Lund University

Department of Sociology

'Overcoming Hopelessness':

Asylum Seekers' Experiences of Precarity and Empowerment in Sweden

Author: Hugo Fritjofsson

Supervisor: Dalia Abdelhady

Master's thesis: WPMM42: 30 credits

Spring semester 2023

Word count: 17, 808

Key words: Sweden, asylum, migration, qualitative, refugees

ABSTRACT

Author: Hugo Fritjofsson

Title: 'Overcoming Hopelessness': Asylum Seekers' Experiences of Precarity and Empowerment in Sweden

Master's thesis: WPMM42: 30 credits

Supervisor: Dalia Abdelhady

Department of Sociology, spring 2023

Sweden has long been seen as a generous, inclusive provider for refugees, historically granting social rights on par with citizens shortly upon arrival. However, extensive recent academic literature has come to critique this perception, highlighting retrenchments and restrictive developments in asylum policy amid increasing precarity for asylum seekers. Studies have also documented mental health vulnerabilities among refugees and asylum seekers, often linked to their insecure legal status. At the same time, a critical literature has aimed to challenge prevailing narratives of the refugees as a vulnerable and politically muted group, by exploring the concepts of agency and resilience. This thesis seeks to develop this seemingly contradictory discussion. By conducting six in-depth interviews with Swedish asylum seekers from the past decade, the asylum process and settlement are explored. Examining themes of credibility, temporality, and resource scarcity, the research identifies significant challenges facing asylum seekers in Sweden. While asylum seekers demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness, the study reveals a diversity of distinct, structural constraints on agency, highlighting the complexity of decision-making within limited options.

Key words: Sweden, asylum, migration, qualitative, refugees

Popular science summary

Sweden has historically had a reputation for its generosity and inclusivity towards refugees, granting social rights on par with citizens shortly upon arrival. However, partly because of broader social and political developments, such as restrictive immigration reforms following growing numbers of asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016, rising anti-immigrant sentiment, and the mainstreaming of social-conservative nationalism, this image is increasingly being brought into question. Studies have also shown a prevalence of mental health vulnerabilities among refugees, often relating to legal uncertainty. In contrast to the framing of asylum seekers and refugees as vulnerable, is a literature related to critical feminist theory, that emphasizes individual agency and resilience. This creates a fundamental contradiction – contemporary asylum seekers are legal constructs, strongly affected by legal doctrine and regulatory frameworks, and their precarious position in society makes them vulnerable. A priori, this would seem to make them lack agency to some extent.

Based on six in-depth interviews with individuals who sought refuge in Sweden in the last decade, the study examines their migration process and settlement in Sweden. The findings indicate that legal obstacles and settlement issues, such as housing and employment, pose significant challenges for people seeking refuge in Sweden. Analyzing the themes of credibility and burden of proof; time and uncertainty; and lack of resources, the study finds considerable variety in challenges facing asylum seekers in Sweden depending much on personal circumstances and characteristics of the person, such as their national background, age and whether they migrated to Sweden alone or with their family. The challenges highlight the constraints on asylum seekers' agency within the Swedish context, even as they exhibit resilience and employ various strategies to navigate their circumstances, showing the complexities of intentionality and the limits of agency in constrained environments.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the individuals who generously shared their stories and time with me. Your willingness to open up and share your experiences is deeply appreciated. Your courage, resilience, and ability to put your stories into words have left a lasting impact on me. I would also like to extent my thanks to the people of Stockholm who helped me make the connections to enrich this research journey.

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Dalia Abdelhady, for her words of encouragement and insightful feedback. Leonie, your constant encouragement during the extensive writing process has been invaluable. Dad, your meticulous proofreading is greatly appreciated.

I would also like to acknowledge my fellow peers in the Welfare Policies and Management Master program and everyone who made Lund feel like home over the past two years. These experiences have been truly unforgettable.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Globally, asylum seekers – those seeking refuge from persecution, violence, conflict, and human rights violations – reached record numbers in 2022, having doubled since 2011 (UNHCR, 2022). Sweden has historically been perceived as generous and open towards refugees (Borevi, 2012; Johansson, 2008; Schierup, 2006), upholding an image of tolerance, human rights advocacy, and development (Silander, 2007). In the past decade, however, authors have begun to question Sweden's status as a generous provider for asylum seekers. Schoultz (2014) documents how current migration systems legitimize bureaucratic violence; Wettergren et al. (2014) identify arbitrariness in asylum status determinations; more broadly, Dahlstedt et al. (2019) describe an end to the era of 'Swedish exceptionalism' in its inclusivity towards refugees. Moreover, studies on mental health among asylum seekers have highlighted a vulnerability to mental issues, owing among other things to insecure legal status (Blackmore et al., 2020; Solberg et al., 2020). These concerns coincide with broader social and political developments, such as restrictive immigration reforms following growing numbers of asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016, rising anti-immigrant sentiment, and the mainstreaming of social-conservative nationalism.

Narratives of vulnerability and victimization told in both academia and media trivialize the experience of seeking asylum and make accounts of individual resilience unseen or ignored. In contrast to the academic literature of refugee vulnerability, there exists an extensive critique of the refugee construct as politically and deliberately muted, underscoring the role of individual agency and decision-making (Arendt, 2005; Malkki, 2008; Nyers, 2006). Yet, the voices and lived accounts of asylum seekers themselves remain conspicuously absent from this discussion.

To understand asylum seekers' challenges, we need personal narratives across diverse contexts of seeking asylum. Asylum seekers are not a homogenous group. Recognizing the diversity within this group, this study seeks to elucidate variations in backgrounds and experiences. This study employs in-depth interviews with asylum seekers who arrived in Sweden over the last decade. This approach seeks to ensure authenticity and insight, avoiding predetermined assumptions about refugees. Listening to and communicating the stories of asylum seekers is also an attempt to hold us as social scholars accountable to their perspectives. The interviews will focus on the ways that asylum seekers navigate the asylum process, especially their interactions with Swedish Migration Agency,

henceforth SMA, and subsequent settlement, i.e., obtaining housing, employment, and education, and how one responds to and tries to overcome those challenges.

Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration is used to frame the analysis, focusing on the interaction between structure (sociological, societal) and agency (political, agentic) (Giddens, 1984). This conception of agency emphasizes the active role of individuals in social life. Agents possess reflexivity, intentionality, and the capacity to make choices, according to Giddens (Ibid, 105). They engage in ongoing processes of monitoring, rationalizing, and motivating their actions. While agents are influenced by social structures, they also contribute to the reproduction and transformation of those structures in a process of 'encountering' and 'routinization'. Giddens proposes that structure and agency may be viewed, not as independent and conflicting elements, but as a mutually interacting duality (Jones, 1999, 105). Interview questions were developed to clarify how the agency and structure are mutually constitutive. What are some interpretations and responses to challenges faced by asylum seekers? Are asylum seekers active agents or merely victims? Are they able to overcome or exercise agency in the challenges they face in adapting to life in Sweden?

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 reviews prior literature and policy contexts, identifying gaps and explaining the theoretical framework's application. The study delves into Sweden's asylum legislation, including the 1994 Act on the Reception of Asylum Seekers and the Aliens Act of 2005. The legislation transitioned from a generous to a more restrictive approach, due to political decisions and changing public attitudes. Different categories of protection are explored – different rights and restrictions for asylum seekers are specified for refugees, persons needing protection, and those in 'exceptionally distressing circumstances'. Subsequent chapters explore research design, findings, and analysis, providing insights into asylum seekers' challenges and agency.

Chapter 2: Previous Literature and Theoretical Framework

In this part, previous literature is summarized to give an overview of policy context and the academic discussion framing contemporary asylum seeking in Sweden. Gaps in the academic literature that the thesis seeks to address are identified. The chapter ends by discussing the theoretical framework and how it is applied to the analysis.

2.1 Policy Context

The main legislation governing Swedish asylum seeking is the 1994 *Act on the Reception of Asylum seekers*, and the *Aliens Act* of 2005, amended in 2016. At the time, the 1994 Act was considered more generous than most other European asylum legislation. It allowed asylum seekers to enter the labor market as soon as they submitted their application for a permanent residence permit (Parusel, 2016). However, the 2005 the Aliens Act (2005:716), effective in 2006, introduced restrictions following debates on fiscal policy and public sector expenditures, impacting asylum seekers' rights to settle (Hedlund et al., 2015).

Following an increase in asylum seekers in 2016, a majority of whom were fleeing the Syrian civil war, significant changes were made to legislation. Among the most drastic changes were the introduction of temporary rather than permanent residence permits for protection status holders, stricter limitations on the right to family reunification, and ending welfare support for people who received a deportation order (Skodo, 2018). Steps were also taken towards merging asylum and labor migration policy, as the prospect to remain and earn one's right to family reunification was made contingent on labour market participation and economic self-sufficiency (Öberg et al., 2017). The provisions aimed to harmonize asylum seeking with obligations to EU minimum standards (Aliens Act, 2016:752). The provisions were advised against by almost all consultative bodies and met with outrage by many NGOs, and human rights organizations (Salmonsson et al., 2018, 526). Negative attitudes towards migration increased and positive attitudes to migration decreased in the years following 2015 (Eurobarometer, n.d.). In 2021, the temporary provisions, which were extended in 2019, were signed into permanence by the Swedish Riksdag. The 'law of exception' was thus made permanent, shifting a state of exception into a new normal (Philipson Isaac, 2022).

At present, asylum seekers can be awarded residence permits on three different grounds: 1) As refugees; 2) as persons 'otherwise in need of protection', also known as 'subsidiary refugee status'; and 3) because of 'exceptionally distressing circumstances'. All applicants are termed asylum seekers. Those who receive refugee status are called refugees; those who belong to the other categories are 'persons in need of protection'. The first category, also known as convention refugees, are those who have reason to fear persecution in their native country due to certain characteristics. It may be on grounds of race, nationality, religion, political beliefs, gender and sexual orientation, or membership of

another particular social group, and is unable, or unwilling because of his or her fear, to get the necessary protection of that country (Aliens Act, 4th Ch. 1§, 2005). This is irrespective of whether the persecution is at the hands of authorities, or whether the authorities cannot offer protection against persecution by private individuals. It also applies to stateless persons. The meaning of 'persecution' includes a certain intensity or recurrence of actions such as threats against a person's life or liberty; physical, psychological, or sexual violence; gender-specific threats; and torture.

Subsidiary protection, the second subcategory of asylum seekers, is mostly formulated in domestic law. This group includes those 'who have left their native country and have a well-founded fear of being sentenced to the death penalty, or to be subjected corporal punishment, torture or any other inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment'. It also includes persons who have a well-founded fear of being subjected to severe abuse because of armed conflict or because of other grave issues in their home country, as well as persons who are unable to return to their home country due environmental disasters (Aliens Act, 4th Ch. 2§, 2005).

The third category, granting residence permits based on 'exceptionally distressing circumstances' involves assessing an individual's health, adaptation to Sweden, country of origin situation, and age (Aliens Act, 5th Ch. 6§). Children shall be granted residence permits on a more lenient basis compared to adults.[1]

Different types of asylum seekers are entitled to different protections. Refugee status ensures Geneva Convention-rights, such as rights to travel documents, family reunification, temporary travel documents, subsidized fares for family members, right to citizenship after four years of uninterrupted residence. Subsidiary protection provides lower levels of protection, with conditional rights to travel documents, conditional family reunion, right to citizenship after five years, or eight years if identity assertion is difficult (Wettergren et al., 2014). Notably, Sweden has been exceptionally restrictive in its use of the convention refugee category, vis-à-vis granting subsidiary protection (Ibid).

The categorizations contain overlaps and similarities across different forms of asylum status, which may cause ambivalence regarding determinations of applicant status.

---

[1] It is noted that this paper does not refer to asylum seekers coming from Ukraine, following the 2022 Russian invasion of the country. This is because refugees coming from Ukraine generally are covered by Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), a directive invoked by EU ministers to provide immediate, temporary protection for displaced people from outside the EU.

This thesis uses the term 'asylum seeker' to denote all individuals in the interview sample. In

---

other words, it does not distinguish between individuals from different subcategories of protected status nor those rejected in their asylum claims.

2.2 Institutions, Asylum Process and Outcomes

Asylum claims are processed in three consecutive legal instances. The first instance is Swedish Migration Agency, SMA, which processes all cases of residence permits, also handling work permits and other types of migration. SMA has been described as a hierarchical administrative authority, characterized by objectivity and procedural correctness, which can limit its moral and emotional considerations (Norström 2004, Wettergren, 2010). Applicants have the right to an individual assessment, that his or her case is properly investigated, and an oral hearing (Wettergren et al., 2014). The process includes identification of the applicant and determining reasons for seeking asylum. A decision is made based on various factors, discussed further below. Rejections in permit applications process are issued by the agency and it assists with voluntary returns (Salmonsson et al., 2018). Coercive measures against non-residents are enforced by the Police authority (Ibid). Negative decisions by SMA can be appealed to the Court of Migration, which is under jurisdiction of the public administrative court system. The highest level of appeal – the Supreme Migration Court – requires leave to appeal, which is granted only if the case could be of importance as precedent, meaning that only questions of law, not facts, are allowed.

The Court of Migration operates as an adversarial system. Applicants must defend their claim against a prosecutorial adversary, SMA, the agency issuing the rejection in the first instance. The burden of proof is on the applicant. Normally, the agency's set of facts and evaluation is presented first, and the story of the applicant second. There is generally little room for the applicant to verbally tell their story in the court proceedings (Lundberg et al., 2019). In 2020, the proportion of migration cases in the court of appeals that were settled with an oral hearing was 4% (Domstolsverket, 2020, 36).

