

It is fantastic to be me here and now, in Torrevieja

A study of Existential Health of retirees in Sweden and Spain

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY, DIVISION OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY, LUND UNIVERSITY

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Author: Olof von Knorring

Supervisor: Nina Gren

Examiner: Tova Højdestrand

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate what makes Swedish retirees migrate to Costa del Sol and how it affects their perception of their Existential Health as expressed in Meaning-in-life, Coherence and Trust, building on a two-week fieldwork, with observations, free conversations, and a short questionnaire. The overall research question is how the migration has influenced retiree's perception of their Existential Health. Main research questions are the following (A) What is it like to be you here and now as a Swedish retiree? (B) What is better with your life in Spain as compared to Sweden? (C) What is worse with your life in Spain as compared to Sweden?

As a theoretical basis, I will draw upon material about the concepts of Existence, Meaning in Life, Coherence and Trust. For Existentialism I use the thinking of the German philosopher Heidegger. About Meaning in Life, Coherence and Trust, I use articles and publications within the fields of Psychology, Philosophy, Medical Sociology and Existential Anthropology.

What are the benefits, and how did they get to know ABOUT them, that makes retirees take the step to leave Sweden, permanently or for a couple of months per year. Do they see any disadvantages by migrating.

I also investigate what context the retirees live in, what they include and exclude from their daily life. Do they try to integrate in the Spanish society or limit their context to Swedish diaspora and Swedish groups and places, like the Swedish Church.

During my fieldwork, I got a strong feeling that the migrants were living a life here-and-now and intentionally did not integrate in the Spanish society. They instead kept to contacts and social life in the Swedish diaspora. One aspect of this is that it is not the migration in itself that is important for the migrants well-being, it is how they themselves grasps, interprets and reconstructs their existence.

The results show that the migration does positively affect Existential Health in the sense of Meaning in Life, Coherence and Trust. But to a lesser degree than I expected.

Social Anthropology, Existential Health, Heidegger, Meaning in life, Sense of Coherence, Trust/Confidence, Swedish retiree migration

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1. Introduction and background

“Quality of life! We are from Stockholm but live in Torrevieja during the winter. Here I get sun almost every day, escapes the darkness, snow, and cold and heavy clothes! Food is cheaper, vegetables are tastier, and the wine is cheaper! Social life is great as people are happier and easy to get in touch with. I go out in the daylight every day and meet friends, walks, plays mini golf and card games. The pension lasts longer, and I can afford to go out and have coffee. I feel good here and am happier in the sun.” (my translation).

Before I started my fieldwork in Torrevieja, Spain, I joined a Facebook group “Torrevieja svenskar” and posted a message asking about what made them moved to Spain. Above is one typical answer I received. Several retirees expressed similar positive views.

But I also got some more critical views, like this from a woman (my translation):

“What made me live part time here in Spain is the warm climate and the social life. But it turned out that I feel people do not know how to behave in the social life, sometimes it feels like the Middle Age, when talking about others [the Spaniards]. You cannot really trust the Spaniards, but there are of course also good people.”

And from a woman that had sold her apartment and was moving back to Sweden:

“We had a nice apartment for 10 years. But we got tired of traveling as my children work in Sweden and I longed to be with them. So, despite me feeling better here, I could not take any more separations.”

During winter, a lot of Swedes go to warmer countries and stays there for a considerable time. According to a survey from 2022, “Svenskar i världen”, a total of 643.000 Swedes lived abroad more than 6 months a year and of them 104.000 in Spain.¹ In that survey, the main reason, for Swedes in all countries, to migrate was love (26%) and to find a warmer climate (24%). For retirees, the main reasons were better climate (68%) and lower cost of living (41%). The main drawbacks mentioned are distance to relatives and friends (50%) and, increased cost for health care (18%).

¹ Svenskar i världen, Kartläggning 2022

My interest in my thesis, based on the concept Existential Health and its core concepts Meaning (in life), Coherence and Trust/Confidence, is to see how Swedish retired people experience spending time (especially the winter) in Spain. How do they perceive their Existential Health? Better or worse than when living in Sweden?

2. Research Theme and Research Questions

In my thesis I will investigate, by participant observations and interviews, how people's perceptions of their well-being are affected by longer stays in Spain, as migrants or "snowbirds".²

The aim is to explore Swedish life-style migrants in Spain and their idea of what a good life is about. Overall research question is how the migration has influenced the retiree's perception of their Existential Health (see chapter 4):

- What is it like to be you here and now as a Swedish retiree?³
- What is better with your life in Spain as compared to Sweden?
- What is worse with your life in Spain as compared to Sweden?

This thesis can be seen as a standalone continuation of my Bachelor thesis on Existential Health and its use in a Swedish context (von Knorring 2023). Based on my former thesis, I interpret the concept of Existential Health as "believing in and being able to take advantage of life". I base this interpretation on definitions of the concept that I found in articles and previous research on Existential Health. In the Bachelor thesis, I went through theories about Existence and Health, in different contexts, aiming to find a common core in the concept of Existential Health. The core I found, that is used in most definitions, consists of three separate concepts, namely Meaning (in life), Coherence and Trust/Confidence.

3. Methods, Reflexivity, and ethical considerations

3.1 Selection, introduction, and delimitations

It is obvious to me that the best way to learn about Swedes living abroad is to visit a place where many of them reside and make participant observations and interviews. I knew that a popular country to relocate to, or stay for a longer period, is Spain. But where to find Swedes

² Snowbird is a person who migrates from the colder northern parts to the warmer southern locales, typically during the winter

³ Svenska kyrkan - Rätten till existentiell hälsa, (my translation to english)

in Spain? A simple google search revealed that popular places are Torrevieja, Malaga, Torremolinos, Marbella etc.

Me and my wife have visited Marbella once before and thus ruled that out as I wanted to have fresh eyes, when observing. So, I choose to visit Torrevieja. It is rather easy to visit, with a lot of flights from Copenhagen to Alicante. The distance from the airport to Torrevieja is 50 km and when renting a car, it takes between 1 and 2 hours to reach the town. The car also made it easy to get around in the vicinity to visit places and to find people to interview or have conversations with.

Once I had decided the place to visit, I went to social media, read Facebook, to try to find information about Torrevieja, I immediately found three groups that I joined, *Torrevieja Svenskar*, *Svenska pensionärer i Spanien och Torrevieja* and *Club Expat* (Club Expat is not their correct name as I will write about members of the club). All three groups require membership to read and write messages. The groups present themselves in this way (my translations):

Torrevieja Svenskar (27.000 members):

“To all Swedes and Scandinavians that want to give advice, ask questions, and share experiences, information, anything that you want to share with others. [...] All advertising will be removed”⁴

Svenska pensionärer i Spanien och Torrevieja (2.500 members):

The group is for all Swedish retirees in Spain and Torrevieja or all that have thought on moving down, [...] We will share our thoughts, give advice and information.”⁵

Club Expat (more than 750 members):

A forum for members in the club and other northerners who spend shorter or longer time in Costa Blanca.”

By becoming a member, I could thus follow the threads posted there and it gave another view of what is interesting when you live as an expat, snowbird and/or retiree. I also posted a short

⁴ Torrevieja Svenskar, Om, Facebook Group

⁵ Svenska pensionärer i Spanien och Torrevieja, Om, Facebook group

message, introducing myself, followed by a few questions. I kept this message short as I did not expect anyone to read a lot of text and to reply similarly.

In the groups on Facebook, I found information about two especially interesting places, the *Swedish Church* in Torrevieja and a social club, let's call it "Club Expat". I regarded both sites as excellent places to meet and hang out with Swedes. Well, at least to get a chance to observe and to talk to them. I contacted both places and got a warm reply from the Club and we agreed on a date for an interview. The church did not reply at all. But, in the end, that was not a problem, and I was warmly greeted when visiting in person. In the other Facebook groups, I posted a few questions about living in Torrevieja. I got 11 answers and followed them up by mail or posts.

Swedes living in Torrevieja are mostly retirees that either live there permanently or as snowbirds, avoiding the winter in Sweden. The age span is thus high, from the age of 60 to 90. There are some exceptions from this for people doing distance work or a few that have changed employer to be in Spain permanently. My intention was not to meet these younger people, and I did not.

I have worked in the industry for many years, mostly with quality and environmental systems, and made many business trips. In my work I performed several hundred internal audits (a type of interview) with all kinds of employees, and this taught me a lot about how to make efficient and detailed interviews. I also have had the opportunity to do many trips abroad on my vacations. Normally, when I travel abroad, I do not seek for Swedish contexts nor to meet Swedish people as I want to experience the local culture and speak to the locals. I have thus never had an insight into what it is like for Swedes to live abroad. So, the task of actively searching for Swedish contexts and Swedish people to interview and understand their way of living was completely new to me.

Today I am retired and have grey hair and wrinkles in my face thus looking very much like the people I want to meet and talk to. I did not expect any difficulties getting in contact with others and to start conversations and it turned out to be even simpler than I had anticipated.

I had prepared several subjects I wanted to have discussions about to learn the views of Swedes in Torrevieja. Sometimes I could keep to the questions but more often the conversations went off in different directions, revealing thoughts and feelings I had not anticipated.

To have a starting point I had prepared a short questionnaire, see Appendix A, with a presentation of myself and a few questions about living in Torrevieja. To me, this is a subtle way to present myself more formally and to have a starting point for conversations. Now, I got 17 questionnaires filled out in Torrevieja, but it did not trigger conversations as I had expected. Some did not want to fill it in at all, and one lady put it like this, with emphasis and a loud voice, “I will not fill in anything. I am too private for that.”

I also searched for a place to live and found an apartment 8 km south of the city centre. To get there, I rented a car at the airport so to get around was not a problem. I studied a bit of Spanish so I, at least, could order a beer, ask for the check at a restaurant and explained that I only spoke a little bit of Spanish.

During our 2 weeks visit in Torrevieja, me and my wife walked the streets in town, went into restaurants, strolled along the beaches, went into shops, and kept an ear open to try to locate people speaking Swedish. I found several people and couples and approached them - in Swedish and to speak Swedish was a real barrier breaker that always made the other part interested.

I had prepared to make semi structured interviews, but it turned out to be impractical, so I instead let the interviews have a character of free-floating conversations. I made a total of 10 longer conversations that I recorded, after getting consent from the other part. I also had a total of 9 shorter casual conversations with persons I met at different location and under different circumstances. My wife participated in all conversations as a passive listener.

In town and on beaches, it is impossible to distinguish Swedes as they look like anyone else. Observations thus was mostly about how all people act and what they do without regard to their background and belonging. In the church and at the club, on the other hand, it was possible to make participant observations as all visitors were of Swedish origin. To get close to and to get a feeling of how it is to live in Torrevieja, I went to the Swedish Church several times, on a Thursday at a waffle-event, on a Sunday mass, for a choir rehearsal on a Friday and last time singing in the choir on Sunday mass. This opened for a lot of small talk with other participants and gave an insight to how it is to have something meaningful to participate in each week.

Since coming back to Sweden, I have kept an eye on Facebook and the information posted in the three groups I am a member of. What I can see even more clearly now, is that there are a lot of companies and persons offering help such as transportation to and from the airport, to

look after the properties when the owner is not present, and much more. It is almost like a whole industry.

I have limited my data collection to Swedes (and a few Norwegians), thus not approaching any other nationality or native Spaniards. Nor did I search for, or talked to, younger people living permanently in Spain as I expected their opinions to be somewhat different from the retirees. My interest is mostly in how older people look upon their lives in Spain and how it differs from living in Sweden. Does it improve their sense of Existential Health, which is: of meaning in their lives, their sense of coherence and their sense of trust.

3.2 Reflexivity

As I mentioned, I spent two weeks in a place with a lot of Swedes, namely Torrevieja. I went to a club, to the Swedish church and talked to people in restaurants, along streets and beaches and in grocery stores. By this I met a lot of people, but I have a feeling that I also missed a lot of people with a different kind of living. Most interviewed owned their own property and could support their living in Torrevieja and at the same time have a place to live in Sweden. I did not meet poor or lonely people, if they exist in Torrevieja. On the last day, at the airport, I spoke shortly with a couple from Norway. They lived in a caravan at a camping site close to the airport. This type of migrants went totally under my radar, and I really do not know anything about their situation and their living in Spain, or at home. But I presume they have another interesting story to tell.

