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Re-interpreting rationalities of risky migration

Syrian refugees' sea journeys to Europe Dance between wisdom and despair

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Re-interpreting rationalities of risky migration

Syrian refugees' sea journeys to Europe: Dance between wisdom and despair

LEJLA SUNAGIC

DIVISION OF RISK MANAGEMENT AND SOCIETAL SAFETY | LUND UNIVERSITY



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Dance between wisdom and despair

Lejla Sunagic



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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Title and subtitle: Re-interpreting rationalities of risky migration Syrian refugees' sea journeys to Europe: Dance between wisdom and despair.

Abstract:

The thesis explores the migration experiences of Syrian refugees who arrived in Sweden and Denmark by crossing the Mediterranean Sea in small, precarious boats. It aims to illuminate how these refugees managed the risks they faced during their journey to Europe and the meanings they associated with these risks. The research focuses on the socio-cultural and individual contexts within which risk is perceived, experienced, and navigated, while recognizing the dynamic nature of risk.

The thesis is guided by the central question: *How did Syrian refugees construct their understanding of the risks associated with their clandestine journeys to Europe?* The participants' narratives provide insights into subjective factors that shaped their perceptions of risk and influenced their migration decisions—such as a desire for life change (as explored in Paper I) and a sense of commitment to their children's future (as discussed in Paper II). The analysis also reveals that participants' understanding of risk was fluid, evolving over time. It transpired that it was contingent on whether their risk assessment referred to the before migration or after the migrant, furthermore it changed depending on who the risk was being evaluated for (e.g., comparing their own risk-taking to that of others).

Finally, the empirical studies challenged the traditional binary of rational versus non-rational approaches to understanding risk by revealing a nuanced interplay between these logics (Paper III). In the context of Syrian migration, it demonstrates that rational and non-rational modes of risk perception coexist dynamically and fluidly.

The findings underscore the complexity of the decision-making processes of refugees engaged in clandestine migration and the difficult trade-offs they faced in pursuit of their goals. This research contributes to migration studies by highlighting the importance of subjective factors in understanding migration motivations and risk perceptions, thus challenging the dominance of structural explanations in the field. Furthermore, it contributes to much needed enlargement of frameworks through which risk research capture fluidity and of risk perception (Burgess, 2006).

Key words: Refugees, migration, risk, perception, decision-making, rationality, subjectivity.

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Re-interpreting rationalities of risky migration

Syrian refugees' sea journeys to Europe:
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This thesis is dedicated to all the participants in this research — Syrian women and men — who opened their hearts and minds to me, allowing me access to their powerful stories of pain, hope and resilience. Without their willingness to share, this work would not exist. The process has been deeply enriching, and its impact will stay with me always.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Summary	10
Sammanfattning	11
Appended publications and manuscripts	12
Introduction	13
Research background	13
Research gap and research question	15
Clandestine migration and risk	16
Empirical background: Syrian refugees' migration to Europe	17
Theoretical framework	20
Individual risk perception and behaviour: Embedded agency	20
New developments in social and cultural approach to risk: Unstable intersection of individual, social and cultural	21
Epistemological position(s) in socio-cultural research of risk	23
Methodological consideration	24
Choice of method	24
Participants' profile	25
Participants recruitment strategy	25
Research ethics	26
Data analysis	27
Research validity	29
On the author's positionality	32
Summary of empirical studies	35
Theoretical contribution	38
Practical considerations	41
Reference	42

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I would also like to extend my thanks to my colleagues at the Division of Risk Management and Societal Safety, whose camaraderie enriched my experience.

Summary

This thesis explores the migration experiences of Syrian refugees who arrived in Sweden and Denmark by crossing the Mediterranean Sea in small, precarious boats. It aims to illuminate how these refugees managed the risks they faced during their journey to Europe and the meanings they attributed to these risks. Adopting recent perspectives on risk (Zinn 2008, 2011, 2017, 2022; Brown 2013, 2016; Lupotn, 2013, Taylot-Goodby & Zinn 2015), the research focuses on the socio-cultural and individual contexts within which risk is perceived, experienced, and navigated, while highlighting the dynamic nature of risk.

The participants' narratives offered insights into the subjective and ideational factors that shaped their perceptions of risk and influenced their migration decisions—such as a desire for life change (as explored in Paper I) and a sense of commitment to their children's future (as discussed in Paper II). Moreover, the analysis highlights the role of space in shaping subjectivity as a critical element in migrants' risk navigation. It also reveals that participants' understandings of risk were fluid, evolving across time and space.