Outcomes are generally unpredictable and vary depending on several factors.

Beyond personal circumstances, the most critical may be the asylum seekers' country of origin. Recognition rates and status assignment also co-varies with gender and age of the applicant (EU).[2] The recognition rate in all applications for international protection was between 20–30 per cent in Sweden in the last five years (Migration Agency, 2023a).

2.3 Literature Review

This section will review current academic literature to contextualize this study, citing both general research on refugees and in the Swedish socio-legal context. This will reveal gaps in the academic literature and concretize our research questions. To begin, there is a fundamental, ontological critique of the ways that refugees are discussed and understood in academia and media debates. According to Lipson and Malaise (1999), earlier academic work on refugees can be categorized into two major paradigms.

The first paradigm describes refugees as a 'poverty-stricken and political class of excess people'. The second paradigm objectifies refugees as a medical phenomenon, reducing individuals 'to physical bodies in need of repair' (1999, 89). These authors acknowledge the stressful nature of migration, requiring adaptation, accommodation, or coping mechanisms, and that 'past traumas, resettlement issues, jobs and poverty, and ethnic discrimination have a stronger impact on health and health seeking… than do cultural characteristics' (ibid, 89). However, they provide a critical feminist perspective, portraying refugees as resilient – 'refugees provide a vivid example of the human capacity to survive despite the greatest losses and assaults on human identity and dignity' (ibid, 89). They thus follow an academic tradition of critiquing the 'refugee' construct, as a politically suppressed and deliberately muted group, evident in the works of Arendt (2005), Malkki (1992) and Nyers (2006). This literature emphasizes the importance of personal agency and identity in shaping the lives of refugees.

More recently, several authors contribute to these critical conceptions of refugees – emphasizing the need for dialogue and interaction to create a more nuanced and meaningful representation of refugee experiences and identities. Zetter (2007) discusses how state bureaucracies have formulated fragmented and differentiated labels and identities for asylum seekers, creating intricate connections between bureaucratic processes, politics, and

---

[2] Recognition rate is the term used to describe the rate of positive outcomes as a percentage of the total number of decisions on applications for international protection (EUAA, 2022).

the lived experiences of asylum seekers and refugees. Rajaram (2002) considers what narratives and methodologies researchers employ for relaying refugee experiences, and how

---

Western experts often fail to empower refugees to share their own stories. This has yielded a depoliticized and oversimplified image of asylum seekers. Similarly, Gatrell (2013) regards 'refugeedom' as a complex historical construct, based on legal doctrine that has evolved and been re-defined over time. He contends that Western media often has portrayed refugees as invisible and anonymous.

In the Swedish context, a growing body of research has documented the hardships in the lives of asylum seekers. An extensive academic literature shows the multitude of problems that arise in the bureaucratic, judicialized process of asylum determinations. Criticisms of the bureaucratic system for determining asylum cases have often focused on the institutional premise of accuracy and objectivity. Neat categorizations of asylum seekers often conflict with reality, making for an imperfect match between an applicant's case and migration law (see e.g., Bladini, 2016; Wikström et al., 2013; Wettergren et al., 2014). Another issue in the Swedish asylum system are long processing times (von Eggermont Arwidson et al., 2021, 2). While the average length of the asylum procedure (i.e., for all tracks) had significantly decreased from 507 days to 256 days in 2021, final decisions often take several years due to appeals processes (Migration Agency, 2022; ECRE, 2023). This literature has often depicted the institutional shortcomings and social marginalization facing refugees and asylum seekers, yet it also emphasizes the constructed and political nature of the discourse surrounding these issues. Some authors highlight the need to understand the agency of irregular migrants and refugees, exploring how they navigate precarious situations (Strange et al., 2017). This includes various forms of agency by marginalized people, such as storytelling, creative politics, and everyday actions. Lundberg (2019) continues this discussion by examining the political nature of certain actions taken by refugees, such as organizing theatre performances and creating works of art, and how such political actions have significant liberating and empowering meaning. Khosravi (2018) highlights the segmentation, hybridity, and complexity among the Iranian diaspora in Sweden. He urges researchers to avoid generalizations and instead focusing on particular histories and individual circumstances, to reveal diversity, disintegration, and contradictions within what has been assumed to be a homogenous diaspora. Elsrud (2020) employs an ethnographic approach, showing how inhumane living conditions facing young

unaccompanied asylum seekers in Sweden urges them to seek asylum in other countries, an act termed 'reescaping'. The act of re-escaping is seen not only as a strategy for survival, but a means to reclaim dignity, self-control, and belongingness.

2.4 Theoretical frameworks: Epistemic Injustice, Temporality, and Resources, and Structuration Theory

This study delves into the challenges encountered by refugees and asylum seekers, exploring how they navigate these obstacles. This section examines specific challenges sourced from the academic literature on asylum seeking.

Firstly, the prominence of mistrust and suspicion is anticipated within these challenges. Asylum applicants must skillfully recount their persecution fears in ways that translate across language and cultural barriers, aligning with expectations of the SMA. Notably, SMA officials will perform so-called credibility assessments, to assess internal and external consistency as well as plausibility of asylum claims. This evaluation is highly influenced by normative judgments, according to some authors. However, these standards often remain implicit and subject to interpretation (Spijkerboer, 2005; Berg et al., 2009). Power imbalances have also emerged in studies, further exacerbating these challenges (Bladini, 2016; Diesen et al., 2005; SOU 2006:30). Ultimately, credibility assessments, based on a positivistic understanding of reality, risk epistemic injustice – when prejudice causes the hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word, or, when a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage in making sense of their experiences (Fricker, 2007, 1; Lundberg, 2021). Indeed, SMA has indeed been criticized as being permeated by a 'culture of disbelief', marked by 'an environment of skepticism', that 'aim[s] to discredit asylum claims rather than establish their substance' (Khosravi, 2010, 112).

Temporal dynamics stand out as another issue prominently discussed in the literature. The issue of time and uncertainty provides a fruitful entry point for examining the role played by agency and whether it is possible to overcome or navigate such social structure by asylum seeking individuals. Several authors discuss how prolonged and uncertain processes inflict psychological distress and anxiety on asylum seekers (Gleeson, et al., 2020; Li, et al., 2020). Studies have shown that the prevalence of psychiatric disorders is significantly higher for persons who have been in the asylum process for more than two

years (Laban et al., 2004). Canning (2021, 122) refers to a temporal limbo, in which agency and autonomy is suspended, which causes not only mental strain but can also 'induce poverty and create temporally harmful conditions under which security for the future is increasingly dissolved'.

Thirdly, several authors have discussed the influence of social class and economic capital on Sweden's asylum system. Considering the judicialized, bureaucratic setting for asylum determinations, entry and stay is increasingly premised on labor market attachment, often requiring a minimum monthly income, as well as having certain ties to country, which are more easily procured for those with economic capital. There are other structural disadvantages in the asylum process. SMA plays a dual role, first as investigator and decision-maker, then as prosecutorial agency if appeal is raised. In cases of appeal, SMA possesses specialized legal expertise, whereas the provision of legal aid as a public counsel for asylum seekers is not financially lucrative for Swedish lawyers, according to Joormann (2020). This puts claimants at disadvantage and the respondent – the state – at an advantage, since it is SMA's investigation that forms the basis for the hearing. These disparities underscore the link between economic resources and the ability to successfully mount an asylum claim. Critics have also pointed to how Swedish refugees disproportionally are placed in peripheral and rural areas with high unemployment and native depopulation where the prospects for integration, both socially and economically, are poor (Wennström, et al., 2019). The gap in living conditions between foreign-born and native-born seems more difficult to bridge in Sweden than in other countries (Scarpa et al., 2019, 43). Again, this is points towards an example of power imbalances, of structural constraints with the sociolegal context of asylum seeking in Sweden. These academic discussions lead us to question the possibility for Swedish asylum seekers to assert agency and what possible paths for navigating these structures asylum seekers have.

To address these intricacies, the thesis employs structuration theory developed by Anthony Giddens (1979). In his work on structuration theory, Giddens proposes that structure and agency may be viewed, not as independent and conflicting elements, but as a mutually interacting duality (Jones, 1999, 105). Social structures – policies and institutions; cultural norms; resources; social networks, form a social fabric that shapes and constrains the capacity for agency of individuals. Nevertheless, social structure is not a monolithic, external force that determines human behavior. Agents possess reflexivity, intentionality,

and the capacity to make choices (Jones, 1999, 105). They engage in ongoing processes of monitoring, rationalizing, and motivating their actions, according to Giddens.

Social structures are continuously reproduced and transformed through the actions of agents. According to Giddens, social structures are both constituted and constitutive of individual action in a process of 'encountering' and 'routinization' (Giddens, 1979, 5). The interview questions were developed to clarify how the encountering and routinization takes place in the lives of Swedish asylum seekers (see Appendix). The overall purpose of the study is to examine the stories and experiences of asylum seekers, in their experiences with migration systems and integration following settlement in Sweden. Another way to frame this, is that the study aims to explore how asylum seekers navigate and respond to challenges in the social structure, the way it constitutes space for action and choice, and to what extent interview participants see themselves as active agents in making decisions impacting their lives.

2.5 Purpose and Research Questions

The significance of this study builds on the insights and critical frameworks presented in the literature review. Several questions come to light. The study aims to answer the following research question: *To what extent can asylum seekers exercise agency while confronting challenges they face in Sweden, including during the asylum-seeking process and subsequent settlement?*

To answer this, the following sub-questions are posed:

i) *How do asylum seekers in Sweden perceive the comprehensibility of the asylum process?*
ii) *What are the experiences of asylum seekers during the waiting period and how does it impact their well-being? iii) What strategies do asylum seekers employ to maintain a sense of agency and solidarity within the asylum process?*
iv) *How do asylum seekers navigate and respond to perceived suspicion and mistrust during interactions with authorities?*
v) *What are the effects of facing constraints on agency for asylum seekers' wellbeing?*

By conducting in-depth interviews with asylum seekers from the last decade in Sweden, this study contributes to a research tradition of dialogue and interaction, emphasizing subjectivity and heterogeneity in asylum seekers' experiences. The analysis will focus on the

interplay between individual agency, the structural constraints, resilience, and their impact on the diverse asylum seekers' subjective experiences.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Method

3.1 Operationalization and Narrative Research Design

The data material was collected through qualitative interviews with asylum seekers who sought asylum in Sweden in the last decade. Whenever possible, interviews were conducted in person, to catch nuances in communication such as facial expressions or gestures, which may be important aspects of information. However, as the location of interviewees were dispersed across Sweden and abroad, Zoom-interviews were also conducted. Digital interview may be become more formal, possibly demanding more preparations from the interviewer so that the conversation does not stall (Ahrne et al., 2015, 44).

As a researcher, it is important to be aware and exercise reflectivity over one's positionality and situatedness in relation to interview participants (Haraway, 1988). This includes being wary of not asserting any type of authority, not give any advice or moral exhortations or arguing with the participant. Nonetheless, the inequalities manifested in the relationship were difficult to overcome. Trust and mutual respect are vital aspects in building rapport with the interview participants, and even more so in vulnerable, precarious, and unstable environments such as the field of asylum seekers (Boccagni et al., 2018). Efforts to minimize epistemic violence and Eurocentric biases have been to continually address consent, and provide opportunities for further discussions (Elsrud, 2020, 506-7). This is developed below.

The study employed a narrative research methodology, examining the stories and experiences of asylum seekers in Sweden. The narrative research methodology is a qualitative data collection method focusing on individuals' sense-making through their stories. The method aligns with Giddens' idea that auto-biographical reflections are critical for contemporary self-reflection: making life comprehensible by telling one's story (Giddens, 1991). This approach allows a degree of analytical adaptability by centering each person's narrative on the aspects of their experiences that are most important to them. This allows for complexity and a wide focus to inform the analysis.

A pilot interview was initially conducted to refine the interview guide. To ensure coherence and consistency across the data material, the same interview guide was used in all

interviews (see Appendix). However, the open-ended nature of questions also allowed for certain topics to be explored more in-depth. Questions were formulated to help respondents move forward in their stories. Since the narrative study interviews resemble normal conversations, spontaneous follow-up questions and other questions outside of the interview guide were also included. To ensure reliability, interviews were recorded (Esaiasson, et al., 2012).

The process of analysis consisted of four steps. First, recorded interview materials were transcribed verbatim in their entirety, including other details such as pauses or laughs. The second step was to read through the transcriptions repeatedly. In a third step, the transcribed materials were analyzed to find significant, meaningful units of information, coded according to themes found in the literature and the data (Elo, et al., 2008). The analysis was complemented by field notes written during interviews and before coding the final data material. Additional codes were added or excluded as the interviews proceeded. The goal of the thematic coding is to classify large amounts of information into an efficient number of categories of that represent similar meaning (Elo et al., 2008, 109; Hsieh et al., 2005, 1278). The empirical material was coded into three broad categories, partly informed by the previous literature: credibility and burden of proof; temporality and uncertainty; lack of resources. In the final step of the analysis process, these themes were discussed in terms of Giddens' (1979) structuration theory, focusing on the interplay between social structure and individual agency. The analysis also links to relevant sociological literature in relation to asylum migration, emphasizing the idea of social structure, critically discussing the themes.

