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## Identity Formation Among Kurds in Sweden

A study on second-generation immigrants

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“So,  
here you are  
too foreign for home  
too foreign for here  
never enough for both.”

- Ijeoma Umebinyuo, *Diaspora Blues*

## Abstract

This thesis concerns theories of identity formation and feeling of belonging amongst people in Sweden with Kurdish background. The purpose of this thesis is to study the processes of identity and feelings of belonging among second-generation immigrants of Kurds in the Swedish society. The study presents some theories about identity formation and diaspora making, as well as secondary theories to give the reader a broader understanding on the subject as a whole. The research focus on the individual understanding of identity construction of five Kurds whom have been interview for this purpose. This study will show that identity and belonging are core issues that second-generation Kurds have to deal with. Additionally, the thesis will also show that indivial identities are not static but change depending on circumstances and context. The results show that young Kurds have the ability to navigate and feel a strong sense of belonging to their Kurdish identity while still feeling part of the Swedish community. By balancing the two identities and socializing with both cultural contexts, a third space is formed in which their hybrid identity emerges.

**Key words:** identity, ethnicity, culture in-between, belonging, Kurdish, cultural hybridity, diaspora

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## 1. Introduction

War along political and cultural oppression against the Kurdish people have resulted in mass migrations from their native homelands in search for safety and a better life elsewhere. More recently, a variety of different studies have been conducted on the identity formation of Kurdish diaspora communities throughout different European countries. These studies however have mainly and foremost been conducted on first generation of Kurdish immigrants and refugees (Eliassi, 2010). This qualitative study is not only limited to first generation of Kurdish immigrants, instead it draws it empirical material from individuals that were born in or came to Sweden at a young age.

Growing up in Sweden to two immigrant parents have often resulted in questioning my own identity and sense of belonging. I cannot recall how many times I have been asked about my “origins” or confronted with the question of “where I am actually from” due to my position as a “second-generation immigrant”. This confrontation however does not have the same impact on my parents as it does for me. Their “origin” and “homeland” is tied to their past, a physical place in which they can recall memories and experiences, while I feel that my sense of belonging could shift depending on the context. My experiences of a Kurdish collective identity and homeland are instead and foremost shaped within a Swedish context. These questions of belonging that I carried with me were never a traumatic experience for me, but they often reminded me that subjects of “origins” and “belonging” are not only personal issues but rather social and political questions. As Sweden’s immigrant population grows and more children are born to immigrant parents, it becomes relevant to study the identity formation of the second-generation immigrants. Studies of their identity and how they form their “transnational” or “multicultural” identities in the societies they live in might shed light on how they incorporate themselves into mainstream society and what challenges lies ahead for future generations. Furthermore, the reason for choosing to study the Kurdish diaspora is not only a matter of personal familiarity. While other studies point out that children of immigrant groups tend to engage less frequently with their parent’s ancestral homes and distance themselves from the culture and norms of their homelands, the second-generation Kurdish immigrants have a noticeably high level of participation in various Kurdish cultural and political activities in the diaspora (Bruinessen 2000). The diaspora Kurds in Sweden, in general, show a high level of cultural, political and social diversity which is also reflected in the number of influential

Kurdish personalities who occupy important positions within Swedish public life. Second-generation Kurds have been active in organizing themselves by establishing Kurdish student associations and other organizations that focus on the cultural and political life of Kurds in the diaspora while maintaining ties to their parents' home countries and fostering Kurdish national discourse (Khayati and Dahlstedt, 2014).

## 1.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to investigate the identity formation among Kurds in Sweden and how they understand their own identity in an attempt to answer the following questions:

- How do second-generation Kurds in Sweden understand and perceive their identity?
- How do second-generation Kurds in Sweden position themselves when encountering with the Swedish society?
- Does the Kurdish identity in Sweden amongst second-generation immigrants constitute a unique hybrid identity?

## 1.2 Historical background

The Kurds have a relatively short history of living in Sweden (mostly since the mid. 20th century) compared to other diaspora communities, like the Jews who have been settled legally in Sweden since the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Bredfeldt, 2008). Apart from a few exemptions from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the working immigrants from Turkey, who migrated mainly to Germany, due to the needs of the labor market in Europe in the 1960s (Bruinessen, 2000) the majority of Kurds in Sweden today arrived here in different waves from the 1970s onward (Berruti et al.: 2002). Unlike earlier, the majority of these immigrants were Kurdish political refugees, who fled to Sweden as a result of the Iranian revolution in 1979, following the Iran-Iraq war, the escalation of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey and the former Iraqi regime's genocide campaign against its Kurdish population of Iraq during the 1980s (McDowall, 2004). The early 1990s also saw its shares of Kurdish political refugees, this time Kurds were fleeing from Turkey's "death squads", as mainly members and sympathizers of the Kurdish national cause were rounded up,

executed or mysteriously “disappeared”. These were followed by refugees that fled from the Kurdish civil war in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1994 (Sheikhmous, 2000).

Many of the Kurds who came to Sweden from the late 1970s and onwards were active in the various Kurdish political movements and came to Sweden as quota refugees (Berruti et al. 2002). It is however difficult to estimate the number of Kurds in Sweden today as the law forbids to register people based on their ethnicity. To further complicate this, the countries that receive Kurdish refugees and immigrants often register Kurds based on their country of origin and former nationality. Which means Kurds get classified as Iraqi, Iranian, Turkish or Syrian citizens rather than Kurdish. The Council of Europe (2006) estimates that more than one million Kurds live in western Europe, which makes them one of the largest diaspora populations within Europe (Andy Curtis, 2005). The number of Kurds in Sweden is estimated to be between 60,000 to 70,000 people (Khayati and Dahlstedt, 2014). It is important to remember that the Kurdish diaspora do not constitute or is not to be characterized as a homogenous group. Different social and economic factors, gender, sexuality, class, educational level and occupation along with other factors that characterize the Kurdish diaspora population reflect the heterogeneous nature of this particular diaspora group. There are many factors that show a wide disparity between various Kurdish communities and families, Kurds in Sweden do however preserve their collective ethnic identity in Sweden through different platforms and means such as radio and TV, cultural and political activities, language, Kurdish music and food culture, socialization with fellow diaspora Kurds and family members, as well as keeping the ties with the home country are different ways in which the diaspora Kurds can maintain their Kurdish identity.

