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**Strengths-based social work with unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families:**

**A qualitative study of *Barn i Start***

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## Abstract

*This thesis explores strengths-based social work with unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families in Lund, Sweden, through a qualitative study based on participant observation and interviews at Barn i Start (BiS), a program for refugees. Previous research claims that welfare provision in Sweden has changed from a purely state-run service provider toward a heterogenic landscape of various public, private and non-governmental actors, and that different normative discourses inform social work with migrants. This study explores the practice of strengths-based social work in a mixed public/non-governmental organization, against the backdrop of challenges related to the social integration of refugees in Sweden. Combining theoretical foundations from both the concept of social integration and the professional field of social work provides an effective basis in the analysis of the situation of unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families in Sweden. Findings suggest certain structural benefits to a mixed public/non-governmental approach, as well as apparent practical gains of the strengths-based social work performed by BiS in Lund as a family-centered approach aiming at the strengths and capabilities of participants. Considering a wide range of obstacles when having arrived in Sweden, BiS offers unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families safe and reliable services and group workshops promoting both self-awareness and practical information through discussion, exercises and reflection.*

**Keywords:** Social work; Migration; Social integration; Strengths-based social work; Unaccompanied minors; Newly-arrived families; Refugees; Public/non-governmental partnerships

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## Abbreviations

**BiS** Barn i Start

**HRW** Human Rights Watch

**IFSW** The International Federation of Social Workers

**IM** Individuell Människohjälp

**NASW** The National Association of Social Workers

**NGO** Non-governmental organization

**OECD** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**PES** Public Employment Service

**UNHCR** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background and research problem

During 2015, Sweden received 162 877 applications for asylum (Migrationsverket, 2016a). The sheer numbers generate certain implications for a country which “in the international discussion has always been seen as an especially admired or criticized model of the welfare state’ (Kaufmann, 2013:115). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) criticizes the housing shortages in many Swedish municipalities slowing down the settlement and integration process of newly-arrived refugees (OECD, 2016a). Further, Human Rights Watch (HRW) identifies key shortcomings in the Swedish treatment of unaccompanied minors, including a lack of appropriate accommodations and lengthy asylum application processes. As a consequence of these deficiencies “some children are not receiving the care and attention they need and to which they are entitled” (HRW, 2016). As indicated, there are some serious issues arising from migration concerning the social well-being and social settlement of newly-arrived children and their families in Sweden. In view of these circumstances, it remains unclear how the situation for unaccompanied minors and migrant families in Sweden can be improved.

During the 1960s, the immigration issue rose in prominence in Sweden and became a question for social work (Montesino & Righard, 2015:10). Subsequently, discussions began on the topic of how to integrate immigrants into society, using slogans of cultural pluralism, equality, freedom of choice and partnership (Bevelander, 2009:300). Political decision makers initiated integration programs based on a common Swedish welfare tradition according to which social issues were addressed by politics and mostly administrative actions. Social welfare authorities have, however, been criticized for their understanding of refugees as unable to manage their own lives (Montesino & Righard, 2015:57). This focus on refugees as a problem group was institutionalized after the Second World War (Montesino & Righard, 2015:45). Critics have asserted that the efforts by the state-run social services are experienced as incomplete, as they negatively affect the self-

reliance of migrants (Harslof & Ulmestig, 2013:203; Kamali, 2004:11). Furthermore, there has been a discourse on social workers being unprepared to meet contemporary global developments that create social vulnerability. As social work does not remain unaffected by globalization, it is necessary to locate social issues at the local level also in relation to an international context. Social work in Sweden, however, both in education and in practice, does not pay special attention to the historical context of global phenomena such as conflicts, warfare and geopolitical developments like colonialism, racism and violence (Jönsson, 2014:39). In terms of migration in Sweden, contextualization appears difficult: “with the country located at the geographic margins and not having any colonies of its own, immigration and minorities have hardly played a role historically” (Kaufmann, 2013:115). Therefore, one might question if Swedish social workers are sufficiently trained to work with such groups.

Still, social work performs a central role at the local level within the work with newly-arrived refugees in Sweden. It can be said, however, that the field of social work has been too passive regarding ongoing social changes, such as racism, and often the professionals are subordinated administrative processes and are thinking in terms of cost-efficiency. This passivity weakens the core objectives and strengths of the social work profession, which are to provide support and safe conditions to people in vulnerable situations (Montesino & Righard, 2015:222).

Social work in Sweden follows set categories in order to offer services to defined target groups, often referred to as individual or family levels (Montesino & Righard, 2015:59; Perlinski, Blom, Moren & Lundgren, 2011:63). Therefore, Swedish social work mirrors a heterogenic field from child welfare, social care, drug and alcohol treatment through social assistance, often individual or family oriented. However, the adherence to group referred interventions is not unproblematic, as some groups, such as unaccompanied children and refugee families, are insufficiently protected as they are not effectively taken care of by the established institutions of social protection such as schools, families or health care. In the face of the challenging life situations of those unaccompanied minors and families, there is a need for adjustments within the objectives of social work themselves (Montesino

& Righard, 2015:59). Jönsson (2014:44-45) highlights that social workers in Sweden are limited in their possibilities to face social problems with new and creative approaches beyond the established ways of state-centered social work. The increasing refugee and migration flows challenge the Swedish state-centered social work approach, the current social integration practices and the established knowledge on migration within the discipline of social work.

Due to the neoliberal reorganization of the Swedish welfare model since the 1990s, social work has changed. Both the characteristics of the institutional landscape and the provision of social assistance are influenced by trends of decentralization, specialization and privatization. As a consequence of a politicized field, unfavorable framework conditions, such as economic interests and the rigidly constructed right to asylum, often make it hard for social workers to support newly-arrived refugees to the extent appropriate for what is essentially a human rights profession (Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003:176). Changing framework conditions within the welfare state raise new questions about the relationship between professionals and clients and about the contents of the agenda driven by social welfare authorities. As responsibilities within social welfare provision are increasingly being shifted from the Swedish government to non-governmental actors (NGOs and private organizations), the framework of social work with migrants at the local level is adapting to this restructuring. As a result of a retreating welfare state, mixed public/non-governmental cooperation is becoming increasingly common as different actors from different sectors work together in the same fields (Jönsson, 2014:44).

We need to understand how practical social work is realized in a changing policy field and in new organizational contexts in order to further develop appropriate social integration strategies to newly arrived people. This can help with identifying whether activities respond to this category's state and needs, and what potential benefits and limitations such activities include.

The process of migration might be fraught with difficulties, and often involves negative experiences for newly arrived children and families. On this account, social work needs to provide services that improve the situation of the newly

arrived by focusing on the strengths and resources of these clients. Kessler (2009) sees declining state responsibility as a reason for a trend in social work programs to place more responsibility on the clients themselves “for designing and constructing their own lives’ (311) and to regard their social problems as a deficit of skills. Accordingly, the idea of focusing on strengths within social work is developed from the fact that the helping professions put much emphasis on “psychosocial approaches based on individual, family, and community pathology, deficits, problems, abnormality, victimization, and disorder” (Saleebey, 1996:296). The strengths-based perspective and practice, then, is a social work theory paying attention to the existing strengths, skills, interests and resources of an individual. While individualized social work might conceive migration as a problem or as different from the norm, the strength oriented approach tries to focus on the individual resources and skills. The clients are encouraged to approach their own situation in the present, with their own expertise, by looking at what is going well and to proceed from this positive base.

The organization *Barn i Start* (“Children in Start”) is a social work program for refugee children and families incorporating these current changes. In Lund, Sweden, professionals from both public welfare authorities and volunteers from non-public and church organizations are involved in this program. In its manual, *BiS* states that the individual resources and skills of the participants are their primary tools, and is described as an approach facing the social situation of newly-arrived people in Sweden. The focus lies primarily on children but also includes their parents and siblings, irrespective of residence permit status. By focusing on the present, *BiS* wants to support both children and their families to a good start in the new country by distancing itself from a purely problem and deficit orientation. It is about creating safe meeting places for newly arrived families and unaccompanied children in order to share feelings and thoughts with others, to gain new perspectives about themselves and about their own individual resources.

The extent to which this approach is innovative or adapting to new circumstances is an open question. *BiS* seems to be a response to the restructuring of purely state-run social services focusing on the social integration of migrants.

How they perceive the situation of newly arrived children and families, and which working strategies they use, will be the main focus of this study.

### 1.2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore how social work with unaccompanied minors and newly arrived families is performed at *BiS* in Lund, Sweden. By describing the life circumstances of participants identified by *BiS*, it can explain how *BiS* perceives the social situation, and its related challenges, of the recently arrived in the setting of a new country. This will facilitate describing how the strengths-oriented working strategies of the organization are implemented within *BiS*. Finally, this study identifies how the different stakeholders are involved in the mixed organizational structure and the choice of contents within the program design. How *BiS* meets these challenges will also provide possible indications for improvement of structural impediments and/or benefits of the mixed model.

### 1.3. Research questions

With regards to the purpose of the study, the research questions are as follows:

#### Main question:

How is strengths-oriented social work with unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families performed within the mixed public/non-governmental approach of *Barn i Start* in Lund, Sweden?

#### Sub questions:

1. How does *BiS* perceive the social situation of the recently arrived?
2. What strategies does *BiS* employ in its work?
3. How does *BiS* stimulate the participants to use their own resources?
4. How are the different actors involved in the realization of *BiS*?

#### 1.4. *Barn i Start*

At Lund municipality in Sweden, almost directly across from Denmark connected via the Øresund Bridge, symbolizing an entrance gate for arriving foreigners, a strengths-based social work approach, comprising different actors of the public and non-public sector, is offered to migrants irrespective of residence status. In a brochure by *BiS* Lund, the organization is described as a social work group program for migrant children and families that emphasizes the individual resources and skills of the participants by promoting a safe forum for the exchange of migration experiences and related challenges of being new to a country.

*BiS* works with different groups of children of different ages, and offers groups for their parents or guardians as well. Much focus is put on the perspective of the migrants, and the perspective of children in particular. In short, the aim is to strengthen children's identity and self-esteem. Beyond the daily work, *BiS* offers group workshops. The weekly sessions revolve around different topics such as emotions, defense mechanisms, the time before the flight, the flight itself, family, risks and choices, "you are valuable", communication and the future. Within the weekly group workshops, participants are also encouraged to gain more knowledge about Swedish society and to expand their social networks.

At *BiS*, children and their parents meet others who often have similar migration experiences, and they are supported to see themselves as valuable. *BiS* wants the children and their guardians to express themselves in different ways in order to activate resources and to experience themselves on different levels. Various approaches are therefore used in the group sessions, such as, for instance, art, group talks, music and role plays (*BiS* Lund, 2014). *BiS* strongly emphasizes the participants' way of thinking, skills, behavior and emotional life. Consequently, the approach follows the idea that social work with people who have experienced stress and persecution should focus on the existing resources of the affected individuals and not try to only focus on symptoms and a negative situation. Thus, the *BiS* workshops try to empower the skills that are available and well-functioning to allow the participants to meet the demands of a new life in Sweden. The possibly negative

history and experiences are intended to transform into better self-understanding as well as knowledge about both themselves and the asylum process itself. In this way social integration and (psycho-social) health and well-being is promoted by giving opportunities to create a social network with other migrants, to strengthen one's self-image and to enhance affiliation among the participants of the workshops (BiS Lund, 2014).