Their risk assessments varied depending on whether they referred to the period before or after migration, thus questing the stability of values that underpinned risk behaviour. Their risk understanding also shifted depending on whom the risk concerned—for example, when comparing their own risk-taking to that of others.

Furthermore, the empirical studies challenge the traditional binary of rational versus non-rational approaches to understanding risk by revealing a nuanced interplay between these logics (Paper III). In the context of Syrian migration, they demonstrate that rational and non-rational modes of risk perception coexist dynamically and fluidly.

Paper IV provides an overview of the field through empirical studies that explore the connection between risk perception and (unsafe) migration, with a particular focus on the role of subjective factors. In sum, the findings underscore the complexity of decision-making processes among refugees engaged in clandestine migration and the difficult trade-offs they face in pursuit of their goals.

This research contributes to migration studies by emphasizing the significance of subjective factors in understanding migration motivations and risk perceptions, thereby challenging the dominance of structural explanations in the field. Furthermore, it contributes to the much-needed expansion of frameworks through which risk research captures the fluidity of risk perception (Burgess, 2006).

Sammanfattning

Denna avhandling utforskar migrationsupplevelserna hos syriska flyktingar som anlände till Sverige och Danmark genom att korsa Medelhavet i små, osäkra båtar. Syftet är att belysa hur dessa flyktingar hanterade de risker de mötte under sin resa till Europa och vilka betydelser de tillskrev dessa risker. Genom att anlägga ett nytt perspektiv på risk (Zinn 2008, 2011, 2017, 2022; Brown 2013, 2016; Lupton 2013; Taylor-Gooby & Zinn 2015), fokuserar forskningen på de socio-kulturella och individuella sammanhang inom vilka risk uppfattas, upplevs och navigeras, samtidigt som den erkänner riskens dynamiska natur.

Deltagarnas berättelser ger insikter i de subjektiva och ideationella faktorer som formade deras riskuppfattningar och påverkade deras migrationsbeslut – såsom en önskan om livsförändring (som utforskas i Artikel I) och en känsla av ansvar för sina barns framtid (som diskuteras i Artikel II). Analysen lyfter även fram rummets roll i formandet av subjektivitet som en kritisk faktor i migranternas riskhantering.

Den visar också att deltagarnas förståelse av risk var flytande och förändrades över tid och rum. Deras riskbedömningar varierade beroende på om de syftade på perioden före eller efter migrationen, vilket ifrågasätter stabiliteten i de värden som låg till grund för riskbeteenden. Deras riskförståelse skiftade också beroende på vem risken berörde – till exempel när de jämförde sin egen risktagning med andras.

Vidare utmanar de empiriska studierna den traditionella dikotomin mellan rationella och icke-rationella ansatser till riskförståelse genom att visa på ett nyanserat samspel mellan dessa logiker (Artikel III). I kontexten av syrisk migration visar de att rationella och icke-rationella former av riskuppfattning samexisterar dynamiskt och flytande.

Artikel IV ger en översikt över forskningsfältet genom empiriska studier som undersöker kopplingen mellan riskuppfattning och (osäker) migration, med särskilt fokus på subjektiva faktorerens roll.

Sammanfattningsvis belyser resultaten den komplexitet som präglar beslutsfattande bland flyktingar som engagerar sig i irreguljär migration och de svåra avvägningar de ställs inför i jakten på sina mål. Forskningen bidrar till migrationsstudier genom att lyfta fram subjektiva faktorerens betydelse för förståelsen av migrationsmotiv och riskuppfattningar, och därmed utmana dominansen av strukturella förklaringar inom fältet. Vidare bidrar studien till den nödvändiga utvecklingen av teoretiska ramar som kan fånga riskuppfattningens flytande karaktär (Burgess 2006).

Appended publications and manuscripts

The thesis is based on four papers that I authored independently: one has been published, two have been submitted, and one is still in manuscript form. Throughout the creation of these papers, I was responsible for all aspects of the research, including data collection, study design, data analysis, and manuscript writing. This hands-on involvement provided me with a deep understanding of the research process from beginning to end. Narrative research

In developing this thesis, I benefited significantly from the interdisciplinary guidance of my supervisory team, whose expertise added valuable perspectives to the research. Additionally, the constructive feedback received through blind peer reviews from academic journals was instrumental in refining and enhancing the quality of the papers.

The Paper I has been published in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies (JEMS)*, a journal committed to advancing the understanding of migration through original empirical research. Paper II has been published in *Population, Space and Place*, a journal that emphasizes a multidisciplinary approach to human migration. The Paper III is under review with an international journal which explores the concepts, processes, and implications of risk across various fields. Paper IV is currently in manuscript form and aims to review the literature to develop a deeper understanding of the connection between risk perception and clandestine migration, with a focus on subjective factors.