### 1.3 Previous research

The Kurdologist Martin Van Bruinessen’s important works on the Kurdish diaspora prove the importance of the exiled communities as active sites for Kurdish politics (1999, 2000). His studies highlight how the Kurdish national identity is formed and strengthened in the diaspora through social and political activities in Europe. Bruinessen (1999) mention the impact the 1980s Kurdish refugees had on the German Kurds that had come earlier as labor force immigrants in the 1960s. This new wave of politicized Kurds, with their experiences of political and cultural oppression in the homeland and involuntary migration, strongly enhanced the earlier Kurdish immigrant’s sense of ethnic identity. Bruinessen also stress the important role

Kurdish intellectuals have had in strengthening of Kurdish national awareness in the diaspora, who by their work have manage to draw the Kurdish labor immigrants into the Kurdish political discourse. This revival and strengthening of Kurdish awareness has had an impact on the second-generation Kurdish immigrants in Europe too, who show great interest in Kurdish identity and politics, partly because they are raised in a “homeland-oriented” environment, but also as a result of the exclusion they face from the mainstream society due to Germany’s reluctant citizenship policies and failure to incorporate these communities in to public life (Bruinessen 1999, 2000).

Another study that touches similar subjects in regard to identity and belonging amongst the second-generation diaspora group is written by Janroj Yilmaz Keles (2019) in which he examines the factors that drives young Kurds that grew up or were born in the United Kingdom, to return or move to Iraqi Kurdistan. Political, ideological as well as emotional aspects are taken into consideration when he analyzes young Kurds return mobility and argues that the underlying factors are not economically motivated as other research has put much focus on. Instead, young Kurds are motivated by the collective trauma of their parent’s displacement and their relation to the imagined homeland.

Other important works on the Kurdish diaspora that also focus on identity is “*Spaces of Diaspora: Kurdish identities, experiences of otherness and politics of belonging*” by Mino Alinia (2004). Alinia explore the general issues of how displaced populations, such as immigrants and refugees, relate to notions of origin, homeland and belonging. The primary aim of her research however is to study the experience of the Kurdish immigrants she has interviewed and analyze their relationship to Sweden, their country of origin and the Kurdish diaspora. The results of her study show, among many things, that young Kurds in Sweden experience of racism and exclusion is an essential part of their maintenance of their Kurdish identity. Another important issue in Alinias study is the notion of homeland. She states that younger Kurds often feel ambivalence towards their country of origin but at the same time do not feel fully at home in Sweden either. “Home” for the Kurdish diaspora is “*built around the Kurdish movement, Kurdish identity and politics*” (Alinia, 2004: 233). The issues of homeland are central to the issues of identity as she explores the different strategies of reproducing and maintaining the Kurdish identity within a Swedish context. The study however only focuses on first-generation immigrants but gives a broad understanding of the Kurdish diaspora and its formation.

Another important work on the Kurdish diaspora is “*A stranger in my homeland: The politics of belonging among young people with Kurdish backgrounds in Sweden*” by Barzoo Eliassi (2013). His study examines young people with Kurdish background and how they form their identity in Sweden by focusing on the processes of inclusion and exclusion, and how young Kurds in Sweden deal with ethnic discrimination and racism. His study problematizes issues of identity, belonging and the multidimensions of racism through postcolonial theory and identity formation. Other studies worth mentioning on the Kurdish diaspora, especially in regards to the Swedish context, are written by Alinia and Eliassi (2014) and Khayati (2008). Their studies on the subject have shown that identity and belonging are core issues shared by Kurds in the diaspora in regard to identity formation. While their study highlighted how younger Kurds make use of their Kurdish identity as a reaction to their exclusion from the mainstream society and stigmatization of the imposed immigrant identity, this study will instead focus on how the second-generation maintain their Kurdish identity and by which means that identity is expressed and reproduced as previous studies on the Kurdish diaspora have shown that the Swedish society and identity have a more significant impact in second-generation immigrants (Alinia and Eliassi, 2014). Language and material culture seem to be key factors in how young Kurds create a sense of belonging and maintain their Kurdish identity. It is also important to note that this study will not focus on Kurdish nationalism, or political and nationalistic construction of Kurdish identity, but will rather investigate the Kurdish identity on a more individual and cultural level. This also means that the study and the results will be limited to those participating in the research, worth no further generalization on the larger community of Kurdish diaspora.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Identity: definitions and theories

Identity can be defined in different ways. Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1998) argues that identity is equal to being oneself but also different. Individuals constitute different attributes such as ethnicity, gender and age along other factors which in turn constitute an individual identity. Individuals can then make use of one or several of these factors in a giving situation, not only in means of communication but to position themselves in society as well as distancing themselves from other individuals. This means that self-identification is subjected to

negotiation in which people express themselves according to the context or situation they are in (Prins, J et al. 2013). This follows the lines of Claire Mitchell's (2006) definition of identity, that a person identifies themselves in relation to others. It is this antagonistic comparison that creates a sense of "we" and "them". By stereotyping the other group and generalizing them, one can create their identity in relation to others (Mitchell 2006). The term appears therefore in relation to other people. Identity is therefore socially constructed and negotiated through interaction with others (Prins, J et al. 2013). It is also worth noting that identity can be categorized into two spheres; individual and collective identities (Hammaren and Johansson 2007). Stier (2003) meant that the individual identity is influenced by the conditions and structures of society and illustrates this by contrasting identity with a portrait; the artist makes a self-portrait which represent one's self-image and how a person sees and understand him or herself. Other artists are simultaneously also participating in painting a portrait of our main person. In these metaphors, Stier (2003) try to reflect how identity is both the identity we assume of ourselves but also that other people put narratives and identity on us as a way to categorize people. We do this both consciously and unconsciously (Stier 2003). Brubaker and Copper (2002) also present this dual use of identity, the first being self-understanding and the second concerning the idea of a collective identity that refers to the sameness of a group. The group can be perceived objectively, meaning the characters that make up the group, "sameness in itself" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 7) or subjectively, the shared experience and feelings of being one group. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) present other important key uses of identity that will be taken into consideration when analyzing the data material, this is because they stress the usage of terms such as "self-understanding" and "self-identification" when dealing with concepts of identity and since this thesis is investigating how individuals themselves understand their identity I find Brubaker and Coopers (2000) work to be of great use.