Both me and my wife are retired and of Swedish origin. That we are of the same age as the informants made it easy to get in contact with them in a way that, I presume, would not have been possible for a younger person. That my wife accompanied me also made it easy to socialize, one pair to another. If I had approached people alone, I am not sure that I would have got the same acceptance and outcome of the conversations. I never felt awkward in any of the conversations or visits that we made during the fieldwork. Except maybe when we were not welcomed, at the church, to join a group of four sitting at a table having coffee. The seats were reserved for their current friends. I have long had a vague desire to buy something in Spain for us and this might have been one reason for my interest in Torrevieja and the lives Swedish retirees live there. But I must confess that this desire is no longer there.

3.3 Ethical considerations

I have made the following ethical considerations, following the principles of the American Anthropological Association⁶:

- Do no harm: all places and persons are anonymous in my thesis, thus not possible to trace.
- Be Open and Honest Regarding your Work: Prior to interviews and observations, I always presented myself and what I was doing (see Appendix A – Hur är det att vara du?)
- Obtain Informed Consent and Necessary Permissions: prior to interviews and more informal conversations, I always asked for permission to use the information in my thesis.
- Weight Competing Ethical Obligations: I have not found any competing ethical obligations.
- Make Your Results Accessible: My thesis will be published and thus available to the public.
- Protect and Preserve Your Records: The research data will be stored on my personal computer, thus not available to the public.

My position is that I do not see the topic I am studying as something that in any way can harm my informants. The interviews are not deeply personal nor revealing information that might be traced back to the informants and give them any problems.

4. Theory

As theoretical base for my thesis I use material about the concepts Existence, Meaning in Life (MIL), Coherence and Trust. For Existence, I use one of the most important philosophers on Existentialism, namely the German philosopher Heidegger and his book *Being and time* (Heidegger 1962). About MIL, Coherence and Trust, I use a few articles and publications within the fields of Psychology, Philosophy, Medical Sociology and Existential Anthropology. I will also look into *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Trust*⁷ as it describes different ways trust can be interpreted.

⁶ AAA Statement on Ethics

⁷ OECD (2017), *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Trust*, OECD Publishing, Paris

4.1 Existence, according to Heidegger

The German philosopher Heidegger claims that we, as humans, are thrown into a world, a world already full of meaning and activities that the individual cannot fully control. But he also claims that “Being is always the Being of an entity” (Heidegger 1962: 9)⁸ (“*Sein ist jeweils das Sein eines Seienden* “). That is to say that humans have a mode to be that has an understanding relationship with this being. In short, a human understands that it is (existing). Heidegger introduces the denomination of *Dasein*, an existence that can make sense of the world (Heidegger 1962: 12).

The Being-in-the-world, the *Dasein*, interacts with others through *Mitsein* (Heidegger 1962: 118). The Being always have a choice to take the effortless way and go with the flow of others in an everydayness (*das Man*) (Heidegger 1962: 114) or make own decisions and choices. To live in *das Man*, means that the individuals does not take care of their possibilities, it’s could-be. The basic state of mind of *Dasein* is anxiety and fear. Fear is always there and brings us back from the comfortable living in everydayness “anxiety brings it [*Dasein*] back from its absorption in the ‘world’” (Heidegger 1962: 189). The Being is free to choose its actions and way of living. The everydayness (*das Man*) sets out certain ways of doing things but if the Being frees itself from this, it frees itself to live authentically, in main freedom.

For Heidegger, nothingness (the complete negation of the totality of beings) is apprehended in anxiety, an unease about being as a whole. The *Dasein* is thrown into the world, from nothingness, and have not had power over one’s own Being from the ground up. *Not* thus is “it itself, being a basis, is a nullity of itself” (Heidegger 1962: 284). When the *Dasein* lives in *das Man*, it is living in the nothingness of the everydayness, not taking the opportunities it has, the potential-for-Being (*Seinkönnen*).

Heidegger writes about *Dasein* in singular. But the *Dasein* Being-in-the-world is always shared with others, in a with-world (*Mitwelt*). As Heidegger puts it “Being-in is Being-with Others. Their Being-in-themselves within-the-world is *Dasein*-with [*Mit-dasein*]” (Heidegger 1962: 118).

When we live in the everydayness (*das Mann*), our conscious is guilty and calls us to start living our own life (“*Weil nur das Selbst des Man-selbst angerufen und zum Hören gebracht*

⁸ Pages according to the original book

wirt, sinkt das Man in sich zusammen”) (Heidegger 1962: 273). But the call does not in itself tell us something, it is a call for us to start see our possibilities (*eigensten Möglichkeiten*).

I interpret Heidegger as a call for us to live our lives on our terms, to take the opportunities we have and stop being part of the go-with-the-flow, *Das Mann*. But at the same time, we always share our existence with others in the *Mitwelt*.

4.2 Existential Anthropology, according to Jackson

My thesis is close to the anthropological sub-field founded by Michael Jackson in his book *Existential Anthropology* (2005), where the focus is on critical events that disrupt an individual’s life. (This will most certainly affect one’s existence and thereby also change one’s perception of Existential Health, i.e. one’s sense of Meaning in life, Coherence and Trust). Critical events mentioned by Jackson are e.g. wars or disasters. I would like to scale down this magnitude of events to cover more mundane and not critical events. Jackson implies this and clarifies that events also can be situations where something vital is at play and at risk. I would take it a bit further and include events that somehow changes something in a person’s life. One such event is a move to and adapt to, a new country. As I will argue, this event will have an impact on one’s Existential Health.

Human wellbeing is an endless experimentation how to live on one’s own terms (Jackson 2005: xii). Wellbeing is thus much more than adjustments to a given context. Humans have the ability to reflect, and Jackson writes, “Beliefs and ideas are thus, more often than not, outcomes of an activity, or retrospective abridgements of it, that helps us come to terms with what have already happened” (Jackson 2005: xv). What is important here, to me, is that it is not the event in itself that is important for our wellbeing, it is how we ourselves interpret and reconstruct it. Jackson writes “human existence is seldom a matter solely of ourselves, but of our relations with others, it is grasped only within ourselves” (Jackson 2005: xxviii).

4.3 Meaning in Life (MIL)

Many studies, as I show below, give the same impression – that the concept of Meaning in Life (MIL) is complicated and multi-faceted. MIL is described as something that is intuitively sensed but most cannot define or describe what it is nor what it consists of. MIL is also seen as a result of subjective judgements or by reflection on one’s live. Most of the studies state that MIL consists of three main parts: *Coherence* or *Comprehension* (typically described as the degree that life make sense); *Purpose* (typically described as having a sense that life has valuable goals); and *Significance or Mattering* (typically described as one’s life is

of value and matters beyond the self).

What these parts consists of changes through live, from childhood to old age.

Linking Loneliness and Meaning in Life, according to Suh & Lee

Suh & Lee investigates if there is a link between loneliness and Meaning-in-Life, MIL, is described as a “subjective judgment of one’s life as meaningful, rising from daily experiences used as informational sources” (Suh & Lee 2023: 366). Data in the study were gathered from a total of 410 students at the public University in Northeastern USA. MIL is seen to have three facets, *Coherence*, *Purpose*, and *Significance*. (Suh & Lee 2023: 367). In short, Coherence, is the degree to which life make sense; Purpose, is having a sense that life has important goals; Significance, is a sense that one’s life is inherently of value. The focus of the study is on the mediating role of self-compassion and interpersonal mindfulness. The authors argue that the experience of meaning often is found in interdependence with others and that “loneliness is detrimental to meaning in life” (Suh & Lee 2023: 366). The study is based on three hypotheses: 1) there is a negative association between loneliness and MIL; 2) this negative association is mediated by self-compassion; 3) the negative association will be stronger for those low on interpersonal mindfulness (Suh & Lee 2023: 370). The outcome of the study supports all three hypotheses, i.e., that there is a direct association between loneliness and MIL; self-compassion is a significant mediator in this association; and low interpersonal mindfulness moderated (lowered) the effect of self-compassion.

The study uses statistical and reflective methods to investigate their theories. A source of uncertainty is that the statistical material represents only a small fraction of society.

I agree to most of the study, and it has added two concepts to my understanding of MIL - Loneliness and Self-compassion.

Development and nature of Meaning in Life, according to Hill

Most people have an intuitive sense about how they find meaning in their lives but cannot define it (Hill 2018: 19). They have a sense of the sources to meaning, e.g., relationship, religion etc. Several definitions of MIL are mentioned to show that, in literature, the concept of MIL and purpose-in-life often are used to describe the same thing (Hill 2018: 20). Hill specially points to the definition of MIL made by Steger “the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one’s being and existence” (Hill 2018: 20). Hill recognises that MIL consists of a number of interrelated constructs and is very hard to define. The article ends with the authors own definition of MIL, “MIL involves a felt or intuitive sense of meaning, a sense that one matters and is significant, a sense that one has purpose and goals

and is engaged in life, a sense of coherence or comprehensibility, and a sense of enjoyment of reflecting about meaning”.⁹

The method used is based on literature studies combined with reflectivity about MIL.

I can only agree that the definition of MIL is complex and can involve many different aspects. What aspects to include, according to me, depends on who is making the definition and in what area of interest the definition is intended to be used.

Meaning in Life, according to Metz

This study addresses three models of MIL based on the properties: *purposiveness*; *transcendence*; and the *aptness of emotions* such as admiration and esteem. Metz starts by pointing out that the word *meaning* can have multiple meanings, causing problems to define and use it. Metz continues by pointing out that monistic models of MIL does not capture everything and thus proposes another model based on pluralism and family resemblance (Metz 2013: 17). According to Metz, a) some philosophers hold it true that to speak of a person’s life being meaningful is to say that a person feels satisfied upon achieving her aims (Metz 2013: 24), b) others says that MIL is essentially connoted to something about God. Metz rejects these ideas as being too cramped and counterintuitive. About pleasure, Metz says that it may enhance MIL but does not constitute it. When searching for MIL, humans may experience pleasure, but “it does not follow that pleasure *qua* pleasure is what would make their existence significant” (Metz 2013: 27) Metz then proposes that a theory to cover MIL need to include an overlap between the three properties mentioned above and be a pluralistic theory. At the same time Metz argues that this might not be true. It could be that a sole property gives the best answer to MIL. This sole property, Metz concludes, is still to be discovered.

The method used, is a critical discussion about some of the monist theories about MIL. The result is used to propose another theory which is pluralistic, i.e., includes a multiple of concepts that together might constitute MIL.

To me, this approach is highly theoretical but the conclusion that MIL is constituted by many different aspects and concepts is no surprise. This shows that, as expected, the question about MIL is overly complicated.

⁹ Hill, page 37

4.4 Coherence

Coherence or Comprehension (typically described as the degree that life make sense) is not a clear concept and there are several opinions about how to interpret it, as can be seen below.

The three Meanings of Meaning in Life: Distinguishing Coherence, Purpose, and Significance, according to Martela & Steger

Martela & Steger writes in their article that research about MIL has been rather unclear about what to include in the notion of Meaning. Two dimensions has historically been centred: *Coherence*, or one's comprehension and sense made of life, and *Purpose*, or one's core aims and aspirations for life (Martella & Steger 2016). To try to clarify this unclarity, Martela and Steger lifts three facets about what the notion of Meaning include: Coherence, Purpose, and Significance. In the article these three notions are described and how they overlap and how they can be understood as stand-alone concepts.

I will not discuss Purpose and Significance further as it, to me, is closer to Meaning **of** Life than Meaning **in** Life. Meaning of life is about why we exists at all, and my thesis is not about that.

Humans have the ability to reflect upon their lives. Coherence is a reflective approach to form a coherent mental representation, a cognitive map, of the world, as an individual experiences it. This map helps making sense out of the individuals experiences (Martella & Steger 2016: 22). In other words, life is coherent when you can see and understand patterns in it that makes the whole comprehensive (Martella & Steger 2016: 9).