Paper I: Sunagic, L. (2024). Risk perception and desire in decision-making: The case of Syrians' sea migration to Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2024.2334407>

Paper II: Sunagic, L. (2025). The Complexity of Parenthood in Forced Migration: Risks, Commitments and Dilemmas. *Population, Space and Place*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.70143>

Paper III: Sunagic, L. Syrians' Sea Migration to Europe: “I carved out my chest to remove my heart and replace it with a stone. That is how I made decision to take the boat.” Manuscript under the review in an international journal.

Paper IV: Sunagic, L. Role of subjectivity in shaping risk perception and influencing migration outcomes. Manuscript.

Introduction

Research background

Recent research explores how migrants relate to the risks of clandestine journeys, specifically how they understand, assess, and respond to the risk of unauthorized border crossings (Bastide, 2015; Belloni, 2019; Carling, 2012; Carling, 2017; Carling & Schewel, 2018; Collins, 2018; Darkwah et al., 2019; Deshingkar & Gueye, 2022; Hagan & Ebaugh, 2013; Hernández-Carretero & Carling, 2012; Inuyama, 2021; Kaytaz, 2016; Kiriscioglu & Ustubici, 2023; Massa, 2024; Nyamnjoh, 2014; Poole & Riggan, 2020; Portmann, 2019; Prothmann, 2017; Simonsen, 2023; Therrien & Pellegrini, 2015; Thornton, 2020; Vacchiano, 2014; van Bommel, 2020). Migrants' assessments of the risks associated with clandestine migration are shaped by risk perception, i.e., an individual's cognitive judgment of the level of risk linked to a behaviour or situation. This perception can be influenced by a range of subjective and objective factors (Sjöberg et al., 2000). While earlier studies predominantly focused on structural factors, more recent research has highlighted the importance of subjective dimensions that influence how migrants perceive risk. These factors can contribute to increased motivation for migration, reduce uncertainty, and help individuals make sense of the potential adverse outcomes of dangerous journeys (Czaika, 2021; Erdal & Hagen-Zanker, 2022).

Because subjectivity is one of the key concepts, it requires precision (Levac et al. 2010). Subjectivity refers to the way individuals perceive and interpret the world based on their personal experiences, emotions, beliefs, and biases. This contrasts with objectivity, which is an attempt to view and describe the world based on facts and evidence, independent of personal feelings or opinions (Hagen-Zanker & Hennessey, 2021). In this thesis, subjectivity included factors such as *feelings*, *state of mind* or *intuition*. These elements are deeply rooted in an individual's internal and subjective experience. Related but not interchangeable are ideational factors such as beliefs, faith, and norms, which are individual yet embedded in societal and cultural systems (Czaika, 2021; Erdal & Hagen-Zanker, 2022; Hagen-Zanker & Hennessey, 2021). Furthermore, subjective factors frequently intersect with ideational elements which are embedded in societal and cultural systems. This intersection underscores the social and cultural foundations of risk perception, illustrating how individual judgments are informed by shared cultural frameworks and collective understandings.

Regarding the role of subjectivity as a driver of clandestine migration, research has shown that young men in Mali, for example, were willing to undertake the risks of migration in hopes of reclaiming a sense of masculinity lost due to their country's socio-economic constraints (Portmann, 2017). Similarly, among youth in Ghana, the determination to fulfil a rite of passage into adulthood—through marriage and starting a family—served as a powerful motivator for engaging in dangerous migration (van Bommel, 2021). In the case of young Ethiopians, unauthorized border crossing was often driven by desire: the aspiration to participate in an imagined outside world, to attain a desired lifestyle, and to shape a new identity (Belloni, 2019). Research on clandestine migration from Morocco has further illustrated how young migrants' subjective constructions of modernity acted as a driving force for migration. Their pursuit of modernity clashed with the normative structures imposed by European border regimes, resulting in experiences of marginalization and risk-taking (Therrien & Pellegrini, 2015).

Research shows that migrants are often acutely aware of the significant risks associated with clandestine journeys (Bakewell & Sturridge, 2021; Jasper Tjaden & Dunsch, 2020; Tjaden, 2022; Batista, 2018; Batista & McKenzie, 2017; Carrera & Carling, 2012; van Bommel, 2015; Kiriscioglu & Ustubici, 2023; Trauner et al., 2024). The ability to navigate and manage these risks constitutes a crucial part of their decision-making process (Czaika, 2021). For many migrants, reflections on the potential risks of life in the destination country are temporarily set aside, overshadowed by the immediate, life-threatening challenges involved in the journey itself.

