thorough ethnographic analysis of the situation in which undocumented migrants seek to survive at the fringes of the welfare society, in Stockholm, Sweden. During the past ten years, this situation first changed for the better but then for the worse (e.g. Nordling et al. 2017; Wahlström Smith 2018; Lind 2019; Hammarstedt 2021). Undocumented migrants, or 'the paperless' (*papperslösa, sans papiers*) as those engaged in activist movements often call themselves, lead their lives in Sweden in nearly complete invisibility. This means hiding in privacy – being *gömda* – but also in the public, that is, dwelling among other people as unidentifiable subjects.

were reiterated until the results became saturated. Upon a closer examination, most of the studies included in the first pool of search results lacked focus on the Nordic countries, or employed one or several of the search terms in different meaning of the word or only in passing. We also excluded unpublished sources such as BA and MA theses. We then selected for further scrutiny those studies that fulfilled all our search criteria and dealt with one of the Nordic countries. After assessing the content of 28 remaining studies, we were left with the following eight studies that reported empirical results on undocumented migrants' embodied experiences of (in)visibility in the Nordic context: Khosravi (2010), Holgersson (2011), Sigvardsson (2013), Wahlström Smith (2018), Sager (2018), Bendixsen (2020), Gadd (2022), and Nikunen and Valtonen (2022). While this is an evolving research field, to our knowledge this body of literature is as comprehensive as possible at the time of writing.

Similar findings have been made in other Nordic countries (Jørgensen & Meret 2012; Bendixsen 2018; Karlsen 2020; Tedeschi & Gadd 2021; Nikunen & Valtonen 2022).

While the European North is generally known for its high level of well-being and safety, the region offers remarkably narrow life opportunities to migrants without formal status. Informal space beyond the highly organised and thoroughly digitalised society is thin and scattered. A personal social security code or identity number admitted by the state is needed for a variety of public and private affairs (Bendixsen 2018; Burrell & Schweyher 2021). It is very difficult to find housing, to work, attend education, or get basic services such as health care without the code. Moreover, strong authentication that requires an electronic access code is requested increasingly in many ordinary situations. Getting access to basic infrastructures, such as public transportation or telecommunication services, and making financial transactions and online dealings, often necessitates a confirmed digital identity. Recent sanctuary initiatives in Malmö, Stockholm and Oslo to issue temporary library cards without requesting the card holder's ID information clearly show how difficult it is for undocumented persons to access public services in a digital society (Lundberg & Dahlquist 2018).

The lack of a verifiable digital identity not only means practical difficulties but, also, a constant risk of being exposed as an illegal migrant who can be detained and deported. Even seemingly innocent situations, like getting treatment for a minor injury or being photographed, can involve the request for an ID (Wahlström Smith 2018). That the societies are dominantly white adds to the danger of being identified as illicitly displaced. Staying invisible is hence a constant concern for most undocumented migrants in Nordic countries. At the same time, people must find ways to exist in the cramped situation that can last for years, as embodied persons with physical, mental,

and social needs. Invisibility does not equal with evanescence, rather it compels plenty of active agency and, perhaps surprisingly, visibility.

One practice that undocumented migrants have developed is “hiding in the public”. ‘As soon as an undocumented person ventures out among people, he/she must passively or actively take the guise of someone else’ (Sigvardsdotter 2012, 27). To do this successfully, in the eyes of others, one must employ specific tactics that lead to the establishment of what we call “the façade”. The façade can be understood as a protective layer that replaces the unavailable mask in social encounters. Without it, one risks losing social existence altogether. As expressed by one of the participants in Sigvardsdotter’s study, ‘being undocumented is to cut the communications with one’s surroundings’ (ibid., 128).⁵ As both physical and social presence with other people is of utmost importance to a person’s sense of self, undocumented migrants may strive to engage in communicative relations by performing as someone else, that is, by building a façade between their experienced and visible subjectivity.

