



**LUND UNIVERSITY**  
Center for Middle Eastern Studies

## **Power and Resistance**

*Exploring strategies of self-empowerment among Syrian asylum seekers in  
Sweden*

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Arts  
In Middle Eastern Studies

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*In loving memory of my grandmother*

*(1919-2017)*

*May this thesis capture her enduring belief.*

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the experiences of Syrian asylum seekers in Sweden, who are waiting for their decision or have recently received it. The empirical data have been collected through semi-structured interviews with ten women and men during a month-long fieldwork conducted in the autumn of 2016 in an asylum centre located in the south of Sweden. The research queries the regimes of power that shape the everyday realities of respondents, mainly the Swedish state, camp administration and wider Swedish society. Simultaneously, the study illustrates how individuals are active agents, navigating their interactions and resisting and negotiating the established power relations.

*Key Words:* Power Relations, Resistance, Asylum, Waiting, Syria, Sweden

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## Introduction

It was a warm and sunny autumn day, Samir and I were on the bus on our way to the camp. It was my first visit to the centre and Samir, a 22-year old Syrian refugee, agreed to introduce me to his friends living there. During the whole journey to the camp, Samir was enthusiastically talking about his school life in Sweden, his plans after graduation and how he would like to become an engineer. After a while he paused dwelling upon his thoughts, and then shared with me the other side of the story. The one he was reluctant to reveal in the beginning of our conversation. Samir told me how lonely he feels at school as his course-mates refuse to befriend and look down at him as they have found out the “truth” about him, and how he misses life in Syria, his family, friends and most of all the call to prayer, *adhan*,<sup>1</sup> which to him seemed to represent the most beautiful sound in the world.

Upon our arrival to the camp, I found myself contemplating a plethora of unanswered questions. *How was Samir so eager to finish his studies and become an engineer despite the apparent discrimination and racism he was facing? How did these challenges relate to his sense of empowerment and feelings of desperation? What were Samir’s accounts of discrimination a true reflection of?*

I realise that, that very moment was crucial to shaping my understanding about the research, I was about to undertake as Samir’s words brought to my attention the questions pertaining to the complex reality of power structures, human agency and social change, all of which were the interwoven aspects of my respondents’ lives.

After jumping off the bus, we found ourselves in a remote village about an hour away from the nearest town of Linhälla<sup>2</sup>, where communal and social life

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<sup>1</sup> The adhan (Arabic: اذان) is the Islamic call to worship, recited by the *mu'adhin* (Arabic: مؤذن) at prescribed times of the day.

<sup>2</sup> The name of the city is fictional and is applied to ensure the confidentiality of the research.

revolved around the small local church. The camp itself was an abandoned hotel with old-fashioned and worn-out furniture with grey and unwelcoming walls. The people living in here ironically referred to it as the “five-star hotel” while talking to their friends in other countries.

The day I arrived coincided with a celebration that was organised by members of the local church and volunteers from neighbouring houses. For my respondents, it was a rarity in their otherwise monotonous lives. Swedish songs and dances filled the room, where adults and children from both nationalities were dancing in roundelays and exchanging gifts. However, after a while in the most Swedish of environments, the tunes of the traditional Levantine *dabke* were heard. All the Syrian men began to dance inviting their Swedish guests to join and for a moment one could feel the presence of a “*little Syria*” in a remote village in Sweden.

That day had a profound impact on generating my views. I realised the common thread of my queries and the relationship between this final episode and the experiences of Samir. Both episodes were marked by power relations and shifting power dynamics. In the case of Samir, societal pressure was excluding and banishing him for being a refugee. Whilst, in the case of the camp, the Swedish community was willing to embrace asylum seekers but with the prerequisite of cultural hegemony. By introducing local social customs, the members of the community were imposing the accepted cultural norms and reaffirming the superiority of the Swedish culture.

Nevertheless, in both cases people expressed their agency and resisted in their own way. In the case of Samir, by refusing the label “refugee” and striving for his aspirations, and in the case of the people in the camp, by reviving their native traditions to preserve their identity.

These events led me to think about various strategies of self-empowerment among marginalised communities and the intricate interplay between social structures and human agency. Hence, to explore the realities of Syrian asylum seekers and their interactions with different regimes of power in Swedish society, I pose the research questions:

- 1. What are the main structural constraints relating to everyday life of Syrian asylum seekers in Sweden?*
- 2. How do asylum seekers navigate their daily interactions within these constraints and how do they resist them?*

### **1.1 Research Purpose**

The thesis sheds light on daily realities of Syrian asylum seekers living in Sweden. It aims to explore the multifaceted legal and socio-economic boundaries that respondents face to identify their impact on individuals' situations. Additionally, the study explores the acts of agency performed by asylum seekers that can challenge the established regimes of power on the level of state and society.

At the same time, the analysis counters the dominant discourses of victimisation and homogenisation over such individuals. By illustrating the individual agency and techniques of self-empowerment, the study emphasises the creativity and determination of the participants.

Finally, the thesis aims to raise awareness of both Swedish and international relevant authorities to better attend to differing needs of asylum seeking and refugee populations.

## 1.2 Disposition

The thesis begins with a discussion of socio-political context of reception and recently emergent public discourses surrounding asylum seekers in Sweden, demonstrating the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments that grew with the increasing numbers of asylum applications. I refer to such socio-political context as a basis for understanding the legal and social constraints that asylum seekers currently face in Sweden.

Furthermore, the literature review discusses how the existing scholarship on asylum seekers lacks the analysis of subjective and differentiated stories of resistance and self-empowerment, presenting the findings mostly in collective political terms, thus homogenising the refugee population. To connect the current disparate literature, the thesis explores the complexities of individual realities by connecting the macro level of analysis with micro level of individual narratives.

The theoretical basis for this thesis builds upon Agamben's and Foucault's conceptualisations of sovereign and disciplinary power, providing a framework for analysing the experiences of Syrian asylum seekers within the boundaries of Swedish sovereignty. By engaging with Agamben and Foucault (among others), I intend to question the extent of such individuals' political exclusion as *bare life* and their exposure to disciplinary power exercised by the sovereign. In addition, by incorporating the ideas of everyday tactics and resistance mechanisms of Scott and de Certeau, I also query how asylum seekers navigate their interactions with various modes of power and how they tactically challenge the existing power structures by both subtle and open acts of resistance.

Accordingly, the methodology section offers a description of various stages through which the data for the analysis were collected. In each respective section, I

provide the reasons for specific methodological choices and discuss some of the challenges I faced as a researcher while conducting the study.

The findings section presents the data divided into the identified themes exploring the daily experiences of respondents. The themes are *Waiting as a Challenge, Disciplinary Mechanisms of Power, Resistance to Disciplinary Power, Public Visibility and Socio-Cultural Integration* and *Economic Integration*.

Correspondingly, the analysis part is divided into two respective headings *Power Relations and Oppression* and *Resistance and Self-Empowerment*. In the first section, I analyse the various modes of power operating on multiple societal levels, underlining the numerous legal and social constraints that contain the potential of the respondents. The second section, illustrates how these established power relations are negotiated by the individuals who perform as active agents, navigating their interactions and resisting their socio-political, cultural and economic marginalisation.

Ending with a conclusion, the thesis suggests possible future directions for academic research based on the questions this study has generated.

## **Context**

### ***2.1 Socio-Political Background***

The Syrian civil war has caused a mass migration of people, many of whom have sought asylum in different parts of the world, including Europe. According to the estimates provided by UNHCR, around 884,461 asylum applications have been submitted in more than 37 European countries between 2011 and 2016 (UNHCR 2016). Most Syrian asylum seekers (64 percent) have applied for asylum in Germany and Sweden (Ibid.). Thus, Sweden became one of the EU member states with the highest number of asylum seekers per capita (Ibid. 27). Syrian asylum seekers constituted the majority of asylum applicants in Sweden (Ibid. 28). In the following months, with asylum applications on the rise, the Swedish asylum system and reception centres faced significant challenges. A sense of crisis began to crystallise in parts of Swedish government, political parties, media and larger society. As a result, historically liberal and open asylum policies began to shift with the introduction of more restrictive measures to limit the numbers of arriving asylum seekers (ENAR 2016). On 11 February 2015, the Swedish government released the first draft of the new temporary asylum and family reunification legislation which will be in force for three years. With the introduction of new legislation temporary residence permits (either a three-year under the Geneva Convention or 13-month under subsidiary protection) became standard permits granted to refugees, except quota refugees, who are still entitled to permanent permits (Swedish government 2015). Temporary permits can be extended if the applicants prove themselves to be financially self-sufficient and afford their own housing (Swedish Migration Agency 2017). Additionally, only three categories of protection are now part of the legislation: protection according to the Geneva Convention on refugees, subsidiary protection

according to international and EU legislation quota refugees via the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. While previously available two categories of Swedish legislation of “otherwise in need of protection” and “particularly distressing circumstances” are now excluded (Demos 2017). At last, laws regarding family reunification have become more restrictive. Refugees who are granted a subsidiary protection permit are now allowed to reunite with their family members only in exceptional cases (ENAR 2016). These changes in asylum policy affect a great number of Syrian refugees as most of them are enlisted under the subsidiary protection category (Ibid 28). Thus, the introduction of temporary legislation decreased the level of protection to refugees to the lowest possible without violating international and EU law.