Narrative research design aligns with the importance of social structure in shaping the experiences of asylum seekers. Typically, narrative research integrates a micro- and macro-perspective, to take the perspective of an actor in the context of social and personal meaning ascribed to their actions (Öberg, 2015, 55). It contextualizes experiences – some of these aspects have been outlined above, such as legal or social factors that influence people's experiences and stories. This may reflect social processes, highlighting the link between private and public, individualizing stories about society (Ibid, 58). Instead of focusing on the effects of a particular policy, or one's experience with a certain public authority, a narrative study thus has the capacity to link actions and practices within the social policy domain with wider, perhaps more abstract, social, or political conditions. Additionally, in a context of divisive public discourses and policies that exclude and deny immigrant populations equal rights and protections, collecting and sharing the stories of

asylum seekers may promote empathy and understanding among researchers, policymakers, and the public. This may help to counter negative stereotypes and stigmatization of asylum seekers. The approach may also facilitate the development of trust and rapport between researcher and participants, which may be of importance when studying vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Some characteristics of narrative research is the idea of *plot* – the logic of the story can be condensed and summarized into distinct experiences that are gathered to create a meaningful unit, *retrospection* – reconstructing meaning of the past into a contemporary perspective. Narrative frameworks often include *turning points*, or *crises*, that structure life into *before* and *after* (Ibid, 56)*.* This allows us to identify common themes and patterns in the stories collected, shared across stories of multiple asylum seekers. It may help us to identify areas of concern and potential interventions that can improve the experiences of asylum seekers. For such a thematic analysis to be possible, it will require intelligent reflection and intent listening by the interviewer (Ahrne et al., 2015, 37). It will also require interpretation and seeking to understand the meaning behind the stories collected. In general, the methodology will also require some level of flexibility, in accommodating the wishes or demands of interview participants. This is developed further below.

3.2 Sampling and Participant Recruitment

The study's focus on exploring common challenges of seeking asylum in Sweden, and diverse responses to those challenges, favored the sampling to be conducted by way of convenience and purpose. The intention was to encompass a variety of people with different national backgrounds, experiences, and reasons for seeking asylum.

Interviewing asylum seekers comes with several challenges, moral and ethical, as well as practical. Gaining access to the field proved difficult from the positionality of the researcher, due to limited contacts within this demographic. The sensitive nature of asylumseeking compounds the difficulty of selecting interview participants. Clearly, there are concerns about the sensitive nature of asylum seeking and many reasons for asylum seekers to be reluctant to speak with a researcher. Asylum seekers may be facing deportation, residing in Sweden 'illegally', wherefore speaking to a researcher would entail a degree of risk. There are highly personal issues at stake: questions regarding status in society, deservingness of social rights; stories about difficult and traumatic events; of

struggle and hardship. This emphasizes the importance of anonymity and confidentiality, further discussed below.

The sensitive nature of the research severely impacts the possibility for discretion in choosing interview participants. A goal for the collection of data in the study is to find a sample of interview participants that can provide maximally rich information, with as few participants as possible (Ahrne et al., 2015, 39). With these considerations, the thesis employs a non-probability snowball sampling. Contact was initiated through a network of asylum seekers or individuals connected to them, facilitating subsequent participant recruitment. This sampling method 'authenticates' the researcher to new interview participants – initial interview participants can vouch for the researcher being trustworthy when introduced to subsequent participants. A risk associated with snowball sampling is that the interview participants are too similar, and that the material becomes one-sided. However, the data collection uses multiple 'gatekeepers' from different parts of Sweden, mitigating the risks of homogeneity.

A key gatekeeper was a contact person from a Swedish civil society organization. Civil society organizations provide diverse forms of support for asylum seekers, from essentials like shelter and food to information and legal assistance. People active in such organizations become important contacts for asylum seekers, entrusted with knowledge about their asylum processes and daily life in Sweden. The gatekeeper functions as an intermediary between researcher and interview participant, facilitating contact, obtaining informed consent, as well as finding out some basic information about the participant to gauge interview suitability. The goal was to interview a minimum five of persons – not a representative number, but also not making the study completely dependent on one person's opinions (Ahrne et al, 2015, 42). This number will not reach an adequate level of saturation, that is not the objective of this study.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

As the previous discussions have highlighted, the issue of ethical treatment is critical for this study and needs careful consideration. The most important concerns are addressed here.

3.3.1 Informed Consent

Before starting the interview, participants were verbally informed of their freedom in choosing to participate. They were informed of the study's purpose and general question topics before agreeing to participate. Participants were encouraged to ask questions at any point, and informed that their consent was voluntary throughout the interview, meaning that they could pass on any questions, withdraw consent, pause, or end the interview on their own terms without prejudice. This was particularly important as some of the interview question touched upon deeply personal experiences of the participant. There was a risk that asking questions about those experiences, of having the person recall certain moments, could cause those memories to be relived. As a researcher, it was critical to be listening attentively and to listen for whether the person willingly continues telling their story, maintaining a continuous focus on consent throughout the conversation.

3.3.2 Consequences for Interview Participants

Minimizing consequences and the risk of damage suffered by informants was a fundamental obligation. There is a vital moral responsibility to ensure integrity, equal treatment, that no discrimination takes place leading up to and during the interview. Following the interviews, an important consideration was which data materials to include in the paper, not only for the research question, but in terms of consequences for the participants. As discussed by DeSantis (1990), this included thinking about how materials could be used by public officials or powerful but resentful persons to manipulate entrants or public perceptions about them. These risks were underscored by participants' concern about their personal safety and the risk of persecution if they were forced to return to their countries. There was also potential risk with being identified while in Sweden, with fears of violence from other ethnic or political groups from the same country with whom there is conflict. The researcher considered these risks to take strongest measures possible to ensure their security by ensuring confidentiality, protecting their identity, and anonymity.

3.3.3 Confidentiality

Confidentiality was promoted by treating all data with discretion. Participants were informed of their anonymity and the interviewer's confidentiality (Kvale et al., 2009). Data that identify the participants is not revealed. Names are anonymized and information that

would identify them was redacted in the transcription material, such as other names or locations. Recordings and transcription were stored in password-protected files and saved on local hard drives and subsequently deleted.

3.3.4 Researcher's Role

The role of the researcher carries a potential for harm – interpretations of people's stories and narratives are prone to misunderstandings or prejudices that inform the final analysis. This is an important consideration throughout the analysis. Interviews can carry a degree of uncertainty, as conversations may lead to people saying unexpected things. Critical throughout each interview is the awareness that questions related to the experience of seeking asylum may be sensitive. The materials used in the final analysis are carefully considered in what information is shared.

The role and positionality of the researcher must also be considered. According to Young (2005), it is important to recognize that the interview takes place in the context of 'deeply unequal political structures', which are cannot realistically be overcome in the course of an interview. She writes that '…the possibility of resolving the very real social and cultural disparities between the self and the other – the key antimony at the heart of our discipline – through a transcendent philosophical maneuver seems dishonest to me' (Ibid, 2005). In other words, the structural differences the research subjects and researcher cannot be sufficiently bridged simply by acknowledging those differences, nor can one assume to overcome one's own social positioning and subjectivity (Nourpanah, 2013). Understanding the 'Other' instead required a more charitable and sympathetic perspective. This meant not to ceasing to think of oneself, but to see the 'Other' not as distant, or as strange, but to recognize shared human experiences beyond portrayed differences (Ibid, 61). These ethical considerations underpin the study's commitment to responsible and respectful research practices.

Chapter 4: Data and Analysis

The data in this study builds on interview materials from interviews conducted in the early spring of 2023. Over the course of six interviews, seven persons who had sought asylum in

Sweden in the last 10 years were interviewed (one interview was with two persons). Each recorded interview lasted between 45–90 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in English and Swedish. Transcriptions were all translated into English. A basic summary of the participant outcomes, legal and otherwise, is as follows:

- Participants consisted of a heterogenous group of individuals, in terms of backgrounds, age, and other personal characteristics.
- National backgrounds of participants were: Three from Afghanistan, three from Syria, and one person from Nigeria.
- Per the time of the interview, five out of seven persons interviewed had been granted asylum and permanent residence in Sweden.
- One person was waiting to appeal to the Migration Court, following first instance rejection by SMA.
- One person had been rejected at both the SMA and appellative instances, and subsequently chosen to move abroad to France, where he was granted refugee status.

4.1 Interview Participants

- **Aaliyah, 20s, Syria:** The first interview was with Aaliyah, a woman from Syria, who arrived with her father in the fall of 2014, fleeing the violence and destruction of the Syrian civil war. She arrived only weeks before new restrictive asylum legislation was implemented, receiving approval at the first instance of processing. The rest of her family arrived in the following year. Today she lives as a citizen in Sweden with her family and one sibling.
- **Nadia and Salim, 40s and 50s respectively, Syria:** This interview was conducted with two persons, Nadia and her husband Salim, also from Syria. They also arrived close to the peak of asylum seeking – Salim arrived in the fall of 2014, Nadia arrived the following year, along with the family's children. Like Aaliyah, they obtained permanent residence permits after being approved by SMA in the first instance. The family has since become Swedish citizens.
- **Erkan, 40s, Afghanistan:** Erkan applied for asylum in Sweden after his house was attacked by Taliban and receiving threats on his life in Afghanistan. He sought

asylum with his family, had his asylum case and resident permit approved in the first instance, and was granted protection from political persecution.

- **Karim, 20s, Afghanistan:** Karim arrived in Sweden as an unaccompanied minor in his late teens in the fall 2014 fleeing conflict and persecution in Afghanistan. He arrived exactly one week before the new restrictions on the asylum process were implemented. While studying for his high school diploma, Karim was rejected by both SMA and the Court of Migration. When the 'Upper Secondary High School Law', Gymnasielagen, was implemented, Karim satisfied all requirements, and became eligible to finish high school and obtain employment. He was subsequently able to remain in Sweden.

- **Amir, 20s, Afghanistan:** Amir also arrived as an unaccompanied minor, in his late teens in 2015. His father died when he was young. He and his family belonged to an ethnic minority group, facing violent persecution in Afghanistan at the hands of the Taliban. During the processing of his case Amir studied towards his high school diploma. Following multiple rejections and years of appealing, he emigrated to France, where he was granted asylum, and has since settled and found employment.

- **Aminu, 30s, Nigeria:** Aminu applied for asylum in Sweden in 2021. Before becoming an asylum seeker, Aminu was a graduate student studying in Sweden, at a Swedish university. Upon finishing his studies, he moved back and worked in Nigeria. In the same year as he moved back, ethnic conflicts flared up in his region of Nigeria. As part of a marginalized ethnic group and member of chastised political party, he feared for his life and chose to return to Sweden to apply for protection, which resulted in rejection by SMA. At the time of the interview, he had sent his appeal application to the Migration Court and was waiting for the process to begin.

4.2 Thematic Coding: Challenges and Obstacles in Seeking Asylum

The thematic coding takes an inductive approach, seeking to develop an understanding of common obstacles and challenges in the asylum process and settlement, and begins discussing how interview participants navigated those challenges. The identified challenges are thematically organized to three themes: (1) *credibility and burden of proof*; (2) *temporality and uncertainty*; and (3) *lack of resources*.

4.2.1 Credibility and Burden of Proof

This first theme refers to challenges in the first phase of asylum seeking, during the SMA process, namely issues relating to credibility and burden of proof for asylum applicants. Karim and Amir, who came to Sweden as unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan, as well as Aminu, from Nigeria, notably the three applicants that received rejections by SMA, all expressed strong condemnations of the asylum application process. All three experienced issues relating suspicion and mistrust by migration officers. Aminu recounts how his credibility came into question:

> [On how SMA officials responded to his story during his interview]: Aminu: *"Yes, they listened to it. They criticized it also. They asked a million questions; it was about four hours. It was four hours, yes. Because they criticized every bit."*
> H: *"How did they criticize it?"*
> Aminu: *"In parts they were… They tried to ambush you because, if you say something, they will now try to formulate the same question in another way, to see if you can remember, the information you have. Yeah, they will frame the question in another way, to see if you will state the answer, the same thing again, or whether you will divert and make a mistake."*
> H: *"And what do you think the point of that was? Was it to test the credibility, to see if what you were saying was true?"*
> Aminu: *"Yes, to test the credibility, and also to… They want to use it – to me, the way I see it – they want to use it to make you to fail immediately – the decision that "you are lying", that you can go."*

In this excerpt, Aminu describes his first interview with SMA taking place similar in the style of a cross-examination. During a four-hour interview, officers are 'asking a million questions', repeating and rephrasing questions to elicit contradictions or changes in his story. As we will see, his credibility is doubted, aspersions of lying or misconstruing his intentions are cast throughout the interview. Aminu describes his interview with SMA as 'an ambush'. SMA officials were not open-mindedly assessing his story, but rather presumed the interviewee to be lying or not telling the whole truth, wherefore they ought to be treated with suspicion.

What Aminu describes here is the commonly utilized tactic in SMA interviews, *credibility assessments*. As mentioned, credibility assessments check for three things: *internal* consistency, *external* consistency (conformity with known facts), and plausibility (Weston, 1998). The dimension of internal credibility relates to the inner 'coherence' of the applicant's narrative, the amount of detail presented, and whether the story aligns with documentary evidence presented in the application. As described by Aminu, internal credibility assessments challenge the narrative of the interviewee, by asking questions in repetitive or similar ways, to find 'cracks' in the narrative, ultimately to decide whether person is credible: '…they will frame the question in another way, to see if you will state the answer… or whether you will divert and make a mistake'. In this sense, the technique also resembles a how criminal investigations are conducted. In Aminu's case, the approach is a belittling experience – having to answer the same question over and over, while realizing that the interviewer is not interested in the information you provide, but rather to 'catch you off-guard', as a 'fraudulent' asylum seeker. At the same time, it is a deeply unsettling experience, knowing that any contradiction or inconsistency during the four-hour long interview might make you come across as dishonest, causing your application to be rejected, to 'make you fail immediately'.