## 2.2 Assimilation and acculturation; belonging to a different society

Since the question of belonging and being a member of a different society other than the setting of the "home culture" previously mentioned is associated mainly with immigrant communities and their relation to the host country it would be good to familiarize readers of this thesis shortly about notion of assimilation and acculturation, which are problems one has to deal with when discussion issues of integration. Acculturation was defined by the Social Science Research Council as;

“...culture change that is initiated by the conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems. Its dynamics can be seen as the selective adaptation of value systems, the processes of integration and differentiation, the generation of developmental sequences, and the operation of role determinants and personality factors” (SSRC 1964: 974)

Young King who have done extensive research on the communication behaviors of immigrants and argues that communication is a central part of the acculturation process of immigrant communities and explains that acculturation is a “*interactive and continuous process that evolves in and through the communication of an immigrant with the new sociocultural environment. The acquired communication competence, in turn, reflects the degree of that immigrant’s acculturation*” (Kim 1982: 380). Time in the host country, educational background and sex along other factors such as language competence are key determination for acculturation motivation and accessibility to host communication channels (ibid.) which can in turn foster integration. For immigrants, it means developing a sense of belonging to the host society, which often involves accepting and acting according to the norms and values of the new host country (Nadzeya Laurentsyeva and Alessandra Venturini 2007). How immigrants are accepted into the mainstream society by the dominant culture is another issue, racial discrimination further complicate immigrant’s attitudes and sense of belonging to the dominant culture which might explain why immigrants often feel ambivalent about their identity as their sense of belonging are often questioned (Eliassi 2013). Integration to the host society however have benefits other than acceptance by mainstream society, it can also help immigrant communities to easier take part in the social, economic and political life of the host society. Integration however can raise questions of assimilation. The Kurdish people who have been persecuted and culturally oppressed in their native homelands may have a strong need to sustain their ethnic identity even more so when living in exile (Eliassi 2013). Furthermore, as this study will show as well, young people with Kurdish background in Sweden often contrast the political and cultural freedom that they experience in Sweden to that of their native home countries of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria which they “*make use of in their identity formation*” (Eliassi 2010).

## 2.3 Diaspora

In a time of political calamity and global mobility, the subject of ethnicity and culture becomes even more important as different groups of people meet and interact as a result of increased migration by both guest workers as well as refugees to western countries since the 1960s (Tubergen, Maas, Flap: 2004). The sheer size of these immigrant populations has various social, political and economic implications for the “homogeneity” of nation-state. Diaspora communities are today a growing phenomenon and with it comes other challenges and opportunities. Studies regarding identity and belonging amongst diaspora communities show that their identity is shaped by several different countries, of which the host country is only one. Khalid Khayati and Magnus Dahlstedt presents four perspectives on the diaspora in the book *International Migration and Ethnic Relations: Critical Perspectives* (2015). A trauma/victim perspective, a formalistic or nomadic perspective, a post-colonial perspective and a social constructivist perspective. The first one concern the trauma or victim perspective that emphasizes involuntary migration. The key word here is “forced”, or forced migration, in other words displacement. This relates to the experiences of repression and persecution of any given group in the country of origin which resulted in the scattering of the group far away from their native homeland. Diaspora communities can through narratives of collective suffering, form a sense of common identity as the experience of a collective cultural trauma often can become part of the groups identity (Volkan, 2001). The trauma perspective also emphasizes the ethnic and cultural characteristics of the diaspora group and touches the subjects of ‘homeland’ by portraying diaspora communities as being oriented towards their former homelands and the ideas of one day returning.

Other perspective that are worth taking into consideration in the analyze of this paper is the post-colonial and social constructivist perspective. From a post-colonial perspective, the victim perspective focus on homeland orientation risks to portray the diaspora as passive victims that long for a place elsewhere rather than “*creative subjects engaged in dialogue with and often opposing the prevailing structures of domination in the countries of residence*” (Khayati and Dahlstedt 2017: 70). The social constructivist perspective presented by Khayati and Dahlstedt is also be taken into consideration. Parallels can be drawn on this perspective to Brubakers (2005) ideas about dispersion in space, orientation to a homeland and boundary maintenance which constitutes the three main elements that create the diaspora (Brubaker 2005: 5).

Dispersion of a specific group, whether caused by force or conducted voluntarily, is an ordinarily acknowledged foundation of a diaspora. Brubaker (2005) talks about the partial movements of a people across nation-state borders or within a given state generating the development of a diasporic identity.

The reason why this perspective fits well into the analysis of identity construction of diaspora communities is because the constructivist perspective admits the complexity of mass migration and the processes of diaspora formation. While some people's identities are shaped by the history and experience of forced migration, the perspective acknowledges that other people root their diasporic narratives based on ideas rather than spaces. This is relevant in the analysis of identity shaping of second-generation immigrants. While first-generation immigrants can use their country of origin as a point of reference (Alinia and Eliassi 2014) second-generation immigrants have to rely on other strategies to construct their idea of homeland and identity. The model also upholds the idea that diaspora identities can be constructed around memories as well as material things (Khayati 2008).

Homeland orientation, the second component of the constructivist approach of diaspora formation, functions as an "*authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty*" (Brubaker, 2005: 5). The constructive model both emphasizes earlier work on diaspora where the homeland of the diaspora community is painted in an image of "nostalgia", "homesickness" and memories of "victimhood" as well as newer approaches on diaspora formation that identify transnational ties and strategies that diaspora communities develop.

The third element of the diaspora is boundary maintenance, which Brubaker (2005) argues, comprises of the maintenance of distinct identity in relation to the host society. It does this either by resisting assimilation or by the means of self-segregation, which maintain the idea that a diaspora is an example of post-colonial resistance by defining the boundaries of its identity. The boundaries of the diasporic identity (if perceived homogeneously) are however constantly challenged by the changes in political as well as social landscape of the original homeland. While Brubaker believes that the diaspora as a distinctive community is held together by dense social relationships but also a sense of sameness that link different members of the groups together into "*a single transnational community*" (Brubaker 2005: 6) while admitting its diverse complexity and hybrid nature.