In addition to that, the laws relating to the rights of education for adult asylum seekers are very restrictive. Only once the residence permit is received, they are entitled to attend lessons in Swedish organised by local municipalities (Swedish Migration Agency 2017). And given the fact, that the knowledge of Swedish is largely a requirement to enter the Swedish labour market (Behtoui et al. 2004), it can pose a major challenge to many refugees of subsidiary protection who are expected to be employed within a short period of time (13 months or three years) in order to extend their permit.

At the same time, public debates have shifted towards more nationalistic and anti-immigrant sentiments. A recent study conducted by a leading British think-tank Demos, observes how the dramatic changes in asylum policies were accompanied by an increased focus on questions pertaining to national identity and civic integration (Demos 2017). The study reveals how discourses around Swedish values and immigrants who need to assimilate into Swedish culture have become prominent

among both elite and non-elite members of the society (Demos 2017, p. 375). Some of these discourses also portrayed immigration as a potential threat to the stability of the welfare state (Ibid. p. 388).

In the same way, another study by Kara and Kjellgren (2016) demonstrates how the main Swedish media outlets discussed the issues of asylum seekers and refugees. The findings of the research suggest that the newspapers portrayed the situation overwhelmingly in terms of “refugee crisis”, the crisis that Sweden and Swedish people are challenged by. Words like “katastrof” (catastrophe) and “kollaps” (collapse) were applied to imply the endangered state of Swedish society and welfare system (Kara and Kjellgren 2016).

Accordingly, as the public debates hardened giving in to the rhetoric of right-wing political parties, the hostility towards refugees and asylum seekers increased. There were numerous reported cases of hate crimes, assaults and arson attacks on asylum centres (Malmlöf 2016). Particularly, asylum seekers of Muslim origin became targets of racist and xenophobic attacks (Ibid. 37).

To summarise, the unprecedented large numbers of asylum applications in Sweden were followed by the introduction of more restrictive asylum policies and rise of nationalistic and anti-immigration sentiments which became more dominant in political and public discourses. Nevertheless, the impact of these changes on people’s opportunities to integrate into society have been largely neglected by researchers as well as relevant authorities. The new temporary legislation granting residence permits one year at a time can substantially complicate the situation for housing, employment and education for many Syrian asylum seekers and refugees. Additionally, the securitising language of media alongside the nationalistic and anti-immigrant rhetoric of politicians can fuel the discriminatory public attitudes and discourses. As a result,

integration of asylum seekers and refugees can be significantly constrained and hindered.

## Literature Review

### *3.1 Seeking asylum: resistance and agency*

Generally, the literature on Syrian asylum seekers is focused on those who are seeking asylum, the strain placed upon the countries who receive them, and the treatment of people by the state. A vital component of asylum experience is missed, the responses of people to the restraints and limitations imposed over them by the receiving state.

As such, the aim of this review is to indicate the limitations of current studies regarding Syrian asylum seekers and their acts of resistance and agency.

Due to how recent the situation is regarding the Syrian asylum seekers, there is a paucity of literature on the subject. Much of the research is focused on the examination of the quality of medical health services, the procedures that asylum seekers are subjected to, and the mental and physical conditions of asylum seekers within detention centres and hosting facilities (Sharara and Kanj 2014). As Dawn Chatty (2010) argues, this is a growing field, prioritised by humanitarian aid organisations seeking out the “victimised sick.” Additionally, medical studies are supplemented by a variety of demographic statistics collected by inter-governmental agencies or NGOs, such as those by UNHCR. Whilst useful source material, these figures are limited in providing insights into the experiences and everyday realities of asylum seekers. A notable exception is the study conducted by Şenay Özden (2013) exploring the difficulties Syrian asylum seekers and refugees face while living in Turkey. Özden’s study reveals more personalised stories of asylum seekers discussing the hardships associated with camp life and the exploitative nature of the labour market. However, this analysis is limited in its usefulness for understanding the resistance strategies people apply navigating their lives within such challenging environments.

Thus, as the research on experiences of Syrian asylum seekers is underdeveloped, the inspiration for the analysis can be drawn from earlier studies conducted with asylum seekers in different parts of the world. In doing so, it will be appropriate to establish what are the main structural constraints for the people who seek asylum to find an initial point for the study of the acts of resistance and agency that they might apply.

Several studies have identified structural constraints associated with the inability to work and study due to restrictive asylum policies, non-recognition of qualifications, lack of references and discrimination by employers and recruitment agencies (Wright 1995). In addition to that, “loss of status” or being an asylum seeker or a refugee has had negative associations, particularly in terms of public perception, impeding the ability of individuals to move forward with their lives in exile (Hunt 2008). These structural constraints can have a grave impact on refugees’ mental health and force asylum-seeking populations into vulnerable and exploitative situations leading to homelessness and destitution (Ibid. 47).

The existing literature has tried to address questions relating to the intricate interplay between vulnerability, resistance and agency of individuals who are encumbered by structural constraints. In the past, refugees and asylum seekers were more represented in terms of helplessness and loss with a tendency towards homogenisation and victimisation, denying them any form of agency. It was explicit in UNHCR literature, which depicted the lives of refugees as: “...desperately simple, and empty. No home, no work, *no decisions to take* today. And none to take tomorrow. Or the next day. Refugees are the *victims* of persecution and violence. Most *hope* that, one day, they may be able to rebuild their lives in a sympathetic environment. To exist again in more than name” (UNHCR 1993, p. 48).

In her study of refugees as recipients of aid, Harrell-Bond (1999) asserts, that the documents she obtained from agencies emphasised images of *helpless, starving masses* who depend on agents of compassion to keep them alive. As refugees and asylum seekers were so often victims of violence and forced migration, many assumed that they also had no agency (Ghorashi 2005). Similarly, even in more recent times the image of a refugee can often be portrayed one-dimensionally, focusing mainly on the sufferings and hardships people endure. Johnson (2011), investigating the role of visual representation through images in the international refugee regime, claims that the pictures of refugees establish them as undifferentiated victims, voiceless, without political identity or the corresponding possibilities of agency.

Nevertheless, homogenising and victimising portrayals of refugees and asylum seekers have been criticised by more recent studies challenging the discourses of pity and exclusion. The scholars have shown the existence of agency and resistance at different stages of the lives of refugees. In an article about conceptualisation of migration, Turton (2003) argues that using the term *forced* migration leaves little or no space for independent rational decision making and implies that refugees are simply passive victims of circumstances. Instead, he emphasises the determination of people who decide to flee their home, by defining them as “*purposive actors.*” As he asserts, migratory processes are shaped by the acts of individuals and group *decision making*: “decisions about whether to move, when to move and where to move” (Turton 2003).

Further, Turner (2010), examining the everyday realities of Hutu refugees in Tanzania, challenges the perception of refugees as victims of circumstances without any political agency. While describing the view of the refugee camp from the air, he manages to capture the contrast between the organised and confined spaces of the

camp and the reality on the ground. As he notices: "...even from the air one could see footpaths made by the movement of thousands of pairs of usually bare feet, wound their way through the camp, breaking strict geometry of UN roads and creating lived space" (Turner 2010). Thus, he reaffirms the *resourcefulness* and *creativity* of people in the camp in their pursuit of securing their lives and avoiding the seclusion zones designed by the UN.

Furthermore, recent scholarship explores the possible displays of agency and resistance, with regards to recent protests in camps (Askland 2007, Bhimji, 2014, Cisneros 2011, Galvez 2009, Kleist 2009, Menjivar 2006, Milner 2011, Puggioni, 2014, Rygiel 2011, Rigby & Schlembach 2013, Tyler 2013). Studies focus on the political advocacy and activism that refugees and asylum seekers show in opposing restrictive immigration policies. Through conscious strategies of participating in protests, media campaigns, and engaging with various support organisations, refugees enhance their sense of well-being in material and symbolic ways (Galvez 2009). Thus, individuals demanding political visibility and inclusion, simultaneously participate in the nation-states that penalise, reject and denigrate their very presence (Bhimji 2016).

Scholars have observed how refugees and migrants transform the idea of formal citizenship through their acts of everyday dissent (Anderson 2010, Chimienti 2011, Isin 2009). Engin Isin (2009) refers to the agentic acts of disempowered people as "*acts of citizenship*" acts undertaken by people who are political subjects, making a claim on the "*right to have rights*" (Arendt 1943), rather than accepting the passivity that might be imposed on them. In this respect, many researchers explore the agency and resistance efforts of refugees through their mobilisation of unions, religious networks, and maintaining identity as collective claims for citizenship rights and inclusion (Bailey 2010, Bhimji 2016, Lowry and Nyers 2006, Moulin and Nyers

2007, Piacentini 2014). The groups established by refugees are mainly organised along national, ethnic or linguistic lines and are generally described as Refugee Community Organisations (Kelly 2003, Zetter and Pearl 2000). As Piacentini (2014) argues the group formation in and of itself is a process of everyday resistance, whereby being in a group provides an opportunity to collectively resist the ascribed “asylum seeker” label through assertions of belonging to a wider community of practice. Moreover, the collective space provides a critical support mechanism, a safe place to discuss concerns about asylum claims, exchange information on lawyers, and thus work out collective ways of coping with the daily struggles of uncertainty. For instance, Bailey (2010) illustrates women asylum seekers’ agency through the foundation of their own non-governmental organisation which she identifies as a collective “*home*” space. She emphasises women’s self-determination in exercising their choice to be active members in the society and brings attention to local grassroots movements which are challenging the invisibility of asylum seekers and refugees (Bailey 2010).