Åsa Wahlström Smith’s study presents vividly how this may be done, largely through children’s agency. The minors involved in her study, residing in Sweden with their families, told how they ‘check themselves’ to behave in ways that would make them as unremarkable as possible (Wahlström Smith 2018, 597). This could be to greet people briefly in the housing estate’s flight of stairs’, in a manner *Swedish children* would do. They also employed creative tactics, such as resorting to a superhero identity among local friends to hide their missing identity (‘I’m anonymous’) or exhibiting their

⁵ In an extreme case, this may add to the development of life-threatening conditions, like in the case of Pervasive Refusal Syndrome that migrant children and youth in Sweden, and elsewhere, have suffered from (Hacking 2010; Ngo & Hodes 2020; Otasowie et al. 2021). The condition of being paperless has been identified as a major cause leading to the Pervasive Refusal Syndrome, which may build during a lengthened uncertainty about life prospects, exacerbated by untreated traumas of previous intolerable life (Bodegård 2005; Khosravi 2010).

home to the local police officer's daughter to put an end to doubts about their life situation (ibid. 598). Both tactics were used in an intimidating situation where the child realized that invisibility could only be maintained through performing overt visibility. Other hiding strategies were described by one of the mothers in Wahlström Smith's (ibid., 600) study. She had created a visual façade to appear as a Swede in public, which included carefully selected makeup and dressing, as well as keeping silent even with her children so as not to reveal her accent or foreign language. These examples reveal the prevailing classed and racially codified hegemonies that place under suspicion everyone appearing non-native (see Toivanen 2014, for the Finnish context).

The above-described tactics and strategies enabled undocumented children and adults alike to live in the community, not as themselves but as some-ones recognizable by other people. In Sigvardsdotter's study, one of the participants shared an openly positive experience in this regard. While the undocumented woman had simply asked directions in public space, a kind response from a commoner had made her utterly happy; feeling of being alive, a human among other humans. 'Although the well-wishes were intended for an entirely different endeavour, and for people they were not, it penetrated to them and their object all the same.' (Sigvardsdotter 2012, 115). While the example itself has a positive tone, it also foregrounds what undocumented migrants are constantly living with: in Plessner's terms, the feeling of not being a person. The disruptive consequences of resorting to the façade were explicitly expressed in Sigona's (2012, 55) study: A young undocumented migrant in the UK describes an uncomfortable situation where she was forced to present future educational plans to blend in among other young persons who discussed their forthcoming university studies. She felt that necessity to lie undermined her self-worth.

These opposing examples reveal the double-edged character of the façade. Like the mask, the façade between one's experienced and social self makes possible our appearance as persons among other persons, allowing undocumented migrants at least momentary escapes from the situation of extreme social isolation and providing for practical issues such as going to school and doing groceries. The difference between the two tactics is, however, that the façade is unidirectional, lacking the balance between subjective and social self, which forms the core of the mask. As Hengstmengel (2014, 290) portrays, the intuitively enacted mask concurrently hides our interiority *and* enables interaction, which upholds the balance between our corporeal and lived body. The façade, instead, involved a constant interruption between the two.

A participant in Sigvardsson's (2012, 128) study reflected upon what this may lead to in the long run: 'As an undocumented person, it is easy to get stuck in a vicious circle. But it is not necessarily a downwards spiral, it is inward'. Analysing the personal consequences of the active (in)visible condition, with a phenomenological approach, she argues that the Merleau-Pontian 'split' may gradually come to inform the subjecthood of undocumented migrants. The concept refers to a particular form of alienation where the subject becomes distanced from the world where she or he resides, rather than living in it. In other words, the 'concealment and disguise' that social situations rely on 'transforms a person's relation to his/her environment' (ibid.).