The issue of credibility comes up repeatedly, and Amine gives three specific examples of how it is questioned by authorities.

> H: "*Do you remember any specific questions or interactions during the interview?*"
> Aminu: "*...Like, for instance, because I told them that I joined [political affiliation], then after which the organization was proscribed as a terrorist organization. So, next, when they now ask me: "why did I join [political affiliation] when I know that it is a terrorist organization?" I now told them that when I joined, that I have said, that when I joined, that I joined before it was proscribed by the government as a terrorist organization. So, yes. That's the only one that I can remember.*"

First, he is asked by SMA officials why he chose to join a political affiliation that was designated as a terrorist organization by the Nigerian government, knowing that it would endanger him in public life (the question coincidentally overlooks the fact that such a criminalization of political affiliation may fall under the definition of political persecution by the Geneva Convention of 1951). The question does not ask neutrally 'Why did you join

the organization?' or 'When did you join the organization?'. Rather, the question comes with a presumption of guilt, that Aminu knowingly joined a 'terrorist organization', having a choice in becoming a part of a political group that is repressed. Aminu's answer is simple and logical – he joined the group before it became designated as a terrorist organisation by the government.

He then recounts how he fled Nigeria, which caused SMA officials to voice reservations:

> Aminu: *"they [SMA officials] said that the… because there was no way I could leave the Nigerian airport if I was fighting the Nigerian government. And that there is no problem in the [federal state] of Nigeria where there are tensions. And lots of materials, newspapers, you can check online, is pointing to the fact that there is tension in [federal state] part of Nigeria. Yes."*
>
> H: *"And, so your explanation that there is conflict and that there is a threat of violence to you, that it is not a good excuse because you could travel to the airport?"*
>
> Aminu: *"Yes. But I explained to them that I purposely did not… the airport I used wasn't in [federal state], so I went North Central, which is Abuja, to use the airport where I am not known. Because I am also a security personnel, I worked with the security authorities in Nigeria… I know how they work."*

Nigeria having a federal system of governance, the security police was presumably administered on state-wide, rather than national level. Because of his prior experience of working for the government, he was knowledgeable about the administration of the security police and how a warrant for his arrest would be enforced. Again, the answer Aminu provides seems simple and logical. By avoiding the airport in the state where he faced persecution, he was able to escape Nigeria.

In this example, it is the external credibility that is being challenged by the authorities. External credibility is evaluated by focusing on whether the content of the applicant narrative is supported by available knowledge in the country information databases used by SMA. The information provided in SMA databases serve as blueprints of the 'objective' truth and is compared to the applicant's account. The assessing of external credibility – determining credence of one's story in relation to relevant country information – relies on a positivistic understanding that the world can be described, through language, in

terms of objective facts and truth (Wikström et al., 2013, 93). This is exemplified by Aminu's story of having to travel to an airport in another region to escape the country. SMA officials compare his statements and 'subjective' descriptions of the threats he experienced to the 'objective' safety situation in the databases. The interviewing official is determinate that 'there was no way I could leave the Nigerian airport if I was fighting the Nigerian government'. It is evident that Aminu's account is inconsistent with their information of Nigeria, causing him to be disbelieved.

There is a third example of his credibility coming into question:

> Aminu: "…And also, during the decision, they say that when I was coming to Sweden as a student, that in the home, that I felt that after my studies I will go back: "Now, I don't want to back". I explained to them that it is because of the current situation. When I was going to Nigeria, I didn't know that any issue would come up after my study."

Prior to seeking asylum, Aminu had resided in Sweden as a graduate student. Upon finishing his studies, he returned to Nigeria with the intention to remain there. However, according to Aminu, violence suddenly and unexpectedly erupted in the area he resided. His intention of staying in Nigeria after his studies was therefore disrupted. Again, there is a presumption of guilt, that he did not go back to Nigeria voluntarily, but rather that he strategically left Sweden only to return shortly thereafter. Again, the credibility assessment comes as a belittling experience, causing Aminu to feel criticized and doubted rather than listened to and heard by SMA officials.

Amir, who arrived as unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan, also faced concerns with credibility in his SMA interview:

> H: "How do you think they [SMA officials] were with the interview, when they posed questions – how did you think they were? Were they open and tried to understand, or were they difficult to talk to?"
> Amir: "In the interview? Yeah… They asked many questions. They asked many questions that I could not answer. I did not have much information about Afghanistan either. Because I was small. I was not in school there either. And there were problems there."

22

Amir also recalls being asked 'many questions' by SMA officials and that he did not have answers to many of them. It is incumbent upon the asylum seeker to have information about the situation of the country, and as we have seen, to have the *right* kind of information – information that conforms with SMA's databases – or else, the asylum claim may be undermined for failing to prove a credible threat towards the person. These findings align with studies that show how internal credibility assessments have resulted in many asylum applications being rejected based on the narrative being 'vague' and 'lacking details' (Rehnberg et al., 2020; Wadensjö et al., 2021). Paradoxically, as we see in Amir's answer, it may be precisely for the same reason that person is seeking asylum that they also lack the 'correct' facts in the interview – Amir, who never went to school growing up, belonged to a persecuted ethnic minority in Afghanistan and whose father died when he was young, naturally was not granted an opportunity to be informed about greater societal forces that caused him to flee. Nonetheless, this information is sought by the interviewing officer in order ascertain his credibility and perhaps could have prevented him from being rejected. Other issues with asylum processing posed significant challenges to asylum seekers. Karim, who also arrived as an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan, on being interviewed by SMA:

> Karim*: "They asked about everything, actually. For two-and-a-half-hours, they asked me, about my family, about my mom and my dad. And then, "if you don't have any other family?" Then, what else did they ask? Where did my parents live…" H: "They wanted to see whether you could go back to Afghanistan, was that the case?" Karim: Exactly. They asked, "if we send you back to Afghanistan, what happens to you then?"*

When asked about his first interview, Karim immediately gravitates towards the way he was asked questions by SMA officials. Like Aminu and Amir, he does not recall that the interviewer examined his story neutrally and openly. Rather, interviewer was intent on knowing the personal risks of Karim going back to Afghanistan. Karim's view on how the asylum process works is developed later in the interview, upon receiving the first notification that his asylum application had been declined:

Karim: *"They thought that I could not prove to them that it is not safe for me to go back to Afghanistan. I could not prove it to them, that's how they thought."* H: *"...you had to prove that there was danger towards your life, that's it?"* Karim: *"Yes, exactly. And then they said to me, when they told me that "we are sending you back", then I had turned 18 also, I was no longer under 18. Then, they said to, they decided, they accepted my background, "everything you have said, everything you have told us, we accept, but you are now over 18, and you are a man, and you can make it in Afghanistan, somehow." Exactly. "You are not a child anymore. You are a man"."*

When Karim is not able to prove that violence would be committed towards him, it is taken as adequate reason to expel him, and subsequently his application is declined. Contrary to criminal law, which presumes innocence until guilt is proven, in asylum applications, the burden of proof is on the applicant: the applicant needs to appear believable and make credible that there exists a threat towards him or her according to the basis for protections. The decision not only rests on the applicant's credibility and evidence in referencing past experiences, but also whether the assessment can ascertain a *future* threat (Johannesson, 2017). In Aminu's case, SMA officials cast aspersions that Aminu, during his studies in Sweden, thought to himself: *"Now I don't want to go back",* and left for Nigeria, only to strategically come back within a year. One cannot prove or disprove the counter-factual, there can hardly be proof of the allegation that he planned to come back to Sweden – yet, by the nature of the statement, the onus is on the applicant to disprove the claim. Amir, who ended up moving to France after being rejected in Sweden, where he was granted asylum, has described feeling 'pressured' and 'judged' throughout his contacts with SMA. In the interview when re-applying for asylum in France, he describes is a stark contrast, that the interviewer came across 'like your friend'. For Karim, the asylum claim had fewer issues relating to credibility: as stated: 'Everything you have said, everything you have told us, we [SMA] accept'. Nonetheless, as he was unable to prove a threat to his life, and he was rejected, the assessment process being predisposed towards rejection.

4.2.2 Temporality and Uncertainty

For most interview participants, the initial SMA process took around a year to finalize from the time the initial asylum claim being made. Thus, temporality and uncertainty were significant in all their experiences. However, the salience of temporality and uncertainty differed greatly depending on characteristics of the asylum claims and process outcomes. Amir received the initial SMA rejection after about a-year-and-a-half, after waiting six months for the first interview. For Karim, SMA's decision took longer, as his interview was postponed due to a deficient translator, having his interview divided into three separate occasions with months in between. In Karim's case, it took over three years before the initial investigation was completed:

> Karim: *"It was bad, frankly speaking, one might say. Because first it took so very long to wait for the interview, and thereafter you wait for the response. Yes, it took like 3-4 years, and I waited. And thereafter, at the end, after waiting for 3-4 years, I was rejected, and they would deport me back to Afghanistan... The first 3-4 years, they were a disaster for me."*

For Karim and Amir, who were minors when they arrived in Sweden, the long processing times were especially consequential: arriving at the age of 16, they received their first decisions by the time they had turned 18. As mentioned, the Aliens Act makes a distinction between children and adults in asylum determinations, being less lenient in determinations involving adults. Upon receiving his initial rejection, Karim appealed the decision, but lost the appeal. Gymnasielagen, 'the upper secondary school law', was introduced in 2018 (Migration Agency, 2023a). The purpose of the new law was for young people who had been rejected in their asylum applications to be allowed to remain if they studied and could prove self-sufficiency. Karim managed to fulfill all requirements, granting him a temporary residence permit. By this time, seven years had passed from his arrival in Sweden. Asked about whether the asylum process has shaped his view of Sweden, he returns to the question of time:

> H: *"Has your view of Sweden changed?"*
> Karim: *"Yes. I think so because it does [should] not take seven years for a person. I think it's a long time, this process. I think it should be a shorter time. Like a year, you can give people – you can remain in Sweden or not. But not seven years. I have other*

friends too, who just like me, the situation is the same, still are waiting for the decision from SMA via Gymnasielagen. I have a few friends, who, in the last few months received their residence permits, but they are also in the same situation as me. But I think, it's going badly actually."

H: *"But the big problem is the time aspect?*

Karim: *"Yes, exactly. That time you wait for an answer from SMA. That time you wait for an interview with SMA. I'm thinking it takes very, very much time."*

The issue of temporality is strongly linked to uncertainty. When an asylum applicant is notified of rejection, they generally have four weeks to arrange his/her own deportation (Migration Agency, 2023b).

H: *"And then, it must be difficult to plan your life during that time?*

Karim: Yes. During that time, you cannot plan anything, actually.

As Karim points out, uncertainty makes planning very difficult, obstructing settlement, as few landlords or employers will sign employment contracts or apartment leases for persons that may be expelled on such short notice. When Karim finally received his approval for residency under Gymnasielagen after seven years of processing in Sweden, his future was still uncertain, as his residence permit remained temporary and could still be revoked if he did not secure a work contract within six months ('fulfilling the requirements'):

H: *"It felt really good, actually. "Great", I thought. I thought, "slowly, slowly, I will get a residence permit. It will get better". But, anyway, during that time, I also thought, since it was not 100% that I could receive a residence permit, it was not certain. That was also very stressful. But I fought hard and studied and completed high school and only thought about SMA, as a matter of fact, nothing else, to fulfil the requirements, fulfilling the requirements. I thought only about that, actually."*

A small survey by the Swedish Refugee Law Center of 98 cases, found significant internal differences between asylum assessment units in Sweden. The report found that Stockholm approved asylum in 85% of Afghan asylum cases in the summer of 2022, while the overall

approval rate in Gothenburg was only 28% during the same period (Swedish Refugee Law Center, 2022). As we see in the stories of Karim and Amir, this uncertainty figures not simply as a statistic, but exerts a constant, immense psychological pressure on asylum seekers.

By contrast, for the three interview participants of Syrian nationality, the processing time and legal uncertainty played a less significant role. Aaliyah, from Syria, arrived in Sweden as a teenager with her father in 2014, estimated that it took around a year to receive her approval for protection status. Aaliyah had heard from other that the waiting time is very long. Still, when told how long the waiting time is, she is confounded. She also knows there is little to do for asylum seekers at that time, to an extent a period when she is excluded from the new society, not being able to work or study, also noting the lack of investment by authorities during this time. She also recognizes that uncertainty may be even greater for other nationalities than Syrians:

> Aaliyah*: "...So, it's like, the waiting time – they should have been more let's say, invested in it more. But also, when we, at the time, when we used to ask the migration board, they were like "but you're not sure that you can stay". There were people who were... Because they came from different countries, other than Syria, for different reasons, they were accepted, they were not given their residence..." "...And for us Syrians, we were like "but we are..." We were told at that time most likely we most likely going to be accepted."*

In 2018, Sweden became one of the most restrictive among affluent states in Europe for asylum seekers from Afghanistan, granting residency to only 30 per cent of the applicants according to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE, 2018). Last year, the recognition rate was 76 per cent for Syrian applicants, but 54 per cent for Afghan nationals (Migration Agency, 2023a). As this answer suggests, this is something that asylum seekers may be acutely aware of. Among the three Syrian persons interviewed, all were approved in the first instance, compared to one out of three Afghan interviewees. However, though being approved in the first instance, participants still expressed a sense of frustration with temporality and uncertainty. Waiting could also take on other forms, such as processing with other authorities and housing queues.