Everyday acts of resistance have been studied also as individualised forms of action. Contrary to organised political actions, these acts of dissent are oriented towards short-term, rather than systemic change and pose an indirect, rather than a direct challenge to the sovereign power. Individual acts of resistance can range from hunger strikes, suicide attempts, and lip-sewing, to escape and concealing of identity (Bhimji 2016, Ellermann 2009, Kjærre 2011). The research illustrates the body politics that takes shape, helping people to gain visibility in contesting their rights.

The self-empowering tactics that refugees and asylum seekers apply are mainly observed in political collective terms, with less attention to the specificities of their individual realities. At the same time within the individual dimension, resistance

strategies tend to amount to acts of desperation rather than self-empowerment and agency. Most studies fail to thoroughly explore the interrelationship between the acts of agency and resistance and the difficulties associated with the asylum process and camp life.

Similarly, little academic attention has been devoted to the phenomenon of waiting as experienced by asylum seekers and its implications for strategies of resistance and agency. Several qualitative studies have addressed the phenomenon from the perspectives of time, power dynamics, activity, sense of belonging and being a part of the wider society. Many researchers have scrutinised the notion of *uncertainty* and how it is experienced by asylum seekers. Dupont's (2005) research on asylum seekers in the Netherlands identified *uncertainty* during the waiting period as a significant variable that affects the well-being of asylum seekers and can result in psychological as well as drug and alcohol related problems (Dupont et al. 2005). Furthermore, Lal's account on politics of asylum of Great Britain portrays the waiting process as "*long, arduous and painfully frustrating experience*" (Lal 1997, p. 24).

Following the same line of logic, Lacroix (2004) also identifies waiting for the status as one of the most painful periods of the claimant process. She highlights how pervasive is that aspect in their lives, putting them *on hold* and impeding their progress towards settling and integration (Lacroix 2004). In a similar manner, Stewart (2005) examining the "vulnerabilities" of asylum seekers in the UK, claims that waiting is characterised by *anxiety, existential boredom* and a *feeling of exclusion* among asylum seekers as they find themselves in a state of "inbetweenness" or liminal condition (Stewart 2005). Similarly, Chan and Loveridge (1987, p.745) in their study exploring the emotional and psychological life of the Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong, assert that while waiting refugees feel like "they lost track of *where*

*they are, why they are and who they are.*” Also, they reassert Lacroix’s conclusion that the long-term waiting period affects the psychological well-being of asylum seekers and further hinders the chances of integration into the new society (Chan and Loveridge 1987). Regarding the implications of waiting time on psychological health of asylum seekers, Beiser (1987) contributes with the study conducted in Vancouver about the people displaced from Southeast Asia. He suggests that altering one's perception of time may be an adaptive strategy. Moreover, according to him, during periods of acute stress, asylum seekers apply a coping mechanism of focusing more on the present to the relative exclusion of past and future, as the re-emergence of past and future into consciousness brings about a risk for developing depression (Beiser 1987).

Waiting period for asylum seekers can be fraught with feelings of anxiety, frustration and exclusion, which in turn can affect their chances of successful settlement and integration. Yet, lesser academic attention has been given to explore what are the effects of the experience of waiting in relation to the asylum seekers’ acts of agency and resistance. While, there are a number of studies addressing the disempowering effects of long-term waiting on asylum seekers, the effects that might indirectly lead to acts of self-empowerment have been largely neglected.

### ***Discussion***

Thus, as it became apparent the more recent academic literature challenges the victimising perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers, acknowledging their potential to be claim-making and rights-taking political beings. Nonetheless, it still has less discussion of refugees’ and asylum seekers’ individual and differentiated struggles for self-empowerment. Additionally, as we have observed, even though there are

different studies exploring the experiences of individuals while waiting for their asylum decision, several important questions are still lacking in the analysis.

Most of the research addressing the resistance and agency of asylum seekers and refugees tend to represent the phenomena in collective political terms, thus homogenising the refugee population and paying less attention to the complexities of individual realities and subjective narratives.

This research contributes to the existing literature by connecting the macro level of analysis with micro level individual narratives. Additionally, it adds to the understanding of the waiting period for asylum seekers and its implications with regards to agency, resistance and self-empowerment within the refugee camps.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***4.1 Structure and Agency***

The question of interrelationship between agency and structure has been one of the oldest and most widely debated topics within the sociological tradition. Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration offers an analysis that explains the interplay between the two. He defines structure as both the "medium and the outcome of the social practices they recursively organise" (Giddens 1984, p. 25). Thus, even though the structure shapes much of social practice it is also being reproduced and possibly transformed by that practice. Giddens describes structure in terms of what he refers to as modalities or a set of rules and resources engaging human action (Ibid. 34). Modalities can refer to the cultural constraints such as established norms, customs, traditions and ideologies that influence the behaviour of individuals by introducing specific rules and laws to regulate human conduct. At the same time, Giddens argues that while being restrained by established structures, human actions are also enabled by them. For example, human agency can be performed by not paying attention to traditional social norms, substituting or reproducing them in a different way. Accordingly, people's agency ensures that they always have some degree of freedom, some room to manoeuvre. Ultimately, Giddens affirms that human actors have the potential to modify and alter social structures, thus leading to social change.

For refugees and asylum seekers, structural constraints can manifest in restrictive asylum policies and discriminatory public discourses. These constraints can condemn them to the status of strangers, outsiders, and aliens, stripping away their rights of becoming political beings (Isin and Rygiel 2007). Hence, being in legal limbo limits the capacity of asylum seekers to express and assert their agency. To understand the interplay between the established structural constraints and the

capacity of asylum seekers to act and modify their own social reality, Giddens's theory of structuration can be of great assistance. However, the structuration theory lacks the analysis of the modes of power and how they operate on multiple societal levels to ensure the functioning of established structures. Therefore, to better understand the sources of power and its various modes of operation, it would be appropriate to consider the ideas of Michel Foucault. Specifically, his concepts of "governmentality" and "bio-power" are of interest for this research.

Disciplinary power stemming from the logic of governmentality, defined by Foucault, is a power exercised through administrative systems and social services, such as prisons, schools and mental hospitals (Foucault 1979). According to Foucault, established systems of surveillance and assessment ensure that people behave in expected ways by disciplining themselves: "the success of disciplinary power derives from the use of simple instruments: hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination" (Ibid, p. 98). In other words, disciplinary power is derived from constant surveillance, examination, functional organisation of space, introduction of time tables and daily routines. Hence, without having to resort to use of violence, disciplinary mechanisms ensure the control of populations and the promotion of norms about expected human conduct.

Additionally, the techniques of establishing control and subjugating physical bodies have been elaborated in Foucault's concept of bio-power. The term can be broadly defined as power over life. Foucault (1990) used the concept to demonstrate the strategies of biopolitics applied by different institutions such as governments to regulate the life of populations, relating to "anatomy-politics" of human body linked to birth, death, reproduction, illness and so forth.

Foucault's ideas of governmentality and bio-power have been redefined and applied within the realm of refugee studies by Giorgio Agamben. According to him, the figure of "refugee" can be represented as a paradigm for understanding the modern techniques of disciplinary power (Agamben 1998). As he asserts, the refugee camp is a space which produces and dominates individual subjects by introducing the logic of governmentality (Ibid.95). Agamben portrays refugees as the ultimate "biopolitical" subjects, regulated and governed in a permanent "state of exception" within the boundaries of the camp (Ibid.110). "Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to *bare life*, the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realised, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation" (1998, p. 171).

Thus, while being politically excluded from the *polis*, bare life is constantly exposed to sovereign violence and relegated to the state of exception. In the contemporary nation-state world system refugees and stateless people are the ones who are deemed to be *homo sacer*, the ones with no protection and no rights of inclusion.

Agamben also refers to the notion of potentiality. He claims that, it is not only the body of refugee that is excluded, but also one's potential is being contained, regulated and objectified, before it results in bodily inclusion or exclusion. Therefore, to consider the status of the potential of asylum seekers, in the next section I will look into the micro dimensions of individual action and resistance in the face of sovereign panopticism.

#### ***4.2 Everyday tactics of resistance***

To understand the strategies and tactics applied by asylum seekers in navigating their interactions with various modes of power, I highlight some theoretical concepts

relating to the agency and resistance of the subaltern groups. Individuals belonging to these groups are, as a rule, socially and politically outside of hegemonic power structures. Being excluded from society's established institutions they are denied the means by which people have a voice in their society (Hylton 2007).

It is worth mentioning that, Agamben's and others' discussion of refugees, while acknowledging the political exclusion and exposure of refugees to sovereign power, reproduces discourses that foreclose refugee agency and the possibilities of systemic change (Bousfield 2010). Therefore, in search for suitable analytical concepts, I bring in other theories more relevant to analysing different acts of agency and resistance performed by asylum seekers.

The concept of resistance has had varying connotations, referring to various forms of human actions and behaviours on individual, collective and institutional levels of social life (Hynes 2013). The term can be defined as, for example, "acting autonomously, in one's own interests", "active efforts to oppose, fight, and refuse to cooperate with or submit to . . . abusive behaviour and control" or simply "questioning and objecting" (Hollander et al. 2004).