## 2.4 Cultural hybridity and third spaces

Cultural hybridity emerged from post-colonial discourses as a response to multi-cultural awareness emerging in the field of social science during the 1990s (Hall 1992). The usage of this concept is relevant to this study as I attempt to how second-generation immigrant Kurds position themselves in the Swedish and Kurdish cultural spheres. An increased number of immigration and migrants worldwide indicates that our societies are becoming what sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse ((2009) calls "the global *mélange*" ("a global mixture")" which he means is a result of globalization. The trend he identifies is a global culture of hybridization, that the cultural patterns of the immigrant community mixed with that of the hosts generate a new identity that is a hybrid between that of the home culture, that is the culture of the home country or place of origin, and the outdoors culture, that is the culture of the host country (Pieterse 2009). The term hybridity has been associated with the work of Homi Bhabha who further developed the concept of hybridity from literary and cultural theory in an attempt to analyze the construction of cultural identity within conditions of antagonism (Bhabha 1994). According to Bhabha, hybridity takes place in conditions of inequality, hybridity is the process in which the colonial power and authority subjected narratives on the identity of the colonized. The focal point of Bhabhas work is therefore the analyses of unequal forces of cultural representation when addressing problems concerning issues of authority in places where cultural differences is what constitute social hierarchy and hegemony. Moreover, Bhabha argues that the new hybrid identity is generated by the mixture of different cultural elements of the colonizer and the colonized. The study of cultural hybridity theory can therefore be used to challenge the validity of any essentialist cultural identity, which links it to post-colonial discourses which reject any nation of culture or identity to be fully essentialist in nature (Said, 1978). Bhabha claims that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in what he calls the "third Space of Enunciation" (1994: 37). He argues that hybridity is a form of in-between space, where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' (Bhabha 1994: 38) occurs, forming a "third space". Third space theory will be used in this paper for the purpose of analyzing whether young people with Kurdish immigrant background constitute a third space in Sweden, if they represent an example of this theory by standing in-between the "Kurdish culture" and that of the "Swedish culture". By applying the terms of hybridity and third space, one might get an insight into how living in-between cultures constitute inner conflict which in turn makes individuals negotiate new identities, third spaces, in the dominant cultural society.

### 3. Methodology

The use of a qualitative study method was regarded most favorable for this type of research in order to achieve a broader understanding of how Kurds born or raised in Sweden form their identity. The method used to conduct the research took shape in the form of semi-structured interviews as the purpose of the interview in these types of studies is to gain an in depth understanding of the informant's life, emotions and opinions (Aspers 2011: 139). The qualitative methodological approach allowed me to study a specific phenomenon, investigate its properties and features so that we can use them for our analysis later on (Repstad 2007). Furthermore, the qualitative research method is also very flexible in the way that it creates opportunities of dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewees, adding more questions, perspective and nuance to the study. Interviews comes with completed guidelines, questions and topics but the interviewer is not bound to them. It's difficult to interpret the person's motives, actions and thoughts through observation only, interaction with the person is therefore much more valued for the research. All these thoughts were taken into consideration when I began researching. I started by looking up relevant literature on the Kurdish diaspora with the help of my supervisor. I started conducting interviews shortly after. All the research questions and hypothesis were created after I had conducted the interviews, the same is true for the theoretical background. I transcribed the empirical material and could from there see common themes and patterns which I systematized so that I could easier draw conclusions based on the theoretical background.

#### 3.1 The research participants

This thesis concerns the identity formation of second-generation Kurds that live in Sweden, so I was in need to come in contact with Kurds who were either born or grew up in Sweden. This was not a major challenge for me due to my own Kurdish background which gave me a head-start in reaching out to people I wanted to interview. I contacted friends through social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and also used the opportunity of these platforms to reach out too other people. Kurdish-Swedish Facebook pages and groups were very useful in this regard. The targeted group of qualitative studies is important as they clearly affect the result of the research.

I acknowledge that my targeted group, “Kurds in Sweden”, had little limitation and could encompass many different peoples. I however didn’t see this as a major problem for this specific study since I don’t take gender, class or sexual orientation into consideration when analyzing the data. The only qualification was that my informants should either be born or raised in Sweden, the later meaning they came to Sweden at a young age which I interpreted as in their early teens. The motivation behind this was due to my own hypostasis that Kurds who were either born or came to Sweden at a younger age would have a more direct contact and access to the Swedish society due to them growing up in Sweden and participating in the Swedish school system. This fell line with the main objective of the study, since earlier research on the identity formation on Kurdish diaspora in Europe have foremost involved first generation immigrants and their experience in the new society, I wanted to investigate the identity formation of second generation immigrants (or Kurds who either migrated or came to Sweden as refugees at a younger age). I am aware that I based this assumption on my own experience and expectations. However, it is worth mentioning that second generation immigrants, generally feel more attached to Sweden and the Swedish society, which is a result in that they claim more social space than the first generations (Alinia and Eliassi, 2014). As I briefly mentioned above, my targeted group also included people regardless of their gender, religion, sexual orientation, occupation or educational level. I however anticipated that the questions regarding these terms might come up in the analysis or discussion of this thesis.

The research participants are between the ages of 21 and 43. I found the age gape to be of interest as I assumed it might tell me something about the informants that were born in Sweden compared with those who came to Sweden at a young age.

## 2.2 Ethical reflections

Since the data is processed by the researcher alone and how he or she interpret the material, representation, or how the research participants are presented in the study is important. Ethical problems are therefore a main concern in conducting qualitative studies. There are several ethical guidelines that an interviewer can follow from Pål Repstads book “*Närhet och Distans*” (2012) which I took into consideration. These formal and informal rules are there to protect the informant who may for example give out sensitive information. I however didn’t believe that this specific study would raise such issues, but it is good to be aware and reflect on these types of questions. Instead, I emphasized on my obligation to keep the research participants fully

informed on the purpose and use of this study, that their participation is voluntarily and that they were allowed to interrupt the interview or drop out of the study if they didn't want to participate anymore. Furthermore, it's the informants right to remain anonymous and for this reason all the informants were given pseudonyms as an ethical issue to protect their real identities. The research participants were also reinsured that the material gathered will be dealt with confidently and only be used for the purpose of this study as I see this as standard procedure before beginning an interview regardless of the subject.