Martela and Steger argues that Coherence is value-neutral and descriptive, and that it is an epistemic notion, it is about what we as individuals know. They write "Human effort to find coherence is thus an attempt to create accurate mental models of the world to facilitate predictability and consistency" (Martella & Steger 2016: 18).

The article concludes that "in order to live in the world as reflective beings, humans seem to need three things: they need to comprehend the world around them; they need to find direction for their actions, and they need to find worth in their lives" (Martella & Steger 2016: 33).

One thing not discussed is how people limit their lifeworld. It is easier to comprehend a small and local context and I believe that this limiting of the world that means something to you is

one way to cope with the overwhelming amount of information we are bombarded with each day.

Life Stories, The creation of Coherence, according to Linde

This book is about Life stories and how individuals create them. The book is mostly about texts and how these texts are to be formulated to make sense and make it possible to transfer a story to others. My thesis is not about how to transfer a sense of coherence but there are some sentences in the book that is applicable even to my purpose. The chapter about What is a Life Story begins with “In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable and constantly revised life story” (Linde 1993: 3). Life stories express who we are, how we feel about ourselves, and how we became what we are. Life stories are used to, amongst others, to show that we belong to something (a group etc) and that we understand the moral and standards of this something. Another way to use life stories is to give us information about what is expected, what the norms are, and what belief system that is used to establish coherence (Linde 1993: 3). Coherence, according to Linde, is created, “from the morphological level to the level of discourse unit to the social and historical level of the coherence system” (Linde 1993: 3). Coherence is thus created by interweaving many levels, both linguistic and social (Linde 1993: 219). Furthermore, coherence is both a social demand and a psychological internal demand. A coherent life story helps the individual understand the current situation, the past life, and imagined future.

To me, Linde has an interesting theory that a coherent life story helps to create an understanding of life and make it possible to live for the future with a comfortable sense of being in the world.

Sense of Coherence – SOC, according to Antonovsky

The model *Sense of Coherence* – SOC, was created by the Israeli/American researcher Antonovsky. What puzzled Antonovsky was how it was possible for people to remain healthy and living good lives even after experiencing major trauma. This perspective, why someone remain healthy, is called salutogenic.

In his book *Unravelling the Mystery of Health* (Antonovsky 1987), Antonovsky compare SOC with several similar concepts and gives a theoretical foundation to SOC.

Antonovsky's basic question was (my translation) "why do people end up at the positive end in the Health-Unhealth dimension, wherever they are at a specific moment" (Antonovsky 2005: 16).

Antonovsky divides SOC into three main components, namely: Comprehensibility, Manageability and Meaningfulness. *Comprehensibility*, refers to "the extent to which one perceives the stimuli that confront one, deriving from the internal and external environment, as making cognitive sense, as information that is ordered, consistent, structured and clear" (Antonovsky 1987). *Manageability*, refers to "the extent to which one perceives that resources are at one's disposal to meet the demands posed by the stimuli that bombards one (Antonovsky 1987: 17). *Meaningfulness*, refers to "the extent to which one feels that life makes sense emotionally, that at least some of the problems and demands posed by living are worth investing energy in, are worthy of commitment and engagement" (Antonovsky 1987: 18).

Antonovsky claims that we always are bombarded with impressions that causes stress which must be coped with, stressors. To cope, each human has several general resistance resources, GRR, such as money, experience of the self, social support, a stable culture etc. These GRR:s contribute to make stressors comprehensible and that this, with time, will create a sense of coherence.

Sense of Coherence is defined as

"a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement" (Antonovsky 1987: 19)

Not everything in our lives affect our SOC. Areas we have no interest in is not important to us and thus do not affect us. Antonovsky point out four spheres that always are significant to us, namely one's *inner feelings*, one's *immediate interpersonal relations*, one's *major activity*, and *existential matters* (like death, conflicts, and isolation) (Antonovsky 1987: 23).

Antonovsky writes that a strong SOC can be maintained by being flexible about what in life that is important.

A distinctive feature of SOC is that it develops during a person's lifetime and is influenced by the surrounding society and culture where the person grows up and lives. In a context where others decide everything and we have nothing to say, we are reduced to objects, leading to low SOC. Antonovsky writes (my translation) "A world that is thus experienced as indifferent to what we do, will be experienced as a world that has been deprived of its meaning" (Antonovsky 2005: 130).

Strong SOC, Antonovsky writes, is created in persons that, for *Comprehensibility*, has a stable ability to assess reality (Antonovsky 2005: 44) and make problems and stressors understandable (Antonovsky 2005: 188). For *Manageability*, has the ability to recover and not feel like a victim of circumstances (Antonovsky 2005: 45), and can choose how to handle strategies to cope with stressors and has the general resources for resistance needed (Antonovsky 2005: 186). For *Meaningfulness*, has an ability to get involved and consider demands as challenges (Antonovsky 2005: 46), a feeling that it is worthwhile to deal with stressors instead of shunning them (Antonovsky 2005: 187), and also have a flexible approach to what is meaningful in one's life (Antonovsky 2005: 186).

Heidegger makes a philosophical exposition to find answer to the question about Sein, (die Seinfrage), what it is like to be a human, to exist (to Dasein). A basic idea with a Dasein is that it is an existence that can make sense of the world.

And to make sense of the world, we are close to SOC, and its three main components, comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness.

4.4 Trust and Confidence

Human actions are fundamentally directed towards the future but are grounded in the past. A feature of all actions is that the effect of them will appear only after they are made. We thus need to have trust that the response to an action will be what we anticipated.

Trust in modern societies, according to Misztal

Trust is a very imprecise and confusing notion, but trust is "an essential element of our mutual welfare and more broadly as an aspect of a worthwhile life" (Misztal 1996: 13). Misztal conceptualizes trust as "a social mechanism which can be explained by people's beliefs and motivations" (Misztal 1996: 9). Trust is also a pre-condition for us to be able to live autonomously and to formulate our self-identity. Trust consists of several concepts that varies depending on the context where it is used. Trust can be seen as something individual (that you trust yourself and your abilities - confidence), as interpersonal and as something between you

and the society at large. Typical concepts included are security, hope, confidence, predictability, uncertainty etc.

I agree that trust is necessary to live our lives fully. Without trust it is not possible to know how to act to have an intended result.

Trust (Swedish = Tillit), according to Aronsson

In modern societies, where nearly everything is intertwined, economically, politically, and socially, trust is almost a prerequisite for everyday life. We need to trust that, and have confidence in, things will continue to work as expected, even when we as individuals do not understand it. Aronsson point out that trust have various levels, it can be individual, interpersonal, and between individuals and the society at large. The concept is ambiguous and depends on the context where it is used.

To exist, in a social world (MitDasein), means to live in uncertainty about the future. We cannot foresee nor control the actions of others. To have trust is therefore necessary to make the world more predicible which in turn decrease uncertainty and stress, (my translation) “The psychological core of trust is that people and things are trustworthy. As a result, human identity is stabilized, and the social world becomes more foreseeable and manageable” (Aronsson 2017). To speak with Heidegger’s language, when we have trust, we might dare to act and leave the everydayness (das Man) and perhaps even take care of our potentiality-for-Being (Seinkönnen). But, if we lack trust, (my translation) “it will limit people’s actions, create tension, anxiety and stress reactions that can develop into ill health” (Aronsson 2017).

OECD Guidelines on measuring trust

OECD have published a book about how to measure trust. The aim of the book is to assist data producers and describes best practices in trust management and proposes a set of measurements to form the basis for international comparisons (OECD 2017: 11). The guidelines distinguish between *interpersonal* trust (trust in other people) and *institutional* trust (trust in all types of institutions). Interpersonal trust is separated into (OECD 2017: 11):

- *Generalized* trust, referring to trust in people who are not known and to situations where the person being trusted is not specified.
- *Limited* trust, referring to persons being know, like family, friends and neighbours.

About Trust, OECD writes that it is of fundamental importance to the well-being of individuals and society. Individuals, “in order to live comfortably, people need a personal

feeling that the others [...] can be trusted” (OECD 2017: 11). OECD point out that there is relatively little research on “the effect of the respondent health conditions on trust” but mentions a World Health Organisation’s survey (WHO, 2012) as an example.

The book then goes through several different measures made by different agents and, in appendix 1 shows “Illustrative examples of trust measures” and in appendix 2 “Question modules”.

I agree with OECD that trust is of importance to individuals’ health, and thus also is an important part of Existential Health. I am not going to measure trust in any way, but the book helped me better understand the complexity of, and what to include in the concept of trust.

5. Previous research

I have not been able to find any research about Existential Health for Nordic retirees living in Spain. But there are several research projects made about Nordic retirees in Spain. The focus of those projects is mainly about social and economic issues and existential matters are not mentioned. As Hanna Eldarwish, points out in her article in *The Badger* “Belongingness and Existential Mattering,” (Eldarwish 2022) a sense of belonging can promote meaning in life. I have thus also investigated some research about belonging.

“There’s a wide range of literature suggesting that a sense of belonging promotes meaning in life; that humans are social beings and that we have an innate need to belong and matter. Essentially, when I feel like I belong, I feel like my life matters” (Eldarwish 2022).

I have found three previous research projects that I will look into

- Gavanoas, *Pensionärsplanetten*, 2016, a journalistic book about Swedes in Spain and their retiree migration in a global world
- Woube, *Finding One’s Place*, 2014, a doctoral thesis about Swedish migrants to Costa Del Sol
- Olsson, *Guiden till Spaniensverige*, 2018, a book about lifestyle migrants to Costa del Sol

Pensionärsplaneten – The Retiree planet (Gavanas, A.)

The book is based on a social anthropological research project¹⁰ that resulted in several articles and this book. Gavanas made her interviews in Spain during the winters of 2013 and 2014 (Gavanas 2016: 8). When Gavanas first came to Costa Blanca, she was surprised that the environment she went to was so dominated by Nordic retirees (ibid.). Gavanas have interviewed many persons to get their life stories and learn how they live in Spain. A large part of the book is about how Swedes see themselves and their relations to workers employed for, mostly, household duties. Interviewed are people living quite different lives, like poor retirees, disability pensioner, and retirees without a home.

Migrant Swedes look upon themselves as an asset for the areas where they live as they buy things and offer job opportunities. A typical view from one of the retirees (my translation) “We Swedes are popular in Spain because we are so good at consuming. Just think: where would Spain be today if we weren’t here?” (ibid: 33). They see themselves as desirable, reliable, and upright persons that can move freely around the world. But there is another reality, for those that are poor and need to be careful with their money. The Swedish Church is a popular place to get in contact with others. Many of the retirees say that they have a schedule full of activities, living their lives to the full. Typical activities are hanging out on restaurants and cafes together with other Swedes. Other popular activities are volleyball, dancing and to sing-along at “Swedish” restaurants and stroll along the beach. But what is behind all these activities? Is there a sense of idleness, emptiness, and loneliness that individuals try to fill? And do this the uncomplicated way, by spending time with other Swedes. Gavanas uses a quote from the author and tourist Lyttkens in his book *Vinter på Teneriffa* (Lyttkens 1955) that implies this (my translation):

“It is often difficult to get in touch with the local residents. Language difficulties can be a reason [...] In addition, the idleness often creates sociability and makes it near at hands to join compatriots” (Gavanas 2016: 149).

About health care, Gavanas writes that people not living permanently in Spain are entitled to emergency care only. Another thing to consider is that if they need a transport back to Sweden, in case of getting sick or dies, this cost is not covered by the Swedish consulate (Gavanas 2016: 43). Furthermore, the Spanish health care system relies on help from families

¹⁰ Research Project: Svenska pensionsmigranter i Spanien och deras migrantarbetare

and relatives, and when those are far away, it creates a problem (Gavanas 2016: 45). To have proper care during the last years of life is very expensive in Spain, meaning that most must return to Sweden to get appropriate care on e.g. retirement homes.

The new language is a hurdle for many, and most does not care about learning Spanish. But they do not regard this as a problem if they are relatively healthy and spend their time together with other Swedes.