Traditionally, resistance has been regarded as something visible and sizeable, such as large-scale protest movements (Hollander et al. 2004). As noted earlier, refugees and asylum seekers engage in mass demonstrations protesting discriminatory legislations and difficult living conditions within camps and asylum centres (Askland 2007, Isin 2009, Puggioni, 2014, Rygiel, 2011, Tyler 2013, Kleist, 2009).

Nevertheless, some scholars like Hynes (2013) argue that resistance is not only a form of reaction through which mass movements challenge existing structures of power, but also a strategic response of individuals to the workings of systemic structures in everyday contexts. Everyday acts of resistance performed by relatively

disempowered groups of people are elaborated in works of Comaroff (1985), Ong (1987), Scott (1985) and Willis (1977). As Butler (2014) emphasises, these non-violent forms of resistance are crucial for the purposes of asserting existence, claiming the right to public space, equality, and challenging oppressive power relations. In Scott's (1985) definition, resistance can manifest itself not only in open and direct confrontations, but also in acts of hidden and disguised resistance, such as "foot-dragging, escape, sarcasm, passivity, misunderstandings, disloyalty, slander, avoidance or theft" which amount to acts of desperation (Scott 1989, 1990). To Scott, these subtle acts of resistance, which he identifies as "weapons of the weak", are more accessible to disempowered people as they rarely have access to the resources or opportunities to resist openly and publicly. Additionally, non-conformity implies correction and penalty, institutionalised by the disciplinary power. As Scott (1990) asserts, everyday acts of resistance expressed in "hidden transcripts", even though they might seem insignificant and invisible, have the capacity to challenge the power relations between the subaltern and the sovereign.

Complementing Scott's ideas of subtle acts of resistance with Michel de Certeau's "theory of tactics" is a useful strategy to analyse the struggles of individuals against the panopticism of the sovereign. De Certeau (1998) explores the tactics of ordinary people as attempts to regain their own independence and to undermine the political and cultural rituals and representations imposed upon them. As de Certeau claims: "tactic is an art of the weak, by which they make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected" (Ibid. 30). Consequently, the weak "use, manipulate and divert" the spaces imposed upon them to create "unexpected results." Thus, by learning to cope with cultural and structural

constraints individuals develop a sense of worthiness, build self-esteem and develop the ability to change personal and structural conditions that are barriers to developing individual potential.

To summarise, the theoretical basis for this thesis provides a framework for an analysis of the experiences of Syrian asylum seekers within the boundaries of Swedish sovereignty. By engaging with Agamben and Foucault, I question the extent of such individuals' political exclusion as *bare life* and their exposure to disciplinary power exercised by the sovereign. In line with Giddens ideas, I aim to understand the interplay between structure and agency in the context of everyday life of asylum seekers. In dialogue with Scott, de Certeau and others, I query the ways asylum seekers navigate their interactions with various modes of oppression and the ways they tactically challenge the existing power structures by both subtle and open acts of resistance. Moving between multiple levels of society, I will posit how subjective experiences and actions contest and inform practices of human exclusion through institutions such as the Swedish state, camp administration and local community.

## **Methodology**

### **5.1 Design of the study**

The study derives its material from a month-long fieldwork in an asylum centre located in southern Sweden. Visiting the centre and spending time with the individuals on daily basis, allowed me to develop a better understanding of their everyday realities. Besides that, it provided more flexibility with regards to the research directions, as I could guide my research based on the findings of my observations. Moreover, it facilitated my communication with the respondents as with the passage of time, I gained their trust which helped them to speak candidly to me.

The study combines narrative research and phenomenology. Upon reviewing the literature review it became apparent that exploring the narratives of asylum seekers as a source of understanding of their experiences has been widely acknowledged and practiced (Gemignani 2011, Innes 2016, Smith 2015). Narrative approach contributes to the research of asylum seekers' lives and their acts of agency by exploring their subjective experiences through their lived and told stories (Creswell 2007). Narrative research implies "construction of the self via reconstruction of the past" (Fischer-Rosenthal & Rosenthal 1997) allowing a thorough analysis of respondents' lives and experiences (Chamberlayne et al., 2000, Wengraf 2006).

Furthermore, phenomenology facilitates the analysis of subjectivity as it is more concerned with personalised, inner worlds of meaning and how the external world is received and processed (Schutz 1967). In comparison to the narrative approach, phenomenology is more concerned with addressing commonalities. As such, it would be useful in understanding how Syrian asylum seekers experience different modes of oppression and how they strategically resist and challenge them.

## 5.2 Research Paradigm

I adopted constructivism as a research paradigm for my study. Constructivism as a social theory offers theoretical lenses to understand the on-going formation and creation of the social world (Schwandt 1994). Constructivists are committed to the view that what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective. Knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind. They emphasise the pluralistic and plastic character of reality. Pluralistic in the sense that reality is expressible in a variety of symbolic and linguistic systems, plastic in the sense that reality is stretched and shaped to fit purposeful acts of intentional human agents (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). As Diana Fuss (1983) argues constructionists are concerned above all with the *production* and *organisation* of differences, and they therefore reject the idea that any essential or natural givens precede the process of social determination.

Furthermore, epistemologically, I approached my research from the perspective of social constructionists. The fundamental principle of this school of thought is that reality is socially constructed (Gergen 1985). As Gergen puts it “the terms by which the world is understood are social artefacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people” (Gergen 1985, p. 267). “Accounts of the world...take place within shared systems of intelligibility-usually a spoken or written language. These accounts are not viewed as the external expression of the speaker’s internal processes (such as cognition, intention), but as an expression of relationships among person” (Ibid P.278). In other words, “an objective truth” is constructed through social experiences and interactions and sustained through social processes. The emphasis is on the collective generation of meaning as shaped by conventions of language and other social processes (Ibid p.280). For example, the concept of a

“refugee” has its universally acknowledged definition, developed through social interactions among members of international community. However, with the so called “refugee crisis”, the underlying meaning of the term began to change, influenced by dominant stigmatising and homogenising discourses. Thus, social interactions and various social processes reconstructed the “truth” and “knowledge” about the concept.

Ontologically, my research is approached from the perspective of constructivist realism. The theoretical pillars of this ontology balance the elements of realism with constructivism. According to the realist view, the researcher is independent from what is being observed and that the findings are objective (Lincoln et al, 1994). Contrary to that, constructivism regards reality as the result of social interactions, thus asserting that the findings are relative (Cupchik 2001). Meanwhile, constructivist realism reconciles these two approaches; accepting the existence of an external social reality, which however is only accessed through the interpretations of subjects (Ibid. 84). Thus, social research implies a subjective interpretation of the reality. As Hammersley (1995) pointed out “there is no such thing as ‘true’ knowledge, however there are claims that we can assess based on plausibility, credibility and evidence.”

To summarise, it was crucial to analyse the data through the lenses of constructivism with the fundamental premise that knowledge is sustained and created through social process. That allowed me to better understand how “truth” and “knowledge” are conceptualised in given social and historical contexts and be more sensitive to the discourses generated by the respondents.

### 5.3 Participant Selection

The study is based on the narratives of ten asylum seekers living in an asylum centre. The participants were either waiting for their asylum decision or had recently received it. Initially, I established contacts with respondents through informal networks, followed by a snowball sampling method (Hennink et al. 2012). This technique was suitable to conduct a study in the realm of a camp life, where respondents have been sharing the same habitat for a long time and were aware of each other's experiences. All the participants interviewed had Syrian nationality.

### 5.4 Semi-structured interviews

A narrative approach combined with phenomenology uses interviews as the main source of data collection. An in-depth ethnographic interview emphasises the meanings that the participants themselves place on their own life story, thus building up a rapport between interviewer and interviewee. Ultimately, this generates a wide range of responses, thoughts, and reflections without imposing the researcher's own framework of ideas and restricting the possible range of answers (Creswell 2012).

To ensure that a more free-flowing conversation-like interview/discussion took place, the style of the interviews was semi-structured with an interview guide and a series of open-ended questions. The study followed the "*factist*" approach of seeing the interview data as yielding the one truth that can only be obtained by sitting and talking to people in depth, getting at what they think (O'reilly 2012). Thus, viewing the data from the constructionist perspective as being produced as a result of social processes and interactions.

The questions were intentionally chosen to guide the conversation based around the intersections of *camp life*, *resistance* and *self-empowerment* to address the

main structural constraints associated with the camp life and the strategies of resistance developed by respondents. It is worth mentioning, that even though there is a lack of direct questions which engage with the themes of resistance and agency, still indirect questions such as: *Can you describe a typical day for you here?* or *What are your current goals and how do you plan to achieve them?* indirectly address the strategies of self-empowerment. Additionally, questions were intentionally made to be *flexible and adaptable* depending on respondents' answers. The choice of open-ended questions allowed participants to interpret each question in a variety of ways (For instance: *How do you feel about living in Sweden? How would you describe it?*), encouraging reflexivity and giving the interviewee time to delve into her/his thoughts, express contradictory opinions, doubts, fears, hopes and so on. Thus, open-ended questions made it possible to observe the participants from their own perspective, getting an emic view of reality, without exposing one's own line of questioning (Babbie 2000).