### 3.3 The interview

As mentioned above, semi-structured interview was seen as the optimal use of interview method because of its flexibility. I therefore developed a short interview-guide consisting of a list of questions that reflect the theme and questions of this research in order to reach the aim of this study. In this way the informants could formulate the answers as they saw fit and new questions could develop while the interview was proceeding. Moreover, the guide became useful in avoiding awkward silences. Most of the interviews took place in a café on the suggestion of the informant. This worked very well because it created an opportunity to get to know the informant more personally in a more informal environment. I wanted the research participants to feel comfortable and at home during the interview but at the same time keep myself distanced for the purpose of not being affected by my own similarities to the informants. I did this by trying to hold a balance between being approachable but still formal enough to know that this was an interview and not an everyday conversation. I began the interview by informing the interviewees if they approved using audio-recording and that they are not obliged to answer questions they don't want to. I then proceeded with the interview and collected the date on audio-recording using my own mobile phone. It is worth noting that most of the café interviews resulted in the drinking coffee accompanied by an interesting conversation on the subject after the formal interview had finished. I realized that valuable data could be used from these conversations and asked if I could take written notes as we proceeded the conversation. One of my interviews were conducted via Skype, due to the reason that I couldn't travel to conduct it in person. The Skype interview came in very handy, however, I acknowledge that face-to-face interview gives the interviewer a better advantage as it easier to detect facial expressions and body language. I also acknowledge that the number of interviews fell much lower than I had planned when I started this research which may have an effect on the results,

but I can defend the decision of limiting my data to five interviews by two factors. The first one being that I realized after the fifth interview that all the informants share some common opinions and thoughts in relation to the topic and questions which I saw as a sign that I was on the right path of reaching the aim, and although I admit that a broader sample would be preferable, I felt that I had the material I needed for my analysis. The second reason for this decision is that it was around this time into the research that I realized that I needed to investigate the identity formation of a limited number of people with the “same” background rather than doing a more generalizing study on “Kurds in Sweden”. This was mostly due to time limitation and scale of this research.

Majority of the interviews were around 40-50 minutes long, with the shortest being 25 minutes long. Five of the interviews were conducted in Swedish while two were conducted in both Swedish and Kurdish, both the translation of Swedish to English as well as Kurdish to English have been translated by myself. The research participants were as follows:

1. Dilan is a 21-year-old Kurdish woman who was born in Malmö, Sweden. She is studying at university. Her parents are from Iraqi Kurdistan
2. Ardashir is a 23-year-old Kurdish man who was born in Sweden and is currently studying to become a teacher at university. His parents are from Iranian Kurdistan.
3. Runak is a 27-year-old Kurdish woman who is born in Sweden in Upplands Väsby. Her parents are from Iraqi Kurdistan.
4. Dilovan is a 31-year-old Kurdish man from northern Kurdistan (Turkey). He came to Sweden with his family in 1999 when he was 12 years old.
5. Mina is a 43-year-old woman who was born in Iraqi Kurdistan. She fled Iraqi Kurdistan together with her family in 1986 and arrived in Sweden in 1988 as a 13-year-old girl.

#### 4. Analysis

The aim of this study is to analyze the identity processes of Kurds in Sweden and how they develop their ethnic identity in the diaspora. This constitutes the main aim of this study. Secondary aims of this study are to investigate whether Kurds born or raised in Sweden appropriated a “third space” identity or in-between cultural identity as defined by Bhabha

(1994; 1996). In the section below, I will present the material gathered from the interviews and put them in a context of theoretical perspectives.

#### 4.1 Belonging: Kurdish, Swedish, both and in-between

Eriksen (1998) argues that the term ethnicity in relation to identity is not something that is static and unchangeable but in constant change, identity can be manifested differently depending on the situation and circumstances. The identity of an individual is therefore constantly reconstructed or negotiated depending on the context. Dilan is a 21-year-old woman who was born in Sweden. When asked about how she identity herself she answered:

**[Dilan]:** “It depends on who is asking, when I am abroad I usually say that I’m Swedish as it implies that I am from Sweden. Some people might interpret this as a way of denying my Kurdish heritage, it might be that in an indirect way but that’s not the purpose, I just say so for the sake of simplicity. If anybody else asks, I say I’m Kurdish because that is what I feel I am the most”

Dilan feel and identify Kurdish although it depends on the context and her encounter with other people. Her self-identification is subjected to negotiation in which she positions her feeling of belonging according to the context and situation she is in (Prins, J et al. 2013). Immigrants often answer in “a fuzzy way” when asked where they are from, the question of belonging is something that affects all peoples but immigrants experience this in a different way because *“their mode of belonging is often seriously challenged and questioned”* (Eliassi 2013: 83). When asked about why and how she feels more Kurdish, Dilan answered:

**[Dilan]:** “because there are similarities in the culture, language and there are somethings I don’t talk about with my (ethnic) Swedish friends, that I can talk about with my Kurdish friends because I know they will understand better”

Dilan construct her Kurdish identity both on the grounds that she shares cultural traits and language (objectively) with other Kurds in Sweden but also subjectively, in that she perceives

and feel that her Kurdish friends understand her in ways her Swedish friends cannot due to their shared experience of Kurdishness (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Runak's self-identification is slightly different than that of Dilans' although they both hint at a feeling of both and in-betweenness. Runak too is born in Sweden but say she feels both Kurdish and Swedish, although this variate from time to time:

**[Runak]:** "I identify myself as both, more Swedish than Kurdish would be weird to claim but I cannot claim that I am not Swedish because I am born and raised here, and I have never been to Kurdistan either. I am both, or Kurd from Sweden, one's feeling of identity shifts depending on where you are and whom you're with, for example, when I am at work I have to be able to approach people in a Swedish way, but I definitely feel that I am both Kurdish and Swedish".