I have seen myself that the population in certain areas, of and around Torrevieja, are mostly foreign, Swedes, Norwegian and British. Most of those I spoke to, did not mention the Spanish society, except for the health care that they praised as world class.

Finding One's Place (Woube, A.)

This doctoral thesis from 2014, is an ethnological study of *belonging* among Swedish migrants on the Costa del Sol in Spain – “The objective of this thesis is to study how belonging is created and given meaning in everyday practice by migrants from Sweden” (Woube 2014: 15). Belonging is seen as an experience of inclusion, by practices shared with others. It is about finding and understanding one's place in a social world and feel connected to it. Focus is on the different practices upheld in a transnational social space and how this creates feelings of belonging. The feeling of belonging is in itself a contradiction in today's society where individual freedom and independent choosing of lifestyle is important. Migration is a sign of this freedom, but migration also breaks the old belonging without by default giving a new belonging. This new belonging thus needs to be created and how this is done is one of the objectives of the thesis.

A common way to cope with the reality in a new country is to establish a diasporic infrastructure (Woube 2014: 188). Swedish migrants, lives in diasporic settings, but have a superior position in the global ethnic hierarchies due to both finance but also due to the perception of the locals. The locals separate Swedish, and northern Europe migrants, from the migrants from poorer eastern Europe countries that migrate to Spain to find work (Woube 2014: 91). Swedes also have the possibility to return to the old country. The people interviewed states that they engage in and are committed to the Swedish diaspora collective and base their belonging on practices and traditions familiar from Sweden, “the Swedish presence on location becomes valuable as Swedish arenas, around which to orientate one's daily life” (Woube 2014: 192). The decision to migrate can be based on an understanding that the new is different and desirable and the migration can be seen as an adventure contrasted

with the routine everyday life in Sweden. At the new location, social encounters with the own collective groups, e.g. the Swedish diaspora, in different localities are important.

One story, told by Margareta, claims that many elderly only socialise with other Swedes and that the only thing in Spain that really interests them is the climate (Woube 2014: 86).

The thesis ends with “Transnational belonging [...] connected to the Swedish diasporic collective that can function as a compensatory source of national affiliation for the Swedish migrants on the Costa del Sol” (Woube 2014: 195).

The thesis is about all types of migration, such as for studying, to find a better work, for love and about finding a better climate.

But once the migration is done, was the old life really so boring and has the new life become better? Did the migrants find better life, better Meaning, better Coherence, and better Trust? I think that what this thesis is about, i.e. belonging, is an important part of all this. If you find something that you can connect to and feel that you belong to, it will help to find MIL, and to get a better sense of Coherence and Trust, and in the end make lead to a better Existential Health.

Guiden till Spaniensverige – The guide to Spainsweden (Olsson, E.)

Olsson studied Swedes living in Costa del Sol for several years. In the book he investigates what he calls “lifestyle migrants” (Swedish: livsstilsmigranter) that is characterised by their desire to change their lives and improve their quality of life. Much of this improvement relies on buying real estate (house, apartment etc) in Spain (Olsson 2018: 3-4). The migrants live in Spain for months or longer each year and a few of them permanently moves to Spain with the intention to stay for life. Olsson writes (my translation):

“The book is about these lifestyle migrants but not as much about their existence in Spain” (Olsson 2018: 4).

Olsson interviewed people in Torrevieja and Fuengirola where there are enough Swedish people to be a small town, and as there are so many Swedes it is not possible for everyone to know everyone else. Olsen describes that two people meeting in a supermarket or restaurant, do not connect deeply only because they are from Sweden and happen to be at the same place far away from home (Olsson 2018: 4). A lot of the Swedes are not interested in socializing with other Swedes and thus avoids the Swedish church and associations. But, at the same time, it is obvious that Swedes feel as a community with solidarity (Swedish: gemenskap) to

each other. How this solidarity is established is one topic investigated in the book. Is it the Swedish background and/or the language that enables this solidarity or makes people feel connected in some way? Woube point out that a way to cope with a new country is to establish a diasporic infrastructure based on common background. As a guide to understand the book, Olsson writes (my translation):

“The discussion in this book is about the organized attempts to establish a social community, but also about how the migrants gets a working and comfortable life where the lifestyle project can be realized” (Olsson 2018: 5).

A Swedish community feeling is clearly expressed in the Swedish Church and at clubs and communities in Torrevieja. The migrants have a demand for local services like craftsmen, physiotherapists, transportation etc. and there is a waste supply of such services. There is also a great supply of services in entertainment, sports, and culture. Olsson writes that it is obvious that the migrants feel that it is safer to use suppliers that speak Swedish, especially for legal and health issues (Olsson 2018: 131). The migrant also wants to keep in touch with Sweden and thus needs the technique required to connect to internet and to watch Swedish tv-channels. There is also a demand from the migrants to visit relatives and friends in Sweden now and then. Olsen point out that much of this is a question about costs and finance. Key questions in the book are how the social associations tries to get the migrants attention and make them join and become members and what the connection within the communities looks like.

Torrevieja, and other similar places, are heavily exploited and, according to Olsson, has lost all charm it once had but it still has good climate and weather. Olsson made a survey, and it supported the idea that climate is an important factor behind a migration or longer stay in Spain. In figures, 85% said that “better climate” was the main reason for them (Olsson 2018: 44).

Olsson writes that there is an openness between people and that living in Spain is void of requirements (Olsson 2018: 45), but this openness and social life does not include the natives, the Spaniards. The natives are sometimes even in minority in the urbanisations and restaurants.

On the surface, it seems that the climate is the main reason to come to Spain, but it is only the climate and sun that attracts people? Another reason is health issues (the warm climate may reduce the felt illness) and that it is easy to continue to have contact with Sweden. As Olsson

continued to talk to people, he got a feeling that there are other deeper explanations that the informants were not willing to talk about it. The reasons and feelings might be too private to talk about (Olsson 2018: 47).

The migrants seem to live with one foot in Sweden and the other in Spain and to cope with everyday life, they need a lot of support that they can find information about in Facebook and non-commercial sites on internet.

About integration, Olsson refers to a study by Per Gustafsons och Ann Elisabeth Laksfoss Cordozos (2017) about migrating Swedish retirees. The study concluded that Swedes avoid being included in the Spanish society. Yet another study by Lundström (2017) indicates that the retirees are aware of their privileged situation and ought to, at least, try to come closer to the Spanish society, but the barriers to become more integrated are many and you need to speak Spanish, learn how the Spanish society work (read bureaucracy), understand how social life work in Spain and have access to social contexts. Olsson see the Swedish migration to the south of Spain as an expression of a will to live a comfortable and safe life, but at the same time keep in touch with the Swedish society (Olsson 2018: 170) and to realize a lifestyle project.

As it will be clear in my thesis, I recognise much of what Olsson writes, even though my research is not about clubs or associations and how they work. I have met 20-30-40 Swedes and asked them all if they speak Spanish and the answer was always – No. I also agree that Swedes sticks to each other, or other Swedish (or Norwegian) speaking people. I am not sure if this is true or a consequence of me meeting only part of the Swedes living there. But I do not believe that Swedes trust helpers only because the helper speak Swedish. To me it is a consequence of Swedes not being able to speak Spanish and not having an understanding of the Spanish society, thus having to use Swedish helpers. As for Olsson, I did not meet people that avoids the Swedish church and associations.

6. Presentation of findings

I will in this chapter make a rather detailed description of the field, Torreveja. followed by how it was to enter the field. I will then present the information I gathered through interviews and conversation with people I met. These parts are rather lengthy. My purpose with this is to give a thorough ethnographic description to give a good understanding of the field and the people prior to describing common experiences and traits. This will be followed by

descriptions and analysis of a few common topics, about the life in Torrevieja, that I found in the interviews.

6.1 The field site - Torrevieja

Torrevieja is located on the east coast of Spain, not far from Alicante. The area is part of a 200 km long coastline popular among tourists and people relocating from their home countries, e.g. Sweden. As many Swedes live in Torrevieja it is an interesting place to make research. Olsson did visit the area multiple times for ten years to gather data to his book *Guiden till Spaniensverige* so he also thought it was an interesting field site, as he writes (my translation) “Torrevieja has [...] a Swedish population that corresponds to a smaller Swedish city” (Olsson 2018: 4).

The climate is mild, with the coldest months of January and February having temperatures ranging from 12° to 16°C. The hottest months of July and August have temperatures around 28°C to 35°C. Sunny weather predominates, and rainfall is scarce and intermittent. Water temperature varies from 14°C in February to 25°C in August. The climate is described like this on internet in the city tourist guide:

“Torrevieja has a micro-climate which marks it out from other neighbouring towns. The proximity of two salt lakes works in favour of good climatic conditions with regard to both torrential rainfall and strong winds.”¹¹

The city population have grown tremendously from 1991 when it had 25.000 residents to 100.000 in 2023. Out of these, about 50% are of Spanish origin. About 1677 Swedes are registered residents¹², that is registered as living in Spain. But many more owns a house or apartment that they visit some weeks per year. Unfortunately, I could not find any accurate figures about how many Swedes that own properties in Torrevieja.

The city centre is located between a highway and the Mediterranean Sea. The highway is dimensioned for the traffic situation decades ago and there are daily traffic jams in both directions. The space available for the city to grow is thus limited and I cannot see that the centre has expanded much the last 20-30 years. The streets are narrow, many are one-way-streets, and it is difficult to get through in some streets when cars are parked on both sides. I had to drive very carefully, even with my small Mini Cooper. Parking along the streets is

¹¹ Torrevieja tourist guide on the net - [Torrevieja.com/en/climate](https://torrevieja.com/en/climate)

¹² Torrevieja home page, news

difficult and I had to cruise up and down to, at last, find a tiny empty space for my car. I did not want to do as some others, park illegally at the street intersections. And it still is out of season, with a limited number of tourists.

Most of the houses looks a bit worn with grey facades but there are some new apartment houses under construction. Walking the streets is easy, not many people out and those I met was friendly. I noticed that the streets are clean and well kept. The city centre is remarkably quiet except where construction work is going on. There are several restaurants, most of them have tables outside on the sidewalks, some in tents or other types of shelter. To make it easy for foreigners, most of the restaurants in the city centre display their menus in Spanish, English and Swedish. To try to become hubs for Swedes, there are restaurants with names clearly stating that they have Swedes as their main target group and they post information on Facebook to highlight that they do Swedish home cooking but to my surprise, I did not find any restaurants with Spanish food as their specialty. There might be some, but I did not notice them. In the urbanisation we lived, and probably in others too, I saw a tendency that restaurants aiming at different nationalities got together close to each other. This is obvious for English and Irish restaurant that often were located side by side while Nordic restaurants were more scattered around the city and urbanisations.

Most of the population increase has been in a substantial number of urbanisations (i.e. gated communities), spreading out to the north and south of the centre. These urbanisations also attract restaurants and shopping centres and becomes small communities by their own. There is no need to go far to have a good everyday life. Further urbanisations are planned and started to be constructed. A controversial example is Cala Mosca, located on the only undeveloped strip of land in Playa Flamenco where the plan is to build 2.200 new homes.¹³ When this urbanisation is built, there will be no undeveloped land near a beach left for many kilometres south of Torrevieja.

The gated communities have janitors employed to look after the gardens, pools etc., and what I could see, they are doing an excellent job leaving green lawns, well-kept vegetations and inviting pools.

The countryside around Torrevieja, on the other hand, is very dry and barren with truly little green vegetation.

¹³ Murcia Today, "Final approval given"

6.2 Entering the field

Prior to boarding the airplane from Copenhagen to Alicante I thought

“How would it feel if I were going to my own property in Torrevieja? Now, it feels like I am a stranger travelling to something unknown. A place where I do not know anyone or anything. How will it feel after my two weeks there? How will my feelings and perceptions have changed?”

The flight from Copenhagen was almost full. I heard people talking about their apartments in Spain and how often and for how long they visited. A lot of smiles and much laughter. My impression was that people did not know each other when starting a conversation. Everyone seemed to be in a good mood, but one man worried a bit as he had had a water leak in his apartment and did not know how much that was damaged.