## 2. Research background: From public to mixed welfare provision

This chapter engages the research on changes in social welfare provision, and on social work with migrants, in Sweden. Relevant stakeholders and perspectives are explained further throughout this chapter. The literature on the subject is selected of a wide range of scholars from different disciplines. The first section discusses studies focusing on the changing organizational character of welfare provision and delivery. The second section explores research on social work with migrants from various point of views. The third section focus on critical studies on social work with migrants in Sweden. Although obviously not comprehensive, literature presented here represents a broad array of approaches to the subject.

### 2.1. Public sector

In Sweden, the provision of social welfare and social work is to a large extent a public sector responsibility (Perlinski *et al.*, 2011:62). The national, county and local municipal levels comprise the main foundation of this public sector. Operating relatively independently, state organizations are entrusted with social welfare and social integration programs. Even though they have no direct influence on the associated legislation, their influence on the Swedish public is strong (Schierup, Hansen & Castles, 2006:224). Perlinski *et al.* (2011:62), however, emphasize that according to a constitutionally guaranteed autonomy, municipalities are the ones responsible for the provision of social welfare, both politically and financially. As concerns the newly-arrived, the Public Employment Service (PES) is responsible

for introduction programs and the granting of financial assistance. The municipalities, however, are important actors in receiving newly arrived individuals, particularly in the areas of housing, schooling and education (Wiesbrock, 2011:55). It is clear that even though PES is playing a leading role in migrant integration in Sweden, there are actors at the national and local levels involved, as well, supporting both the recently arrived and those already established in Sweden (OECD, 2014:20).

A central element of the Swedish welfare model is to provide social services and social protection systems financed through taxes. Due to the economic recession of the 1990s, however, the government restructured the publicly financed welfare system (Edlund & Johansson Sevä, 2013:547). Reforms by the Bildt government in 1991, based on the idea that public welfare can be produced by private actors, have led to increasing privatization (Larsson, Letell & Thörn, 2012:4). Even though there have been organizational changes, “the character and basic principles of the welfare state have not changed drastically from the general or universal model’ (Bergh, 2014:67). It might be questioned, however, that as the reforms aim at competition among service providers and the freedom of choice, Sweden has come closer to a capitalist welfare state. Schierup, Hansen and Castles (2006:206) describe a situation where the restructuring of public services might help undermine the quality of welfare. This is due to the reorganization of state institutions and that the provision of services are increasingly assigned to private actors. Furthermore, financial means at the local level remain insufficient (Schierup, Hansen & Castles, 2006:206).

In 1996, Lundström (124) noted that the Swedish voluntary sector had but little importance within social welfare due to the fact that the government delegated responsibility to the municipalities. Comparing Sweden with continental Europe, the welfare system has been regarded as providing “high levels of both social security transfers and government and tax-financed social services’ (Dellgran & Höjer, 2005:41). As a consequence, non-public actors have been more important there than in Sweden.

Twenty years ago, however, there were already trends toward a declining Swedish government-run welfare state in a changing global context. As a consequence, new approaches and services gain more importance and “fill a more central role, both as producers of services and as interest organizations” (Lundström, 1996:141-142). Jönsson (2014:44) sees decreasing state responsibility as a reason for the non-public sector to take more responsibility in order to engage social problems and to balance still-existing social inequalities. In light of the many civil integration activities and campaigns which have appeared in Sweden as a response to the large influx of asylum seekers, it becomes clear that cooperation between different sectors should be extended (OECD, 2016b:16).

## 2.2. Non-governmental actors

Due to neoliberal changes in Sweden, and their associated deregulation, fragmentation and privatization (Granberg, 2008:374), the social welfare provided by the state is declining and more responsibility is relegated to private and non-governmental actors within social work. In the context of unaccompanied minors, different forms of support have been established, such as initiatives for the provision of housing, food and health. Other initiatives focus on counseling or offer legal support or assist in communicating with the authorities. Other campaigns try to raise awareness of the situation and needs of migrants. Some also try to foster cooperation between different professionals across various sectors in order to improve the situation for migrants living in Sweden (Jönsson, 2014:44).

Lavalette and Ferguson (2007:447) make the presumption that an increase in non-governmental participation will result in more freedom within social work action beyond the restricted framework shaped by the state. In this way, civil society actors will become valuable partners of other voluntary and non-public organizations collaborating on social work (*Ibid.*:447). Among the non-governmental actors engaged in social work there is a wide range of different actors including “capitalist enterprises, households, social movements, NGOs, voluntary political institutions such as the church, professional organizations, trade unions, cultural

organizations, independent media organizations, political parties, electoral associations and a range of welfare and disciplinary institutions such as schools, hospitals, asylums and prisons' (*Ibid.*:452).

Even though an increase in non-governmental engagement in Sweden can be seen as a democratic and desirable development, it has to be treated with caution as it is a broad collection of different stakeholders and approaches representing many contradictory interests. As this development may undermine state-run social welfare, social work professionals should critically scrutinize such civil society activities (*Ibid.*:457). Powell and Geoghegan (2005:143) also identify certain challenges due to the re-emergence of non-public actors in social work. As social welfare is increasingly carried out by civil society, strategic cooperation between the state and the stakeholders of the third sector is seen as valuable (*Ibid.*:143), although it may be worth noting that even though actors in the third way have good intentions to support migrants, their approaches and philosophies sometimes carry negative ramifications for their target groups (Jönsson, 2014:44).

Due to the declining Swedish welfare state, the effectiveness of alternative approaches, such as those by civil society, should be questioned. Jönsson argues that "NGOs receiving economic support from the state have been under increasing pressure to convince governmental authorities of their effectiveness in their activities" (*Ibid.*:45). There is a trend toward project-based social welfare with limited goals "by identifying and categorizing vulnerable groups and presenting successful interventions" (*Ibid.*:45). Accordingly, it remains questionable to which extent new social programs are indeed effective rather than mere cosmetics in order to demonstrate readiness to act in the debate on migrants and their life situation in Sweden.

### 2.3. Private actors

Changes due to economic conditions and the availability of new knowledge made available by globalization can be regarded as both positive and negative. Privatization can be seen as a direct reaction to discontentment, uncertainty and substantive changes (Becher, 1999, *cited in* Dellgran & Höjer, 2005:44). The ongoing development of privatization within social welfare activity is readily discernible over the last several decades. As the interaction between state and market is changing the traditional framework of welfare provision, private actors gain more importance across Europe (Gilbert, 2002:100). Fernandes (2015:259) sees Sweden as a clear example of how a traditional social work field has changed toward privatization of welfare services. This development may have negative consequences for newly-arrived refugees due to changing framework conditions within social welfare.

Similar to other European countries, the Swedish welfare system today is characterized by decentralization, privatization and a mentality of cost-efficiency. There is a recognizable development of publicly financed social work activities being carried out by private companies that are subcontracted (Liljegren, Dellgran & Hojer, 2008:196). The trend toward privatization can be viewed as a process away from purely government-run social work activities financed through taxes; however, Gilbert notes that “no system of social protection among the Western democracies has ever been purely public” (Gilbert, 2002:100). Accordingly, the state is commonly supported by other organizations and institutions, such as family or church, in order to provide social welfare and protection. According to Liljegren, Dellgran and Hojer (2008:197), Sweden is experiencing a shift toward welfare pluralism on the one hand, while, at the other hand, the Swedish state is supplanted from its leadership role in the provision of social protection measures by a mixed range of service providers. Consequently, clients do no longer exclusively have contact with public authorities due to the reason that private actors produce social welfare as well (Edlund and Johansson Sevä, 2013:543).

Dellgran and Höjer (2005:42) highlight the complexity of the phenomenon within the Swedish context both in political language and in implementation, according to which there are two reasons for privatization within Swedish welfare. One can be characterized as politically initiated, where former state-run activities are given to alternative actors. A second one is described as a more spontaneous privatization “where former employees of national and local government agencies start their own practices and sell their services to various public actors” (*Ibid.*:42). Dellgran and Höjer do, however, identify indications for privatization in Sweden also to be both because of discontentment and as “a professional strategy for status, legitimacy, autonomy and control” (*Ibid.*:42). To illustrate, as there is a great need for housing for newly arrived individuals in Sweden, many private accommodation providers have appeared. Some are accused by activists of being unserious actors taking advantage of the lack of housing (Al Ghussain, 2016). As a consequence, it can be assumed that an uncertain housing condition for migrant children and families can affect their life situation and social well-being.

*BiS* in Lund is a social work activity that involves actors from different sectors. Both public and non-governmental actors participate in the program realization. The local social services cooperate with the church of Sweden and with the non-governmental organization *Individuell Människohjälp* (“Swedish Development Partner”).

## 2.4. Social work with migrants

### 2.4.1. Individual focus

Within practical social work, a central area of action is preventive and counseling work with children and families. Social work with migrants, however, is concerned not only with handling the individual challenges of others, but must itself also negotiate between conflicting requirements: It is an advocate of socially disadvantaged individuals and groups with the aim of their participation and social integration, but, on the other hand, social work should also act as an agent of its contracting

authorities, its respective norms as well as having an obligation to society. Social workers, then, find themselves within an interdependent web of various actors (Dimitrijoska & Ilievski, 2016:57).

People who wish to seek asylum in Sweden have to contact the migration authorities. While the decision is being processed, the asylum seeker receives housing and food by the migration authorities. When the investigation by the authorities is finished, a refugee permitted to stay is asked to join an introduction program usually lasting between 18-24 months. The introduction programs are geared toward issues of education in Swedish, knowledge about society and an introduction into the labor market (Bergmark & Minas, 2006:38).

Soydan (1999:101) claims that, apart from issues of belonging to a minority and having experienced migration, newly-arrived families compare to Swedish families in life circumstances, including issues arising from cohabitation, parenting or financial worries (*Ibid.*). The unique challenges arising from migration and belonging to a minority group revolve around the facts of being in the setting of a new and foreign country, and the experiences of leaving one's home due to war and conflict may have traumatized both children and their parents. Once arrived in a new country, feelings of separation from relatives and being perceived as a stranger by the host society can also be stressful (Gustafsson, Fioretos & Norström, 2012:75).

Social work practitioners have to take on several roles, including in the work with families and children seeking asylum. On the one hand they have to act as human rights defenders, while, on the other, they are receivers and active listeners to, potentially traumatic, experiences and stories of flight, war and persecution. Furthermore, they are companions while vulnerable newly-arrived children and families settle down in a new and foreign context (Healy & Link, 2012:224). Since social work is a human rights profession that advocates social justice, one could question whether professionals in Sweden have been sufficiently proactive regarding existing negative conditions or have simply been reduced to the remote helpers of an immigration control solely deciding on access to resources and ser-

vices. It is therefore important to encourage an active position for practitioners engaging themselves beyond the expected demands for the well-being of migrants. Healy and Link (*Ibid.*) suggest that social work practitioners need to incorporate an extensive perspective, including the socio-ecological context, in respect to the precarious living situations of migrants. Further, relevant structures and services within the local, national, regional and international context have to be included and employed in order to be in a position to work with the vast diversity of migrants' experiences.