Research with Syrian and Afghan migrants in Turkey (Kiriscioglu & Ustubici, 2023) illustrates that many migrants feel *obliged* to take the risk, driven by the fear of remaining indefinitely in a state of 'limbo'. Thus, the decision to embark on a dangerous journey is not necessarily a reflection of high-risk tolerance, but rather of the perceived absence of viable alternatives. Similarly, a qualitative study conducted in Nigeria found that the aspiration for a better life—particularly the prospect of a stable income—motivates young men to pursue unsafe migration journeys, despite awareness of the risks involved (Inuyama, 2021).

Afghan migrants interviewed by Kaytaz (2016) while en route through Turkey expressed a resigned acceptance of danger and potential death, shaped by the extensive suffering they had already endured in their home country. Across these narratives, risk is perceived not as an anomaly but as an inseparable and normalized element of the migration experience (Bakewell & Sturridge, 2021; Kiriscioglu & Ustubici, 2023; Trauner et al., 2024). Rather than deterring migration, the risks associated with clandestine journeys are understood by migrants as challenges to be resisted and creatively navigated. In this sense, risk-taking becomes a pragmatic and almost routine part of the journey—described by one participant as akin to “wearing a jacket during winter” (Kiriscioglu & Ustubici, 2023).

Research gap and research question

This thesis contributes to the growing body of migration research by demonstrating the role of subjectivity in shaping risk perceptions related to clandestine migration. Its empirical foundation is grounded in narrative interviews with Syrian refugees in Sweden and Denmark who arrived via the Mediterranean Sea. These interviews offered participants the space to reflect on and engage with their experiences of risky migration to Europe. The thesis explores how participants understood and contextualized the risks they faced, and how they made sense of those risks within the broader frameworks of their lives and aspirations.

It is important to note that, although many of the cited studies position risk perception as a central or prominent analytical tool, few provide a deeper theoretical or conceptual elaboration of the term. Instead, risk is often treated as a general concept, sometimes merely serving as an attribute of irregular migration. Additionally, the research tends to explore migrants' risk perception in relation to fixed variables—whether subjective or material—and at a specific point in their migration process, without addressing the dynamic nature of risk assessment. While we have insight into how migrants' risk perception is mediated by future-oriented aspirations, it remains unclear how the risks associated with migration are understood in hindsight, once the desired migration outcomes have been achieved in the host countries.

This thesis makes a significant contribution to the field by addressing a key knowledge gap through a distinct analytical approach. Unlike most studies that focus on risky migration based on accounts from migrants still en route, those who returned before reaching their intended destinations, or those shortly after arrival as asylum seekers, this thesis examines migration decisions from the perspective of migrants who have settled in host countries and largely achieved their migration goals.

The retrospective approach applied in this thesis provides a unique opportunity to explore the fluidity of risk perception by examining how the subjective and ideational factors that initially informed migration decisions evolve over time and across different contexts. It offers valuable insights into the dynamic interplay of perception, experience, and context in shaping migrants' understanding of risk. This analytical perspective addresses critiques, such as those by Burgess (2006), which argue that existing frameworks for analysing risk often fail to capture its fluid and dynamic nature.

Secondly, much of the research has included religion or faith among the subjective factors influencing migrants' risk perception (Hernández-Carretero & Carling, 2012; Prothmann, 2017; Darkwah et al., 2019; van Bommel, 2020; Thornton, 2020; Deshingkar & Gueye, 2022; Hagan & Ebaugh, 2013; Nyamnjoh, 2014). Thus, the research has acknowledged both material and non-material rationalities—particularly religion and faith—as shaping decisions to undertake risky migration. However,

except for Bastide's study (2014), there is limited analysis capturing the interplay between these distinct strategies. The ways in which spiritual beliefs converge with and affect rational modes of thinking remain largely unexplored.

To fill in the above gap, this thesis is guided by an overarching research question:

How did Syrian refugees interpret their understanding of the risks associated with their clandestine journeys to Europe?

The main research question is distilled into two sub-questions:

1. How did they balance different risk rationalities that intersected and influenced their decisions to migrate?
2. How did subjective elements that influenced their risky decisions change or evolve throughout the migration experience?

Given the importance of temporal aspects in the thesis, such as the forward and backward assessment of risk of the journey, narrative analysis was the most appropriate method. This approach provided participants with the space to structure their stories temporally and spatially. They reflected on and recounted their lives within specific times and places (Reissman, 2008). Narrative research was an obvious choice, as it allows space for subjectivity, which can often be overshadowed by macro-structural views of social relations. By "linking biography with society," it merged the participants' subjectivity with context (Reissman, 2008).