This finding resonates with our Plessnerian conception of the façade which further emphasizes that, in the prolonged situation of paperlessness, also the *relation to oneself as a person* transforms. As Chrobak (2021, 45) points out, when a person becomes 'a functionary of the system', her or his existence to herself *as* herself is contested. We read this contestation as a disruption in one's social existence *as* a person, i.e., someone capable of balancing the 'mutual interlacing' of one's lived and

the corporeal body (*Leib/Körper*) in a way that ‘permits the individual, under certain conditions, to assume [a] mask and posture [... of one’s] social position’ (Plessner 1970, 44). Since the challenge to one’s personhood is deeply embodied in this way, it is often experienced somatically. Through ‘somatic modes of attention’ (Csordas 1993) people may become bodily aware of the vulnerability of their social existence as persons.

In her study on the everyday experiences of being undocumented in Norway, Bendixsen (2020) highlights how her research participants often express the loss of control over their lives through bodily sensations. This entails both feelings of excessive self-awareness, such as anxiety, stress, emotional distress, depression and ‘mental torture’, as well as physiological symptoms like headache, stomach-ache, pain in muscles, loss of appetite and insomnia. Similarly, Holgersson (2011, 256) found in her study that people in hiding experience ‘pounding hearts and sweaty palms’ when ‘struggling not to let the fear show’. Bendixsen reads these symptoms as experiences of ‘embodied unbelonging’ accumulated through a series of challenging encounters between undocumented migrants and the official Norwegian society (Bendixsen 2020, 488). Lacking the possibility to position themselves as full persons in these encounters, the migrants are pushed out of balance into a ‘disorganization in relation to [their] “position” [their] “state of being,” which, in view of the mediative role of [their] body, also affects the relation to the body’ (Plessner 1970, 109).

Similar implications to undocumented migrants’ mental and physiological well-being are described in Khosravi’s (2010) ethnographic study on life as an undocumented migrant in Sweden. Several of his research participants described experiences of becoming listless and depressed in consequence of being separated from family members, or having sleep disorders and psychosomatic pain under stressful life

conditions in the new hostile environment. Highlighting the severity of physiological consequences of undocumentedness, Khosravi (2010) points at an epidemic in 2006 where more than 400 children of undocumented migrants became completely unresponsive and refused to ‘talk, eat, drink, and move over periods of months or even years’ (also Bodegård 2005; Hacking 2010). Both embodied experiences are examples of loss of personhood and the ‘organized relation’ to one’s body that it entails (Plessner 1970, 111).

Challenges to personhood are often intimately linked with the practices through which undocumented migrants struggle with visibility and the requirement of social invisibility as part of their embodied agency that turns intercorporeal at the presence of other people (e.g. Weiss 1999). In her study on the visibility and invisibility as everyday experience in undocumented migrants’ lives in the Swedish context, Sager (2018) points at the embodied visibility as one of the sources of anxiety among migrants. In particular fears of being caught by police, or being reported to officials by someone if one’s undocumentedness is exposed, were felt as an intense embodied stress. In words of one of her research participants, ‘when we saw a police car, the children got so scared they jumped and tried to hide in the bushes. We were totally struck by panic’ (Sager 2018, 179).

Yet, at stake is not only fear of being exposed as such, but also diminishing existence as a person: ‘the experience of feeling invisible, being rendered non-existent, as the most pervasive and deeply rooted fear’ in an irregular situation (Sager 2018, 179). Drawing from similar findings in the Greek islands’ context, Spathopoulou, Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi (2020, 19) argue that this may lead to instrumentalising one’s body and ‘adopting [the category of vulnerability] as an embodied identity’. Bendixsen’s (2020) study underlines the particular importance of being recognized as a

person for undocumented migrants, even if only temporarily. What this entails is not simply an acceptable status or social role, but rather physical co-presence and interaction with trusted people that allows ‘migrants to feel ‘relaxed’ and to belong to a welcoming religious or ethnic community’ (Bendixsen 2020, 495). In the Finnish context, Nikunen and Valtonen (2022) found that giving public visibility to experienced embodied non-existence can also lead to such recognition. They organized a photography workshop leading to an exhibition at a world culture museum, where photographs taken by undocumented migrants portrayed how ‘they are here, but not present’ (ibid., 225).