Interviews were carried in both Arabic and English, based on the preferences of the respondents. They were *recorded to avoid note-taking and allow a more natural flow of conversation*, without getting distracted and losing the eye-contact. Immediately, after the interview, the notes *were complemented, and the main points written down comprehensively*.

### **5.5 Data Analysis**

I began the analysis of my data with the transcriptions of the interviews. As Davidson (2009, p. 37) asserts “transcription is a process that is theoretical, selective, interpretive and representational.” That said, I completed the transcription

emphasising the actual words that were said, rather than involuntary vocalisations that I considered less important and part of a process of remembering.

Furthermore, the main analysis took place with an establishment of key themes. First, I read through the ten transcripts and underlined the responses relating to the main themes in my research: *camp life, resistance and self-empowerment*. Then, I meta-coded the multitude of responses to find new themes (Ryan and Bernard 2003). The process involved a semantic analysis by sorting the quotes into categories based on identified common words and concepts. Later, I cross-examined the categories sorting them into inter-categories in accordance with the logical progression and intra-categories by highlighting the differences and similarities among the responses based on the initial main categories. As a result, the meta-coded categories and word co-occurrence helped me to identify the final themes: *Waiting as a Challenge, Disciplinary Mechanisms of Power, Resistance to Disciplinary Power, Public Visibility and Socio-Cultural Integration and Economic Integration*.

## **5.6 Reflexivity**

The conduction of a thematic analysis implies that the researcher is intimately involved in the production of the findings as he/she makes the decisions on the coding and the categorisation of those codes. Similarly, the categorisations I have made were influenced by my personal choice of what appeared to me as the most prominent ideas or themes. Therefore, it was imperative that I was explicit in presenting how I reached my thematic choices.

Additionally, it was imperative that I acknowledged, as Böhm (2004) stated, the possibility of bringing my own prior knowledge about the investigation. This was particularly relevant for my research as discussions of “refugee crisis” on the media

and alarming reports by human rights organisations about violations of asylum seekers' rights were widespread. Therefore, to minimise the risk of having preconceived ideas, I constantly re-evaluated the data based on plausibility, credibility and evidence, maintaining the scientific perspective.

At last, my influence as a researcher, given my status as a woman, non-Swede and an outsider could have had an impact on the process of interactions with the respondents. First, being a woman researcher could have implications for the interviews with male respondents, particularly discussing questions that could compromise their masculinity and social status. However, at the same time, it could facilitate my interactions with female interviewees, discussing sensitive issues. Nevertheless, to minimise the effects of my gender, I intentionally chose questions that would not compromise neither masculine nor feminine sensitivities. In addition to that, I went into the field with a clear idea that some male and female respondents might have a predisposed attitude towards a young woman researcher and an outsider. And to address this, I sought to establish contacts through a snow-ball sampling method and do participant observation to gain the trust of respondents.

Eventually, I found my ethnic background of a non-Swede and a non-Westerner to be of significant relevance to the research. As a subaltern group, asylum seekers are often socially and politically excluded from the hegemonic power structure of the sovereign and can find themselves on the margins of society (Klocker 2004). Thus, they might be sensitive to power relations involved in social interactions. Being a non-Swede and a non-Westerner, allowed me to be on more equal grounds with respondents and lessen the power dynamics inherent in the research process. Accordingly, interviewees were more eager to share their grievances and express their critical thoughts about the host society. Similarly, my ethnic background of an

Armenian facilitated the interactions with respondents. Since the Armenian diaspora has had long traditions in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, almost all my respondents had a sense of apparent affinity with Armenians. At last, my own experience of being an immigrant, living in a foreign country was something that participants could relate to. The fact, that I had to navigate my interactions with the host society and, at times, experience similar situations, such as long-time waiting for receiving or extending a residence permit, to a certain extent, provided grounds of finding commonalities in shared experiences.

### **5.7 Reliability and Validity**

The main limitations that may compromise the reliability and validity of this research are identified to be researcher bias and translation errors in the process of presenting and interpreting the data (Lewis 2009).

To address the researcher bias it is important to identify the initial biases and assumptions a researcher might have. As an individual researcher, who has never been exposed to any of the experiences of asylum seekers, I might have different ideas of such notions as *migration or self-empowerment*. Consequently, this could be in conflict with the realities of my respondents and their self-understanding. Therefore, to depict the everyday realities of my participants as objectively as possible, corresponding to their own vision, it was necessary to refrain from assessments based on predisposed ideas and assumptions. For example, my employment of such terms as “asylum seeker” or “refugee” in their analytical forms may reflect my own understanding or description rather than those of my respondents. Being informed by Western-centred hegemonic discourses, these labels that are mostly used with demeaning and patronising undertones had no meaning for my respondents that they

could relate to. Therefore, I avoided using such labels in the interviews, allowing the emergence of self-generated terms that can be more appropriate and would lead to a different analysis to take shape.

Additionally, as a non-Arabic native speaker I went into the field with a clear understanding of limitations connected to linguistic difficulties and nuances that I could encounter in the data collection process. During few interviews with respondents not proficient enough in Modern Standard Arabic (al-fuṣḥá) and communicating in a local dialect, some questions had to be repeated and comments had to be clarified to ensure the accuracy of comprehension. As a consequence, this process affected the flow of the conversation at times, which might have caused the participants to alter their words and had an impact on the overall progression of the interview, thus running the risk of not reaching a complete saturation of the point. As a result, this could have affected my ability to draw parallels between the experiences of respondents without having a thorough understanding of the meanings they ascribe to different phenomena. That said, I kept in mind such implications during the data comparison.

### **5.8 Ethical Considerations**

The respondents of this study were asylum seekers waiting for their decision and those who had already received a temporary permit and were still living in the camp. Their legal, political and social status in Sweden and their experience of displacement turned them into individuals belonging to a vulnerable marginalised group. Due to their legal status, asylum seekers are subject to arrest and deportation if the Swedish relevant authorities would consider the applicant's presence threatening or dangerous (Khosravi 2009). Therefore, the main ethical concerns identified in this thesis are confidentiality and anonymity. To ensure that the information provided would remain

anonymous and confidential, participants were informed that any details that could lead to their personal identification would not be disclosed in the published thesis. For these purposes, not only pseudonyms were employed, but also occasionally the data that could reveal the identity of the respondents were omitted from the data presented in the thesis.

Also, it was clarified for the respondents that the answers they gave were not going to influence the decision of their application and that the research conducted was solely for academic purposes. That helped the participants to feel more open to talk about their daily experiences.

Furthermore, the question of power dynamics that can arise between the researcher and respondents was considered. To minimise that, I relied heavily on participant observations to establish a good rapport with respondents and find commonalities in backgrounds, experiences and views. Also, respondents were free to discuss questions, relevant to them personally, alongside with the questions prepared in advance. Thus, I avoided the imposition of a strictly structured way of interviewing.

## Findings

### 6.1 Waiting as a challenge

During the participant observation, it became apparent that waiting period was one of the most challenging aspects for asylum seekers. All my respondents found the difficulties associated with the waiting period overwhelmingly distressing. I have underlined several responses to give a general idea about their concerns. The disturbing effects of prolonged waiting-times were addressed in the words of Hakim (29 years old). Hakim escaped Raqqa, one of the strongholds of ISIS, as he was targeted and accused of “espionage and treason” for cooperating with international humanitarian organisations. He aimed to reach as he defined “the furthest place” possible from the reach of ISIS. As he was denied access to Norway, he applied for asylum in Sweden. Referring to the time spent in the camp, Hakim noticed:

**The long waiting time is killing us.** Me and my friend live in the same room and we have been here before anyone else. We have been living together in this same room and having the same life for so long that now we are having even the same dreams. We wake up and tell each other our dreams (laughing). We have been waiting for so long. It’s enough already. We should go out. I don’t want to spend all my life here.

Fears and doubts relating to the outcome of their applications and the consequent implications on their lives were also prevalent in the discussions about the future. Karima (32 years old) who also fled the Syrian civil war with her husband (Nadim 40 years old) hoping to find a safer place for her family, similarly identified the waiting period as the most excruciating part of asylum process due to its uncertainty. “*We are*

*anxious and worried all the time because we don't know if they will give us a positive or negative decision. What will happen to us, if they refuse to give us a permit.*" For her husband Nadim, giving interviews to the officers of migration agency was the most difficult part:

Waiting is the hardest and thinking too much...worrying whether you will get it or not, what will happen to you [...] that's hard [...] Especially, after the interviews, when you feel anxious whether you have told the right things to them or not [...] that's very troublesome.