Aaliyah: *"...But yeah, it took around, we waited basically, a year from, since we arrived until we, I got my final decision. And, you know, it takes time after that, to get your ID and register, and Skatteverket..."*

For Salim and Nadia, also from Syria, the experience is similar – the wait was long but appeared more manageable, and resulted in approval in the first instance:

Salim: *"Yes, the first interview was in [location] in Gothenburg with SMA. It was after almost six months."*
H: *"You first had an interview in Gothenburg after six months. Did you have any more interviews then or did you receive your decision fairly quickly?"*
Salim: *"Not directly. After the second [interview]. It was maybe three months, more, four months. And I always was sending letters to the officer to explain the situation about the family in [other third country]. We always had to wait. Wait. Wait. [Laughs].*

These findings seem to show that time and uncertainty is unevenly experienced by the participants. For the Syrian interviewees, processing times were lengthy and frustrating, but they nonetheless resulted in approval within about a year of coming to Sweden. Their experience of waiting and uncertainty comes across as more manageable, because they seem to have faith in being approved due to their national background. The time in waiting came across as an initial, but temporary frustration. For the remaining applicants, particularly of Afghan national background, time and uncertainty in processing took on a different, almost existential meaning.

4.2.3 Lack of Resources

The third theme revolves around inadequate resources available to asylum seekers. The term 'resources' encompasses a wide range of factors, including institutional support such as legal aid, welfare provisions, and educational opportunities. It also refers to access to information, social networks, other forms of social capital. It also includes access to employment, housing, and financial stability. Resources can either be self-accrued through

personal efforts by working, studying, or expanding one's contact network, or endowed by state institutions, civil society, or simply luck – often arising from a combination of sources.

Aminu's experience of lack of resources mainly concerned deficient legal support during the asylum process. During his first SMA interview, he was provided a lawyer to represent his interests. The lawyer's role is to ensure that the interview is conducted 'fairly and correctly' (Swedish Refugee Law Center, 2018). They may ask the applicant questions to ensure that all relevant information is presented, but are generally not meant to speak for their client during the initial interview (Ibid). However, as Aminu recounts, the asylum seeker may not be informed about this fact, instead assuming the lawyer would take an active stance in supporting their client.

> H: *"...was your lawyer also trying to support you in defending you?"*
> Aminu: *"No, no, my lawyer didn't contribute anything at all. My lawyer just asked me one question. But he did not support me."*

When the lawyer does not actively answer questions on their behalf during the meeting, the applicant may sense that their lawyer is unsupportive. In the first SMA interview, Aminu's lawyer interjected only once, to ask a question, according to Aminu, nonetheless following procedure. Moreover, the interview with SMA lasted four hours, resembling, as we have seen, an interrogation. Aminu may very well have benefitted from legal counselling or guidance during that time:

> H: *"Do you feel like in the initial interview, if you would have had a better lawyer, that you could have had a better chance to not get… to get accepted in the initial process?"* Aminu: *"Yes, yes."*

When appealing to the Migration Court to overturn SMA's rejection, Aminu is represented by the same lawyer. Invariably, he feels his lawyer is unsupportive:

> H: *"And he or she has not said anything about what maybe will happen, or how to process the case, or what they expect?"*

Aminu: *"No, I mean, he just said that in the past time that he spoke with the court, and he said that they will fix it for me, but since then he has not called me. And I will be the one calling him, he has never even called me once. I initiated the call myself. It's frustrating."*

Karim also recounted feeling unsupported by his lawyer. After losing his appeal to the Migration Court, the law afforded him a final chance to appeal to the highest court, the Supreme Migration Court. At this point, his lawyer suddenly refuses to file the second and final appeal.

Karim: *"The second time we applied [for an appeal], me and my lawyer, to the court. And then the third time [third 'application' – second appeal], she, my lawyer, she called me, that I should meet her, regarding applying a third time... But I wanted to apply a third time as well. But my lawyer said to me, "if you have a different case, we can apply a third time. But if you don't have a different case then, with the same case, you will be rejected too – it is best that we do not apply".*
Therefore, I waited, and I thought "she at least said I have three weeks to file the appeal". But she thought that we should not file the third attempt, appeal the [second] time. Therefore, she said, on the Friday, she quit. She thought, "she is done with me". And then, I was feeling bad, not feeling good, felt terrible, and those three weeks expired. The time expired, and thereafter, I became 'undocumented'."

Here, it is important to note that the final appellative instance, the Supreme Court of Migration, only grants leave to appeal if the case could be prejudicial, that is, if it enquires into legal questions and interpretation of law, not reviewing the facts of the case. This supports what the lawyer told Karim when saying 'with the same case, you will be rejected too'. Karim's lawyer is likely correct legally speaking – if there is no legal matter in question in the case, the Supreme Court will not bring it up, even if the actual verdict issued by the Migration Agency or Migration Court is wrong. However, to Karim, it appears as though the lawyer just does not believe in the possibility of winning in court, and therefore quits. For the individual applicant there are powerful incentives to appeal, and a strong conviction of a right to stay.

H: *"Did you say directly then, when you spoke on the phone, that "I want to pursue another appeal"?*

Karim: *"I said, "I want to pursue the [second] appeal". But she said, "you will certainly be rejected". "If you want to try appealing, you will certainly be rejected this time too, with this case – if you have a different case, we can try and appeal". But I did not have another case."*

After spending over five years of processing and appealing, Karim is fully rational in doing anything in his power to remain in Sweden, even with a low chance of success – 'I want to pursue a second appeal'. Additionally, even though the Supreme Court of Migration may not grant him leave to appeal, Karim is fully within his legal right (no matter how legally rational) to appeal to the final legal instance. Appealing, even if lacking legal bearing, could be seen as an act of defiance, if merely on symbolic grounds. Instead, the lawyer generates a harsh blow to applicant's hope to appeal. Karim is allotted three weeks to file the appeal to the Supreme Court of Migration, but now without a lawyer, as she quits following the rejection in the Court of Migration. He says that his situation at this point felt 'completely hopeless'.

Part of the problem here is how information is transmitted to the asylum seekers. Applicants could be informed of the fact that Migration Court decisions are final most cases earlier. Similarly, for Aminu, who saw his lawyer unsupportive during his first interview with SMA, when the lawyer simply followed procedure of not speaking for the client during questioning – the lawyer here comes across as unhelpful and unwilling to help at a critical juncture – 'she is done with me', rejecting his wish of appeal and quitting as his legal representation.

Furthermore, the strength and access to legal support is consequential for the outcome of one's case. During the process, lawyers are assigned to the applicants by SMA. Karim described how publicly appointed defendants have limited incentives to perform well:

Karim: *"I put it like this: A lawyer helps, they get paid, and they help as much as possible. But they help, I don't think, from the heart. Because they are working. It is their job. They get money, they are with me in interviews, file some paperwork here*

and there. The lawyers don't help from the heart. If you have a friend as a lawyer, they may help you from the heart. But those you get from the Migration Agency; they just take money. They don't care if I am rejected or not. They don't care."

Similarly, Aminu described his lawyer as 'sluggish' and lamented the fact that lawyers are difficult to replace:

H: *"But they're the government lawyers, they get assigned to you, you don't choose the lawyers, is that right?"*
Aminu: *"Yes, I don't choose the lawyers. Because if I would have had my will, I don't know, I might try to change him if he's... as he is much sluggish. I don't know. But they are provided by government, and they don't to have pride to change themselves. It is not easy to change the lawyer."*

This points to a broader problem of transparency in the asylum process and the significance of one's legal support. The idea of the system as objective, transparent and judicially secure comes into conflict with how it operates. A lack of information to applicants throughout the process makes procedural and legal facts appear as sudden and incomprehensible. In Karim's case, the lawyer's unwillingness to file for appeal creates an inexplicable situation, which conflicts with presupposed ideas of objectivity and right to due process. He is convinced being allowed to stay and determined to appeal, but when his lawyer quits, it instils a sudden sense of hopeless: 'I felt terrible' and 'completely hopeless'. There are statistical and legal facts that could be provided to make the process more understandable to the applicants – for example, since deliberations of law are uncommon, Migration Court decisions are final in just about all cases. According to a disputation by Cegrell Karlander (2021, 137) leave to appeal by the Supreme Court of Migration was issued in 0.5 per cent of cases in 2020, approximately a few dozen cases per year. Also, in the first instance of appeal, applicants also have low rates of success. In cases relating to asylum in general the rate of overturning on appeal was 17% between 2017–2019 (Migration Agency, 2019). In appeals over status determination (e.g., refugee or subsidiary status) the Court of Migration overturned 2% of decisions (Ibid, 86). Had Karim been aware of this, the conduct of his lawyer may at least have been understandable. Likewise, if Aminu had known that his

lawyer would not be speaking on his behalf, but merely there to observe that the interview proceeded 'correctly', he too may have been able to adapt to his situation. These are but two examples of how a judicialized process of asylum applications fails to inform and adequately support the applicants, instead causing asylum seekers a sense of incomprehension and alienation.

Other interview participants faced fewer issues with a lack of legal or informational support during their asylum process, following approval in the first instance and fewer concerns with SMA. Lack of resources was more relevant for their settlement. Several interviewees referenced inadequate institutional support in various ways, including access to information about how to apply for housing, employment, educational prospects, and other questions that arose after receiving resident permits.

> H: *"...if you went through it [the asylum process] again, what would be your wishes for how the system could be changed? What were your biggest challenges with how the process went?"*
> Aaliyah: *"Generally, it was good. Maybe I would wish more with [of] an explanation. I mean, they did their best to explain and say things slowly. But still because it's the first time, still I would maybe wish for more explanation.*
>
> *"…Because, it was like, we were like freezing [frozen], not doing much. Like, I went to school a bit, but not most of the time. Most of the time I was, like, at the camp, sitting, doing nothing basically. Just on the internet all the time. …So, you forget how you live normally for a period of time, and then you go back to the real life, even after like I got my residence [permit], and my father, we were like, no one… there was no special meeting or someone special that would teach us like: "now you do this and that". At the Migration Board they were like "you go to Skatteverket, and you get your ID". But what about after that? How do we get an apartment? How do we move out? Who pays for that? So… that was a lot of – the dependency of refugees and themselves to figure out things. How to live, how to start here in Sweden. So that was maybe a bigger obstacle than the paperwork I would say.*
>
> *Because I know the paperwork is going well."*

Here we see differences in challenges clearly – for many Syrians, arriving before the 2016 restrictive provisions, the obstacle was not with the migration bureaucracy, though the processing was slow – 'I know the paperwork is going well'. Rather, it was that very little was done for their settlement and integration into society or community. After living at a municipal housing facility in a rural area, no information meeting or support systems were provided about their new home, options for employment or studies, guidance or advice, much less given a purpose in groups or communities to feel part of Swedish society – 'how to live, how to start here in Sweden'. In addition, the geographical isolation made it even harder to learn about the Swedish society, language and culture.

> Aaliyah: *"So it was not easy to learn from another, someone who is in the same position as you, about the country. …We were in the countryside, away from the city, which also impacted us on how much we get to learn the speed of our learning process about Sweden, the language, the culture, everything. Because later on, as we moved out of the camp, and we meet different people, we heard actually, stories from immigrants, or Syrians, who stayed during that waiting time in the city, and they were closer, let's say, to… had more communication, went to the church more, the Red Cross, different organizations and stuff, so they had more access to the Swedish society than us when we stayed in the countryside. So, it's like, the waiting time – they should have been more let's say, invested in it more."*

The reception facility location was also consequential in access to other opportunities and resources. Erkan also experienced difficulties in taking the first steps into society after receiving residence permits for him and his family. As opposed to Aaliyah, Erkan arrived with his family and did not stay a municipal facility, but instead tried finding his own accommodation, but was unable to, and ended up living five persons in a single hotel room.

> Erkan: *"…I have during this time a very big problem because my family is coming, I'm living in a hotel. And my wife is sick, and my two other children are sick, and I have a so tough time in Stockholm. In one room, we are living like five people. And all time I have a contract with the municipality, so like one year I will be spending my hard life in Sweden. And then I found an apartment in [another city]. Like seven*

months now, a little bit better, but still, I have so much stress, I have so much problem.”

In cases of successful asylum applications, SMA facilitates settlement together with officials of the respective municipality. Municipalities are responsible for housing and resettlement, including schooling for children and young asylum seekers. Many municipalities suffer from a general housing crisis: 204 out of 290 municipalities report an overall shortage of housing (National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, 2022). All municipalities do not suffer from geographical isolation, however. When Nadia and Salim first arrived in Sweden from Syria in 2014, they were initially satisfied with the accommodation provided by the municipality – not a reception facility, but a private apartment.

> Salim: *“…They moved us to an apartment on [name of street] in [suburb of Stockholm]. It was really great there, really nice.*
> Nadia: *“We had a great time there. The children had a great time there. They had a great time playing there.*

The municipality provided the apartment for two years following approval for asylum. After the two years expired, the family was expected to find another accommodation, in effect evicting them from their home. This created an obstacle to their integration – as they were cast out of their initial residence, after a brief period of settling in, they had to restart the process of settlement.

> Salim: *“When they came the first time, to [Stockholm suburb], we lived there for two years. A year and eight months. The system was bad. After two years, we had to leave to another municipality.”*
> Nadia: *“Yes, I said to you, that the children, it is really difficult to move. The children have a good time in the school, it is a big problem. The children have a great time here, the friends and the school is good, then move to a different school.*

When they are first uprooted, subsequent adjustment is more difficult.