Runak too mention that her feeling of belonging and identity is dependent on different social situations. In other words, her feeling of belonging is situational, which is more common among the second generation in regard to their sense of belonging (Alinia and Eliassi 2014). She defines her belonging to the Swedish society in her experiences of growing up in Sweden which interestingly almost contradict her way of constructing her Kurdish identity. While her "Swedish identity" is bound to time (growing up) and space (in Sweden), her Kurdish identity seem to stem from other, perhaps more essentialist, factors as she mentioned that she has never been to Kurdistan before. Runak further illustrate her feeling of "both" by explaining that:

**[Runak]:** "on the inside I feel like I am both, because I follow the norms of the society and I celebrate both Kurdish and Swedish holidays, but outsiders might see me as a "well-integrated immigrant" and not "a Swede"

Runak's sense of belonging is in other words shaped by her familiarity with the Swedish culture, by participating in Swedish holidays, she participates in the dominant culture while still holding on to her Kurdish identity leading her to feel both Swedish and Kurdish at the same time. Runak is however aware of the formal and informal ways of belonging to the Swedish

society (Eliassi and Alinia 2014). Individuals with immigrant background often find their “immigrant-status” being a determining factor for their identity and belonging and it is not uncommon for second generation immigrants to often appropriate this identity as a way of acknowledging their common experience of exclusion from the mainstream and white-dominated Swedish society (Eliassi 2010). This is not the clear case in Runak’s experience, but she is aware that the mainstream society that she lives in may not always acknowledge her Swedish identity and perceive her as a foreigner (Stier 2003). Dilovan gave similar answer to the questions regarding his self-understanding of his identity:

**[Dilovan]:** “I feel like both Kurdish and Swedish at the same time, I feel I can associate myself with both Kurdish and Swedish culture even though I don’t feel hundred percent at home with both those identities either. It is a difficult feeling to explain, I am both in the sense that I feel I belong in Sweden even though certain factors make me feel like a foreigner, and the same goes about when I visit my family in Kurdistan”.

Dilovan feels both Kurdish and Swedish but at the same time feels like he is a stranger in both cultures. His dislocation from his country of origin have resulted in a cultural mix as a result of his encountering with Swedish society. This has made him feel both alienated from the two cultures while still making use of both cultural identities, in other words, he structures his identity in the third space, between the Swedish and Kurdish culture incorporating both elements. While some factors make him feel excluded in the mainstream Swedish society, it is the same cultural encounter with the Swedish society in the diaspora that also make Dilovan feel different when he visits his home country. Ardashir understand his identity similar to Runak and Dilovan but the main contrast is a slightly different way of formulation. Instead of feeling both at the same time, he expresses that he feels that he belongs to something in between.

**[Ardashir]:** “I am in-between or both in some ways, I have a Kurdish identity which is a matter of my ethnic identity that I have gotten from home, but I am also shaped by the society I live in which have made it possible for me to identify ‘myself as Swedish too. I don’t feel that I am fully Kurdish nor fully Swedish either but at the same time still do if that makes sense”.

Ardashir does not feel he is fully Kurdish nor fully Swedish, this is because he has to negotiate his identity between the culture he has “*gotten from home*” through his family and that of the dominant Swedish society that he interacts with daily (Pieterse 2009). He understands his identity as being in-between the Kurdish and Swedish cultures, perhaps a hybrid of both. This contrast between the home culture and the society around them is something that other informants have mentioned as well. Mina explains:

**[Mina]:** “ Swedish culture is not foreign to me, I live here, I work and interact with others around me every day, it makes me part of the society but my identity is also shaped by my Kurdish heritage which I feel strongly with, it is not always easy to tell them apart [...] it is a big conflict for me, while it has given me freedom in certain things, my Kurdish identity in Sweden have also limited me in certain aspects of life”

Mina’s sense of belonging derives from both the Kurdish and Swedish culture, the two cultures is what constitute her identity but at the same time create feelings of conflict within her. Other research participants also mentioned different types of conflict in regard to their identity, often in the form of “cultural crash” that they experience.

As seen above the research participants in this section identifies according to his or her own understanding of what constitutes as Kurdish and Swedish culture (Brubaker and Cooper, 2003). Their narratives explain how they position themselves in Swedish society. All of them feel integrated or part of the mainstream Swedish society, not only because it is part of their everyday life and where they grew up but because they have adopted what they consider Swedish values and traditions ((Nadzeya Laurentsyevea and Alessandra Venturini, 2007). The research participants construct their identities through different cultural and social settings that constitute an identity based on in-betweenness, the intermixing of these cultural elements shape hybrid identities that are different and similar at the same time, which can constitute a “third space” (Bhabha 1994).

## 4.2 Strategies of maintaining Kurdish identity

This section will focus on how the second-generation immigrants maintain their Kurdish identity and through which means that identity is expressed and reproduced. Language and material culture seem to be key factors in how young Kurds create a sense of belonging and maintain their Kurdish identity.

**[Runak]:** “Kurdish language is very important to me and I am grateful that my parents always encouraged me and my siblings to speak Kurdish at home and with one another, not only as a way of preserving our culture but be able to talk to our family members in Kurdistan. We had mother tongue education and would watch Kurdish cartoons on the TV, all my siblings including me also have Kurdish names and speak Kurdish fluently today.”

Runak does not only make use of Kurdish language as a manifestation of her Kurdish identity but uses it also as a way of preserving it. The importance put on this can perhaps be a result of Kurds being oppressed in their homeland, which gives Kurds a stronger need to sustain their ethnic identity and culture (Eliassi 2013). Runak continues with

**[Runak]:** “If I have children in the future, I would like them to be able to speak Kurdish too and have Kurdish names”.

Dilovan have already made that step by giving her daughter that was born in Sweden a Kurdish name:

**[Dilovan]:** “I gave my daughter a Kurdish name because I wanted to preserve our Kurdish culture, I grew up in Turkey where the Kurdish language is forbidden in school, we would get beaten in the class if we spoke Kurdish, Sweden is different, it’s democratic and respects human rights, we can even get Kurdish classes in school so why give up on that”.