Holmqvist (2009:417) identifies a trend whereby migration is regarded as an individual handicap within the Swedish welfare state. As a consequence, newly arrived families and children are encountered on the basis of their psychosocial hardships which need to be addressed and resolved by the Swedish welfare services. This view of the welfare services moves responsibility for the precarious situation away from global or structural factors, toward the individual who is then at least involved for the establishment of the social emergency (*Ibid.*).

It might be assumed that attention is not paid to the entirety of the problem in the situation of those recently arrived in Sweden, but that issues arising from migration are reduced to questions of gender or culture. In this way, the problems are both ascribed to a certain group and individualized. The responsibility is shifted to the newly-arrived to improve their situation by own measures. Another facet of individualizing the social problems of newly-arrived people is the lack of focus on exclusionary structures or incomplete political and civil rights, that may exist in society and that hinder newly-arrived children and families from participating actively at all levels of society. In this context, Fernandes (2015:258) criticizes the Swedish introduction programs for putting too much emphasis on the responsibility of the individual. Societal obstacles or problems with integration policy are thus insufficiently addressed.

#### 2.4.2. Ethnic groups

Traditionally, Sweden can be viewed as a homogeneous country in terms of culture and ethnicity (Bay, Strömblad & Bengtsson, 2010:1). Although some other European countries have a longer history of receiving migrants, this phenomenon was not very common in Sweden before the 1960s. Among the Nordic countries today, however, Sweden has the highest number of immigrants (Harslof & Ulmestig, 2013:35). In 2015, Sweden, a nation of approximately 10 million inhabitants and known historically for its pro-immigration policies, received the highest number of asylum seekers per capita compared with other European countries (Traub, 2016).

Ethnicity is a contentious concept due to the fact that it is not easily defined or separated from terms such as race and culture. Within the Nordic countries, Harslof and Ulmestig (2013:193) identify a common understanding of ethnicity that refers to a geographical origin and culture. It is, however, worth critiquing that the concept of race is still part of discourses on ethnicity and culture. Soydan (1999:160) comes to the conclusion that social work with minorities is influenced by ethnocentrism. An ethnocentric perspective judges foreign cultures based on one's own cultural context, viewing the latter as more important or better.

This becomes clear in different ways, particular in the treatment of immigrants in Sweden, and other Nordic countries, where they are perceived to be in need of training as compared to the regular local population (Harslof & Ulmestig, 2013:204). Harslof and Ulmestig point out the evidence on ethnification being part of Swedish social welfare in order to justify introduction activities for immigrants since a “distinction between dominant and subordinate groups is created between immigrants and the overall population and where the majority population is constructed as the norm and immigrants the others”(Ibid.:212). It becomes apparent, that ethnification is a concept that focusses on the uniqueness and otherness of people in order to interpret this differences as authorization or restriction for rights. For this reason, newly arrived migrants are at risk of being regarded as passive and ascribed negative qualities based on stereotypical patterns (Ibid.). Montesino and Righard (2015:79) also highlight that differences between the newly-arrived and

the host society are constructed, where the former are seen as others and the latter as the norm. Further, they describe an ethnification associated with the attribution of social risks or the expectation of deviant behavior.

#### 2.4.3. Cultural differences

Due to the complexity of culture and other related concepts, such as ethnicity and race, these terms are often discussed in many divergent and contradictory ways (Montesino & Righard, 2015:32). Due to immigration over the past few decades, Swedish social work recipients have become an ethnically and religiously diverse group. As welfare services in Sweden are still to a large extent a public sector responsibility, Eliassi highlights the importance of the “settings where institutional encounters occur between social workers and immigrant clients”(2015:555). In this context, Eliassi (2015:569) sees a clear culturalist perspective within Swedish social work that creates otherness by separating between the local Swedish population on the one side and foreigners on the other.

Eliassi (2010:28) also identifies a racist view within the social work literature, in which minority groups’ alleged subordinate position is reproduced without paying attention to structural inequalities; while the local population is seen as the norm, immigrants are regarded as deviant (*Ibid.*). Social work is furthermore said to be influenced by stereotypical ideas about immigrants. Consequently, such ideas impact the work between social work actors and migrants as the latter’s cultural origin is regarded as backward and inferior (Eliassi, 2013:42-43; Eliassi, 2015:569). Attributing negative qualities to culture both neglects individual background and reproduces practices counter to integration. This may also limit migrants’ possibilities in regard to labor market integration, education and housing (Eliassi, 2013:42-43). Soydan (1999:106) speaks of a clientization of migrants, as they are ascribed qualities that make them people in need who are different, based on stereotypes.

## 2.5. Obstacles to social work with migrants

Due to immigration, Sweden has become a home for many minorities, though studies show that many of them face racism and xenophobia (Hallgren, 2005:320). Pred (2000:21) sees the treatment of minorities in Sweden as racist in both language and practice through the construction of social categories. Within Swedish society and the welfare system, Pringle (2005, in Pringle 2010:20) sees deep power relations of a discriminatory nature on the basis of age, sex and origin. In this context, Eliassi (2015:568) critiques social work strategies using a cultural competence perspective, as this only individualizes oppression due to belonging to a certain minority group.

Racism in a societal context can be seen as measures and actions in order to highlight the dominance of a certain racialized identity construct over others. Racism can take place at three interconnected levels – the individual, institutional and the cultural (Williams, Soydan & Johnson, 1998:44). Within social work, racism can occur in the way in which social welfare services or benefits are distributed. Furthermore, cultural or personal qualities might be pathologized in order to justify social work measures. This may also result in a group being represented at higher levels within punitive institutions in comparison to the host population regarded as a norm (*Ibid.*). Eliassi (2010:28) pays attention to the fact that social work is a professional field of activity linked to a racist and colonial heritage; an anti-racist movement within research or practice is nonexistent in Sweden.

## 2.6. Critics

Due to lengthy asylum processes and housing shortcomings, newly-arrived refugees in Sweden often have to wait a long time under deplorable conditions before they are actually able to undertake active steps in their new country. The individually designed introduction program may still be seen as a cornerstone of Swedish integration policy by its focusing on language training, civic orientation and different activities geared toward labor market integration (OECD, 2016b). There is,

however, criticism that the programs are taking too much time for highly-skilled migrants, while “those lacking basic skills need a more flexible approach combining longer-term educational support with gradual labor market introduction” (OECD, 2016a). Changes have been made by the government, especially related to undocumented immigrants. These reforms are the result of a strong critique to the Swedish welfare state for not providing the basic medical treatment and social support measures every individual is entitled to regardless of legal, social or economic status according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Jönsson, 2014:44). Valenta and Bunar (2010:479) see the problem not as a lack of appropriate housing or due to the setting of the integration programs; the provision of housing and training alone is not enough, but rather a combination of such measures with more proactive facilitators should be included in Swedish integration policies. As of 2016, the Swedish government is planning to start the integration process as early as possible by organizing and providing social information, language courses and activities with civil society for those still in the asylum process as well (OECD, 2016b:67). Qvist (2016:19) sees this as a policy “for addressing problems of social exclusion, marginalization and poverty.”

Sweden can be seen as a special case, as it is one of the countries within the European Union that has accepted the most refugees and, at the same time, integration measures aim for speedy introduction into the labor market (Peromingo, 2014:76). As migrants in Sweden are put into lengthy contact with the social services, critics argue that this may cause a clientization of the immigrants. The process of clientization means that individuals feel inferior and highly dependent on the welfare system (Kamali, 2004:3). By contrast, Peromingo argues that “newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers in Sweden are not left waiting in camps or parked in social support systems”(2014:76) as getting them employed as soon as possible is a priority. Kamali (2014:11), however, notes that the Swedish integration system makes immigrants dependent on public welfare for coping with the requirements of daily life in a new community.

As the Swedish model is based on economic participation to keep up its social welfare system, there is much emphasis on labor market integration (Fredlund, 2014). It needs to be noted, however, that most persons migrating to Sweden over the last fifteen years have done so for humanitarian reasons or because of family reunification. Consequently, “these humanitarian and family-related migration flows do not correspond to cyclical labor market demand but are rather related to the existence and severity of ethnic conflicts and civil war all over the world’ (Wiesbrock, 2011:60). As a result, the large number of individuals coming to Sweden also do so at times when there are only few jobs for the local population. Hence it has often been difficult for them to get a job at the time of arriving in Sweden (*Ibid.*). Gustafsson sees migrants struggling in the labor market, noting in particular the fact that “they are less likely to be hired than natives” (2013:136). In this context, Valenta and Bunar (2010) concludes that findings from studies on this subject are not unambiguous. There is evidence from the introduction programs that the majority of participants find a place in the world of work when having finished the courses, while other studies describe a significant discrepancy between the situation of immigrants and natives with regard to employment relationships, socio-economic status, adequate accommodation and health care (*Ibid.*).

Summarizing, it appears that the Swedish social service law and other related legal grounds are insufficiently suited to the life circumstances of migrants in Sweden since the framework was shaped for a “faceless individual who, of course, is not an immigrant, but a socially integrated Swede” (Kamali, 2004:3). Swedish integration policies over the last few decades, therefore, have to be criticized, even as the notion of a multicultural society came true. Bevelander summarizes: “[W]hen it comes to the two prominent measures of integration, employment integration and voting participation, it becomes clear that large groups of immigrants are marginalized by the Swedish society” (2009:301).

### 3. Theoretical background

In this chapter the concept of social integration is being discussed, and how it is linked to social work and how social work with migrants is understood from a strength based approach. Collaborating and sharing an understanding of the profession supports the construction of social work, its reasons and objectives. Anyone working with individuals in order to help those need principles for orientation (Payne, 1997:6), and theory is a central element of mutual understanding of professional expertise within social work.

#### 3.1. Social integration

In Sweden, there have been discussions on whether migrants sufficiently adapt to their new sociocultural surroundings (Nekby, 2010:3). The concept of migrant integration is often divided into sub-categories such as cultural integration, residential integration, economic integration and social integration (Valenta and Bunar, 2010:466). It is, however, apparently difficult to find evidence on the measurability of social integration, even though policy makers require this (Spencer, 2003:13). Compared to economic integration which is easily measured by economic indicators, social integration efforts are not readily definable in the same way. Nekby sees the reason for this in the fact that “what constitutes a social or cultural norm is inherently subjective and likely to be defined in relative terms” (*Ibid.*, 2010:3).

In this regard, one may see a relation to Durkheim’s concept of *anomie*, created during a time of transformation toward industrialism. The decline of religious norms and values inevitably leads to disturbances and a reduction of social order. Because of legislative disorder and irregularity, social integration then is no longer guaranteed. According to Durkheim, this status is called *anomie* and is perceived as frightening or as a dissatisfaction by the individual, and it can even lead to suicide (*anomic suicide*) due to the uncertain social framework conditions in life (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Bell (1957:114) presumes that *anomie* is directly linked to the socioeconomic situation of people. *Anomie* may also be placed in the context

of social isolation and social justice, as individuals who are not integrated socially show higher scores of anomic living conditions (Schaible & Altheimer, 2016:941).