Salim: *"Because I, I apply for every apartment. Via Bostadsförmedlingen. But each day if you do not have an income, there is a new offer, for each offer, we have no chance because we do not have an income. When we have an income, we get nothing. Only for Södertälje. "For Södertälje, good chance". Or to Tensta.[3] Or to, I don't know. I don't know why. Because I write on the profile, I have an income, where they ask about income. We get nothing.*

They speak to the system being 'bad' and 'strange' – causing a sense of alienation and frustration, and forcing them towards involuntary segregation, as the only places to find housing in the short-term is by moving to segregated suburbs on the outskirts of Sweden's largest cities, 'only for Södertälje. Or to Tensta'. In Sweden, much of the rental market for housing is part of a queue system. To find a contract for an apartment lease often requires upwards of 5–10 years in the queue, adversely affecting newcomers, who lack the necessary time. Additionally, even for apartment listings where they have the right requirements, such as a certain income level, Salim suspects discrimination, landlords who discard applications when they see an Arabic last name.

Salim: *"Maybe they read the name, they know – [Arabic surname], there.*
H: *"Then they don't want you?"*
Salim: *"No."*

The difficulty in 'uprooting' is not only in employment and housing opportunities found in different municipalities, but it also extends to education. There are differences in educational quality across different municipalities, which poses important questions for the accessibility to education for children and young new arrivals (Nilsson et al., 2016; Salmonsson et al., 2018). For one of the family's children, who has ADHD, the school in the new municipality is not providing enough resources, and he struggles to find friends.

Nadia: *For the children to find other friends, it is really difficult for the children. This is a problem. We changed four schools."*

---

[3] Södertälje and Tensta are suburbs on the outskirts of Stockholm, known for their large immigrant populations and issues related to segregation.

H: *"Has he been to four different schools?"*

Nadia: *"Yes… He doesn't have any friends, you know? It was only when lived in the [first suburb], we continue to have the same friends. But here, in [second suburb], he doesn't have anyone here.*

Salim: *"[Son's name] has ADHD, and he received a lot of support from the school in [first suburb].*

H: *"And not so much here?"*

Salim: "*No, not so much here. When he moved to [current school] – really bad school. Really, really, really bad school".*

The difficulty of finding housing is strongly linked to job opportunities. Salim, who ran his own dentist clinic in Syria for 24 years, applied for many jobs in the dentistry sector resulting in few opportunities.

Salim: *"I have searched a lot of jobs".*

Nadia*: "Every day".*

Salim*: "Every day. Elderly homes, via schools, as dental technician, dental hygienist, assistant. When I was registered at the unemployment office [Arbetsförmedlingen], the case worker gave different 'dental care internships', always. No, always. I don't know why they don't want me working as a dentist. I don't know why."*

Despite 24 years of experience as a dentist, he is unable to secure employment. Instead, he is hired to work as an 'intern' or 'assistant' at a private clinic.

Salim: *"No, as an assistant. "As assistant", but I work as a dentist. Ok. But first she [employer] says, I must do "an internship" for free. And then I will continue as a dentist, afterwards.*

Salim is told he will be working as an assistant, doing an internship, but ends up working as a full-time dentist. During this period, he is not paid. His commute between home and work

takes nearly four hours each day. Arbetsförmedlingen, the unemployment agency, pays the salary of prospective employees for a temporary period, allowing private businesses to bring in new workers after the initial period to avoid paying salaries. The salary is seemingly paid out without any requirements or any controls for what happens to the employee after that.

> H: *"From [suburb] to [other, distant suburb]?"*
> Salim: "*Yes. From eight until six. And you know, when I leave, at six in the morning I leave from home to [the other suburb]. Because of the long journey. I finished work at five o'clock there, maybe. From [suburb] to [suburb] I need two hours. Every day. My children, I didn't see them very much. And after three months they said*
> *"Sorry, if you work and Arbetsförmedlingen pays, ok. But I cannot pay that".*

He still needs to pay for his transportation and food costs. Despite being promised employment after the three-month period, he is subsequently terminated. Later, the rebuttal Salim faced at the first clinic is repeated elsewhere.

> Salim: *"After a year, I worked in a [different part of Stockholm]. There, she promised me to get a contract, but [the employer] finished her summer vacation. She said "sorry, but I don't have much money to pay you and you know, vacation is started, a lot of patients are coming, and I will call you after the summer vacation". There was a guy there, he worked as a dental nurse, he said to me "no, because she will get others". Because before I arrived, there was another person who also worked there three months."*

The excerpt exemplifies exploitative practices used by employers. The same thing happening at a second clinic suggests such exploitation tactics may be systematic and common. The lack of support also points towards another structural issue – the lack of meritocracy for vulnerable populations in Sweden – that human capital and hard work may not generate improved life chances for asylum seekers due to the prominence of exclusion and exploitative practices.

4.3 Agency and Empowerment

The study employs a narrative interview method, focusing on the life worlds of participants, particularly in reference to Giddens' theory of agency and structure. Each participant's experiences and story inform a thematic code of ways that the participants navigate challenges and a basis for discussion.

4.3.1 Social Capital

Giddens defines social structures as 'rules and resources', which are reproduced and transformed through social action (Giddens, 1984). For several participants, the primary obstacle when settling in Sweden was a lack of resources, during and following the asylum process.

> Aaliyah: *"Yeah. It's like all on us, we have to depend on ourselves. And at that time, I remember… Now many Syrians can Google things. There are many Syrians and immigrants who talk about those things on social media, YouTube. But not before. Before, like, there was not enough information about that on the internet. We had like… And even immigration board was not in Arabic. Now they have let's say different languages. And that was like, before, I don't think there was, maybe mainly English and Swedish. So, we had to depend on ourselves a lot and ask people, older immigrants or other refugees what they are doing. So, it was like, social net, socializing – a big part."*

The excerpt shows that structuration and opportunity for agency is not constant or rigid, but change over time, for example with the advance of social media and Arabic being incorporated into SMA information. Giddens argues that structures are not fixed but are constantly being reproduced and transformed through the ongoing practices of individuals and groups (Giddens, 1984; Jones, 1999). This could be seen as an example of Aaliyah, and other asylum seekers, responding to the social structure – meeting the challenge of a lack of support and guidance when coming to Sweden, by being self-reliant, 'to depend on ourselves', exercising agency by forming social networks and sharing information on social media. By networking, the family secures an apartment to avoid living in the camp for another year.

Aaliyah: *"Yeah, it was like private owner we first rented. And he was also like an older immigrant. So, it was like mostly immigrants depending on each other. So, basically my mom didn't have to stay in the camp when I and my father we get... Using our name, let's say, and identity, we get an apartment and that's when we told immigration "she's going to move with us". So, she didn't live for a year in the camp... So, it was me and my father and my middle brother who had to stay like a year in the camp, but the minute we got apartment we left, the whole family left."*

Exercising agency allowed the family to live with greater independence and autonomy. Previously living in a reception center for asylum seekers, obtaining a private apartment felt like progress from her first year living in the 'camp'. Securing an apartment around the time her mother arrived in Sweden was empowering, allowing her mother to avoid prolonged time at the housing facility, 'the minute we got the apartment, we left'.

Social capital was used to overcome a lack of resources in ways beyond intramigrant networks. At the lack of institutional support, civil society organizations would play a crucial role in assisting asylum seekers in various ways. Civil society assisted with information, sending documents, supplied material things such as clothes and food, and very importantly, provided a person to speak to, a friend. Karim mentioned being in contact with at least five different civil society organizations, both domestic and international, during his many years as an asylum seeker. He was supported by private individuals, for example a teacher letting him live with them for almost two years. Again, the exercise of agency can be seen as a response to the social structure. The deficient level of state support for asylum seekers forces them to depend on the goodwill of citizens and civil society. Obtaining such support speaks to the need for resourcefulness and adaptation by asylum seekers.

4.3.2 De-Personalized Agency

For several participants, agency became a more complicated concept when having children. Nadia and Salim's personal decisions and long-term planning would prioritize the wishes and needs of their children, encumbering their own agency. They were more willing to accept hardship if it was for the sake of a hopeful future for their children. The families emphasized a strong sense of future, of planning, of developing a livelihood.

> Nadia: *"Sometimes me and Salim, we say, we move to another, small village maybe, I have relatives, who live in [small city in Sweden]."*
>
> Salim: *"Live near [small city]."*
>
> Nadia: *"They live near there. They live in a house; they really enjoy it there. They have jobs and they work, and they really enjoy it."*
>
> Salim: *"Because it is cheaper there."*
>
> Nadia: *"But if we move there, my children, they do not want to."*

Moving away from Stockholm to a smaller city where their relatives live would lead to cheaper living costs, but the children want to stay near their friends and old school, so the family chooses to remain in the city, knowing it limits their options. Agency is not only an individualized concept for these families. For Erkan, the welfare and safety were a powerful source of purpose and resilience:

> Erkan: *"…I have everything in Afghanistan, but I lost everything in one day, but I'm happy and better, because my family is alive, and I am alive to help my family. And that's the big thing in my life."*

The life stories of several participants are full of the descriptions of small, simple acts of agency, resisting social structures. For example:

> Erkan: *"…my kids are not studying in school in this area. And there is another place in the town where they go to school. And that's a hard job for me, because we have to move my kids 45 minutes away from my house, and I wake them up and prepare them and send them to school and after that I'm coming back to my school to study Swedish language and after that come back to school and pick up the children and then during this time I have meetings, I have a lot of paper works… Because I am so much focused on finding myself a job, to help find my own money alone. To find another place, because I am waiting in a lot of queues, to find a new place. We'll see how that's going to be. Maybe next year everything is going to be fine for me."*

Erkan, an educated professional who is familiar with Sweden, can clearly recognize the difference in educational quality between schools in different residential areas. He travels 45

minutes away from home every day to allow his children to a chance to enroll in a better school. Even though he is busy studying Swedish and searching for jobs, he commutes every day, hoping to give his children better opportunities. Giddens argues that structures are not external constraints on individuals, but rather are internalized in their actions and thought processes (1984). In other words, structures both enable and constrain social action. In the social structure of Sweden's housing market and residential segregation facing asylum seekers, commuting to another area for his children's studies becomes a small act of resistance towards the social structure. Similarly, Salim and Nadia about their children:

> Salim: *"For a future, yes. Everything. I was [gesturing high], and now [gesturing low].*
>
> H: *"Do you think that, with time, things will get better?"*
>
> Salim: *"I hope. I hope. I don't know, I don't know, not so much."*
>
> H: *"It's difficult to know?"*
>
> Salim: *"Not so much. It is very difficult to know."*
>
> H: *"Is it difficult to feel hope?"*
>
> Nadia: *"Yes. Very."*
>
> Salim: *"Yes. Yes. We are putting here, I said, I say – for my children. Their future comes first now. First now. Then I will think of other things."*
>
> Salim: *"Most important. The most important thing is my children."*
>
> Salim: *"The most important thing is my children. They enjoy it here, always. [laughs]."*

Partly due to the lack of agency over their living situation, their outlook on the future is bordering between hope and hopelessness. However, as a small act of empowerment, they express agency by focusing on the wellbeing of their children. They have almost given up hope on their own possibility of being successful but find strength by looking to the future of their children.

4.3.3 Re-Escaping

Several participants discussed leaving Sweden to make asylum claim in other countries and referenced other asylum seekers who had done so. This has been termed 're-escaping' in the

literature (Elsrud, 2020). The decision to leave for other countries would follow rejections at one or all instances of asylum claims.

> Amir: *"Yes, I was rejected four times… Yes, four times. I really wanted to stay in Stockholm, in Sweden. But it was difficult to… The residence permit. It was not so proper, so serious. But when I was in Paris, this new law came [Gymnasielagen], that many people, for many people they had to get jobs and residence permits. But I was in Paris and did not want to risk going back to Sweden."*

Negative decisions and rulings to deport asylum seekers are not end of the migration cycle, but a circular process of escaping and re-escaping, 'a phase of recirculation' (Khosravi, 2016).

> Karim [on friends of his]: *"Yes, from here, they were rejected, and became undocumented, and hid. And then Germany, and what's it called, France. And there they applied for asylum again. And got residence permits. [They received] four years temporary, some of them 10 years temporary. But they say, who gets temporary, it easily becomes permanent residence permits later. The requirements are not so big for them."*

The stories of re-escaping would generally reference either France or Germany. Choosing specifically France as the next country to try is based on knowledge about the country, seeing France as potentially more open than Sweden. The interviews also showed participants becoming proficient at several languages, having good geographical knowledge about cities, borders and legislations (Khosravi, 2016, 179).

Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusion

The study aims to answer the following research question:
To what extent can asylum seekers exercise agency while confronting challenges they face in Sweden, including during the asylum-seeking process and subsequent settlement?
To answer this, the following sub-questions are posed:

i)   *How do asylum seekers in Sweden perceive the comprehensibility of the asylum process?*

ii)   *What are the experiences of asylum seekers during the waiting period and how does it impact their well-being? iii)   What strategies do asylum seekers employ to maintain a sense of agency and solidarity within the asylum process?*

iv)   *How do asylum seekers navigate and respond to perceived suspicion and mistrust during interactions with authorities?*

v)   *What are the effects of facing constraints on agency for asylum seekers' wellbeing?*

The qualitative approach centering on in-depth interviews with asylum seekers has sought to explore the variety in challenges and multitude of responses by asylum seekers, highlighting the heterogeneity and individuality among asylum seekers, as well as their capacity for agency and resilience to adversity.