The possible need for maintaining a façade to hide one’s immigration status depends on how much migrants can trust the others in their communities and social circles. While there is less research on this dimension in the Nordic context, in the US many scholars have paid attention to strategic ways of hiding. Studying latinx students in California, Villegas (2010, 159) found that many undocumented youths used such a façade to handle their fear of being exposed and termed this ‘strategic invisibility [whereby] the identity visibilized is one that works counter to prevalent beliefs of undocumented migrants’. In this case the status as a university student offered an identity that could strategically direct attention away from possible suspicions about their immigration status, as in California many students with Mexican background have no issues with their legal status (Villegas 2010). Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas (2014, 425) refer to this ‘undetectability of “integrated” unauthorized migrants’ with the notion of ‘camouflage [...] a situation of invisibility within visibility’.

In contrast to this, Sager’s (2018) analysis illuminates how the fear of being too visible under the public eye is interlaced with the painful sense of becoming invisible as a human being. In the Nordic context, where whiteness is even more pervasive

hegemonic norm in public space, and where many immigrants, hence, stand out as the ethnicized ‘other’, this interlacing becomes an intimately embodied experience that is difficult to handle by building a façade because the latter is precisely what constitutes the problem (also Guðjónsdóttir 2014; Toivanen 2014). In this situation undocumented migrants not only lack personhood in the sense of being able to belong in social life (conducting a ‘mask’ in Plessner’s terms), but also in the sense of lacking the possibility to blend in by means of strategic invisibility. The racializing encounters where their apparent non-belonging is made explicit are hurtful in themselves but living with the possible consequences further adds to their experienced vulnerability. When the fear of being found, caught and deported takes over, undocumented migrants may experience an intense need to physically hide themselves, to literally stay indoors, with detrimental consequences to their physical and mental well-being (Bendixsen 2020).

Gadd’s (2022) study of the experiences of undocumented migrants in Finland clearly reveals the severity of the embodied consequences of diminished personhood. By moving to bigger cities with larger immigrant population, many undocumented migrants seek the possibility for a life behind a socially protective façade. Yet, life that requires “hiding in public” is not without consequences to well-being. The situation in which one is forced to conduct bodily self-objectivization to maintain a socially viable position – a place and relation with the social world – is experienced as an all-encompassing burden. As one of the research participants in Sigona’s UK-based study expressed, ‘you try to force yourself, you know you live a life that is not true, a life full of lies’ (Sigona 2012, 55). Whereas the mask allows for social role-taking as skilful conduct that sustains one’s personhood, life behind the façade can be characterised as ‘conduct of conduct’ enacted by the Foucauldian self-governing subject deeply entangled in the societal power relations that produce irregularity. As Villegas (2010)

concludes, such situations may lead to the loss of self-esteem and internalization of negative sense of self. Then anxiety, caused by fears of the past or the uncertainties of the future, may ‘take on an embodied form’ (Gadd 2022, 117).

In all, we hope that our re-reading of these insightful ethnographic studies from three Nordic countries has shown how Plessner’s thought about embodied personhood can help to further analyse the many hardships and difficulties, but also coping strategies and possibilities, that characterise undocumented life under radar. Specifically, we propose that façade could be a useful analytical concept for bringing together embodied and visual dimensions of experienced undocumentedness. It allows to see how being challenged as a person – without rights to social existence yet with constant demands and will to appear as some-one among other people – is unsettling inasmuch it means becoming excessively conscious of oneself or one’s physical being through (in)visibility. The situations in which undocumented migrants’ personhood is challenged are thus experienced as fundamentally disturbing, with risk of a loss of integrity, severe problems in mental and physical well-being, and diminished agency.