As today's situation may be seen as similar to earlier times of transformation, the significance of social integration in a globalized world becomes apparent. Giddens (1990:64) outlines globalization as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa." Globalization creates a more direct confrontation with humanitarian consequences. Borders become more and more fluid, and, as a consequence, economic and cultural exchange influences many communities. There are also negative impacts, however, as not everyone is profiting equally from this development. Economic insecurity and high competitive pressure challenges the life situation of many around the globe. New technologies reduce workplaces and create structural unemployment and, by implication, they shape the breeding ground for inequality, exclusion and cultural areas of tension as well (Hewitt de Alcántara, 1994:4).

In a world where borders are becoming increasingly transparent, global phenomena become apparent in the local. Social integration is therefore a current topic that addresses possible trends of anomie. Swedish social work as a central actor at the local level within the work with the newly-arrived and as a promoter of social integration does not remain unaffected in regard to global and national developments. The consequences of the migrant crisis raise concerns and challenges to the profession, especially with regard to the social integration practices at municipalities with migrants as a vulnerable target group.

In 1994, Hewitt de Alcántara concluded a sobering picture of the end of the 20th century. Several states will collapse and global ethnic conflicts will grow more acute. Much of it became true and one may find many parallels today. This applies both nationally and internationally, but it is particularly true at the local level as traditional values, such as reciprocity, disappear and violence becomes a measure of survival in many countries (*Ibid.*:6). In view of this situation, measures for further social integration have to be launched as many people experience that core institutions of society, such as family structures or the community, are not

working sufficiently. Children and young people too often become victims of violence and exploitation is on the rise. This development is accompanied by a destabilization of the established public stakeholders, as well as by a decrease of moral courage and acceptance in interpersonal relationships (*Ibid.*:6).

It is obvious that peace and the possibilities for participation are unequally divided among countries. Due to this, national and international migration is a common phenomenon, and not only since the refugee influx of 2015. Even though migration as such is a positive trend, it can include challenges. Language barriers and different cultural and religious backgrounds require a high level of acceptance and appreciation. Furthermore, migration creates additional work and expenses for existing welfare services (*Ibid.*:4).

In a broader view, social integration entails measures to “readjusting individuals or groups with personal or social problems into societies, communities, schools, families, or other social contexts’ (Johnsson & Svensson, 2013:1). Furthermore, every individual is dependent on a stable and safe social network where people share similar values, feel comfortable, affirmed and taken care of by peers (Rustomjee, 2001:121). In this sense, social integration can be seen as a counter measure addressing deviation from conventional standards and norms. Given this fact, social integration is also closely linked to regulatory practices. While social integration addresses the change of individual behavior in order to approach objectives of life realities, social regulation works with strategies of discipline and penalization. It can be argued that the two overlapping concepts are crucial in counteracting anomie. It has to be noted, however, that definitions of normality and resulting implications for deviance change over time and in accordance with the cultural contexts of a community (Johnsson & Svensson, 2013:2).

According to Johnsson and Svensson (*Ibid.*:1), social integration can be understood as the “production and reproduction of individuals as persons and citizens through processes of socialization that are undertaken by parents, peer groups, schools, churches, media, work places, the health sector and other institutions.’ Portes and Zhou (1993, cited in Valenta & Bunar, 2010:466), however, argue that social integration also refers to the context of the migrants’ reception that is

characterized by three qualities: Firstly, the host nation's attitude and legal regulations toward immigration, which can differ significantly between dismissive and welcoming; secondly, the basic attitude by the host society and possible stereotypes or expectations; thirdly, the attitudes that the migrants bring along themselves. Valenta and Bunar (2010:466) argue that all qualities play a key role in the integration of migrants. Nevertheless, it seems apparent that a nation's legal migration regulations have a major importance in this process, as support and social welfare measures depend on such policies and therefore directly impact social integration.

To achieve this general state of a socially integrated society, social work is needed for implementing strategies that contribute to developments towards social integration.

### 3.2. Social work

It has always been a challenge to define the field of social work, and, due to this, it is part of its characteristics to consider the profession in relation to other fields such as education, psychology or health. Consequently, defining the limits and attributes of social work is an ambiguous matter. This is particularly visible from its field of action between civil society, its human beings and the state. Here social work accepts a conciliatory role "between those who are actually or potentially excluded and the mainstream of society" (Parton, 1996:6; see also Parton: 1998:11). Parton (2014:2053) argues that social work is a socio-legal profession that is taking an intermediary role between family structures and the state. Parton (1998) adds that, by doing so, social work is performed on "a terrain which is ambiguous, uncertain and contested" and social work is therefore a mediator "not only between the excluded and state agencies, but crucially between other diverse state agencies and discourses, together with a wide range of private, voluntary and other philanthropic agencies, and the diverse overlapping discourses which inform and construct them" (*Ibid.*:11). Brekke (2012:461-462) similarly argues that, due to the uniqueness and

characteristics of the key working areas of social workers, there are several theoretical approaches relevant to the profession and that there is place left for more theories to develop as the profession is growing.

Global developments and incidents have a direct impact on social work, as resulting migration flows makes the work with asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants of major importance. Fernandes (2015:245) finds that there is scant literature on the resettlement of the newly-arrived in their new societies from a social work view. Here, attention is paid to social work at the local level, operating as a central agent within the question of social integration of newly-arrived children and families. The large number of individuals having already arrived in Sweden since late summer of 2015 and before leads to the question of how the precarious and much-criticized situation of the migrants can be improved. This is particularly necessary for children, as many of them are without parents or guardians and are thereby at a heightened risk of becoming victims of abuse, exploitation or trafficking. It must therefore be ensured that all children, especially those who enter the country without parents or adults, receive protection from people who violate their rights and deprive them of their childhood. Children must be treated as children regardless of their legal status.

Apart from (unaccompanied) minors, however, social work with migrants concerns all target groups of social work, such as families, recognized refugees and persons who are temporarily granted protection. Given this fact, social workers face a wide range of cross-cultural challenges, psychosocial states and a large variety of languages. There are also more specific issues that have to be dealt with in terms of the asylum law and refugee protection. Within social work practice with migrants, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain professional standards and basic ethical orientations due to thinking in terms of cost efficiency and workload. The welfare of refugees constantly moves between the poles of social work action and child protection, but also according to the rules of immigration and asylum. While social work aims at confidence building measures, the promotion of integration and the development of realistic prospects for the future for migrants,

the immigration and asylum law often impedes or prevents the provision of such important processes as it often triggers mental distress.

The relevance of a closer description of practical social work concerning the efforts for migrant children and migrant families need to be emphasized. For the human rights profession, the contribution to the psychosocial well-being of migrants, the protection of refugees and the promotion of their participation and social integration is of high importance due to their vulnerable (legal residence) situation and their experiences of displacement (OECD, 2016b:42). It is obvious that the process of migration and flight might be fraught with difficulties and involve negative experiences for children and families. Valtonen (2001) highlights the importance of economic and social integration as crucial for a successful future life for newly-arrived people. On this account, social work needs to provide services that enhance the social integration of migrants by focusing on the positive in life and on the strengths of the clients in order to promote confidence, while adapting itself to trends of privatization and the facts of a growing importance of non-public actors within social welfare.

Due to the humanistic base of social work, it belongs to the characteristics of the profession to be concerned with the strengths and positive qualities of individuals and their life situation. Anastsas (2014:576) mentions the significance of approaches paying attention to the resources and skills of people. Due to the fact that social disparities and injustices have a major negative impact on people's lives, methods working with capabilities should be incorporated in all forms of practical social work.

Social work is an unstable professional field due to economic, political and legislative interference and the impacts of meetings between professionals and clients. Social work is operating in a wide heterogenic field consisting of different settings and target groups with different ethnical and cultural origins. Due to this fact, social work is difficult to define and might imply an unclear scope of duties for outside observers. However, Dominelli (2009:24) emphasizes the engagement of social workers in supporting people to improve their psychosocial well-being and to adequately acquire skills and behavioral patterns to cope effectively

with difficult life situations “and seek both personal and organizational change in the process”(Ibid.:24).

The global definition of social work by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) states:

*Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.*

(IFSW, 2014)

Nash, Munford and O’Donoghue (2005:162) identify some corresponding features between the international social work definition and a strengths-based oriented social work practice. Due to the fact that social work tries to promote social change and focuses on problem-solving, the aim is to empower individuals and with the result of an increased well-being. Following the key pillars of human rights and social equality, social work makes a contribution to make democracy more complete with the active participation of its citizens (Ibid.).

### 3.2.1. Strengths-based social work

It is the nature of practical social work to be concerned with individuals and families. Most strategies within social work, however, have a deficit orientation and a strong focus on the pathological conditions of the client’s situation, while other approaches see the problems of an individual to be symptoms of a dysfunction within a greater social context (Early & GlenMaye, 2000:118). There are also approaches that take different paths as they focus on work with strengths, growth and function. Flückiger and Grosse Holtforth (2008:876-877) highlight the apparent paradigm shift within psychotherapeutic measures, whereby, in contrast to established and

problem-centered approaches, there is a major potential by taking the client's strengths and resources as a starting point.

The strengths-based perspective or practice is a social work theory that pays attention to the existing strengths, skills, interests and resources of an individual. For this reason, the focus is not biographic-historic, but rather attention is put to the present and future of the client in order to strengthen and improve the overall condition of the individual. According to Corcoran, detailed information and understanding about the clients past "will not change the future without action" (2004:2). For this reason, emphasis within this approach is put on the strengths of individuals, or the ones of a family system, in order to stimulate a change process. This approach carries elements of constructivism in that it is based on the idea that reality is not objective but a theoretical construct based on assumptions by individuals concerning themselves and their socio-ecological environment.

There are also elements taken from a more social constructionist perspective due to the fact that such assumptions are constructed through the social interaction between people. For the social work practice, this means that social worker and client communicate openly about their experiences, as language is the tool creating reality (*Ibid.*). Social work can only work effectively with the resources the client brings along. This might be the client's motivational attitude, skills, knowledge and experiences. According to Flückiger and Grosse Holtforth (2008:876-877), a strengths-based perspective can help build an efficient collaboration between the client and the professional alliance and support or initiate a change process and the adaption of coping strategies. There is a wide range of resources carried by the clients that are supporting the process of social work with people. Such strengths can be found on both the individual and on the interactional levels.

Furthermore, there are qualities, such as motivational preparedness and personal skills, which might be worthwhile for a social worker to highlight in order to raise the self-esteem of a client. It is possible that such qualities can be discussed or recapitulated, or the client can even be encouraged to directly perceive

the positive impacts from using the strong sides of one's abilities (Flückiger and Grosse Holtforth, 2008:876-877).

Van Heugten and Gibbs (2015:74) see a relation between neoliberal welfare developments and an increasing focus on the existing strengths of recipients of social work practices. As this procedure sometimes underestimates the complexity of the situation of people in distress, the suitability of a strengths-based perspective might be questioned (*Ibid.*). Applying a strengths-based perspective does not, however, mean to ignore the problem situation as it can be assumed that psychosocial circumstances are real and do represent the client's situation. In terms of the described approach, attention must be paid to what is possible as well (Saleebey, 1996:297). This is particularly interesting concerning migrants, as many of them have experienced war, torture and uncertainty. The strengths-focus "denies that all people who face trauma and pain in their lives inevitably are wounded or incapacitated or become less than they might" (*Ibid.*:297).