Me and my wife arrived in Torrevieja on a Tuesday evening and settled in our rented apartment. Next thing was to find a restaurant as we were becoming very hungry. And that turned out to be easy. When we drove close to the apartment, we saw at least 5 places to eat in close vicinity to the apartment. We went to one of them, and already on the way in I heard two group of people speaking, one in Norwegian and the other in Swedish. We ordered from a waitress that did not speak Spanish, she was from Hungary and spoke English, German and Hungarian, but no Spanish. On the way out, I started to speak to the Norwegian people. I almost regretted it, they just kept on talking and talking. Will it be this easy to get in contact with people (and hard to leave them)?

I had prepared a questionnaire (questions as shown in the table below), where I asked people to compare their experience of living in Spain as compared to living in Sweden. I handed out the questionnaire whenever possible, like in the Church and at the Club. I got 17 answers to my questionnaire. This is, of course, much too few answers to be able to make any real statistical conclusions. But the answers gave an interesting indication about the topics of meaning in life, coherence, and trust/confidence. Spain got a higher scoring in all three aspects mentioned in the questionnaire.

	Spain	Sweden
I do something that is meaningful to me each week (Meaning)	68%	58%
I participate in an activity together with others (Coherence)	72%	56%
I trust others, people, official institutes etc (Trust / Confidence)	65%	60%

Table 1- How is it to be you, in Spain versus Sweden

Typical answers indicate that the informants participate in more meaningful activities together with others in Spain. A typical response “I walk and socialize with other Swedes.” The answers about trust did not differ much between Spain and Sweden, a typical response covering both Spain and Sweden states “I fully trust my friends and family. The authorities I do not trust that much”. I end the chapter with an analysis about how life in Torrevieja have affected the informants Existential Health.

6.3 Observations

The Club Expat

The club, located in the city centre, has about 750 members (there is a minor member fee of 25euro). The entrance is adorned with flags from all Nordic countries. The door is a bit anonymous and hard to find. At the wall outside a wrought iron gate there is a small notice with the club’s name and a buzzer to press to get in contact with the club. I pressed the button and a voice said, “Club Expat, welcome” and a buzzing sound told me that the gate was unlocked. We went into the hallway, and after some search, located the club to second floor. We went in and was met by a Swedish woman looking curiously at me. So, I asked for my contact person, and she immediately took me to her. It took some seconds for her to understand who I was, even though we had agreed on a date and time for me to visit. The club is accommodated in two apartments that is remade into one large. It contains a room for administration, one lounge, a small kitchen, a conference room and a small library with book donated by visitors. There is also a small room with old computers that are free to use for visitors. The club arranges courses in, among others, the Spanish language. Across the street there is a square with a large catholic church. Each year at Christmas, a man donates a Christmas tree and arranges transport from Sweden so it can be erected at the square.

The purpose of the club is to, according to the Chairman, to get in contact with Swedes and other Nordic people and help them with social contacts and invite them to activities and excursions. The club is clearly dominated by Swedes.

I sat down at a table in the lounge together with the Chair and the Secretary. The Chair, let’s call her Carina, is a woman in her 60s, properly dressed and with an energetic and interested look, she is clearly used to meet and take care of people. She moved to Spain two years ago but do not speak Spanish. My guess is that she has been a HR woman in a large Swedish company. The Secretary, let’s call her Susan, a warm and ambitious woman that likes to take care of people. She moved to Spain 6 years ago due to problems with her health. She lives

with a Swedish man she met in Torrevieja. She is learning Spanish with the goal to be a fluent speaker.

Excerpt from our conversation (it was held in Swedish, so everything below is my translation):

I started the conversation by saying that my impression was that the club meant a lot to its members. Susan agreed that many says it feels so homely when you step into the club. And that is the way she wants it to be. As she put it “Everyone is welcome in the family here. We do not make any difference between people. Everyone can take part.” Carina agreed and said that is the purpose of the club. When someone is sitting alone at a table Carina usually goes over to talk to them to make them feel included in the community. Carina feels that as soon as you hear someone speak Swedish it is easy to get in contact with them. Susan agrees and adds that another reason is that most do not have large social networks in Torrevieja when they move here. As mentioned, Susan moved to Torrevieja because of her health. She could not stand the winter in Sweden, so it was the climate that made her move to Torrevieja. She lived alone in Sweden but have now met a Swedish man that she lives with. Susan is of the opinion that to be a member in the club contributes to quality of life. Carina, talking about downsides in Torrevieja, said that there are several members that have lost their spouse, but they normally stay in Torrevieja. Susan continued to explain that they have established a life here. Sometimes they visit Sweden when they lost their spouse. If they own property, they usually return here but if they rent, it is harder for them to return. Carina then mentioned that when the health deteriorates, they usually move back to Sweden. I asked about health, when it deteriorates, can they get help here? Carina said, absolutely. She then switched topic a bit and gave an example of a member that lost her husband last year. They had prepared a will and all necessary paperwork. But the laws here are quite different and that shocked her. And the cost for his end-of-life care was over one hundred thousand. This is a story, Carina said, that we should tell our members, together with a solicitor, to make them aware what they should do and think about. Another thing we need to be aware of is that cremation, should be done the day after someone decease and that it cost 36.000 SEK

Susan added that they do have information evenings, and the information they give should be of use and not just for fun and entertainment purposes.

Both Carina and Susan pointed out that there is a health care centre ScandClinic¹⁴ that work like a Swedish “Vårdcentral.” There you can get surgery and other necessary treatment. The payment, for Swedish residents, is the same as in Sweden. I changed topic and asked about possible disadvantages to live in Torrevieja. Carina thought that the language is a barrier. Susan continued by saying that you can learn the language. They did not mention any other disadvantages, instead praising the climate and that everyone, young and old, are outdoors walking and talking in the evenings. They both do not see any problems living in Torrevieja. As Susan put it “I never feel scared here.”

Overall, both Carina and Susan were very positive to living in Spain. They felt they did something important that gave them meaning and coherence. And they trusted people around them, both expatriates and natives alike. I see our conversation as a confirmation of what Woube writes about settling in a new country: “A common way to cope with the reality in a new country is to establish a diasporic infrastructure” (Woube 2014: 188). To me, the Club Expat is one of those diasporic infrastructures.

At my second visit to club Expat, I met a man that newly had been elected Chair of the club. He is in his 60s, let us call him Leo, a nice social person that is easy to get in contact with. I asked what made him come to Torrevieja? Leo explained that he had been to Malaga several times and liked it. He then rented an apartment from a friend in Torrevieja for half a year. But the area was too quiet, nothing happened. Leo wants some action, so he often went to a Swedish restaurant. At the restaurant someone said they knew a Swedish man who wanted to rent his apartment to someone, and Leo happily rented it. A typical day for Leo starts with a lazy morning without alarm clock. But as he is an early bird, he usually gets up early. He like to look at Facebook and follow what is happening there. Then it is time for a long walk, between 10 and 12 am when he usually ends up down at the playa. Lunch is always at the same Swedish restaurant as it is easy to socialise and talk to people there. That restaurant is, sort of, a hangout for Leo and his friends. In the evening Leo is at home, watching TV. He does not speak Spanish and thus avoids Spanish TV-stations. As he put it “Spanish does not work for me.” He expects to still be in Torrevieja in ten years from now as he does not have anything connecting him to Sweden.

He believes that it will be hard to integrate in Torrevieja as he does not know the language, so he keeps to the Swedish community / network instead and to Leo it gives meaning to socialize

¹⁴ ScandClinic, Playa Flamenca

with other Swedes. He usually stays in Torrevieja from August to May, thus avoiding the summer months in Spain as they are too hot. Leos contacts with Spanish authorities is so far limited to one occasion when he wanted to have a fishing license. It took a lot of paperwork and a long time due to the bureaucracy. The police did not want to help as he did not speak Spanish. He got help to find someone helping him at the tourist information. Leo is concerned about theft in Torrevieja. Especially when you leave something outdoors it seems to be almost normal to take it. Leo thinks it has to do with the Spanish culture.

Leo does not miss anything from Sweden even though he thinks it is nice to go home occasionally. Swedish summer have perfect climate, and Leo miss the green vegetation. Green lawns are rare in Torrevieja, and the town is not pretty. He seems to enjoy living in Torrevieja and says that there is a lot to discover, in and around the town. He likes going on trip in the vicinity, mostly together with friends and to find friends is easy when you go to the Swedish places down here.

To me, Leo seems happy with living in Torrevieja. By his position in the club, he is doing work that means something for quite many people, thus giving him meaning. It also gives him a place from where life makes sense, thus giving him coherence. To make the club work and to be able to do his work as chair Leo also needs to have trust, both to himself and to the members. And as I experienced it, he has trust. Other ways for Leo to find meaning and coherence is by hanging out, as he does every day, with friends in Swedish restaurants.

The Swedish Church

The Church is located on the west side, close to the highway through Torrevieja. The traffic noise can be clearly heard on the patio but not in the church. It is a low yellow brick building without tower. The church contains a large church hall, a lounge with tables and chairs and a display of brochures and information about coming events, two offices for the vicar and deacon, a small library, and a kitchen. It also has a large patio paved with yellow tiles and there are many tables and chairs that can be used outside. The entrance are two large glass doors stretching from floor to ceiling. Overall, the layout and construction are very inviting and welcoming.

The church presents itself on its home page, like this (my translation):

“Welcome to the Swedish Church in Torrevieja on the Costa Blanca. Join our community!”¹⁵

¹⁵ Svenska kyrkan i Torrevieja, home page

And

“When the unexpected happens, we in the church can help you with support, dialogues, visits to hospitals and prisons.”^{16 17}

The church sees itself as a hub of Swedishness in Torreveija. It has office hours six days a week giving service to its members and there are several events each week, e.g. on Tuesday there is a social gathering over coffee (Swedish: fika). Thursday is waffle day when people can get around to have a waffle and meet others. Gavanas writes that (my translation) “it is rather a sense of belonging – not necessarily the religious aspects – which is the attraction of the Swedish churches abroad when you don’t know the language” (Gavanas 2016: 47).

The church relies on volunteers and tries to keep the number of employees as low as possible. At the moment it has about 50 volunteers. When someone offers to become a volunteer, the church asks them “what do you want to do” instead of immediately assign them to some sort of work.

On a normal Sunday Mass, there are at least 120 people attending, there is a church choir of close to 30 volunteers. The choir is led by a man that used to be conductor for a choir in Stockholm prior to his retirement. Let us call him Knut.

There has not, during the last two years, been any confirmation nor funeral services in the church but there have been some memorial services prior to the funeral that takes place in Sweden.

The church is very including and, according to the Vicar, cooperates closely with the catholic church. Christmas services is held in the catholic cathedral close to Club Expat, and the services are so well attended that there are not seats for everyone.

Below are some excerpts of conversations I had.

The Vicar is a man in his 40s with long blond hair. He came to Torreveija two years ago leaving his wife in Norrland, and to what I know, she has no plans to move to Torreveija. He is a man that gives a very positive impression. The Deacon is in her 60s, she seems very caring and approaches me as soon as I entered the church building. She came to Torreveija

¹⁶ Svenska kyrkan i Torreveija, Kontakter och information

¹⁷ The Vicar is not aware of any Sweds imprisoned and have not done any visits to a prison for 9 months.

together with her husband when they retired some years ago. They had visited Torrevieja several times before moving permanently.

We sat down in a room adjacent to the church hall, had a waffle and a cup of coffee and started to talk. The Vicar said that “many come to the church and tell me that they are happy about the community and the connection they get here. But they also tell me that they do not have faith.” I replied that “I think we have lost much of our language to describe existential matters and that people claim not to have faith can be a part of this. To me Existential Health is about the ability to believe in and be able to take advantage of life.” Not having faith is not true for all visitors to the church as Lisa made clear during my interview of her (see below) that she is a person of faith and thus go to church.

The Vicar believe that to not have a faith is a bit of lack of connection to something bigger than ourselves. To put one’s own mysterious existence in a historical context and understand that there were others before me, to have a line back, and that everyone is part of something that will come after, and that coherence is the historical context.