Conclusions

This paper has drawn attention to the question of visibility as a common concern among undocumented migrants, with specific focus on predominantly white Nordic countries where the danger of being exposed as an illegal dweller is particularly high due to the highly organised and digitalised society. It contributes to interdisciplinary discussions that have started to pay attention to how people in these vulnerable life situations survive under the governing regimes and mediatised hypervisibility that monitor their precarious lives through various formal and informal practices, shedding light specifically to tactics of social (in)visibility that ‘the paperless’ employ (e.g. Coutin

2005; DeBono et al. 2015; Nordling et al. 2017; Bendixsen 2018; Khosravi 2018; Sager 2018; Wahlström Smith 2018; Lind 2019; Gavard-Suaire 2020; Hammarstedt 2021).

Our approach on the nexus between visibility and embodiment is essentially social, following Schuermann (2019, 55) who defines ‘concrete bodily visibility [as] the condition of social visibility’, and Honneth (1995) who accentuates the existential and moral significance of public visibility for the constitution of identities and interpersonal recognition.

The paper puts forward an argument that, in their attempts to hide from the governing regime (in practice authorities, colleagues, teachers, friends, neighbours, service providers, and other acquaintances unaware of their lacking status), undocumented migrants draw heavily on (in)visibility tactics through which they can build a ‘façade’ between their experienced and social self. We have developed the concept of the façade based on Helmuth Plessner’s (2018, 2019) philosophical anthropology where human embodiment is identified as the medium of agency and the locus of our fundamental vulnerability as ‘persons’. The Plessnerian notion of personhood lies at the centre of our conceptualization, denoting the basic mode of being that holds in balance the duality of human embodiment (*Körper/Leib*), which provides for our capacities to act and relate with others (Plessner 2019, 283). We find that Plessner’s original thought, further developed by contemporary scholars (e.g. Ernste 2004; Krüger 2010; De Mul 2014; Hengstmengel 2014; Honenberger 2015; Dobeson 2018; Shuermann 2019; Chrobak 2021), offers useful analytical tools for exploring what happens to human agency when a person undergoes a prolonged situation of paperlessness.

Drawing on the work by scholars who have carried out ethnographic research with undocumented migrants in the Nordic region (Khosravi 2010; Holgersson 2011;

Sigvardsdotter 2012; Wahlström Smith 2018; Sager 2018; Bendixsen 2020; Gadd 2022; and Nikunen and Valtonen 2022), we have shed light on the notion of (in)visibility in these life situations, as an intercorporeal, experienced, and intersubjective dynamism that involves both seeing and being seen. As these studies show, leading an irregularized life is particularly challenging in Nordic societies where migrants lack many of the livelihood opportunities available in large European and US migrations hubs or metropolitan cities. We have highlighted that focus on embodiment is key to understanding the importance of due recognition of one's social existence, while it also makes conceivable how the need to conceal one's experiential life from public view is harmful to personhood. The concept of façade, distinguished from Plessner's original concept of mask that refers to the ordinary condition of social embodied existence, reveals the two-edged character of the analysed tactics of (in)visibility.

We have suggested that, first, façade forms a protective layer between the person who must hide from the society and those whom she or he faces in formal and informal encounters, as an embodied person who is both seen and who can see others. This allows for social interaction as a recognizable some-one, and for leading a life in the community to a certain extent. Second, as the performed identity deviates from one's experienced subjectivity, the constant maintenance of 'pretend personhood' grows burdensome and harmful. As Sigvardsdotter (2012) argues, in such situations people gradually become distanced from, rather than living in, their social world. In Plessnerian terms, when the dynamism between the lived body (*Leib*) and the body object (*Körper*) cannot operate in an intuitive manner, the consequences to one's agency may be detrimental. The prolonged situation of living with the façade hinders one's possibility to exist as a person, to the point where some people lose their zest for life (Bodegård 2005; Hacking 2010, also Kallio, Meier and Häkli 2021). While this pertains to some

extent to all restrictive life situations, people leading undocumented lives are particularly vulnerable in this regard.

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