On this account, social workers must use a different perspective when using a strengths-based approach. Individuals and families, migrants within this degree project, must be perceived in terms of their "capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes, however dashed and distorted these may have become through circumstance, oppression, and trauma" (*Ibid.*:297). The central interest is what the clients already know and are capable of doing in order to raise awareness and to trust their own abilities and develop self-confidence. This is particularly important as individual skills and characteristics are forced into the background due to negative experiences, such as trauma and displacement. Gaining insight, experiencing community and loyalty can therefore be an effective way to find new courage to face life (*Ibid.*:299). According to Saleebey (*Ibid.*:301) positive thoughts and emotions toward life and toward one's self are decisive factors concerning the psychosocial health of people. It is for this reason that people can recover and go on to face the demands of life when they are confident about their capabilities and skills. The idea of a strengths-based perspective allows for shaping an authentic working relation between client and social worker, even though the search for the client's resources, skills and capabilities can be a challenging matter

due to the life situation they face or the events they have experienced. Additionally, Saleebey notes that “if they have been clients of the welfare, social services, or mental health systems, they likely have been inculcated in the doctrine of themselves as deficient and needy” (*Ibid.*:302).

There are two major advantages of the strengths-based perspective. Firstly, the client is encouraged to help him or herself as they are moved into the center of the collaboration with the social worker. Therefore, “helpers must hear the individual, family, or community stories, but people can write the story of their near and far futures only if they know everything they need to know about their condition and circumstances. The job is to help individuals and groups develop the language, summon the resources, devise the plot, and manage the subjectivity of life in their world” (*Ibid.*:303). Due to this reason, the relationship between client and helper is most important. Willingness for an authentic collaboration must be offered in order to have valuable discussions on shared experiences and knowledge. This requires a mutual dialogue in order to call things by their right name. Since many clients already have been labeled and diagnosed by other authorities, it has an empowering effect to identify oneself in relation to one’s capabilities and resources (*Ibid.*:303). To achieve this, strengths-based work focuses on the capacities, resources, and successes of individuals and families who face challenges and try to increase the favorable impact of these positive characteristics. Strengths-based social work is future-oriented and does not pay attention to events of the past in particular; even though past events are mentioned and acknowledged as important key elements of one’s life, the objective is to encourage clients in thinking about future plans and strategies that will minimize the challenges they face (Van Heugten and Gibbs, 2015:31-32)

According to Van Heugten and Gibbs (*Ibid.*), there are three central aspects to a strength-based perspective within social work:

*1, Everyone has strengths and resources and the potential for resilient responses to adverse life events, and each person is the expert on his or her own lived experience.*

*2, People are capable of deciding what might be the solutions to the adverse life events they are experiencing, and they are to be invited to be the authority on what changes they might like to see and how those changes should come about.*

*3, Human service professionals should view clients positively and work collaboratively with them to help clients maintain control over their lives and to help build clients' internal and external resources.*

*These three frameworks—narrative, strengths, and solution-focused—provide a nonblaming way of explaining people's challenges and enable a positive and resilience-oriented focus for intervention.*

(Ibid.:31-32)

It becomes clear that the strengths-based perspective, also influenced by humanism and person-centered approaches, is a useful framework for social work practitioners, focusing mainly on the idea of client self-determination and an authentic work relation between client and social worker. Finally, as it aims at finding out the client's real potential, positive affirmation and self-respect are encouraged (*Ibid.*).

#### 4. Methodology

This chapter addresses the methodology applied in this study. By using a qualitative approach, or, more precisely, semi-structured interviews and participant observations, the intention was to gain knowledge on how strengths-based social work with newly-arrived refugee children and families is carried out within *BiS* in Lund, Sweden. Based on this information, it was possible to describe the strategies and responsibilities within the program design. Information was also collected on how the program perceives and supports the participants concerning their life situation in the new country. Attention will also be paid to the data analysis itself, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as to ethical considerations related to the chosen research procedures.

#### 4.1. Qualitative data

This study is carried out by gathering and analyzing qualitative data. Using a qualitative approach helps to get an idea of “real life” and authentic social interrelations (Mason, 1996:4). Mason (*Ibid.*) attaches importance to the philosophical position of the interpretative technique as a central aspect of qualitative research. By doing so, significant insights regarding the social world can be obtained and one may study how these findings can be “interpreted, understood, experienced or produced” (*Ibid.*:4). This idea will help to describe the chosen social work program, as insights from both the staff and the observations are gathered and incorporated in this study.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive description of how the social work with newly-arrived is performed at *BiS*. The case study design, with focus on one specific program, was chosen since the interest of this study lies in a more detailed and intensive analysis of a single social work service (Bryman, 2012:66). The data was collected from sources that are related to the specific program (semi-structured interviews with the staff and participant observations during the group workshops), and the collection took place over the duration of two months. All data collected aim at ultimately being able to provide a basis for identifying patterns and thus draw conclusions.

This degree project uses a qualitative design in order to answer the research questions by semi-structured interviews and participant observation. This was done to catch the practitioners’ experiences of the work at the chosen project concerning the work with migrant children and families in Lund. The interviews were conducted with the group leaders of *BiS*, and were conducted from May 2016 to June 2016 in Lund. The approach has been complemented by participant observations by following the workshops of *BiS* on different occasions during the same period. By using a twofold approach, direct knowledge from the group leaders is gained through the interviews and support presumptions related to the daily social work at the local level. The observations during the group workshops allow for conclusions regarding the working methods of *BiS*, their view on migrants and the

role of participants during the course of the workshops. The data is collected from six discrete observation occasions and six different interview partners, all to be able to present a conclusion with regard to the research question.

To get a range of different types of respondents, the author has chosen to interview a number of different people working at *BiS* who have experience in different areas. Due to an internship at *BiS* during the autumn term 2015, the author of this thesis could use his contacts to the organization in order to get in touch with the relevant persons. The interviewees consisted of both of the head and group leaders at *BiS*, and respondents also varied in age, number of assignments, previous experience and other types of aspects. The variety of interviewees is thought to provide a wide basis for the application of the results and analysis of the *BiS* project.

#### 4.1.1. Semi-structured interviews

A major benefit of interviews is to gain knowledge on people's perspectives, attitudes and points of view. This type of research method makes it possible to examine the perspective and mindset of individuals, and it helps to get a better understanding of their positions in a societal context. People's opinions are usually subjective, however, as they are impacted culturally by the society and environments that they live and have been socialized in. It is for this reason that groups with a similar origin or field of activity share similar basic attitudes, which consequently can be placed in relation to the surrounding society. Even if there are individual preferences and mentalities regarding different issues, people usually experience and interpret matters that are related to social and legal standards in a similar manner (Arksey & Knight, 1999:5).

For this study, semi-structured interviews were chosen due to the fact that this method make it possible to carry out research which would not indicate a certain direction to the participants being interviewed. Within qualitative interviewing, emphasis is placed on the interviewee's point of view. Due to the flexible structure of qualitative interviews, the interviewees impact the course of the procedure by responding in any given direction. This might lead the focus of the investigation

shifting to new important areas based on statements made during the interview (Bryman, 2012:470). As semi-structured interviews are largely unstructured in their application, it became possible to gain individual knowledge and inside views on how the staff of *BiS* perceive their work, efforts and daily work performance regarding their social work practice with the participants.

Each interview lasted between approximately 30 and 45 minutes. To give the respondents a chance to feel at ease and thus respond in a more detailed manner to the questions, personal meetings were scheduled. All interviews were recorded and conducted in the Swedish language to guarantee high level of information without language difficulties.

#### 4.1.2. Participant observations

This study also applied participant observations. Using participant observation as methodology is suitable “for studies of almost every aspect of human existence” (Jorgensen, 1989:12). This method allows the researcher to observe and study the essential components of a social context and its interdependencies to a given time and reason (Bryman, 2012:43). It is especially suitable for studying processes, group structures and relationships, the composition of individuals and events. Furthermore, it helps to gain insight into developments over time and it recognizes the relevance of sociocultural background (Jorgensen, 1989:12)

The method of participant observation is a common practice in qualitative research and requires the observer to extensively delve into a social setting. The aim is to observe modes of behavior that are used by members within the framework of a certain group, organization or community in order to develop an understanding for their actions against the backdrop of their own environment (Bryman, 2012:273). Participant observation places certain emphasis on the meanings of human existence by taking into account the inside perspectives of the members of a setting. The everyday activities and items are of central interest to be studied by participant observation. In other words, this methodological approach tries to gather and reveal the meanings and life realities that people have become accustomed to.

By focusing on the meaning of everyday life, “the methodology of participant observation differs from approaches that begin with concepts defined by way of existing theories and hypotheses” (Jorgensen, 1989:14-15). Within this method, however, the level of the researcher’s participation can vary significantly depending on the group and the circumstances and focus of research in which they locate themselves (Bryman, 2012:273). This study applied observations at different group workshops at *BiS* in order to find indicators that characterize the practical and organizational nature of *BiS*. Furthermore, this methodological procedure aims at describing the role of the participants against the backdrop of the social integration and social work activities within *BiS*.

#### 4.2. Coding and data analysis

After having conducted the interviews, they were transcribed. There are several advantages to doing so. Transcriptions help in the way that the interviewer afterward can remember everything that was said. If there is any doubt, it is possible for the interviewer to listen to the interview repeatedly. It also makes it easier to understand in retrospect any small linguistic details that interviewees can sometimes make when they feel an issue is of a sensitive nature. Transcription increases credibility and there is evidence of all the facts that have been presented during the interviews (Bryman, 2012:482). The next step was to sort out the relevant answers by the respondents.

Concerning the participant observations, it can be said that analysis is already undertaken during the observation process itself by the researcher. By taking notes and documenting personal impressions and thoughts, the author of this study produced knowledge on the groups and the professionals. The observation phase was followed by an analysis phase when recurring themes were identified in the documentation, in order to build a coherent story of the perceived key elements during the group workshops. The transcribed interviews were read several times in order to identify such key themes. Finally, themes were identified that both reflect the theoretical foundation of this thesis as well as support to answer the research

question. The participant observations of group workshops were written down in brief notes and then related to the key themes.

The following key themes were identified:

- (a) The organizational structure and contents of *BiS*
- (b) The perception of the newly-arrived within the *BiS* program
- (c) The working strategies applied by *BiS*
- (d) Experienced outcomes of *BiS*

### 4.3. Ethical considerations

This study raises some ethical issues that are important to consider. Since the research used semi-structured interviews and unstructured observations, the list of questions was formulated to be as neutral as possible. The author of this study constantly questioned his own role in order to prevent effects of bias. It is clear that the topic of migration and flight is highly sensitive. For this reason, all conclusions and interpretations were taken from a neutral point of view with as little bias as possible. Before conducting the interviews and observations, the author of this study received approval from all professionals, volunteer helpers, guardians and participants. All information gathered by the interviews and observations was anonymized and everyone was informed regarding the confidentiality and terms.