Dilovan gave her daughter a Kurdish name as a way of preserving their Kurdish identity in Sweden. Both Runak and Dilovan emphasize the importance of language and names in regard to Kurdish identity. The difference however is that Dilovan stresses the importance of language preservation due to his experiences in the country of origin, while Runak who were born in Sweden seem to motivate this on the basis of keeping the tie to her roots, that is, her family members in the home country. First generation immigrants can use their country of origin as a reference when they reoriented themselves in the new homeland (Alinia and Eliassi 2014). Moreover, Eliassi (2013) mentions how the Swedish multicultural policy has played a role in strengthening and promoting the Kurdish ethnic identity by offering financial support that has contributed to an extensive publication of Kurdish literature. All research participants mentioned the cultural and political freedom they enjoy in Sweden, even the ones born in Sweden, the differences however are shown in the way research participants used these narratives to construct their identity. Mina makes use of her experience in the country of origin as an identity maker as well:

**[Mina]:** “When we came to Sweden, we fled in 1986, during the Iran-Iraq war, we fled because of the dangers that were put on my dad’s life as he was ordered to be one of those self-sacrifices that were supposed to go ahead of the military on minefields. It took us two years to reach Sweden. [...] because of the suffering we endured due to us being Kurdish; my dad always made sure that we were to speak Kurdish at home here in Sweden and that we preserve the Kurdish language and culture. Even my little brother who was only two years when we came to Sweden now speaks fluent Kurdish and even uses phrases and sayings that only elderly Kurdish people nowadays use. We felt that we fled to Sweden because we were Kurds and we were allowed to stay and get citizenship because we were Kurds, if we were to lose it (our Kurdishness) then it would be like we didn’t have any reason to be here anymore, so I have kept that core feeling of Kurdishness to this day”.

Mina’s sense of belonging of Kurdishness evokes feelings and experiences of exile and the persecution that her family witnessed “*for being Kurds*”. Being Kurdish is therefore characterized by the collective experience of oppression and suffering (Khayati, 2012) that Kurds faced by the Iraqi authorities. Not only does the memory of suffering define Mina’s Kurdish identity in the diaspora but it is also the motivation for her to preserve it through Kurdish

language and other cultural and political activities. Both Mina and Dilovan's answers stand in contrast to Runak's in the sense that Runak doesn't construct her sense of Kurdishness around the memory of exile and forced migration (Khayati and Dahlstedh 2015). Memories of suffering, television and Kurdish TV programs are not the only means of identity making that diaspora Kurds can use. Dilan use language in her identity making as well:

**[Dilan]:** "speaking Kurdish for has become more important, I didn't speak so much Kurdish three years ago 3 but I have totally embraced it more recently"

But also adds that

**[Dilan]:** "my Kurdish identity is more than just my language, it is the whole culture, the food we eat at home and when we organize a party we dance Kurdish dances, wear Kurdish clothes and so on".

While Dilan also stress the importance of Kurdish language, she mentions other important factors that reaffirm her Kurdishness, Kurdish identity is therefore maintained and reproduced by many different factors and personal experiences. All the research participants use material culture in their identity construction to preserve their Kurdish identity while living in a majority Swedish society, their Kurdish identity is formed by different factors such as the collective suffering of the Kurdish people and memories of exile which in turn motivates diaspora members to preserve and protect the culture of their home country.

#### 4.3 the narrative of homeland as an identity maker

As mentioned above, not all the research participants could evoke firsthand experience of exile and oppression. This however, does not mean that young Kurds born in Sweden cannot make use of collective suffering of the countries in their own identity formation as experience of a collective cultural trauma often can become part of the story a group tells about themselves (Volkan, 2001). This section is related to the previous one is I try to investigate how young Kurds in Sweden form their identity, but rather than focusing on the strategies and how they use material culture to define and construct their identity, I try to analyze the importance of a

“homeland” as a factor in shaping their Kurdish identity in the diaspora. This is due to the fact that all the research participants related to notions of a “home country”. This is especially interesting because as I have mentioned earlier, two of the participants that I interviewed have never been to Kurdistan or their parent’s country of origin, yet “home-country” is central to their identity formation as will be shown below. Alinia (2004) contest that the difference between Kurds who were raised in their native homeland with those who were born or raised in Sweden is that that the former’s narrative of homeland is bound to *“a physical place from which they have lived experiences and to which they have real and material bonds”* (Alinia and Eliassi 2014: 78) while the later use imaginary narratives to construct their idea of “the homeland”. Ardashir for example have never been to his parent’s country of origin, yet he feels attached to the homeland even though he has never experienced it personally.

**[Ardashir]:** “The Kurdishness is not necessarily practiced outside my home, what differentiate me from my Swedish friends is that somewhere out in the world, (is a place that) interests me (Kurdistan)... I burn for it, it draws me, and I identify strongly with it [...] It is not a niche, it is actually a place I have never been too and do not have any economic interest in, but it still catches me”

Second generation construct and maintain narratives around the notion of homeland that they contrast in relation to their lives in Sweden, the idea of the homeland, that is also perceived as their homeland, functions as a key element in their sense of belonging and identity construction (Alinia and Eliassi 2014). Ardashir’s Kurdishness is also defined by his position in the diaspora. He is in many ways like his Swedish friends but part of what makes him Kurdish is that he as a Kurdish homeland and that homeland is somewhere else. Ardashir explained his idea of what the homeland means to him by saying:

**[Ardashir]:** “Homeland for me is where I imagine me walking the streets of my parent’s hometown and hearing people speak the same language which I previously associated with the private sphere of my parent’s home”

Homeland for Ardashir is not something fixed or experienced but is rather based on the idea of what homeland means to him personally. Homeland for him is not about the past but is the product of his image of the homeland in contrast to his life and experiences in Sweden. While

Ardashir maintain a strong emotional connection to his parents' home country through the notions of family, common language, he also feels that he belongs in Sweden. This is however articulated in a different way:

**[Ardashir]:** “Yes, I do (feel at home in Sweden) and not just because of my Swedish citizenship, this country took my family in, I feel part of that community, it (Sweden) gives me all the opportunities (education, work etc.) I walk the streets and I know them as I have done my whole life both is my home, one that I live in and one that I hope to visit in the future”.

His Swedish sense of belonging is therefore driven by factors such as school, work, friends and other social networks that define his everyday life, his interaction with the surrounding Swedish society is what constitute his Swedish identity.