5.1 Discussion

After reviewing the interview materials in conjunction with the academic literature, three major challenges emerged:

(i)   *Asserting credibility and living up to the legal standards for burden of proof during the asylum process.*

(ii)   *Coping with temporality and uncertainty, which involves structural constraints.*

(iii) *Addressing a lack of resources, impacting all participants in distinct ways.*

Together these three themes represent major contemporary challenges and obstacles for asylum seekers in Sweden. The first theme, credibility and burden of proof, relates to the initial phase of asylum seeking, the application process. This theme posed the greatest obstacle to the three interview participants who were rejected by SMA. The Syrian applicants, and Erkan, who had documentary evidence showing that the Taliban had attacked his home, found it comparatively easier to establish potential harm. Once approved by SMA in the first instance, these interview participants displayed a mostly positive or neutral view of their SMA process, despite its extended duration. A person's legal characteristics – for instance, such as Afghan nationality or being categorized as adults, hindered agency by exacerbating legal concerns.

The second theme, time and uncertainty also revealed structural constraints that hindered personal agency. Although temporal dynamics were brought up by all interview participants, application outcomes were varied, again relating to especially to national background, influencing experiences of temporality and uncertainty. Unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan experienced time and uncertainty as months and years of life suspended in anticipation, exerting a constant de-humanizing pressure. This created practical and psychological obstacles to leading a normal life. Applicants approved in the first instance expressed frustration with lengthy processes, but seemingly held a more forgiving view of the waiting period. Still, their uncertainty persisted after residency approval, linked to the precarious housing and employment conditions.

The third theme, lack of resources, was a challenge for all participants in distinct ways. Problems were often interconnected. Participants who referenced deficient legal support and informational gaps during the asylum process also faced difficulties in areas such as temporality, credibility and burden of proof. This highlights how legal issues significantly limit individual agency. These findings conform with the notion that current asylum processes impose bureaucratic violence on applicants and that individual assessment is subsumed by collective categorization (Abdelhady, 2020; Wettergren et al., 2014). As described by De Genova (2002), stories of asylum seekers are framed by 'deportability'. In the context of the judicialized process of Swedish asylum determinations, certain characteristics – national background, age, gender, and labor market attachments, are dominant political and social prisms for evaluating deservingness.

It is important to note that this study does not seek to underestimate the hardships faced by individuals and families compelled to leave their homes due to violence and persecution. Neither should we interpret these challenges or difficulties hierarchically, in terms of magnitude or difficulty. As has hopefully been conveyed, challenges vary for number of reasons. For instance, a young person close to graduating high school, finding themselves in a remote, peripheral town, socially isolated with other asylum seekers, faces different challenges than a highly educated and experienced professional person, struggling to support his or her family due to exploitation and discrimination. The context differs for individuals grappling with legal issues, facing suspicion and mistrust by authorities, a lack of legal aid and information, experiencing incomprehension and alienation in temporal suspension. This highlights the primary fact that heterogeneity prevails when discussing asylum seekers. Context greatly influences challenges and agency. However, it is possible to

assert that certain challenges offer minimal opportunities for exercising agency. As Lundberg (2021) points out, social researchers and intellectual activists have a role and responsibility to play in developing spaces for hope, facilitating conversations and supporting communities of belonging. Though this paper agrees that we should fervently support such activities, it may also be equally important to recognize and address the structural limitations of agency. We observe for several interview participants how the social structure constrains the interviewees and to make choices within a predefined framework. Amid mistrust, suspicion and biased treatment by SMA officials, temporal limbo, or lack of adequate legal support and information, applicants can lose faith. This was embodied in language like 'ambush', 'caught in a web', 'catastrophe' in describing encounters with SMA and the Court of Migration. Employment and housing difficulties, discrimination and uncertainty can also lead to hopelessness. As said by Karim, who searingly described his years of waiting, emphasizing his lack of freedom: *"Prison is much better – at least in prison, you know when you will be free."*

Despite this, interviewees exhibit resilience and agency in instances of being constrained through various structural limitations. They improved their situation and mental health by seeking support from others, in civil society or by creating intra-migrant social networks, relying on family relations, and other ways of sourcing information and resources, and ultimately, by re-escaping. All interview participants expressed a strong desire to be self-sufficient, to work or study and to provide for themselves and their families.

In cases of strong constraints, unintended consequences of actions became more likely. Examples include Nadia and Salim's decision to remain in Stockholm for their children's sake, prioritizing their wishes to remain in a place where they felt familiar. This decision could lead to reinforcing segregation, a consequence they were fully aware of, showcasing their capacity to reflexively monitor, rationalize, and motivate their actions. The complexity of intentionality is evident, as actions driven by limited options can have unforeseen consequences. The story of Nadia and Salim also helps us to understand the sustaining of a social structure, that of geographical segregation between migrants and natives in the suburbs of Sweden's largest cities, not only as a naturalized process, but as an active, even empowering choice facing limited options.

A similar example is re-escaping, which in the interviews emerged as an act that restored agency in cases of facing the bureaucratic violence of asylum determinations. As Elsrud (2020) points out, while it may seem that such an act can boost dignity and

selfcontrol, it may have the unintended consequence of 'prolonged insecurity where individuals risk becoming permanent refugees stuck in precariousness within European borders'. Some asylum seekers in this way become part of an 'abject diaspora', or what Nyers (2003) terms *deportspora*, consisting of undocumented and irregular migrants, stateless people, and deportees. Re-escaping is not only an act of agency, but also an example of exclusion from opportunities for interaction, self-protection, and self-control, in essence that the agency is severely limited (Elsrud, 2020, 502). Though having a strong understanding and rationalizing these actions through their empowering and dignifying effects, the exercises of agency ultimately tell us the extent to which asylum seekers are constrained in their choices.

5.2 Limitations

A clear limitation involves the language barriers experienced by the researcher, both in understanding and communicating with the interviewees, adversely impacting the data collection. With some participants, there were noticeable difficulties in expressing their thoughts. While these issues were generally surmountable, one can easily imagine the inherent limitations of speaking a non-native language for an analysis based on speech – beyond more informative descriptions, there is certain richness in expressions, idioms, paraphrasing, complexity, and subtlety that is inevitably lost. Although a translator could have mitigated this problem to an extent, the fundamental limitation remains. Despite this, the subjective view is that the interview participants found ways of articulating their opinions and experiences in eloquent and powerful ways, and that much of the intended meanings could be conveyed across language barriers.

Another limitation, previously discussed in the academic literature, is how valid and representative the statements of individuals are to the realities and facts about their stories and experiences. As noted by some interviewees, memories of certain events fade. This was particularly evident in questions relating to the asylum process, as interviewees often struggled to remember questions or other details about their meetings with migration officials. Furthermore, as stated by Pearlmann (2009, 888), 'individuals post-hoc explanations of their actions can carry deliberate or inadvertent misrepresentations, harden into social scripts or assert lofty motivations rather than admit to base ones'. The analysis has tried to maintain an ethnographic sensibility to this issue. Nonetheless, this is a risk that

cannot be excluded, although the risk is somewhat alleviated by the fact that numerous stories shared similar interpretations and motives for actions. For instance, the prevalent theme that the future welfare of one's children and family took credence over one's own desires and goals persisted across multiple stories.

Relatedly, another limitation of the study, is the inherent problem of generalization. It is evident that achieving generalizability is not feasible. The difficulty is knowing to what extent the results here could be seen as anomalous. However, as shown in the ethnographic fieldwork by Desmond (2014), a more constructive may be not to measure the proportion of certain attributes in relation to the broader population, but rather to examine the interconnectedness of components in our ethnographic sample. This would entail asking question such as 'is this asylum seeker's relationship to society typical of other asylum seekers?' or 'are the laws and rules applicable to the case of this individual applicable to those of other asylum seekers?'. The answer is generally, yes. One salient difference is the high education levels and labor market qualifications of several participants, which might not accurately represent the average humanitarian migration, often having lower levels of human capital. However, the fact remains that these participants struggled to integrate in terms of obtaining stable housing and employment, despite their high levels of qualifications and suffered from issues of exploitation and discrimination. This, if anything, underscores that settling issues and barriers asylum seekers face to integration are likely even more pronounced in the general asylum-seeking population.

5.3 Future Research

The interviews clearly underscore how opportunities for challenging social structures through personal agency were contingent upon on asylum seeker's legal characteristics. Overcoming credibility concerns and burden of proof is virtually impossible for individual agents from specific national background with lower recognition rates, such as Afghans, especially if they were aged as adults. This finding aligns with the view of current asylum process as exacting a form of bureaucratic violence on applicants, in that individual assessment are subsumed by collective categorization.

A suggestion for future research is an explicit focus and discussion of how group characteristics are defined during data sampling. The variance observed between the individuals in terms of settlement and the asylum process, suggests that the concept of an

'asylum seeker' may be too broad to for researchers and policy makers seeking a concise and useful definition. An insightful avenue for future studies would involve delving further into heterogeneity or homogeneity within the interview sample. For instance, the findings indicate vastly different experiences Syrian, or Afghan, or Nigerian asylum seekers. Age is also a crucial factor in understanding these experiences, and a gendered approach could also likely yield valuable insights. Given the constraints of time and scope for this thesis, expanding or refining the focus to this extent would have been challenging, the approach instead became to embrace the diversity within the sample.

References

Abdelhady, D., Gren, N., & Joormann, M. (2020). *Refugees and the violence of welfare bureaucracies in Northern Europe* (p. 248). Manchester University Press.

Ahrne, G., & Svensson, P. (2015). Handbok i kvalitativa metoder. Stockholm: Liber förlag.

Aliens Act. (2005:716). Regeringen. [online] Available at: https://www.government.se/contentassets/784b3d7be3a54a0185f284bbb2683055/aliens-act2005_716.pdf. Accessed 2023-02-24.

Blackmore, R., Boyle, JA., Fazel, M., Ranasinha, S., Gray, KM., Fitzgerald, G., & Misso, M. & Gibson-Helm, M. (2020). The prevalence of mental illness in refugees and asylum seekers: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS Med.* 17(9).

Bladini, M. (2016). Objektivitet i dömandet—på gott och på ont?. In *Svensk juristtidning 100,* (eds)., S., Kugelberg, C., Asp, P., Anders Eka, A., Flodgren, B & Mellqvist, M., Säfwe, D., & P. Claréus, 303-312.

Boccagni, P., & Schrooten, M. (2018). Participant observation in migration studies: An overview and some emerging issues. In R. Zapata-Barrero, & E. Yalz (Eds.), Qualitative research in European migration studies (pp. 209–225). IMISCOE Research Series. Champaign IL: SpringerOpe

Borevi, K. (2012). 'Sweden: The Flagship of Multiculturalism', in G. Brochmann & A. Hagelund (Eds.), Immigration Policy and the Scandinavian Welfare State 1945–2010, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 25–96.

Canning, V. (2021). Compounding trauma through temporal harm. In *Stealing Time: Migration, Temporalities and State Violence* (pp. 105-126). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Cegrell Karlander, I. (2021). Officialprincipen i migrationsprocessen. Domstolens utredningsansvar. Uppsala: Uppsala University, Department of Law.

Dahlstedt, M., & Neergaard, A. (2019). Crisis of solidarity? Changing welfare and migration regimes in Sweden. *Critical Sociology*, *45*(1), 121-135.

DeSantis, L. (1990). Fieldwork with undocumented aliens and other populations at risk. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, *12*(3), 359-372.

Domstolsverket. (2020). Domstolsstatistik 2020. Jönköping: Domstolsverket.

De Genova, N. P. (2002). Migrant "illegality" and deportability in everyday life. *Annual review of anthropology*, *31*(1), 419-447.

Diesen, C., Lernestedt, C., Lindholm, T., & Pettersson, T. (2005). Likhet inför lagen. Natur och kultur.

ECRE. (2018). Return continues to Afghanistan in Crisis. [online] Available at: https://ecre.org/return-continues-to-afghanistan-in-crisis/. Accessed 2023-05-15

ECRE. (2023). Country Report: Regular Procedure – Swedish Refugee Law Center. [online] Available at: https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/sweden/asylumprocedure/procedures/regular-procedure/. Accessed 2023-05-15.

Engdahl, M., Lindgren. K. & Rosenqvist, O. (2018). The role of local voting rights for foreign citizens – a catalyst for integration? International Migration Review, 5(4), pp. 1134–1157.

Elsrud, T. (2020). Resisting social death with dignity. The strategy of re-escaping among young asylum seekers in the wake of Sweden's sharpened asylum laws. *European journal of social work*, *23*(3), 500-513.

Esaiasson, P., Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H., & Wängnerud, L. (2012). Metodpraktikan: Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad (4., [rev.] uppl. ed.)

Eurobarometer. (n.d.). 'Standard Eurobarometer'. Brussels: European Commission. [online]. Available at: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/browse/all/series/4961. Accessed 2023-05-15

European Parliament. (2020). Report on the Implementation of the Dublin III Regulation. Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, LIBE. Brussels: European Parliament.

EUAA. (2021). Recognition rates: Granting international protection in EU+ countries. [online] Available at: https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2022-06/AR2022_factsheet9_recognition_rates_EN.pdf Accessed 2023-05-15

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: power and the ethics of knowing*. University Press: Oxford.

Gatrell, P. (2013). *The making of the modern refugee*. OUP Oxford.