In recognition of these concerns, no minors or families were interviewed for this study as the sensitivity of the target group of *BiS* could not justify such a methodological procedure in the framework of a master's thesis. Besides, language barriers and translations could have influenced the accuracy of statements given by the migrant children and their families. Furthermore, it is important to follow the guidelines of professional social work within this study, especially according to those of the *Code of Ethics*. According to this directive by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), a social worker's major objective is to ensure the well-being of all clients involved and to support them in meeting their interests (NASW, 2008:1.01). Consideration should also be given to the fact that

social workers who are engaged in research or evaluation “should carefully consider possible consequences and should follow guidelines developed for the protection of evaluation and research participants” (NASW, 2008:5.0.2d).

Due to the vulnerability of the target group of *BiS* and the related principles of the *Code of Ethics*, only observations were conducted. For these reasons, when mentioning issues related to the children and families of *BiS*, the direct information is based on observations and interviews only with the staff working at *BiS*.

With regard to the methodological approach of this thesis, it can be said, that this degree project tried to attach much interest to the requirements of transparency, self-determination, confidentiality and autonomy as it was tried to fully and thoroughly inform the participants of this study.

#### 4.4 Methodological strengths and limitations

There are some limitations when looking at this study. Within this research project, relatively few quantitative data were being used. Still, these kinds of data underline the life worlds of individuals. For this study a qualitative approach was chosen, as a quantitative concept would not have met the social perspective and the life situation of the migrants.

It could be presumed that the implementation of observations might impact the intimate nature of a social setting such as a group workshop at *BiS*. As a consequence, reactive effects can appear since participants of a group will change their natural behavior when they know that they are being observed. Bryman (2012:495-496) states, however, that people usually neglect the presence of a researcher doing observations after a while and become accustomed to their presence and return to their natural forms of behavior. Nonetheless, it is necessary to consider that observation influences the context of the situation that was chosen for the study as unpredictable social interactions will happen between the researcher and the participants (*Ibid.*:495-496). It should also be noted that unstructured observations can enter very private or sensitive areas of a group and their participating members. By

reason of the nature of the chosen methodological approach, unstructured observations might be more time-consuming and disruptive to the routines of an organization than, for instance, an interview. However, reactive effects could also appear in the conduction of interviews with the staff involved. Since the interview situation constitutes an unnatural setting, the interviewees might answer in an inauthentic way (*Ibid.*:496).

Particular attention should be paid, then, to the reflexivity within this qualitative research (Gringeri, Barusch & Cambron, 2013:56). It is necessary to question in what sense “social inputs” impact the process and results of knowledge creation. It can be safely assumed that the issue of social integration of migrants and refugees can cause emotional reactions with respect to the sensitivity of the research area. This has to be kept in mind both for the role of the researcher and to the information given by the staff actively working with the participants of *BiS*.

When looking at the strengths and weaknesses, it is important to examine the reliability, validity, replicability and generalizability of this study as well. Reliability is the causal relationship between the data measurement and the related assumption that the same results would also be obtained in another study using the same material (Perri & Bellamy, 2012:21). In this case, it is to be assumed that other researchers would define similar issues related to the social integration of migrants due to the given changing framework conditions of the welfare state and the increased refugee influx. Consequently, similar obstacles, constraints and claims are likely to be formulated. As such, this study is thought to be reliable even though the interpretative points of view could differ among different researchers.

Emphasis should also be placed on the question of validity. According to Perri and Bellamy, validity refers to “the degree to which the measures or codes used to open a concept really capture what we intend to capture” (*Ibid.*:21). This means that proving validity is to question whether the chosen framework, concepts and theories of this study are suitable in order to answer the questions raised by this study.

Replicability is when “the research can be repeated and whether similar results are obtained” (Walliman, 2006:34). In doing so, objectivity and bias are

checked with reference to the findings. Since the author of this study is himself a social worker, this might be a challenge to neutrality toward the chosen topic and the findings. Subsequently, the requirement of objectivity of this study can only partly be granted because of the effects of different social inputs while addressing the issues of this thesis.

When looking at the generalizability, it is important to investigate if the findings of this project are transferable to settings beyond the scope of this study (*Ibid.*:34). Even though the subject area of this qualitative study can be placed in a wider context, there is a limitation of the generalizability of the findings related to *BiS* in Lund. Place-specific conditions and arrangements in Lund may hinder finding correlations in a wider context.

The objective of this study is to present findings on how social work is carried out in a strengths-based public/non-governmental approach with migrant children and families in Lund, Sweden. The fact that no information from the participants of *BiS* was given directly to the author of this study, but only passively through observations, might be seen as a limitation.

Apart from these considerations, however, the methodological structure of this study should be justified within the given scope of a master's thesis. As qualitative research entails a relatively open procedure, a wide range of significant factors can be considered in addition to social aspects. Therefore, the chosen approach provides valuable ways to examine and interpret the social issues arising from the field of strengths-based social work with unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families and how those are being conceptualized by *BiS* and the practical experience of social workers and volunteers.

## 5. Analysis

The purpose of this study is to explore how strengths-based social work with unaccompanied children and newly arrived families is implemented and performed at *Barn i Start* in Lund, Sweden. In this chapter, the material from the semi-structured interviews and the participant observations will be presented and discussed. The

analysis of the empirical material will be organized in four different steps according to the key themes that were identified in the methodological chapter. The first step analyzes how the newly-arrived children and families are perceived by the *BiS* program. By looking at their life circumstances, social situation and related challenges of having migrated to Sweden, it will be possible to draw a picture of how the *BiS* program imagines the participants. In a second step, attention is paid to the strategies and working methods applied by *BiS*. This focuses on the group activities and their conceptualization. Third is an analysis of whether the *BiS* program influences the participants with the applied strategies. This is done by looking at the activities offered and how *BiS* addresses the participants' situation and individual strengths. The last step analyzes the organizational structure of *BiS* by looking at the contents of the work carried out by *BiS* as well as the division of responsibilities between the public and non-governmental actors.

### 5.1. Perception of the newly-arrived within the *BiS* program

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are 60 million forcibly displaced people world-wide (UNHCR, 2015). Concerning the question of how *BiS* perceives the newly-arrived children and families in Lund, Sweden, a picture can be derived from the empirical material. The social situation for the newly-arrived is described to be quite different within a wide range of starting points that the participants face. Determining factors can be the lack of Swedish language skills, the legal situation of their residence and individual ideas of how to build a life in Sweden.

The core group of participants is from countries such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia; the main countries in the migration board's statistics on refugees arriving in Sweden over the last 20 years (Migrationsverket, 2016a). What all participants of *BiS* have in common is that they are newly-arrived and find themselves facing a new start in Sweden, having to build a new life from scratch. Some have already stayed in their new country for some time, however, and may have gotten some understanding of the country and developed ideas for their future.

A further characteristic is that the psychosocial state of many of the newly-arrived is negatively impacted by experiences of flight, violence or due to the lengthy asylum procedures (see Lindgren, Ekblad, Asplund, Irestig & Burström, 2012:176). Due to the fact that many have experienced traumatic events, there is a high number of people with post-traumatic stress disorders.

Current refugee politics also have an impact on their mental health, as many constantly suffer from the unstable conditions and related stress of not knowing what is going to happen next. Furthermore, it can be distressing if the housing situation in Sweden is perceived as unstable. Many therefore find it difficult to build a life in Sweden and to concern themselves with questions of accommodation or school within an insecure environment while, simultaneously, there is no peace where they come from.

Besides, a majority of participants is worried about friends and relatives left behind in their home countries. One respondent feels that many of the newly-arrived have yet to arrive mentally due this fact:

*They are worried about their relatives who are left back in Syria. They say it's hard to be here in Sweden, to live in the present - in thoughts they are still in Syria with their friends and relatives.<sup>1</sup> (Respondent 5)*

This respondent conveys that, although the refugees are physically in Sweden, in thoughts they are still in their home countries, feeling anxious for the people left behind. This has consequences for their well-being but also for their social isolation in Sweden. It is striking, then, that some newly-arrived in Sweden report to suffer from social isolation and loneliness (Wallin & Ahlström, 2005:142). As most are awaiting decisions by the migration authorities in the asylum process, there is a feeling of inertia coupled with poor possibilities of meeting others even though they desire to network socially. The above respondent adds that individual and family situations are significantly impacted by whether the newly-arrived have received a residence permit or if their case is still being processed:

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<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent interview quotations are translated by the author.

*The situation is dependent on if they have received a residence permit or not. The waiting period is perceived as very distressing and burdensome for the whole family. (Respondent 5)*

There are distinct differences in the situations of those individuals who arrive in Sweden by themselves and those who make it to Sweden as a family. Even though there may be issues within the family as a group (Eklund, Sjöberg, Rydin & Högdin, 2011:200), it represents a safety feature to be with family members and to face a challenging situation together:

*It is very crucial what and who they bring along from their home country. Are they with family? Is the family complete? Are they alone? Have the parents passed away? It is very decisive. (Respondent 5)*

Accordingly, the question of whether families have arrived together in Sweden or a later family reunification is planned plays an important role. Commonly, the men have migrated to Sweden while the rest of their families are waiting either in their home countries or someplace else. Their situations are clearly linked to where in the migration stage the individuals are presently located, and the range of *BiS* participants within these stages is heterogenic.

*I think it is good that we have different people that are located at different stages of their migration. They exchange on the experiences and learn from those who have been in Sweden longer than themselves. This is enriching. (Respondent 4)*

Housing conditions, the asylum process and issues related to the labor market seem to be decisive in regard to the overall condition of the newly-arrived. In this context, Inner (2015:53) states that “finding suitable housing is a key component of establishment for refugees and asylum seekers. It is crucial for employment and equally a condition for a socially sustainable occupation.”

In line with the expectations of anomie, respondent 4 clearly shows that all newly-arrived children and families are perceived to share in common having gone through challenging and difficult experiences because they have left their home countries due to war and conflict. It becomes clear that having arrived in Sweden is linked to existential concerns related to coping with a new life in a new setting. Some describe conflicts at the refugee accommodations, difficulties with the authorities, racism in society or difficulties at school (Respondent 6).

Finding a proper education is also a challenge, as foreign graduation certificates are sometimes not acknowledged by Swedish authorities. Others describe issues with learning the Swedish language, finding adequate housing or getting a handle on building a new life in a new context. Among the newly-arrived are people with different education levels and of different socio-cultural origins (Respondent 5).

For these reasons, Respondent 1 emphasizes that “[m]ost of the newly-arrived stay with people who are similar to them. With *BiS* we encourage new constellations regardless of gender, religion or from which country they are coming.”

## 5.2. Working strategies of *BiS*

*BiS* strategies and their contents are derived from the idea that participants have gone through tough times and events resulting in departure from their home countries and that they face challenges in Sweden (Respondent 4). Respondent 5 clarifies that some issues cannot be solved by *BiS*, even though the people working there would like to do so. As previously indicated, there is a lack of housing for newly-arrived people in Sweden (Migrationsverket, 2016b; Parusel, 2016:90). *BiS* cannot help with housing questions, however, nor influence decisions made by the social or migration services. *BiS* does, however, support the participants in several ways, both administratively, pushing things forward, and by using its huge network of local public and non-public collaborating organizations. Due to this broad setup of

a mixed approach, *BiS* is able to offer support and even respond to problem situations immediately.