## **6.2 Disciplinary mechanisms of power**

The longer I stayed in the centre, the more I heard about different stories relating to the past experiences of the people. Nadir, the eldest respondent (61 years old), a person of most joyful and warm-hearted personality, escaped Saudi Arabia because he was accused of supporting oppositional forces in Syria. The allegations were made based on the fact that he was sending donations and food supplies to his family and to the people affected by the war. Nadir shared with me his experience of living in the camp before my arrival. His words revealed the disturbing reality of the camp reminding a "panopticon prison." He recalled the times of being under constant control by the camp administration, describing how it affected all the aspects of their lives: *"She was watching everybody: no smoking, no noise, no entrance to the restaurant after the mealtime."*

This excerpt clearly indicates the imposition of disciplinary mechanisms through which the administration of the camp aimed to regulate the organisation of space, time, people's activities and behaviours (Foucault 1975). Furthermore, to make

his point clearer, Nadir compares the nature of the camp management with one of the most infamous surveillance systems in Arab countries saying: *“That woman was like mukhābarāt<sup>3</sup>, we escaped from that kind of people from our countries now we find them even here.”* The strict imposition of rules and regulations permeated all the aspects of camp life, creating a sense of imprisonment among the respondents. Amin, (28-years old) a person of outstanding gentleness and kindness, has fled the war in Syria hoping to find a haven for his unborn child and wife in Sweden. Referring to the restrictive and despotic environment of the camp, he noted:

For example, if people wanted to bring some food from the restaurant to their room, they could not, she (the administrator) would shout at them. In the same way, if you wanted to sit in the restaurant after finishing your meal, you could not, there were strict hours for eating, going to your room, for everything. For example, if the time for eating was over, but you have not finished your meal yet, she would say: *“stop, go out”*, and if you would like to take the leftovers with you to eat in your room, she would not let you do that either.

Additionally, the most common complaints of my respondents about the organisation of the camp life, were the ones connected to disrespectful and inhumane treatment.

While recalling the events, Nadir mentioned:

When I arrived here it was so cold [...] You know everyone has something they want to talk with their family on the phone in private [...] I remember,

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<sup>3</sup> Mukhābarāt (Arabic: مخابرات) (also transliterated muḥābarāt / muḳābarāt is the Arabic term for intelligence, as in intelligence agency.

that I would go out in the winter, when it was so cold, just to talk with my family and she would see us going outside and freezing, but never offer the room which was always empty, and we could have easily talked from there.

On another occasion, Nadir had the chance to confront the administrator with complaints about being forced to share one small room with three young men, who did not have respect for his private space.

When I told her that I am an elderly, sick man, it's a small room and I can't breathe because of the smoke, you know what was her answer? **She told me, for me you are a number, I don't know who you are [...] and this room is for four.**

He concluded the discussion with a rhetorical question *"They deal with a human or an animal or what [...]"* Similarly, Amin emphasised the disrespect for privacy and the intimidating attitude within the camp: *"When we were inside, she would just open the door and come in, without knocking. She would say I want to see what is happening, what do you do in your room."*

### **6.3 Resistance to Disciplinary Power**

To fight the existing suffocating environment the people living in the camp decided to mobilise their efforts and challenge the disciplinary mechanisms that were enforced upon them. Nadir, with his compelling charisma and leadership skills was at the front line of organising the *dissent*.

We wanted to change the whole administration. We were around seventy-five people. We gathered everyone's signatures and complaints about different things and discussed all these with the representatives of migration agency and municipality.

He was also very determined to take into consideration the complaints and requests from all the residents of the camp:

I went and asked everyone about their complaints and changes they would like to see. Some said, they need special food for the kids, or for themselves, based on their diet and some asked for hygiene products which at that time were so scarce in the camp [...] We had many meetings, including the one with the owner of the camp house, who appointed the manager in her position.

After five months of numerous meetings with journalists and representatives of the Swedish migration agency, Nadir and the rest of the people living in the camp succeeded in replacing the manager of the camp with a more compassionate and understanding person. Thus, they alleviated the disciplinary mechanisms imposed upon them, and in the words of Nadir, life has completely changed in the camp since then.

#### **6.4 Public Visibility and Socio-Cultural Integration**

In their daily lives, many of the respondents were demonstrating remarkable skills of creativity in transgressing and defying the confines of the camp life. Such acts of transgressions could be traced to "hidden transcripts" of the subtle acts of resistance (Scott 1990).

Faiz (40 years old) with his daring and goal-oriented personality was determined to pursue his career aspirations. After escaping the war, Faiz and his family were striving to create a better future for themselves in Sweden.

As soon as, me and my family arrived at the camp we began to *plan our life outside of the camp, and not inside, because life in the camp is very difficult* [...].

To achieve his goals, Faiz sought to build a social network and increase the chances of gaining access to the Swedish labour market.

As I speak English, I make so many friends in the village. I attend various social events and meetings, talk to people and ask about any jobs that they might suggest.

His good social communication skills provided him with various opportunities to pursue his career in the field of information technologies.

I have found my first internship thanks to the friends I have met here [...] I have made so many friends [...] After completing the first internship, my supervisor agreed to help me find another internship as well.

Faiz was also aware of various predicaments like linguistic barriers that could significantly hinder his career in Sweden. So, even though he could not yet attend

classes of Swedish, he was still trying to find alternative ways of learning the language as quickly as possible.

I am trying to learn Swedish by myself at home. It's hard for me to spend a lot of time on it because of my internship, but I am doing my best to learn as much as I can. Also, when I meet Swedish people, I learn a lot from them [...]  
If you plan to live abroad you should learn the language of the country you are residing in. And if you create social networks, it's better to make them in the local language.

Aiming to integrate into the Swedish society, Faiz was applying all the techniques and tactics available to him despite being forced to live in a camp located in a remote village. Without having the means of commuting to bigger cities, he was trying to grow his social network in the nearby small area.

I have been taking walks around here to meet new people. And I have been trying to join all (stressing) the activities which were organized by the local community [...]. They came once and asked if anyone wants to join and I thought that it's better than staying in the camp. We went out to play games and I have made many friends there. I have also met many people from the church when they were organizing different events [...].

To better understand the Swedish culture, way of living and modes of thinking, Faiz was intentionally spending more time with the members of the local church, neighbours in the village and others whom he had good relationships with.

I am not staying in the camp for the whole time, I am trying to go out and meet the Swedish people and learn about their culture [...] when you take part in the activities, you learn a lot [...] You learn the language, the culture...but if you sit and smoke and sleep, it's useless. People here are sitting, smoking and playing on their phones. So, I wasn't planning to do like that, I was more worried for my life outside of the camp, **because life is not inside the camp, life is outside of it.**

Further, he begins to talk about overcoming nuanced cultural differences:

I have not got to know a lot and that's the thing, I don't know whether it's ok to ask or not. For example, in Syria if you ask a girl about her age, she will be ashamed, but here it might be different. Here it is normal, it's ok. That's why I am meeting a Swedish family to ask these kinds of questions and get more insights into the Swedish way of living.

In a similar manner, Hakim, was determined to reach a good level of Swedish, which to him had the capacity to alter the established power relations in the society:

There are a lot of people who are just sitting here and not studying. They think that they don't need that, and only once they get a decision they will go to SFI and find a job. I don't think like that. I think, the people should study from now [...]. We spend so much time doing nothing, we are just

sitting. So, if I can reach some level of Swedish already here, that will be very good. When I go to the Migration Agency or talk to the people in public places, **I can speak Swedish and if something happens, I can defend myself. I think it is like a power to have to be able to speak Swedish.**

The importance of learning the Swedish language has been unanimously acknowledged by all the respondents. Mahir (22 years old) did not have a chance to attend any classes of Swedish. Therefore, he had to rely only on himself. *“Before, I was living in a different place and there was no one who could help me to study, so I just had to do it on my own. Now I already have a good level of Swedish.”* Aisha (28 years old) was also concerned about mastering the Swedish language. She and many others were regularly attending the classes of Swedish, organised by volunteers in the local church.

### **6.5 Economic integration**

Similar to social and cultural integration, the economic independence was one of the main priorities of the respondents. Moreover, many of the participants proved themselves to be very resourceful in this field as well. Amin, striving for self-fulfilment, was pursuing his interests and passion. Having years of experience of training horses, he succeeded in finding a place where he could train horses again. That allowed him to fulfil his potential and recover a glimpse of his previous life.

A friend of mine from here helped me to find a work. He lives around here. I told him that I love working with horses, and he told me that there is one club here, and we went there together. I told the owner of the club that I was

training horses in Syria and Lebanon and that I would love to come and help whenever she needs help. And she said yes, if you want, you can come. I used to go there every day, even on Saturdays, from morning till afternoon.

While talking about horses Amin would suddenly regain a seemingly lost sense of enthusiasm and excitement. Talking about training horses he was referring to it as an escape hatch to avoid the camp life.

For me it is hard in the camp, because I am thinking about a lot of things. That is also the reason why I can't study that well, but instead I work. The work does not require thinking. *The work helps me to stop thinking.* Especially, when I work with horses, I feel happy and forget about all the worries for a little while.

To increase the chances of getting employed Amin was asking for help from his family members and relatives residing in Sweden. At the time of the interviews Amin, was preparing to leave for Stockholm where his brother in law promised to help him find a suitable job. He was anxious, excited and at the same time terrified to move from a small remote village, where he learnt about *the life in Sweden*, to the bustling capital of the country.

I need to find a work. I should go somewhere else to find it. It does not matter where, I just want to find something. The migration agency tells many people who got their decision, that if you want to stay longer than thirteen months, you must find a job and a house. I am working on it from now, even though I

don't have a decision yet. I need it, so I am looking for it from now. I asked the brother of my wife who lives in Stockholm to find something there for me and he found some work. So, I am leaving tomorrow. I will try there and see.

In the same way, Hakim, was also looking for any opportunity of finding a work he could do.