Gleeson, C., Frost, R., Sherwood, L., Shevlin, M., Hyland, P., Halpin, R., & Silove, D. (2020). Post-migration factors and mental health outcomes in asylum-seeking and refugee populations: a systematic review. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, *11*(1), 1793567.

Giddens, A. (1979). Agency, structure. *Central problems in social theory: action, structure and contradiction in social analysis*, 49-95. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Giddens, A. (1984). The Constitution of Society. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Giddens, A. (1991). Modernity and self-identity self and society in the late modern age. Cambridge: Polity.

Giddens, A. (1993). *New rules of sociological method*. Stanford University Press.

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist studies*, *14*(3), 575-599.

Hedlund, D., & Cederborg, A. C. (2015). Legislators' perceptions of unaccompanied children seeking asylum. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, *11*(4), 239-252.

Hermanowicz, J. C. (2013). The longitudinal qualitative interview. *Qualitative sociology*, *36*, 189-208.

Jones, M. R. (1999). Structuration Theory. Rethinking management information systems. In R. D., Galliers & W. L. Currie (Eds.) *Rethinking management information systems: an interdisciplinary perspective*. Oxford University Press.

Johannesson, L. (2017). *In courts we trust: Administrative justice in Swedish migration courts* (Doctoral dissertation, Department of Political Science, Stockholm University).

Johansson, C. (2008). Svenska flyktingpolitiska visioner. Självbild eller verklighet? Sverigebilder. Det nationellas betydelser i politik och vardag. pp. 113–129. Stockholm: Institutet för Framtidsstudier.

Joormann, M. (2020). Social class, economic capital and the Swedish, German and Danish asylum systems. In *Refugees and the violence of welfare bureaucracies in Northern Europe* (pp. 31-49). Manchester University Press.

Khosravi, S. (2010). 'Illegal' traveller: An auto-ethnography of borders. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan

Khosravi, S. (2016). Deportation as a way of life for young Afghan men. In R. Furman, D. Epps, & G. Lamphear (Eds.), Detaining the immigrant other (pp. 169–181). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Khosravi, S. (2018). A Fragmented Diaspora: Iranians in Sweden. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, *8*(2).

Kvale, S., Brinkmann, S., & Torhell, S. (2014). Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun. 3rd ed. Lund: Studentlitteratur AB.

Laban, C. J., Gernaat, H. B., Komproe, I. H., Schreuders, B. A., & De Jong, J. T. (2004). Impact of a long asylum procedure on the prevalence of psychiatric disorders in Iraqi asylum seekers in The Netherlands. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, *192*(12), 843-851.

Li, S. S., Liddell, B. J., & Nickerson, A. (2016). The relationship between post-migration stress and psychological disorders in refugees and asylum seekers. *Current psychiatry reports*, *18*, 1-9.

Lipson, J. G., & Meleis, A. I. (1999). Research with immigrants and refugees. *Handbook of clinical nursing research*, 87-106.

Lundberg, A. (2011). The best interests of the child principle in Swedish asylum cases: The marginalization of children's rights. *Journal of human rights practice*, *3*(1), 49-70.

Lundberg, A. & Spång, M. (2019). In the world: Action and fabrication by and on behalf of undocumented persons. In (eds.) Cantat, C., Sevinin, E., Maczynska, E. & Birey, T., Challenging the Political Across Borders: Migrants' and Solidarity Struggles. Center for Policy Studies, Central European University, 72-98.

Lundberg, A. (2021). What Should We Do as Intellectual Activists? A Comment on the Ethico-political in Knowledge Production. *Research Methodologies and Ethical Challenges in Digital Migration Studies: Caring For (Big) Data?*, 247-258.

Malkki, L. (2008). National geographic: The rooting of peoples and the territorialization of national identity among scholars and refugees. In *The cultural geography reader* (pp. 287294). Routledge.

Migration Agency. (2019). Årsredovisning 2019. *Rapport*. Norrköping: Migrationsverket.

Migration Agency. (2022). Olika myndigheters ansvar [Responsibilities of different authorities]. [online]. Retrieved from: https://www.migrationsverket.se/Andraaktorer/Kommuner/ Om-ensamkommande-barn-och-ungdomar/Olika-myndighetersansvar.html. Accessed 2023-04-23.

Migration Agency. (2023a) Beviljade Uppehållstillstånd Översikter [Approved Residence permits Overviews]. [online] Available at: https://www.migrationsverket.se/OmMigrationsverket/Statistik/Beviljade-uppehallstillstand-oversikter.html Accessed 2023-0515.

Migration Agency. (2023b). If your application for asylum is rejected. [online] Available at: https://www.migrationsverket.se/English/Private-individuals/Leaving-Sweden/Rejection-ofapplication-for-asylum.html. Accessed 2023-05-15.

National Board of Housing, Building and Planning. (2022). Bostadsmarknadsenkäten 2022 [The Housing Market Survey 2022]. Karlskrona: Boverket.

Norström, E. (2004). I Väntan på Asyl: Retorik och praktik i svensk flyktingpolitik [Waiting for Asylum: Rhetoric and Practice in Swedish Refugee Policy]. Dissertation. Lund University and Umeå: Borea Bokförlag.

Nourpanah, S. (2013). A study of the experiences of integration and settlement of Afghan government-assisted refugees in Halifax, Canada. *Refuge*, *30*, 57.

Nyers, P. (2003). Abject cosmopolitanism: The politics of protection in the anti-deportation movement. *Third world quarterly*, *24*(6), 1069-1093.

Nyers, P. (2013). *Rethinking refugees: Beyond state of emergency.* New York: Routledge.

Parusel, B. (2016) 'Sweden's U-turn on asylum'. *Forced Migration Review.* 52: 89–90.

Pearlman, W. (2018). Moral identity and protest cascades in Syria. *British Journal of Political Science*, *48*(4), 877-901.

Philipson Isaac, S. (2022). Temporal dispossession through migration bureaucracy: on waiting within the asylum process in Sweden. *European Journal of Social Work*, 1–12.

Rajaram, P. K. (2002). Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee. *Journal of refugee studies*, *15*(3), 247-264.

Rehnberg, H. S., Nikolaidou, Z., & Wadensjö, C. (2020). Asylintervjuer borde alltid spelas in. Artikel 14, (1), 12–19.

Salmonsson, L., & Hedlund, D. (2018). Where do we go from here? Challenges and strategies following additional asylum policy restrictions in Sweden. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, *10*(3), 524-535.

Scarpa, S., Schierup, C. & Dahlstedt, M. (2019). 'Is migration bad for welfare?', in Trygged, S. & Righard, E. (eds.) Inequalities and Migration – Challenges for the Swedish welfare state. 1 st edition. Lund: Studentlitteratur AB.

Schierup, C.-U. (2006). 'Paradise Lost'? In C.-U. Schierup, P. Hansen, & S. Castles (Eds.), Migration, citizenship, and the European welfare state: a European dilemma. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Schoultz, I. (2014). Seeking asylum and residence permits in Sweden: Denial, acknowledgement, and bureaucratic legitimacy. *Critical Criminology*, *22*(2), 219–235.

Skodo, A. (2018). 'Sweden: by turns welcoming and restrictive in its immigration policy'. *Migration Policy Institute*, 6 December.

Silander, D. (2007). Tillståndet för mänskliga rättigheter i Sverige. In A. Staaf & L. Zanderi (Eds.), Mänskliga rättigheter i svenska belysning (pp. 72–87). Malmö: Liber.

Solano, G., & Huddleston, T. (2020). Migrant integration policy index. *Migration Policy Group*.

Solberg, Ø., Vaez, M., Johnson-Singh, C. M., & Saboonchi, F. (2020). Asylum seekers' psychosocial situation: A diathesis for post-migratory stress and mental health disorders?. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, *130*, 109914.

SOU. (2006:30). Är rättvisan rättvis? Tio perspektiv på diskriminering av etniska och religiösa minoriteter inom rättssystemet. Stockholm: Ministry of Labor.

Strange, M., Squire, V., & Lundberg, A. (2017). Irregular migration struggles and active subjects of trans-border politics: New research strategies for interrogating the agency of the marginalised. Politics, 37(3), 243–253.

Swedish Refugee Law Center. (2018). Offentligt Biträde. Barnens Asylrättscentrum. Stockholm. [online]. Available at: https://sweref.org/offentligt-bitrade/. Accessed 2023-0223.

Swedish Refugee Law Center. (2022). Short Overview of the Asylum Procedure. *Asylum Information Database | European Council on Refugees and Exiles.* [online]. Available at: https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/sweden/asylum-procedure/general/shortoverview-asylum-procedure/#_ftnref1. Accessed 2023-02-23.

UNHCR. (2022). Figures At A Glance. [online] Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/aboutunhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance. Accessed 2023-05-17.

Wadensjö, C., Rehnberg, H. S., & Nikolaidou, Z. (2021). Tolkfunktionen i asylprocessen. Delmi kunskapsöversikt 2021:4. *Delegationen för migrationsstudier* (pp. 1–110).

Wennström, J., & Oner, O. (2019). Political hedgehogs: The geographical sorting of refugees in Sweden.

Wettergren, Å., & Wikström, H. (2014). Who is a refugee? Political subjectivity and the categorisation of Somali asylum seekers in Sweden. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *40*(4), 566-583.

Wettergren, Å. (2010). Managing Unlawful Feelings: The Emotional Regime of the Swedish Migration Board. *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion,* 3(4): 400–19.

Weston A. A Witness of Truth: Credibility Findings in Asylum Appeals. Immigration and Nationality Law and Practice. 1998;12(3):87–89.

Young, D. J. (2005). Writing against the native point of view. *Auto-ethnographies: The anthropology of academic practices*, 203–215.

Zetter, R. (2007). More labels, fewer refugees: Remaking the refugee label in an era of globalization. *Journal of refugee studies*, *20*(2), 172-192.

Öberg, P. (2015). Livshistorieintervjuer. In Ahrne, G., & Svensson, P. (Eds.) *Handbok i kvalitativa metoder.* Stockholm: Liber förlag.

Öberg, K., & Sager, M. (2017). Articulations of deportability: Changing migration policies in Sweden 2015/2016. *Refugee Review*, *3*, 2-14.

Appendix

Interview script:

'This study is about asylum seekers' experiences and outcomes of asylum seekers coming to Sweden with a focus on the challenges of interacting with authorities and with integration into Swedish society. The questions I would like to talk about deal with one's individual experience and understanding of the migration system. Some of the things I will discuss ask you to reflect upon yourself and often involve making personal judgments that will touch on various background- and related personal topics. Your participation in the study is strictly confidential. Interviews are normally digitally recorded, and this simply provides for accurately keeping track of information. Subsequently, the recording will be deleted. During the transcription of the interviews, your name will be anonymized.

Your participation in this study is important. However, should you at any time wish to stop, you may do so without prejudice to you, and at any time you should feel free to ask me questions concerning the interview or the study. May we begin?' (Hermanowicz, 1998).

Questions:

1. Before starting:

- Is there something you would like me to know before we begin the interview?
- Is there something I should keep in mind during this interview?

2. Introduction/background:

- Please start by shortly telling me about yourself – e.g., Age, national background, occupation.
- Can you please provide some background information about your journey as an asylum seeker in Sweden? b. How long have you been in Sweden, and what were the circumstances that led you to seek asylum?
- For how long have/did you live in Sweden and hen did you first arrive in Sweden/at what age?
- Did you arrive alone or with family? Do you currently have other relatives living in Sweden? Was your application process a 'joint' process as family application or did you do it as an individual?

3. Asylum process

- Can you take me through the process and describe to me what happened? Can you recall some specific interactions/exchanges/events. What happened? How did you feel? Did you feel that your story was being heard and that there was an openness/willingness to listen by SMA or courts? Vice versa, was your story criticized or doubted?
- How was the process? How long did the process take? Is it still ongoing? Were you ultimately granted permanent or temporary residency? Do you remember if you were granted the residence permit as refugee/ "subsidiary protection"?
- What were the outcomes of the process? Did you appeal the decision?
- How do you feel about it looking back? What emotions does it brings out? Do you think Migrationsverket/appeals process was fair? Why or why not?
- How do you see the processing, especially the contacts with Migrationsverket/courts in terms of how they related to you? Were they kind? Were they open? Did they listen to you? Did they want to find out what happened? Were they interested in reasons why you could back?
- What were the greatest challenges or difficulties faced by you in dealing with the SMA and if appealed, the Migration Courts?
- How did these challenges impact the outcomes of the migration case for you? For instance, the decision to grant asylum or residency permit.
- Do you have thoughts about ways of improving the fairness of the process and to make the process easier for people dealing with the migration bureaucracy?

4. Employment and education:

- Did you face any challenges or barriers in finding employment or pursuing education in Sweden? If so, what were they?
- Were there any support systems or programs available to assist you in finding employment or accessing educational opportunities? How helpful were they?

5. Social integration:

- How did you go about building social connections and networks in Sweden?
- What role did local communities or organizations play in this process?
- Did you face any cultural differences or challenges in adapting to Swedish society?
- How did you navigate and overcome them?
- What support services or programs did you access to facilitate your integration into Swedish society? Were they effective in meeting your needs?
- What are your views on the integration policies and measures implemented by the Swedish government? In what ways do you think they could be improved?

6. Closing:

- How do you perceive your sense of identity and belonging in Swedish society? Has it evolved over time? Have you encountered any instances of discrimination or prejudice during your integration process? How did you cope with such experiences?
- Did your perspective of Sweden change? Did you learn from the experience?
- What is some advice you would give to other asylum seekers coming to Sweden today?