In line with the profession of social work, respondent 2 states that *BiS* tries to be most helpful by working from different starting points. A major advantage is that *BiS* also employs native speakers of participants' first language among their social workers and volunteers. As participants can rely on support in their mother tongue during *BiS* sessions or in the course of everyday business, it is possible to assist on many issues without a language barrier. In this way, respondent 6 thinks that the fact of having native speakers among the staff contributes to a sense of security for the newly-arrived:

*I think people feel safe when someone speaks their language. It gives safety to them in their unstable situation.*

Respondent 1 adds that a large part of the daily work undertaken by *BiS* is to find contact persons and contact families willing to support a child or adult with practical matters or recreational activities in the time after having arrived in Sweden. In their daily work, *BiS* also cooperates closely with administrators at the social services and the employment office, as well as with different actors of the health and school systems, in order to receive feedback on where possible demand for *BiS* recruitment exists.

In addition to the everyday business, *BiS* offers weekly workshops for different groups such as parents, focus groups for teenagers and unaccompanied minors and groups for siblings focusing on the youngest. Over a period of 14 weeks, different topics are addressed in accordance with a guideline developed by the NGO *Individuell Människohjäl*p. Observations showed, that the workshops contain different activities and exercises, and discussions around various topics are prompted throughout the workshops. Although the weekly group workshops follow the *Individuell Människohjäl*p's methodological manual, there is still room for flexibility on how group leaders want to run the sessions in cooperation with volunteers and translators. In this sense, sessions can be adjusted according to the group's needs or age-related requirements (Respondent 4):

*It is not like that we just copy a previous schedule and run it exactly the same again each term. It is an ongoing process in which we adapt the program according to a specific group.*

Respondent 1 mentions that most groups start with a brief round of sharing one negative and one positive memory or experience from the last week in order to get a feeling for the general state of the group. Each group meeting focuses on a topic, such as emotions and feeling, risks and decisions, family, the flight or the future. During the workshops, there are informative parts but participants are also encouraged to share feelings and thoughts in discussions or engage in creative activities such as painting (Eklund *et al.*, 2011:206). This means that *BiS* activities are both theoretical and practical (Respondent 4). In addition, different exercises could be studied during the participant observations. Exercises included evaluation, brainstorming and relaxation exercises undertaken in relation to discussion topics. Groups working with the youngest children, however, do not follow this structure, but instead, for instance, play and sing in order to create adequate activities while parents and older siblings attend their own groups. This group can therefore be seen as more similar to childcare offered to ensure that their parents can attend workshops without distraction.

The *BiS* term starts with an introduction where participants are being informed about the structure and purpose of the program. It seems important that the newly-arrived are ensured that all information shared within *BiS* is confidential and that the staff is bound to secrecy. This is usually perceived as a safety feature, as the families and children are often suspicious about sharing information on their flight and the legal circumstances of their residence. After having introduced the *BiS* concept, the workshops continue on topics regarding emotions and defense. Focus is here paid to the fact that experienced emotions are not always shown by individuals. By encouraging the naming of internal psychosocial processes, participants learn why people use defense mechanisms in order to defend themselves in challenging times.

Groups are encouraged to understand why they feel the way they do due to reasons of fleeing and being a refugee in a foreign country. All topics build on one another and follow the notion of gaining more knowledge and reflecting in a group of people with similar experiences. It is stressed, however, that *BiS* is not a therapeutic strategy but a pedagogical program.

In the following, the topic of integration is introduced within a workshop and this unit focuses on experienced encounters with Swedish society. Participants are asked which difficulties they experience concerning this matter. Within the *BiS* program there are also trips scheduled that will stimulate encounters with Swedish society. In Lund, such trips may take the participants to a theatre or to the beach (Respondent 6).

In some groups, group leaders work with a timeline in order to clarify where the group is currently located in reference to the contextual structure of the *BiS* syllabus. The timeline starts with before flight/departure and ends with the future. When talking about Swedish society or the concept of family in this country, however, it is not presented in terms of good and bad. Participants are encouraged to reflect by themselves and with each other, bearing in mind that they might have other views on this concept. *BiS* tries to stress that there is nothing that is good or bad, it is simply different (Respondent 5).

The interviewed group leaders mention that the strategies applied aim on increasing the self-esteem of the individual participants as well as the group itself. Focus is put on the already existing skills of participants within a safe atmosphere, where the individuals experience themselves as valuable and important through mutual confirmation by the group. According to Respondent 3, people grow from this experience, while learning a little more about their own strengths and about how to use them while being new in Sweden. Many of the recently arrived feel that they have become someone else after having arrived in Sweden and having lost a lot (Respondent 5). For this reason, the family becomes a significant reference system (Olwig, 2011:193; Socialstyrelsen, 2015:14). This is why *BiS* tries to initiate discussions and reflection, as well as helping participants to reflect on it and how to express or control feelings. Through this, a space is offered where the

whole family can meet others with the same or similar experiences, get to know each other and exchange experiences.

In line with strengths-oriented social work, respondent 4 emphasizes the importance of participants being helped back to their own resources and strengths while attending the *BiS* program:

*[W]e put light on the resources and strengths they have in order to support them in the challenging situation due to the circumstances of the flight from their homes and the asylum process.*

Respondents 3 and 4 both think that a major advantage of *BiS* is that the whole family is taking part in the program, as many social integration measures are offered only to adults. This makes it a unique place where the whole family as a unit can share and gain knowledge with people of the same fate or age. The unaccompanied minors are usually assigned to a single group. Even though the families are split within the workshops, it is a great strength that the whole family attend and discuss the same topics on the same day. This fact is interesting, as siblings might share thoughts they would not be comfortable with in a setting with the whole family and vice versa. Thereby, *BiS* creates safe structures for all age groups where family structures do not hinder the individual's need to communicate.

### 5.3. Experienced outcomes of *BiS*

The participants are experienced according to the topics of the workshops and their willingness to engage with a topic (Respondent 1; Respondent 3). Even though some groups and topics can be tough and challenging to talk about, the main picture is that the social work professionals identify a difference during and after the program with regard to the newly-arrived. Most of the participants progress from being shy, distraught and suspicious in the beginning to a state where they want to get in touch with others and the staff and finally become friendly or more trusting. Respondent 4 states that some families are distrustful toward public authorities, and

for this reason they are reserved in the beginning as they fear that information shared within *BiS* could disadvantage them related to their asylum process.

*In the start of BiS they sometime are distrustful. “What is the purpose? Why do we meet? And why do you ask?” Therefore it is very important to explain the purpose of BiS. (Respondent 5)*

Even though the lives and social situations of the newly-arrived are not generalizable, most have gone through hardships and still face challenges related to their well-being or with their legal status of residence. Some participants state that they sleep poorly and have nightmares. *BiS* provides an opportunity to share such issues, and clarifies that this must be seen in the context of their refugee history. As they have experienced war and conflict, their bodies and minds react in unusual ways (Respondent 5). The participants are furthermore in different stages of how much they have established themselves in Sweden. *BiS* perceives those circumstances to still offer sufficient shared features among them to become a group for the workshops. In regard to unaccompanied minors, Lundberg & Dahlquist (2012:71-72) state that, even though they have a wide range of different backgrounds and stories behind them, “they find themselves far away from home without their family and their normal social context.”

Respondent 3 says that the participants and their states differ significantly across each *BiS* term and group. However, change can be recognized after the 14 weeks' program in regard to how openly people speak and are willing to share feelings and thoughts. With regard to the groups working with the youngest, Respondent 6 mentions that it is easier for the children as they soon become playmates. Even though their parents might be suspicious in the beginning, they appreciate the efforts by *BiS* when they leave the program.

In line with the expectations of social integration, respondent 5 says that the individuals and families are strengthened after having finished the 14 weeks' program. As parents and children have gained more knowledge on possible tracks for their lives in Sweden, they feel relieved as they have also met other people

who share their stories. Participants often confirm such impressions by stating that they feel better and have made a lot of new friends (Respondent 2).

Many state that they appreciate speaking about the topics being addressed within *BiS*. Respondent 5 highlights the healing impact of putting words to thoughts and feelings. The participant observations showed that the setting and contents of *BiS* might therefore have an inclusive effect. Participants of *BiS* appreciate being integrated into a group and having a context that they are comfortable with. The participants also appreciate meeting peers at the workshops. Again, however, it is stressed that *BiS* should not be regarded as group therapy or treatment, but rather as an educational program with psychological effects (Respondent 3).

Respondents experience that participants start reflecting on the contents and themselves during the course of the *BiS* program. Even though some children, and even adults, might not be used to talk about feelings or about their well-being, the interviewed staff of *BiS* report notable changes and an increased willingness to grapple with their situations. In this context, Lundberg & Dahlquist (2012:74) state that the fear to be sent back to “a country where one is denied access to fundamental human rights makes the children squeeze their stories into what was expected from them, or they just turn quiet.’ Here it appears striking that *BiS* also offers exercises and ways of self-expression in alternative ways such as painting or team-building exercises. Most important, however, seems the fact of creating a space for socializing (Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012:72). Participants become more confident as they start to feel safe in a group of peers they would not have met otherwise (Respondent 1).

Feedback reports that the knowledge provided and shared within the daily *BiS* business and its weekly workshops is appreciated and well-received. Within *BiS* workshops, as mentioned, different topics are being addressed, but during the units participants also get to know more about the Swedish society and the Swedish state and its functions. Even though it is not the main purpose to give information on Sweden, it is common that questions on the concept of family, history, or the tax system arise. Against the backdrop of having left one’s country and being

new in a foreign setting, it is appreciated by the newly-arrived to get this deeper understanding.

Respondents mention that the framework of *BiS* is beneficial, as it is a mixture both in design and implementation. The workshops are applied according to a recognizable pattern with contents that suit most. For this reason, people know what to expect and they recognize the safety-providing structure across the different themes with recognizable procedures for the sessions. Yet there are still options for alternative forms of action, as *BiS* never forces anyone to do anything (Respondent 3).

Sometimes, however, external conditions can make the work of *BiS* challenging. Participants might be tired and stressed out, which impacts group dynamics significantly. Respondent 4 says that sometimes the groups are too big to be able to pay attention to everyone in detail. Due to current migration flows, the demand has increased over the last couple of years. Still *BiS* tries to follow its philosophy and tries to avoid copying previous workshop plans completely. All participants usually state that it has been fulfilling and rewarding, and many times they feel a little happier and feel a little more hope when they leave the group workshops (Respondent 2). This becomes clear by the following statement by respondent 5:

*We have experienced that the participants usually want to continue with BiS. They don't want to quit at the end. They think it's fun and rewarding.*

#### 5.4. The *BiS* organizational structure and contents

The organizational structure and (financial) responsibility for implementation can be described as a mixture between the municipality, the church of Sweden, the non-governmental organization *IM* and civil society (Respondent 1; Respondent 5).