I asked a Swedish man who was working at the church about an internship, a job or anything I could do. Even an unpaid job would have been good. I told him, I just want to go out. I want to meet people and do something good for me. Then he spoke to someone he knew who needed help in the restaurant and I went there to work.

Gaining financial self-sufficiency and independence had an empowering and dignifying meaning for Hakim:

I liked to work very much, especially when I could pay the rent for staying here and for the food that they give us. Nobody was giving me money, I was not reliant on their charity. *I don't want to ask anyone: give me, please this, give me, please that, I want to get my food, my clothes myself.* I have not lived like that in Syria. I had my own work, my life and nobody was helping me. I will do that again. I just need to find a job which won't be temporary, then I will have everything.

The possibility of working and being active throughout the day had a vital importance for Hakim. It became even more crucial for him after the introduction of temporary permits that can be extended only if the person has an income:

I need to find a job, but it is so difficult [...] We have been living in this place for more than a year, far away from the city, with so few opportunities [...] And now, after I received my permit they expect me to find a job and a house in just thirteen months. How am I supposed to do that?

In a similar way, being engaged in any work activity had a crucial meaning for Nadir:

I can't stay without work, I need to work. I think there was someone who said: "I am working, I am alive." Anyway, I forgot, but the point is that, I can't stay without a work, any work, even unpaid, because as I said, **when I work, I am alive.**

Being a professional fine art designer helped Nadir to secure an internship position at the local art boutique where he was spending most of his time. However, Nadir was not fully complacent with it and was planning to have an international exhibition and continue his studies in the field of decorative arts. *"I have fifty paintings from all over the world that I want to exhibit. Then I want to open a gallery of art, where I will present both my and other people's works of art."*

Being fully aware of the potential obstacles that might arise on the way to success, Nadir was still determined to pursue his passion:

I know it will be hard, especially in here (village surrounding the camp), maybe in bigger cities like Malmö or Stockholm it will be easier, but in any case, **I will start from LInhälla. It will be the first step.**

Sumaya (38 years old) came to Sweden with her family fleeing the clutches of ISIS in Syria. As a woman of great intelligence with high education, she was resolute in pursuing her goals and aspirations. Having a work experience as a high school principal, she sought to continue her career in the field of education: *“I want to find a job and start working. I value the work very much and I am used to working. I don't want to stay home and only cook. I want to work outside as well.”*

Like many other respondents, she was trying to find internships and job opportunities on her own, through the social networks she has successfully built.

From the moment we arrived I was trying to find a job. I was contacting my Swedish friends and one of them, who was a teacher at a local school, helped me to have an internship there.

Moreover, even though, she as a mother of three small children, could not afford to study on her own for long hours, especially in a small room where the whole family was placed to live, she was still using all the spare time she had to study Swedish. *“We have been here almost a year and a half. Many people feel bored while waiting, but I don't, because I study all the time.”* Despite having lived in the country for such a short time and not having any opportunity to attend language courses, Sumaya managed to become fluent in Swedish only by studying on her own. To my question,

if it was not difficult to achieve. She answered: *“Yes, it was very hard, but I always thought that the language is the key that will open the doors to Swedish society, so I did my best to learn it.”*

## **Analysis**

### **7.1 Regimes of Power**

The daily realities of the respondents reveal various structural constraints with which they interact on a daily basis. The Swedish state, camp administration and wider Swedish society act as regimes of power influencing the lives of asylum seekers. The state power manifests itself by both legally and politically excluding the refugees and asylum seekers from the boundaries of its sovereignty. In line with Agamben's discussion of the sovereign power and the relationship between the state and non-citizens, the modes of power established by the Swedish state can be observed in legal predicaments present in my informants' lives. The introduction of the temporary permits (either a three-year under the Geneva Convention or 13-month under subsidiary protection) was considered to be a major obstacle for their integration efforts by the informants. All my respondents, except for four persons, received temporary permits. Those who had to apply for an extension of a permit expressed their profound fears and doubts, as in order to receive an extension they need to be financially self-sufficient/employed and be able to afford their own housing (Ibid 16).

The reasons for doubts and fears of my informants are several. First, the asylum centre located in a remote area posed a major structural constraint to the respondents. With very little financial means to commute to the more urbanised cities to create social networks and find more opportunities, most of them had little or no access to the labour market or wider Swedish society. Thus, the sovereign power excludes the "body of the refugee" not only through political and legal, but also physical expulsion. As Agamben notes, through this banishment the very human potential, preserved within a state of exception, is maintained and regulated before it results in bodily exclusion or inclusion. Accordingly, the lives of refugees as ultimate

“biopolitical subjects” are being regulated and governed within the boundaries of the state sovereignty.

In addition to that, the restrictive rights of education for adult asylum seekers pose a major challenge for the integration efforts of the respondents. As only, once the residence permit is received, they are entitled to attend lessons in Swedish organised by local municipalities. Given the fact that the access to the labour market relies heavily on the acquisition of linguistic skills, this can be a major predicament for their economic integration. Subsequently, these legal impediments stall the efforts of individuals to find means of self-empowerment. The words of Hakim are illustrative in this respect: *“We have been living in this place for more than a year, far away from the city, with so few opportunities [...] and now after I received my permit they expect me to find a job and a house in just thirteen months. How am I supposed to do that?”* Thus, the paradoxical logic of twofold state oppression both obstructs the people’s chances of integration and at the same time demands it. In line with Giddens’ discussion of structuration theory, the human action is being restrained by the state established structural constraints, while also being enabled by them. The following chapter will discuss how people’s agency ensures that they always have some degree of freedom, some room to manoeuvre and a capacity to modify their own social reality.

Furthermore, the camp administration, as the embodiment of state power, has been identified as one of the most influential actors feeding into the processes of oppression. Unlike formal state-refugee relations which are marked by the workings of the sovereign power, the lives of the respondents living in the camp were restrained by the mechanisms of disciplinary power. As Foucault highlights, the disciplinary power is exercised by those who represent the sovereign authority in everyday

transactions by their own or the sovereign's rules. Multiple aspects of respondents' lives indicated the dominance of disciplinary mechanisms in their daily practices. Nadir's and Amin's remarks are testimonies to it: *"She was watching everybody: no smoking, no noise, no entrance to the restaurant after the mealtime [...] If you would like to sit in the restaurant after finishing your meal, you could not, there were strict hours for eating, going to your room, for everything."* The constant surveillance established by the camp administration aimed to control people's behaviour and daily activities, such as eating, resting, socializing etc. Additionally, "a prison like" rigid organisation of spatial configurations in the camp explicitly demonstrated the workings of disciplinary mechanisms.

At last, the societal dimension presents the final layer of the regimes of power shaping the realities of my respondents. Here, Agamben's emphasis on state panopticism as a monopolised act of banning the refugees falls short to provide a theoretical explanation to the acts of expulsions at multiple and differentiated societal levels. Samir's accounts on how he has been discriminated against by his fellow school-mates for being a refugee, which resulted in his social exclusion and marginalisation, is illustrative of how various modes of oppression intersect on the level of state and society. Thus, Agamben's approach proves unintelligible to address the acts of expulsions appropriated by social actors that operate not only at macro but also micro levels of society.

## **7.2 Resistance and Self-Empowerment**

The narratives of my respondents reveal not only the regimes of power that they are subjected to, but also illustrate the individual acts of resistance and self-empowerment

that challenge the established power relations. These acts of transgression can be broadly classified as those performed outside and within the confines of the camp.

As the findings suggested, the respondents found themselves exposed to disciplinary power that permeated all layers of the camp life through overarching surveillance techniques established to control the behaviour and daily activities of the informants. Nevertheless, the respondents mobilised their collective efforts to draw the attention of relevant authorities, media and local community to the alarming situation in the camp. And as a result of numerous meetings and discussions they succeeded in changing the head of the camp administration. Thus, the respondents unanimously challenged and transformed the disciplinary mechanisms operating in the camp, by restoring their threatened sense of ontological security and dignity.

According to Foucault, in comparison to sovereign powers, disciplinary mechanisms evoke little resistance due to their discretion, low exteriorisation and relative invisibility. However, the narratives of the respondents illustrate the most vigilant form of resistance which has been aiming to stall the functioning of these mechanisms. Thus, even though Foucault's ideas provide insights into the workings of disciplinary power, they are less useful in analysing the forms of resistance that ensue after disciplinary mechanisms gain visibility. Therefore, attending to Isin's definition of resistance, will provide a better understanding of the strategies applied by the respondents. In line with his discussion, the disempowered people, such as asylum seekers and refugees deprived of the political power of citizenry, transform the idea of formal citizenship through their acts of everyday resistance. In accordance with that, the efforts of the informants to resist the disciplinary mechanisms can be regarded as collective claims for citizenship rights and inclusion or as Isin puts it "*acts of citizenship*" making a claim on the "*right to have rights.*"

Additionally, the narratives demonstrate the plethora of resistance strategies and techniques applied by respondents in their everyday life, transgressing the boundaries of the camp. They indicate the anxieties and fears experienced by the respondents in long-term waiting, caused by uncertainties of the future, which goes in line with the literature. However, what studies have missed to observe was how these challenges can be appropriated by individuals and applied as a source of motivation to act in order to circumvent the disabling effects of waiting. Amin's accounts are illustrative in this respect: "*For me it is hard in the camp, because I am thinking about a lot of things. That is also the reason why I can't study that well, but instead I work. The work does not require thinking. The work helps me to stop thinking.*" Thus, the respondents reverse the disempowering and paralysing effects of waiting into techniques of self-empowerment that transgress the boundaries of the camp. Accordingly, the long-term waiting, seen through the lenses of structuration theory poses a structural constraint, restraining the actions of the respondents and simultaneously enabling their agency and capacity to act.