To the Vicar, meaning is something we must look for when we do not have faith because there is a purpose with each and every life. The Christian faith states that we exist because God wants our lives, and that makes us search for the meaning of life and to try to understand how we fit into the great jigsaw puzzle that God has made. And when we find it, then our lives will have both a direction and a purpose. He explained that he believes that everyone has the whole life to find faith. The Deacon believe that all persons are seekers in some way, they seek for meaning in life and the direction of their lives.

I then asked them if they miss something in Sweden. The Deacon misses her children and grandchildren, but they skype now and then. My question about how often they go home became hard to answer. The Deacon had a hard time to define “home.” It is in Sweden or here in the congregation, or maybe the earth. With that said, she said that she usually goes home for Christmas and when there are special holidays or events to celebrate, like her grandson’s confirmation.

About funerals, the Vicar said that there are 1500 resident Swedes in Torrevieja that have left Sweden completely. But during his 2 years in the church, he had not had any proper funeral services with a burial of an urn. Most people in the congregation are snowbirds and stay in Torrevieja occasionally. In the Swedish Church, there had been a few memorial ceremonies only and some moments at the coffin at a crematory, but no real funerals according to the church order. In most cases the relatives take the urn with them home to Sweden and have

funeral ceremonies there and to bury the urn in the home congregation.

I shifted topic to the different rules and legislation in Spain, especially about inheritance and such things. The Vicar replied that, “generally speaking, you always need help from a solicitor. This is a paradise for consultants. Whatever you are going to do, you need someone to hold hand. And it takes a long time. But it is working, in some way!”

At Sunday mass, I sat in the congregation next to a man that was close to 90 years old, let us call him Ola. His wife sat beside him. They have lived in Torre Vieja permanently for 5 years. The wife is noticeably short and look very ill. She has trouble walking and need help for everything she wants to do. Ola was very satisfied with the Spanish health care system. They have a health insurance and is in contact with a private Swedish doctor. A drawback is that summers are extremely hot making them stay indoors most of the time. They have left everything in Sweden and do not have any connection there. I asked him if there was something he missed from Sweden. Ole said that there were two things he really missed - “the area where I grew up (Swedish: hembygden). I miss it very much. It never leaves me. And the spring.”

After mass, coffee and buns are served. I grabbed my coffee and went outdoors and sat down at a table in the shade. A couple in their 70s came and sat down. The man, let us call him Folke, has cardiac problems and difficulties walking. He used to work for a house removal company and been to many old ladies’ homes and heard their stories. The woman, let us call her Frida, seemed fit and in shape. They previously had a caravan and travelled around Sweden, but they had not been travelling abroad. They live in an apartment that their son bought in 2001. From the balcony, they have a view of the sea.

I asked them what a typical day are like for them? Frida answered that they sleep late, then make breakfast and sits down at the balcony that faces directly south. (The story ended there; I do not know why. Maybe it was about to become too personal). Folke then started to talk about their hobbies, that they like to drive around in the vicinity of Torre Vieja and look for sights and birds. He mentioned a lot of places they had visited, and he told me that he and Frida would guide people from the congregation to a bird sanctuary in a few weeks. Frida then talked a lot about their children and grandchildren. None of them spoke Spanish. Folke put it this way “no, not at all. We manage with translation through the cell phone. Yesterday we bought minced meat, and it went really well.”

I also spoke to a stout man and a likewise stout woman, when having coffee after the sermon. They are both older than 80. Let us call them Lars and Lisa. I asked them what made them

come to Torrevieja. Lisa answered that she is a person of faith and thus go to church. When they looked for a house, a criterion was that it should be within walking distance to the church. They had looked at prospects back home but not been to Torrevieja prior to buying. But one of their children travelled here to have a look. Lisa continued her story by saying that she and Lars volunteered to do work at the church. The work was not only about being included in the congregation but also about getting of social contacts. Lisa told me that a neighbour had said “it’s a pity you need to go to Spain to get this natural way to socialize.” About the church, Lisa said that it is a very inclusive ecumenic church and that it is easy to volunteer. She continued by saying that, in the church, it is much easier to get to know people, they are much more readily available. I then asked what a typical day is like for them? This time Lars took over and said that they never set the alarm clock. They sleep as long as the body needs. Then they take “the day as it comes”. I then asked if there is something they miss from Sweden? Lisa thought for a while and said, “I think it is wonderful to come to Sweden in May when I can start planting in the garden.”

After mass I had an opportunity to talk to the conductor, Knut, and his friend, let us call him Fred. I asked them about what brought them to Torrevieja. For Fred it was his wife, which had visited many times as friends to her had a house here. They did not have any plans to buy a property, but when her friends wanted to sell, they bought their property. The main reason to buy was that the climate in Torrevieja is marvellous, they especially enjoy the daylight, but also that it is about a change of lifestyle from working to be retired. When working you do not have time to experience the good things in life. Fred said that they do enjoy the simple life in Torrevieja “here you can enjoy the light, it is marvellous. You can enjoy life in a straightforward way”. They do not speak Spanish. Fred tried to learn but it did not work out. They do not miss anything in Sweden, but Fred stressed that it does not mean that they do not want to go to Sweden now and then. They have decided that Torrevieja is the place for them, and they will stay there. Fred’s wife is active in the church as a volunteer. To Fred, the Swedish church does much more than religion. There is a knitting day on Mondays, Thursdays with waffles, and there are also meetings with physical training. Much of what is done here is good and it is a natural way to meet and socialise with people, Knut concluded.

I also had the opportunity to interview a lady 80+ and her friend. Let us call them Hanna and Kaj. Hanna is in her 80s and is beginning to have problems to go for longer walks. Kaj on the other hand, is younger and in full vigour. I asked them how they did end up in Torrevieja? For me not to misunderstand their relation, Hanna declared that she and Kaj were friends

only and that she owns a dog that Kaj takes out for a walk every evening. Kaj replied that he has had a dog all his life and that it is hard to be without one. Hanna lives in a rented apartment and usually spend a couple of months a year there. Hanna and her late husband choose Spain as Hanna's husband had a transportation company but wanted to slow down. So, they went to many shows arranged by real estate agents in Stockholm. They went to Torrevieja in 1988 and found a nice apartment that they bought and have been residents since then. Hanna was not retired by then, so she took small jobs here and there. In Sweden she used to be employed by the national post offices. In Torrevieja she has worked with customer service, at an audit firm, and some other minor works. But not everything went well for her and her husband as he passed away 15 years ago. Hanna continued to live in Torrevieja, and her two daughters visit her frequently. When Hanna visits Sweden she stays with them. About his funeral, Hanna said that cremation is to be done within two days. They, some days later, had a memorial service in the local church. She wanted to take the urn with her to Sweden, so she got a special urn and a certificate to bring the urn out of Spain. The funeral service was held in Stockholm and the urn is buried there.

I asked what a typical day is for her. Due to health problems, she cannot take long walks so not much is happening. She often goes to the Swedish church. She said that she has more friends in Torrevieja than in Sweden and that life here in Spain is wonderful, especially the light during winter. and it is easy to socialize here. She expects to stay in Torrevieja for the next 10 years if her health allows.

Kaj, is a trained teacher that used to work in the north of Sweden. I am not quite clear about why he moved to Torrevieja, but he did and worked as teacher for a while. But it did not go well so he quitted and became a real estate agent instead. As he put it "I was one of two honest agents." Kaj does not like the development of Torrevieja and neighbouring areas. There are much to many restaurants and houses being built. As he pointedly put it "I don't think that those living here care about the future all at" and continued "what future does our children have?" This, to me, shows that Kaj was concerned about Torrevieja and how the authorities let the town develop, without consideration of coming generations. Kaj's hobbies are to ride his bicycle in the countryside to look at architecture. He does not like going to restaurants, so he usually cooks his own meals.

I also had a short conversation with a man singing base in the choir. I asked him how he did end up in Torrevieja? The Base answered that they first looked in Alicante but ruled it out as the people there could not speak Swedish and hardly English. They thus started to look in

Torrevejea instead. He and his wife stay in Torrevejea for two months in the spring and two months in the fall as they have too many friends and social contacts in Stockholm to settle down permanently in Torrevejea. What attracts them in Torrevejea is the weather. As the base put it “we are here for the weather but would never move here permanently.” The Base does not speak Spanish, but he reads a bit.

The last conversation I had at the church was with a lady that looked a bit lost. She was in church alone and did not seem to know anyone else there. Let us call her Lone, she is in her 60s and is very soft spoken and sometimes hard to hear. She makes a pleasant impression. I asked her if she live in Torrevejea. Lone and her husband have an apartment in the town centre. They moved to Torrevejea due to health problems as Lone have cystic fibrosis and cannot take the cold in Sweden. They first thought about Thailand, but it was too far away so they started to look around in Torrevejea in 2003. Lone said that the great advantage in Torrevejea is that it is easy to travel as the airport is close and there are many flights.

They contacted several real estate agents and went to Torrevejea have a look and fell for the last apartment that has a direct sea view from the balcony. They do not speak Spanish. On a typical day she sleeps as long as she wants. To start the day, she goes out on the balcony and cleans away the nightly sand and dust and wipes of chairs and tables and sweeps the floor. Lone likes being in the sun and if it is shining, she enjoys it for a while. Then it is time for breakfast and to read the newspapers to see what is going on in Sweden. Lone usually takes a long walk along the beach, sometimes out onto the pier, all the way to the end of the pier. Her husband travels back and forth to Sweden. He is retired too but was self-employed and feels that he cannot leave the company completely. Lone have not been in contact with Spanish authorities nor health care.

I noticed during my interviews and conversations, at the Swedish Church, that although almost everyone tells me that it so easy to socialize and that people are open to new acquaintances, there is a tendency to prioritise already known people and friends. An example is when I approached a table of four, with four free seats and asked if I could join them, I was met with a no. The free seats were for their current friends. Lone experienced the same thing and thus joined at my table instead.

The restaurant, Grill

The restaurant is part of an urbanisation and is located in a small shopping centre close to our accommodation. The centre has two more restaurants, a small shop, and an ATM. This part of the urbanisation is built in the form of a circle with townhouses all around. On the opposite

side of the street there are some large bins for waste recycling. It is so noisy when someone recycles glass bottles that all conversation stops for a few seconds! From the centre you overlook a very well-kept lush avenue with fully grown trees carrying large green leaves. The restaurant itself is divided into a large indoor room and an outdoor pavilion.

One evening, we sat down in the pavilion and saw a party of seven, clearly older than 70, sitting at a table, talking loudly and happily. On the table there were glasses of red wine and some beer bottles. When I listened up, I realised they were talking Swedish. So, I went over to them and said (in Swedish) "I recognise that language." They immediately invited me to sit down and join them. I later learned that they all lived within a few hundred meters from the restaurant. I sat beside a man originating from Norrland, let us call him Anders. Anders is short, thin, and have a deep tan and he is very talkative. He lost his wife a few years ago but intend to stay in Torrevieja. He does not speak any Spanish but that does not stop him from being constantly active. He and his friends in the urbanisation socialise a lot, playing boule, mini golf, going out for dinner.

I asked how he did end up here. Anders said that he had a good friend that lived in Quesada (10 km northwest of Torrevieja) but there was nothing to do there, so they settled in this Urbanisation instead. Anders continued to tell his story:

It is good to live where there is everything you need. And we have a particularly good friendly bond here. We are many that gets together. In this block we are about 30 to 40 people. We bowl. Afterwards we usually go to a restaurant, have a few beers and wine for one to two hours and then we go for dinner. On a normal day, I go out at 2.30pm and returns home a 9 to 9.30pm. We are a bunch of blazers that meet a few times a month for lunch. It takes 4 hours. I have been a resident for 10 years but have lived here for 12 years. I go to Sweden but not so often. I do not miss anything in Sweden, but I travel there sometimes during summer. I do not want to see snow again. When you start to think about moving here, you should rent first and look around.

Anders stopped talking for a while.

While waiting for him to continue, I hear small talk going on at the table and that it is mostly about topics concerning Sweden.