*We started in autumn 2010. We had been talking since a long time about BiS, and that we should have a cooperation between the social services, the church and IM. (Respondent 5)*

The official collaboration is described as taking place between full-time and part-time social workers from the municipal refugee department and the prevention unit of the social services in Lund. According to Eklund *et al.* (2011:189), the Church of Sweden is worth mentioning in the context of refugee reception. In Lund, the Swedish church contributes a suitable location for the weekly group workshops, and the church also finances a 25% post (Respondent 4). In addition, the NGO *Individuell Människohjäl*p is involved, being the founder of the *BiS* method. In Lund, however, *IM* does not contribute to the daily operations or implementation directly. In Lund, *IM* only provides training on the method and may contribute volunteers for the *BiS* workshops. Furthermore, it became apparent during the participant observations that volunteers from the civil society work as assistants during the workshops. The responsibility, however, for *BiS* lies at the social services in Lund. Respondent 1 states:

*I think that we are probably still having some kind of the primary responsibility. We may have the primary responsibility but after all it is a cooperation, we would not survive without the cooperation with the church, and the extra service with the civil society. The group working with the young siblings could not exist without this cooperation.*

Even though the actual implementation takes the form of a collaboration, different actors within the public and non-governmental sectors are involved practically. *BiS* is financed by the municipality, but the coordinators also apply for external funds, such as for activities and trips outside the usual workshop setting. Respondent 1 mentions that:

*We apply for funds from various authorities in order to finance our trips and excursions. Then we receive also financial support from the government because the refugee reception is financed with government funds.*

Respondent 3, meanwhile, maintains that:

*[I]t is a benefit of having a collaboration. If we would just work on the voluntary sector, we would never be able to do it I think. I have seen places where BiS is lying entirely on the voluntary sector, which is much more difficult. It's harder to recruit and to maintain the group activities. Due to the fact that we are employed on a regular basis, we have more resources and time to work effectively, also with BiS as such and in cooperation with the refugee department and their administrators.*

## 6. Conclusions

This thesis has been guided by the question of how strengths-based social work with unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families is performed within a specific public/non-governmental approach in Lund, Sweden.

It has been argued that Sweden has potential shortcomings when dealing with displaced persons. Housing shortages, unstable housing situations and lengthy asylum processes have been mentioned as negatively impacting the well-being and social resettlement of unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families. It has become apparent that some of the currently existing circumstances promote the social isolation of foreign people in a foreign setting, and this starting position fosters dependence on the social welfare services by the newly-arrived. In conditions such as these, an adequate social integration of vulnerable individuals who have left conflict-loaded and war-torn countries cannot be guaranteed, as the Swedish welfare state cannot sufficiently maintain the once highly praised social protection systems.

Considering the changes in welfare provision since the 1960s and related restructuring approaches and perspectives on social work with migrants, Sweden's strategies range from administrative over-categorization to institutionalizing measures. As the reasons and consequences for global issues and resulting migration flows have not adequately been considered, however, the effectiveness of the practice of social work with migrants can be questioned. Unfavorable framework conditions indicated by the welfare state have caused social work in Sweden aiming

at the newly-arrived to slow down due to bureaucratic procedures and economic aspects. Consequently, social problems and social vulnerability among unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families are not sufficiently taken into account.

While the demand for social integration activities and social work with migrants is increasing, the welfare landscape is still being restructured. Neo-liberal shifts in the Swedish governments have led to a turning away from purely state-run welfare provision over the past decades. As a consequence, non-state actors have appeared, underscoring the transformation of the Swedish welfare state from centralization to specialization and privatization. In the context of social work with newly-arrived migrants, NGOs, private organizations and civil society are all gaining ever more importance as the traditional notion of a Swedish state-centered welfare provider no longer corresponds to the situation in 2016. In the face of these developments, the work with unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families have not remained unaffected. Reorganizations and the allocation of responsibilities among different stakeholders implicate renewed social work approaches and social integration strategies within a changing policy field. Considering the reorganization of social welfare delivery, mixed social work approaches of both public and non-governmental actors might therefore unknowingly adapt to the requirements and to the surrounding dynamics of this changing policy field and make a significant contribution to the social integration of unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families.

It has become apparent that many of the newly-arrived are in a weak position compared to the local Swedish population. Due to the stresses of fleeing and uncertain life circumstances after arrival, they find themselves in a precarious situation. These conditions affect this already vulnerable group, their well-being and optimism negatively and may not lead to a successful or immediate process of social integration as a result. A range of negative experiences, rather, leads to anxiety, dissatisfaction, stress and social isolation among the mentioned target group. In order to promote a positive self-perception, the relevance of strengths-based approaches within social work with migrants has therefore been proposed.

As an example of strengths-based social work within a cooperation of public and non-governmental actors, the organization *Barn i Start* in Lund, Sweden, has been selected to be the subject of a qualitative study in order to explore their working strategies.

Regarding the question how *BiS* perceives the social situation of the newly-arrived, it has become apparent that the overall social situation of the unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families is situated within a broad spectrum. It can be noted, however, that the participants, when joining *BiS*, are relatively new in Sweden. They are new in a foreign setting, and this circumstance alone implicates challenges for their daily lives. The scope ranges from loneliness to uncertainty as many participants of *BiS* experience difficulties with their housing situation, language barriers, school and work related issues or they are nervous because of outstanding decisions from the migration authorities with regard to their asylum process. Furthermore, some of the *BiS* participants suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders or they are mentally distracted as relatives are still located in war zones.

This thesis has also explored the strategies applied by *BiS*. In this context, it can be summarized that *BiS* is an activity incorporating the whole family and unaccompanied minors in the framework of social group workshops on useful contents that promote reflection and discussion. It has become clear that *BiS* creates a forum for people sharing similar challenges and stories after having left a home country and arrived in Sweden. The framework structure of *BiS* appears to be easily accessible and it has a recognizable structure. Furthermore, participants can rely on support in their mother tongue and the confidentiality of the contents shared during sessions or while having other contact with *BiS*. Besides, it has become clear that *BiS* is a flexible approach even though it follows a manual. There are always alternative forms and ways for people to participate or to express themselves. Finally, *BiS* promotes encounters with the Swedish society by undertaking excursions, and the social work activity contributes knowledge on the Swedish system.

Within this study, it has also been investigated how *BiS* works in order to stimulate the participants to use their own resources. In this regard, it has become apparent, that *BiS* applies a strength-based perspective focusing on the individuals'

skills and capacities in order to lift their self-confidence and optimism. To improve self-esteem and hope for a future life in Sweden, *BiS* uses different games and exercises during the workshops that promote exchange among the participants and might result in affirmation by the group. Following the idea that everyone is good at something, the unaccompanied minors and the newly-arrived families learn that they are valuable and have the resources to leave a possible spiral of negative experiences. Also, *BiS* can be seen as a weekly meeting place where people get in touch, become friends and maybe even dispute. Due to this socializing character, *BiS* contributes an extension of the participants' social networks.

This analysis looks at how *BiS* in Lund is carried out in cooperation between public and non-governmental actors. The social services of the municipality of Lund carries the main organizational and financial responsibility for recruitment and implementation. In addition to the full- and part-time social workers employed at the refugee department, the Swedish church contributes funding of a 25% position, and also provides facilities free of charge for the weekly group workshops. This cooperative role also extends to the NGO *Individuell Människohjäl*p and volunteers from civil society. In Lund, *IM* is only indirectly involved by providing the self-developed *BiS* method and by offering training as well as manuals for the sessions. Citizens from civil society and from *IM* are also involved as volunteers providing assistance to group leaders during the weekly sessions.

## 7. Suggestions for further research

This thesis has analyzed a strengths-oriented social work approach with unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families at the organization *Barn i Start* in Lund, Sweden. Considering the positive impact on the social integration and well-being of the participating refugees in Lund, a further investigation of this working method and program design appears interesting. In Sweden, there are several cities running their own branches of *BiS*. Which structures and actors are being employed in a national context and which long-term effects are being perceived? Therefore, a national evaluation of *BiS* could give indications for a big picture of the method with

regard to the question of its value for the social integration of unaccompanied minors and newly-arrived families in Sweden.

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## Appendix I – Interview guide

### Opening

- Introduction and general briefing of the project
- Explanations of the interview process (time, speak freely, ask questions of needed)
- Any question or additional information needed before we start?

### Main

- Could you tell me a little bit about yourself (education, profession, responsibility within BiS)
- Which actors are involved in BiS?
- Who is responsible for BiS?
- Who is financing BiS?
- Who is working at BiS and which roles do they have?
- Who are the participants of BiS?
- What groups does BiS offer?
- How and why are the participants recruited?
- What is the life situation of the participants about when they join BiS?
- How are the circumstances of their situation incorporated within BiS?
- How is the perspective of a migrant perspective incorporated?
- Do the participants face challenges? If yes, what kind of challenges?
- How does BiS help them in solving possible issues?
- Could you describe the process of a group workshop at BiS?
- Describe the methods and contents you are working with.
- What is the aim of the activities and exercises within the group meetings?
- Which skills and resources does BiS encourage?
- What are the strengths of the group meetings?
- What are the weaknesses of the group meetings?
- How do you perceive the participants during the meetings?
- What do you think, how do the participants perceive the workshops?

- What does participation mean for you within BiS?
- What is the purpose of the workshops?
- What is most important within a BiS session with regard to the participants?
- How do you perceive the participants before and after the completion of the BiS program?
- Do you think the participants learn something during the BiS program? If yes, what?

#### Closing

- Thank you very much for sharing your experiences! Would you like to add anything?

## Appendix II – List of interviews and observations

### **Interviews:**

Respondent 1: Ulrika Anzén (Barn i Start): 20 May 2016

Respondent 2: Moussa Darwich (Barn i Start): 24 May 2016

Respondent 3: Linn Johansson Erkenfelt (Barn i Start): 25 May 2016

Respondent 4: Zeina Ramadan (Barn i Start): 25 May 2016

Respondent 5: Kristina Johansson (Barn i Start): 27 May 2016

Respondent 6: Anne-Karin Wellbring Guth (Barn i Start): 31 May 2016

### **Participant observations:**

Group workshop 19 April 2016

Group workshop 26 April 2016

Group workshop 3 May 2016

Group workshop 10 May 2016

Group workshop 17 May 2016

Group workshop 24 May 2016

## Appendix III – Consent form

### **Master´s Dissertation Study: Participant Information Sheet**

Student: Malte Bolender – Supervisor: Norma Montesino

You are invited to take part in a study as part of my M.Sc. thesis in Global Studies (Major: Social Work) at Lund University. Please take time to review all information below before giving consent. If anything is not clear, please ask for additional information.

**Title of study:** Strengths-based social work with newly-arrived children and families in a mixed public/non-governmental setting (Working title).

**Purpose of the study:** The purpose of this study is to explore a practical social work approach with migrant children and families at the local level carried out by public/non-governmental actors. In order to reach a conclusion, the implementation and experiences of the specific program *Barn I Start* will be analyzed. The results of these measures will be compared to prior research and literature on the topic in order to clarify how *Barn i Start* is working in this context and how it deals with the participants' needs.

**What will happen if I take part?** You will be interviewed and recorded over the course of 30-45 minutes in which you can express your personal opinions on the questions asked. You can withdraw from the interview at any time. Participation in the study is voluntary. By giving consent for participation you will provide important information for this degree project by means of your opinions, personal perspectives and thoughts on *Barn I Start* in Lund.

**Confidentiality?** All information you provide will be kept confidential and no names will be used for the thesis if not agreed upon beforehand.

**Contact for further information:**

Malte Bolender – Email: gls14mbo@student.lu.se

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this study.