Another interesting aspect that was briefly touched in the previous section is how young Kurds in the diaspora maintain contact with family and relatives in the homeland. Internet enables diaspora communities to sustain transnational connections with their homeland (Khayati 2008) which is why Runak, although she is aware that her homeland is “imaginary” based on her own expectations and ideas argues that:

**[Runak]:** “even though I have never been to Kurdistan, it is not totally foreign to me, I grew up with stories of Kurdistan which I am sure not always reflect reality and everyday life, but I also have contact with friends and family that live there, through Facebook, you know what is going on there and so forth”

Both Runak and Ardashir use narratives and the notion of a homeland in reconstructing their identity, which as mentioned before, is not uncommon in second generation immigrants. The homeland is a subjective and individual feeling which is influenced by many different factors and reinforced by a longing to visit and return back. It is perhaps due to this reason that diaspora communities often tend to idealize the image of their homeland (Safran 1991). The homeland

is however not always constructed through expectations but is also experienced in reality through trips and vacations. Mina have for example in the past went back to her place of birth to work. She feels a strong connection to her country of birth which she considers home:

**[Mina]:** “I feel taller, heavier when I am home (Kurdistan), I don’t know, it is like the gravity is pulling me down, I don’t think I will ever feel like that for Sweden, (Sweden) is a beautiful country and when I lived in Kurdistan I used to feel homesickness, that I can’t deny, at the same time, when I lived there (Kurdistan) and worked, I realized that I don’t feel at home there either, what I assumed was pure Kurdish, what I was taught from my home was seen as either old-fashioned or too European”

Although Mina say she feels at home in Kurdistan, she also felt homesickness for Sweden when living and working there. She emphasizes how she feels more at home in Kurdistan while her feelings of homesickness suggest that her experience of living in Sweden have had a great impact on her sense of belonging. This was manifested when she moved to Kurdistan and soon realized that her Kurdishness was in many ways different than that of the majority society there, while she was perceived as “too European” in other cases. Brubaker (2005) claim that the boundaries of the diaspora identity is often challenged by the social realities of the homeland. Mina’s Kurdish identity as well as her Swedishness is confronted in the homeland. The homeland had changed since her family used to live there, at the same time, her encounter with the Swedish culture had embraced certain ways of thinking that were perceived as too European in the homeland. Contrast can also be drawn between Mina’s “imagined” homeland and the social and political reality that was her homeland when she later in the interview mentioned that “homeland” evokes certain feelings and memories:

**[Mina]:** I don’t know if I can live there right now, I love Sweden in many ways but it is Kurdistan where my heart belongs, I feel at home there through the nature, I don’t know what to say, the connection to the actual land, when you look out the window, stand on the roof, people there took the freedom of scolding me when I lived there, they thought I was crazy to leave that “paradise” and come to this hell, but for me this was heaven”

Mina’s experiences further show the complexity of homeland and belonging. Her sense of Kurdishness is tied to the land in which feelings and images appears in her mind that she feels

rooted too, at the same time she can't imagine herself living there and claim she loves Sweden. The research participants feelings towards the homeland seem to be a blend of many different factors, expectations and experiences. They are however not torn between Sweden and somewhere else, instead they stand between them and feel attached to both places. Sweden and the homeland are interwoven with the idea of home and it is within this framework that they position themselves in relation to their identity.

## 5. Conclusion and further work

The aim of this study was to analyze the identity formation and feelings of belonging among second generation immigrant Kurds in Sweden, and how they relate to Kurdish respectively Swedish culture and/or identity. The results show that one's individual identity is constantly reconstructed with the encounter of another cultures through different means based on where and what context that individual person is in. This study manifest how these five Kurdish individuals understand and construct their identity when living and growing up in Sweden. Their sense of belonging is shaped by the community and society around them and while they all maintain their Kurdish identity, they also make efforts to integrate and participate in the dominant Swedish culture they live in. They all acknowledge their Kurdish roots, they are proud to be Kurdish and undertake different strategies to maintain that Kurdish identity through speaking the Kurdish language and participating in cultural and political activities. But they cannot avoid the encounter with the Swedish culture either because they live and grew up in Sweden. They feel a sense of familiarity with Swedish traditions and norms. An important aspect of their identity is that it is not static or unchangeable, their identity changes as a result of different interactions with other people. In addition, this study also shows that even though the research participants are aware of their "otherness"-status as Kurds, it does not fully alienate them from embracing a Swedish identity. This was also the case for Mina and Dilovan, who are not born in Sweden but came to Sweden at the age of 12 and 13. This would suggest that one do not need to be born in Sweden to be able to feel Swedish as well. This statement would however be easier to back up if this study also included a number of Kurds that came to Sweden as adults. Furthermore, this study does not reflect on otherwise important social variables such as gender, class, educational level and sexual orientation as markers of identity, this was a deliberate decision due to the fact that I wanted to focus on the cultural aspect of identity and

self-identification although I admit that these are all important when analyzing identity and may be determining factors in how people relate to the culture and society around them. I also admit that this study did not focus on racial discrimination in regard to identity formation of second generation immigrant Kurds, but it is an important aspect of the research that the participants used words such as “both” or “and” instead of “us” and “them” when discussing Kurdish and Swedish identity. They have managed to create a balance between what they perceive as Swedish and Kurdish culture. The two cultural identities are not in conflict with each other. Instead they create a space that stands in-between Kurdistan (homeland) and Sweden (host country) which constitutes a third space (Bhabha 1996). This space however does not represent identity conflict or disorientation, it does not have a negative impact on their identity or sense of belonging in the Swedish society because they feel at home in both culture.

Many new questions and hypotheses have come to my mind when doing this research that might be worth further investigation. The results of this study could be further developed by incorporating and introducing more variables and expanding both the theoretical background as well as the empirical material. It would also be valuable to do a more comparative study, either between first-generation immigrants with second-generation immigrants of the Kurdish diaspora, or with second-generation immigrants in different countries to investigate how they differ and how the political and social structures of the country effect Kurdish identity and second-generation Kurds relation to Kurdishness vice versa the host country.

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## 7. Appendix

- Do you identify as Kurdish, Swedish or both?
- Do you feel a sense of community with other Kurds in Sweden?
- How do you think your (ethnic) identity affect you in your everyday life?
- What is Kurdish and Swedish identity for you? How is it expressed?
- Do you feel that the Swedish culture have any influence on your Kurdish culture?
- What makes you feel more “Kurdish” or “more Swedish”?
- Do you ever feel as a foreigner or do you feel that you are part of mainstream society?
- How would you describe your relationship to Kurdistan?
- How would you explain your relationship with Sweden?
- What does homeland mean to you?
- Do you feel it is important to preserve the Kurdish identity in the diaspora? Why?
- Have you ever been to Kurdistan/your parent’s home country?