Anders continues:

There are many thousands of Swedes registered here. There are many advantages. Free medical care, almost free medication, the Spanish system. You see, I am a diabetic. Once, I was run over by a car when walking on a pedestrian crossing. I spent 2 weeks at a hospital and 5 weeks at a private nursing home. I had to pay for the nursing home, but the health care is for free. At the hospital, there was a Norwegian doctor that often came to me for a chat. Health care is better here than in Sweden! I do not speak Spanish, my wife did. I speak a bit of bad English, but I do get by. The weather is incredibly good, it seldom rains, the sun always shines. But there is the wind, of course, it blows hard sometimes, like last week.

That is how Anders ended his story. The group started a longer discussion about who was to pay what of all the food and drinks they had consumed during the evening.

A restaurant at the beach

We walked along the shore in Torrevieja. Passed a bay with cliffs, went around a building and stepped out on one of the most famous beaches in town. A genuinely nice sandy beach, about 50 meters wide and a couple of hundred meters long. Some hundred people were enjoying the sun but only a few got into to the water. Many on the beach was old, in their 80s. Some needed wheelchairs and other help. I saw one son (probably) loading his mother's motorized wheelchair into his car. Across the street there is a string of restaurants, most of them had menus in Spanish, English and Swedish. We sat down in one of them, an Indish restaurant, and faithful to my habit, I kept my ears open, and in a few minutes, I had found a couple speaking Swedish. I went over and said, "that Gothenburg dialect is not to overlook." And got the reply "well you are, we are from Västerås." That was the start of our conversation. They looked fit and had a nice tan. Let us call them Hans and Gretchen. Here is an excerpt (my translation):

I asked how long they have owned a property in Torrevieja.

Hans explained that they bought an apartment in 1988 and have used it during winter since they retired 10 years ago. They went to shows by real estate agencies in Västerås and thus became interested in living here. Several prospects looked interesting when viewing them from home and this made them go, privately, to Torrevieja to have a look for themselves to try to find a nice place. They first bought one apartment but changed to another as they felt that the apartment must be located to allow the sun to shine in and heat the apartment as it can get really cold in the wintertime. The apartment they have now is located close to the sea.

They do have a car in Torrevieja which they leave at the airport long-term parking when travelling to Sweden. They have an apartment in Västerås too. In ten years, they will still be in Torrevieja, if their health is not deteriorating, that is. They told me that the national health service here is fantastic, there is no waiting and first-class treatment. They have insurance to cover what the national health care do not. Prescriptions are written on paper here and the health service can give you all data about treatments, prescriptions etc on a disc that you can show at home. They do not speak Spanish and does not see that as a problem. When visiting a hospital Hans said that “as soon they hear that you are Swedish, they will call for staff that speaks Swedish. It works well.” Hans and Gretchen stay in Torrevieja the whole winter and lately, they have started to stay here even during Christmas and New Year. It felt strange in the beginning but is ok. They meet their Swedish friends at the beach and celebrate, and maybe take a dip in the sea. About if they miss something in Sweden, Gretchen answered “well, our children have their own lives. They work and plans other things, vacations and so on. Do not get me wrong, we have good contact with them. And sometimes they visit us here.” They normally spend the summer in Västerås. On a typical day Hans and Gretchen sleep late, takes a walk along the beach, read net based Swedish newspapers on the balcony. They also read a lot of Swedish books, so it is easy for them to be occupied the entire day. Gretchen said that they watch Swedish TV, news and so, and they feel fully updated about what is going on in Sweden. As they do not understand Spanish TV nor newspapers, they ignore them. They have a high trust in people they meet. As Hans put it “yes, we trust them. Nothing bad have happened to us.”

Gretchen continued by explaining that they have many friends here. Many more than in Sweden and that it is easy to get in touch with people. As a drawback, Gretchen mentions that many of their friends are starting to get old and does not come anymore. Some years ago, they attended a memorial service on a sea cape where half of the urn content was dispersed into the sea. The other half was brought to Sweden for a funeral service and a burial of the urn.

Occasional meetings and conversations

During our walks in town and along the beaches we met people that I heard spoke Swedish. I approached them and started a conversation. Here are some examples of such meetings. We once again met Hans and Gretchen, this time along the shore close to the pier and harbour. They had taken their daily walk along the beach and tried a new Swedish restaurant. They told me that they often visit the Swedish Church and that they meet a lot of people there.

In front of the gate to our accommodation

We saw a couple walking by and heard they spoke Swedish, so we started to talk.

I asked them how they found their way to Torrevieja. They answered that they have a friend that owns an apartment in Spain, and thought it sounded interesting. They are still working but spend a few weeks here now and then. They do own an apartment, close to our accommodation. The woman inherited some money from her mother and contacted two real estate agents. They visited Torrevieja together with the real estate agent and looked at at least twenty-five apartments. At the last apartment she felt that this was the place.

They found that the weather is much better than in Sweden and that was what made them interested in buying in Torrevieja. They both play golf, but it has become very expensive, more expensive than in Sweden.

At Lidl

Every time I went to Lidl, I heard someone speak Swedish. Here is an example from the wine shelves. I asked a man, let us call him Per, in English, what wine to pick. He looked confused so I started to speak Swedish to him. I asked why he was in Torrevieja. He said that his partner owns an apartment a hundred meters from the store. I asked why she owned it in Torrevieja. He answered that they first had been to Marbella but found it too touristic and liked Torrevieja much more. They both play golf and there are many golf courses around Torrevieja. They have lived in the apartment 6 months a year for the last 15 years. They do not speak Spanish, just enough to order beer at a restaurant.

Why Torrevieja

I found two ways people got an interest in Torrevieja. The first was via real estate agents, in Sweden, advertising and having public meetings about buying homes in Torrevieja. Some persons I met had found their real estate this way.

Olsson writes that real estate agencies marketed properties in Spain on large house fairs. The commercials used stated that all conditions to live a healthy, relaxing, and interesting life are met in southern Spain (Olsson 2018: 41). The second way was that friends or relatives already had a property in Torrevieja and it was natural to visit and buy something in the same area.

Everyday life

When talking to people, I got a feeling that they had been lifted up, moved, and dropped down in Torrevieja, in a “bubble”, where they almost without exception, socialised with other Swedes only. All worries and care were left in Sweden. In Torrevieja, nobody expressed

any anxiety or worries about their everyday life. Everything was fine and as they expected it to be. They never set the alarm clock and enjoyed sitting at a balcony before taking a walk along the beach enjoying a life free of worries and stress, enjoying the here and now.

I am not sure if this is the truth. I rather suspect that it is the result of two circumstances. First, the research conversations were between strangers, and you do not open and talk about important and deeply personal issues to people you do not know. Secondly, the inability to speak Spanish makes it almost impossible to keep updated about what is happening in the Spanish society. So, all problems and sad things happening in the local society does not reach and is not understood by the migrants, but they keep updated about what is happening in Sweden, by newspapers and TV. I also heard in many conversations that the topics discussed was about Sweden. Olsson made similar observations and got a feeling that there are other deeper explanations [about why live in Spain] but that the informants did not want to talk about it (Olsson 2018: 47).

Woube found that the people interviewed stated that they engage in and are committed to the Swedish diaspora collective and not to the local Spanish community. The Swedish arenas is something to orientate the daily life around.

Spanish

I asked almost everyone I met about their knowledge in Spanish. Everyone said that they did not speak Spanish. One man told me that it is too hard learn to speak but that he reads books in Spanish. I also asked about their contacts with health care. Several answered that language is not a problem, as soon as the staff (in the hospital or health care centre) hear that they are Swedish, they will call on staff that speaks Swedish. Another solution to the language problem is to visit clinics that advertise that they are in Torrevieja to take care of Swedish persons, thus speaking Swedish. In some of the restaurant I visited, the staff was foreign (e.g. from Hungary) and even they did not speak Spanish. It is almost like two different worlds living side by side, the Spanish speaking and the foreign. Migrants do not see a need to learn Spanish as they easily get by anyway and when they need help, there are companies and people around, that speak Swedish and are knowledgeable in Spanish language and culture, which offers the services needed.

One of the informants said “why learn Spanish? I will never get Spanish friends.”

To me it is a bit odd that even those living permanently in Torrevieja do not bother to learn the native language, Spanish. This makes it almost impossible for them to keep updated about

what is happening in the context where they live. By this they can never be integrated in the society and understand the Spanish culture and way of living nor personally have any close contacts with natives. Olsson writes that the language is a barrier, meaning that if you do not know Spanish you are referred to others with the same background (Olsson 2018: 113). Woube found, in her interviews, a similar lack of interest and knowledge of the Spanish language and society (Woube 2014: 85).

I had a conversation with a heavily built Englishman in his 60s. For the last 15 years, he lives full time in Torrevieja. The reason is that he did not like the weather in UK. I asked if he spoke Spanish. “Well, often when they hear that you are a foreigner, they will start speaking to you in English. But I do not like that. I want to be able to speak the native language. So, yes, I can speak Spanish.” I do not know if this man was representative for the English community in Torrevieja. He was the only English person I spoke to during my fieldwork.

But anyway, this made me think. Why don't Swedes bother to learn Spanish when even an Englishman do? Is it because they are satisfied with meeting and socialize with other Swedes only. Or can it be that those who wants to integrate do not visit the Swedish church nor the club? Can that be an explanation that I have not met them. I suppose that they exist.

Health care

Many interviewed stated that health care in Spain is world class with short waiting time and professional care from experienced staff. They also told me that the health care is not as expensive as in Sweden and that most of the medication is free of charge. And, as said above, there are staff available that speak Swedish. I do not know if this is the case on all hospitals and health centres. There are “Swedish” clinics that cooperate with the Swedish health care system and openly advertise about this on their internet site. This is how one clinic, Scand-Clinic, present themselves on the homepage that is made out in Swedish (my translation):

“In our clinics we work according to the same principles and standards as Swedish health care centres. [...] If you are resident of Sweden, you can have the health care cost covered by the Swedish Insurance Agency.”¹⁸

It is unclear to me what type of medical treatments or medications they prescribe. I met a prejudice about this when speaking to a Swedish medical doctor in Sweden – “I think they mostly prescribe a lot of sedatives to cope with problems of alcohol and drugs.” I did not ask

¹⁸ ScandClinic, Playa Flamenca,

any questions about this while in Torreveija, and nobody explained what type of health care they received (except for diabetes and emergency care), so I do not know if there is any truth in this prejudice. I did not have that feeling when in Torreveija, but I saw a lot of wine bottles and I noticed that I, myself, drank considerably more wine than at home.

Olsson also found that there are many health care companies, with Swedish-speaking staff, who is targeting a Scandinavian market in Spain (Olsson 2018: 60) but he does not write anything about what types of treatment that is given.

Death

The vicar had during his service in Torreveija (nine months) not had any funeral service followed by a burial of an urn. I heard several stories about deceased being cremated and had the urn brought to Sweden to be buried in the home congregation. This was the case for Hanna with her husband while Hans and Gretchen had visited a funeral service where half of the urn content was dispersed in the sea and the rest was taken to Sweden to be buried there.

To me this is the ultimate answer to the question of where “home” is and that the feeling of belonging to the old country never leaves the migrants.

What is better in Spain / Something you miss from Sweden

The common answer to these topics was that the climate is better in Spain. Much more daylight and sunny days but they miss the Swedish spring.

Another thing that many of the informants mentioned is that it is very easy to socialize and get in touch with people. As Lisa put it “it’s a pity you need to go to Spain to get this natural way to socialize”, and Hanna said that it is easy to socialize here.

I asked a lot of people if they missed anything in Sweden and most told they did not. A few said children and grandchildren while others missed the green summer and the ability to plant and grow a garden. One man, in his upper 80s, missed the area where he grew up. He told me that the feelings and experiences from that place will never leave him. My impression was that he and his wife was getting close to the end of their lives and that this triggered nostalgic feelings and longing for the childhood region (Swedish: hembygden).

Another aspect of this is that almost all conversation I heard, and overheard, was about Sweden and what was going on there. The subject sometimes shifted to how it was when they lived in Sweden. To me, this clearly shows that there still is an interest in “the old country” and that the migrants miss it but do not admit it or recognize it themselves.