Furthermore, as Agamben's theory lacks the theoretical basis for the analysis of individual actors' strategies of self-empowerment, it would be more appropriate to attend to Scott's and de Certeau's definitions of everyday tactics and strategies applied by individuals to regain control over their lives, to better understand the everyday realities of my respondents. In line with, de Certeau's ideas, people had to look for the existing cracks within the established system of powers to tactically challenge their social and economic marginalisation. The remarks of Faiz are exemplary of such strategies applied: "*I have been taking walks around here to meet new people... I have made so many friends in the area... I sit and talk to them and ask about jobs.*" Faiz's strategic use of spatial relationships and establishment of social

networks, within for him a limited area, constitutes a creative way of challenging his social exclusion. Thus, he tactically diverts and manipulates the spatial relations within a highly-restricted configuration of space and produces unexpected results by advancing both his social and economic status. In agreement with Giddens, it can be argued that the very structures that limited the freedom of actions, such as the lack of access to Swedish social life, has in turn enabled his resistance strategies and sprung the potential for creativity.

Similarly, in line with Scott's ideas of subtle and disguised acts of resistance, respondents utilised their social networks, be that family members residing in Sweden or friends from Swedish community, to facilitate their access to the labour market and contribute to their economic integration. Amin's and Hakim's words demonstrate their determination in finding employment opportunities: *"I asked the brother of my wife who lives in Stockholm to find something there for me and he found some work. So, I am going there tomorrow. I will try there and see."* *"I asked a Swedish man who was working at the church about an internship, a job or anything I could do. Even an unpaid job would have been good. I told him, I just want to go out. I want to meet people and do something good for me."*

Nevertheless, both Scott and de Certeau define the power relations within the paradigm of "weak" versus "strong." Scott emphasises the state of desperation at the heart of resistance and de Certeau manipulation and deception that individuals resort to in order to challenge the established power relations. Thus, they fall short to offer insights for my respondents' abilities to gain empowerment by building a tactical ground and having a strategic advantage. Sumaya's remarks: *"I always thought that the language is the key that will open the doors to Swedish society, so I did my best to learn it"* like Hakim's words: *"If I can speak Swedish, in case something happens I*

*can defend myself*’ reveal the techniques of resistance grounded in the tactical use of cultural constraints to transform them into means of self-empowerment. Thus, it allowed the individuals to have a strategic advantage in their daily interactions with the Swedish society. Similarly, the pursuit of Faiz to spend most of his time with the members of the local community to develop a better understanding of the established cultural norms, is another example of respondents’ tactical use of the given space in the advancement of their interests.

## **Conclusion**

The aim and purpose of this thesis is to identify the main structural constraints relating to everyday life of Syrian asylum seekers and expose individuals’ acts of resistance and self-empowerment.

Observing the interrelationship of asylum seekers and the Swedish state, camp administration and local Swedish population, the thesis explores the modes of oppression and resistance operating on multiple societal levels. Particularly, the thesis underlines the numerous legal and social structural constraints that the respondents are subjected to, which in turn contain and limit their potential resulting in systems of oppressions. Simultaneously, the study illustrates how these established power relations are negotiated by individual actors who perform as active agents, navigating their interactions and resisting their socio-political, cultural and economic marginalisation. Thus, by leading to self-empowerment the strategies and tactics of resistance affect the lives of individuals both on a macro level, asserting their rights to be political beings and a micro level claiming their place within the community.

Subsequently, the study contributes to the current disparate literature on Syrian asylum seekers by providing an analysis of individual narratives intersecting at

macro and micro levels. Importantly, the research aims to shed light on individual acts of agency and resistance countering the prevalent images of victimhood and challenging the homogenising discourses of pity and exclusion.

## **8.1 Future Directions**

The conclusions that this thesis have drawn, pose theoretical questions that need to be further addressed. Firstly, continuing to follow the experiences of individuals as they hopefully proceed towards successful resettlement, would allow to explore the long-term effects their acts of agency and resistance have on their integration further into the Swedish society. Secondly, conducting research with the members of local community and state officials, which is notably lacking here, would provide an additional perspective to understand the daily interactions between the actors. Similarly, observing the interconnectedness and interplay between individual and collective acts of agency, public discourses and state policies would allow a more comprehensive and overarching analysis to flourish.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge both the advantages and possible limitations of basing the analysis on individual narratives. The discussion has emphasised the individuality, avoiding the risks of generalisation, thus limiting its value for policy reviews, requiring as a rule a longitudinal and larger-scale analysis with a higher number of participants, which was difficult to accomplish due to the specificities of this thesis. With that in mind, it would be important to notice, that the larger scale research would benefit the analysis. Such initiatives can include interviewing larger numbers of participants with a consideration to the aspects relating to gender, social, religious and ethnic background. That would further complicate and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of social realities.

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## Appendix

### 10.1 Table of Respondents

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Work Experience</b>	<b>Current Position</b>
<i>Nadir</i>	61	Syrian	Male	Not Married	Damascus University, Faculty of Fine Arts	(24 years) Interior designer in UAE and Saudi Arabia, Self-employed professional, Head of a design company	Intern at the local art boutique
<i>Amin</i>	28	Syrian	Male	Married, one child	High School	Translator (Arabic, English), Journalist, Horse trainer	Intern at the local restaurant and local farm for training horses
<i>Nadim</i>	40	Syrian	Male	Married, three children	High School	Book salesman	none
<i>Karima</i>	32	Syrian	Female	Married, three children	University of Damascus, Faculty of Chemistry	none	none
<i>Sumaya</i>	38	Syrian	Female	Married, three children	University of Aleppo, Faculty of Pedagogy	(5 years) School teacher, (3 years) Head teacher of a high school	Intern at the local school
<i>Hakim</i>	29	Syrian	Male	Not married	University of Aleppo, Faculty of Pedagogy	(2 years) School teacher of Arabic, (2 years) Employee at Red Cross in Syria	Intern at the local restaurant
<i>Fayz</i>	40	Syrian	Male	Married, three children	Damascus University, Faculty of Information Technology Engineering	(6 years) School teacher of mathematics, (7 years) Computer engineer	School teacher of mathematics, Intern at the local Server & Network Support Company

<i>Mahir</i>	22	Syrian	Male	Married	High School	(3 years) Optician	none
<i>Samir</i>	22	Syrian	Male	Not Married	High School	none	Student at the local Upper secondary school

## 10.2 Interview Guide

Tell me about yourself and your life before arriving in Sweden?

ممکن تتكلم عن نفسك وعن حياتك قبل وصولك الى السويد؟

What made you decide to come to Sweden?

لماذا قررت تيجي الى السويد؟

How do you feel about being in here? What makes you feel that way?

كيف تحس بوجودك في السويد؟ و لماذا تحس بهذا؟

Does life in here correspond to the expectations you had before arriving?

هل تخيلت ان الحياة قد تكون مختلفة في سويد قبل وصولك؟

Have your plans changed since your arrival? Why/why not?

هل تغيرت خططك المستقبلية بعد وصولك الى السويد؟ لماذا؟ لماذا لا؟

Can you describe a typical day for you?

ممکن ان توصف يوم عادي لك؟

Do you have many friends here? Can you tell me about your interactions with them?

هل عندك كثير من الاصدقاء هنا؟ ممکن ان تحكى عنهم و عن مدى تواصلك معهم؟

Can you tell me about the happiest moments you had here in Sweden?

ممکن ان تتكلم عن أسعد لحظة مرت عليك بالسويد؟

What are your current goals and how do you plan to achieve them?

ما هي اهدافك الحالية و كيف تخطط ان تحققها؟

Can you tell me about your asylum process?

هل تمكن ان تحكي لي عن تجربة عملية طلب اللجوء؟

How long have you been waiting for your decision?

كم من الوقت كنت في انتظار (القرار) الإقامة؟

What would you consider to be the most challenging aspects of asylum/refugee process?

نا هي أصعب الأشياء التي واجتهك في عملية طلب اللجوء؟

How would you describe your relations with other people in the camp?

كيف العلاقات بينك و بين الناس الآخرين بالمخيم؟

Can you tell me about your interactions with the migration agency and the personnel working in the camp?

ممكن ان توصف العلاقات مع إدارة الهجرة و الأشخاص الذين يعملون بالمخيم؟

What about your interactions with the members of local community?

ماذا يمكن ان تقول عن المجتمع السويدي و الأشخاص السويدين؟

Would you have done anything differently since your arrival in Sweden, if it were possible?

هل كنت تفضل أن تقوم بأى شىء بشكل مختلف عما قمت به منذ وصولك الى السويد؟

What would you advise to someone who is in a similar situation to you?

بماذا تنصح شخص فى نفس موقعك (طالب لجوء أو يريد الذهاب للسويد لطلب اللجوء)؟

Tell me about your future. How do you see yourself in it?

ممكن أن تحكلي عن كيف ترى مستقبلك؟