What did the migrants not talk about?

I have written much about what the migrants talked about in our conversations, but equally interesting is what they did not speak about. I am aware that I did not specifically ask about these topics but, I thought that at least some of them would mention something about Spanish food or culture showing an interest in becoming at least a bit integrated in the Spanish society. But nobody did except for the deacon that wanted to learn Spanish. Two other topics not discussed was other nationalities and the influence they had on the Swedish diaspora and also the need for local services like craftsmen and helping hands in the household.

This confirmed my feeling that the migrants live a life in connection to other Swedes only. What Spain had to offer, beside sunshine and the sea, was not interesting and did not influence the migrants' lives. Another thing hardly mentioned was if there were any problems living in Spain. I only heard one person talk about dishonest people and a few mentioned the bureaucracy. To me this is a clear indication of the uninterest and ignorance the migrants have about Spain and the local population.

Existential Health - What is it like to be you, here and now

All this said and written. What to say about my research questions?

- What is it like to be you here and now as a Swedish retiree?
- What is better with your life in Spain as compared to Sweden?
- What is worse with your life in Spain as compared to Sweden?

How is the perception of Meaning, Coherence and Trust affected by a migration to Spain?

Meaning in life, what I can conclude is that there are no major changes. But the climate and the narrow and closed context the migrant lives in “the bubble”, or in Woube’s words “the transnational social space”, gives them better opportunities to follow and fulfil the meaning in life they have or fulfil the dream of a better meaning in life in the warmer and sunnier Torrevieja. It is easy to be outdoors and to find people to be acquainted to and spend time with. But at the same time, it could be a challenge to leave the meaning-in-life they had when working and find another (or stick to the same) as a retiree. Suh & Lee describes meaning in life as “a subjective judgement of one’s life as meaningful” (Suh & Less 2023: 366), and that meaning often is found in interdependence with others. Hill writes that “meaning in life involves [...] a sense that one matters and is significant [...] and is engaged in life” (Hill 2018: 38). I could see traces of this in the commitments by the migrants to the church and the club. To be a volunteer, or a member of a club of a tight group of friends gives a feeling that you mean something and is important, thus giving a better sense of meaning in life.

Coherence, the degree that life makes sense, and it is possible to see and understand patterns in it that makes the whole comprehensive, In Sweden you are one amongst many others and might have trouble finding the coherence you want as it is a very complex context. As in Torrevieja, on the other hand, you are part of a smaller community of Swedes, all with the same cultural background and a shared language that separates them from other nationalities and from native Spaniards. This makes it easy to feel part of something, a club, the church, a group going out to restaurant, a Swedish network. Martela & Steger writes that humans have the ability to reflect upon their lives. And “life is coherent when you can see and understand patterns in it that makes the whole comprehensive” (Martela & Steger 2016: 9). Antonovsky divides sense of coherence into three main components: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. As The Swedish migrants live in this smaller society, rooted in Swedish culture, “the bubble” they can understand patterns and feel that they do comprehend, can manage, and find meaning, thus having a sense of coherence. Another reason for a better sense of Coherence is in, what Antonovsky writes, that areas we have no interest in is not important to us and does not affect us. But what always will be significant is one’s inner feelings, one’s immediate interpersonal relations and one’s major activities. A migration to Torrevieja and a life in “the bubble” limits the number of relations and possibly even the activities, giving a less complex life to make sense of.

Trust / Confidence, I again have to point at the small community where the migrants live their lives. Trust and confidence in the group of 1677 residents (and many snowbirds) is high as all are in the same situation. Most of them are retired and have left all troubles and drawbacks in Sweden, e.g. taking care of their business, their involvement in the Swedish society etc. Beside this, they do not participate in the Spanish society, thus not being influenced by local troubles and drawbacks. Aronsson writes that in modern societies, trust is almost a prerequisite for everyday life and that we need to have confidence that things will continue to work as expected. Trust has different levels: individual, interpersonal and towards the society at large. Of these three levels, I can see that individual and interpersonal levels seem to be high among Swedes in Torrevieja. Towards the Spanish society, I am not sure as the migrants almost never are in contact with Spanish authorities nor Spanish natives. The trust towards authorities seems to go via Swedish intermediaries that are knowledgeable in the Spanish way to do things and the intermediaries are Swedish they are automatically trusted.

So, on the surface, and according to their own narratives, Existential Health is improved in migrants to Spain. But if this is true on a deeper and more personal and intimate level, I

cannot tell. To answer that question would require much more research than I had opportunity to do.

I felt that it behind the hectic social life was something else, something not only positive. This feeling was enhanced when I read an article in today's *Sydsvenskan* (2024-04-22) about Chatbots.¹⁹ The researcher Marita Skjuve tells, in the article, that (my translation): "many people feel lonely today, even persons with a rich social life can feel that way. Life is hectic, people do not have time." This could also be true for people living a hectic social life in Torrevieja, i.e. that they deep inside feel lonely. Olsson also writes that he in his interviews got a feeling that some questions are too personal to speak about during a brief meeting (Olsson 2018: 47).

About what to expect, some got their expectations from real estate agents during sales meetings in Sweden, followed by one or two visits to Spain when scouting for real estate, often accompanied by the agents. This information was, of course, heavily influenced by and presented in a positive way by the agents that were eager to sell.

Others got their expectations by visiting friends that already owned property in Spain. This group got a bit closer to a true and deeper understanding of how it would be to live in Spain by information from their friends and by visiting them. But during such visits, would they see how it really is to live there? Did the friends tell them about the downsides, like bureaucracy and the hot summer climate?

Everyone I interviewed told me that everyday life was better than what they had expected. But on the other hand, who would admit that they did some bad decisions by buying property in Spain and leaving Sweden?

As I have pointed out, there are some voices indicating that it is not only positive to migrate. It is hard to leave relatives and the constant traveling back and forth takes its tribute.

Woube end her Doctoral Thesis with a conclusion about why Swedes migrate that I think is true for many of my informants.

The strange and different can be understood as desirable when deciding to migrate in order to change one's lifestyle and enhance the quality of life. The migration is often viewed as an adventure and is contrasted with the dull and busy everyday routine

¹⁹ *Sydsvenskan*, "Artificiella kärleksförklaringar lurar hjärnan", 2024-04-22

before migration. It is the familiarity of everyday life in the home environment that is seen as a starting point for directing attention toward the Costa del Sol (Woube 2014: 194).

7. Conclusion

It was quite easy to get in touch and start conversations with other Swedes. As soon as we started to talk, it felt like we were in a bubble separated from the society and the other people around. We shared a common culture and a common language and that was enough to get a strong feeling of affinity. A feeling I do not find in Sweden when talking to others.

I did not specifically ask, but I believe that a lot of the people I met had been entrepreneurs owning their own companies (for instance, Hanna and her late husband owned a transportation company, Lones husband was self-employed). They thus had been living a hectic life with long working hours, leaving limited time for vacation and leisure. To migrate to Torrevieja, again as I see it, was a to break with that life and a possibility to start a completely new life without having to worry about the company, employees etc. Another aspect is that when someone leave his/her company that has been his/her life for many years, it is easy to be overwhelmed by a feeling of emptiness. What to do today? What gives meaning and coherence now?

I had a strong feeling that the people I met were living in a mood of here-and-now. They left their troubles, dull and grey everyday life in Sweden and focused on living their live here without anything holding them back (an example is Anders that goes out at 2.30pm and returns home at 9.30pm, every day). Carpe diem! A way to avoid feelings of idleness, emptiness, and loneliness! Gavanoas also had the same suspicion, that the hectic life was a way to cover the loneliness they would feel otherwise, and Olsson guessed that his informants had explanations they did not want to talk about (Olsson, 2018: 47).

Gavanoas implies the same finding when she writes that the retirees say that they have a full schedule and are living their lives to the full, hanging out on restaurant and cafes together with other Swedes. The retirees thus lives in a small network shielded from the larger community, an intentional segregation from the society they live in. This small world, “the bubble”, is rather easy to understand and to find one’s place leading to a better Existential Health. Martella & Steger writes that “life is coherent when you can see and understand patterns in it that makes the whole comprehensive (Martella & Steger 2016: 9).

What is important here, to me, is that it is not the migration in itself that is important for the migrator's wellbeing, it is how they themselves grasps, interprets and reconstructs their existence. As Jackson puts it "human existence is seldom a matter solely of ourselves, but of our relations with others, it is grasped only within ourselves (Jackson 2005: xxviii).

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Appendix A – Presentation & Questionnaire

Hur är det att vara du?

Olof von Knorring

Jag är pensionär men studerar på Lunds universitet. Mitt ämne är Socialantropologi.

I kursen ingår att skriva en uppsats om valfritt ämne. Jag har valt ämnet

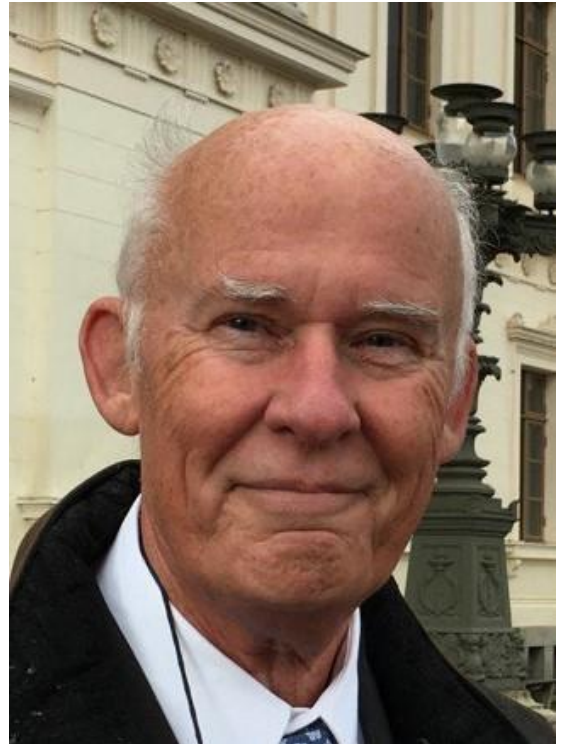
”Hur är det att vara du här och nu”, speciellt för er som bor i Spanien delar av året.

Jag kommer därför att synas lite här och där i Torrevieja några dagar nu i mars.

Jag kommer att göra:

- **Deltagande observation:** dvs jag kommer att röra mig runt och göra lite anteckningar om vad som pågår
- **Intervjuer:** jag vill göra intervjuer med några av er. Intervjuerna kommer att handla om ett ämne som intresserar mig mycket - Existentiell hälsa, framför allt om begreppen Mening i livet, Sammanhang och Tillit
- En **Enkät:** några snabba frågor om hur ni upplever livet här och i Sverige, enkäten innehåller kryssrutor och fält för kommentarer

Med vänlig hälsning / Olof von Knorring



LUNDS UNIVERSITET

Samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten,
Sociologiska Institutionen

A. Vad vill du kalla dig: _____

(du kommer att vara anonym i min uppsats)

B. När började du bo i Spanien: _____

C. Hur länge bor du här per år: _____

Din ungefärliga
ålder:

Yngre

Äldre

Dina intressen

1: Jag gör något som är meningsfullt för mig

Här i Spanien Nej Ja

I Sverige Nej Ja

Vad gör du?

I Spanien:

I Sverige:

2: Jag deltar i något (t.ex. umgås med andra, medlem i något etc.)

Här i Spanien Nej Ja

I Sverige Nej Ja

Vad deltar du i?

I Spanien:

I Sverige:

3: Jag litar på andra (t.ex. andra personer, det officiella såsom vård och omsorg, myndigheter etc)

Här i Spanien Nej Ja

I Sverige Nej Ja

I Spanien:

I Sverige:

Gör så här: Försök att tänka på både för och nackdelar med att bo i båda länderna. Kryssa för det du känner är rätt för dig. Ge gärna beskrivningar av vad det som gör att du känner som du gör.

GRADERING: 1 = NEJ, inte alls, 2 = delvis NEJ, 3 = vet ej, 4 = delvis JA, 5= JA, absolut