Clandestine migration¹ and risk

The ultimate question that migration studies seek to answer is: *Why do people migrate?* (However, migration cannot be fully understood without also asking the inverse: *Why do people not migrate?* These two questions are conceptually intertwined, representing two sides of the same coin).

The motivations behind irregular migration are often straightforward, as most clandestine migrants come from contexts marked by violence, destruction, poverty, and discrimination. When regular border crossings are not accessible, irregular migration becomes the only remaining alternative. Hence, the focus shifts from the reasons for migration to the processes behind the decision to migrate: *How do*

¹ In practical sense, clandestine or irregular migration (migrants) is used to signify entering a state by avoiding a regular border procedure. The term clandestine migration is employed to characterize the journey undertaken by Syrians to reach Europe. This designation encapsulates a fusion of visible (though frequently prohibited) smuggling and migration practices, resulting in the vulnerability of the population and their invisibility to legal protections (Çetta Mainwaringa and Noelle Brigden, 2016).

individuals decide to migrate irregularly? How do they rationalized raking a risky journey?

Clandestine migration routes are specific social spaces characterized by a mix of official, unofficial, and criminalized networks. These spaces are fraught with various forms of violence, including moral, physical, institutional, and interpersonal (Lorenz & Etzold, 2022). Risk and uncertainty are intrinsic to these journeys, making them defining features of irregular migration. Understanding how migrants assess and respond to these risks and uncertainties is critical to comprehensively understanding their decision-making processes.

All forms of migration inherently involve risks. In regular migration, these risks are primarily associated with life in the destination country—such as the potential for unfulfilled aspirations or the fear that achieved outcomes may not align with pre-migration expectations (Williams and Balaz, 2015). In irregular migration, however, the risks are far more severe, involving immediate threats to life and health during the journey itself. These dangers—ranging from exploitation and trafficking to physical harm or even death—underscore the heightened perils faced by migrants who opt for irregular routes.

Research reveals that migrants are often acutely aware of the significant risks associated with such journeys (Bakewell and Sturridge, 2021; Jasper Tjaden and Dunsch, 2020; Tjaden 2022; Batista, 2018; Batista and McKenzie 2017, Carrera-Carling 2012; Bemmell, 2015; Kirisciooglu and Ustibici, 2023; Truaner et al., 2024). Their ability to navigate and manage these risks is a critical component of the decision-making process (Czaika, 2021). For many, considerations about the risks of future life in the destination country are temporarily set aside in the face of the immediate, life-threatening challenges tied to the journey.

Empirical background: Syrian refugees' migration to Europe²

Syria's civil war is one of the worst humanitarian crises of our time (UNHCR). Since 2011, a half the country's pre-war population of 23 million people has been displaced, either internally displaced (6.8) or cross the borders. Syrians accounted for almost 1 in 5 refugees globally, with 6.5 million hosted in 131 countries (UNHCR).

² The thesis was finalized including the researcher design development, data collection, data analysis and writing before the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria in November 2024, after which the context both inside the country and regarding the refugees' situation in the neighbouring countries has changed. This background is pertinent to the context at the time of the participants' migration to Europe, which forms the subject of their narratives.

Syria's immediate neighbours host the largest proportion of Syrian refugees. In 2022, Turkey was the country that hosted the highest number of Syrian refugees that amounted up to 3.5 million refugees. Lebanon was second and was hosting 831,000 Syrian refugees, which makes up 22% of total Lebanese population. 660 000 Syrian refugee found refuge in Jordan. More than 150,000 Syrian refugees have sought safety in Egypt (Statista). These countries do not grant refugee status to Syrians, nor do they offer opportunities for full and legal integration to date. Instead, Syrian refugees have been relegated to poor living conditions, exclusion from the formal job market, and inadequate aid. Many reside unregistered. As an example, 83 percent of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon lacks legal residency, an all-time low (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Due to pressure on the national resources, Syrians are ever more faced with hostility and pressure to return home.

Meanwhile, conditions in Syria have become increasingly hostile to repatriation. As the Assad's regime has retaken vast country's territory, refugees have become increasingly fearful of forced conscription, targeted reprisals, and food insecurity as the economic situation in regime-held territory continues to deteriorate. These challenges to repatriation were dramatically exacerbated in 2021, when the Syrian government instituted a new law requiring Syrian men (displaced or otherwise) who had not completed their mandatory military service to pay an \$8,000 fine or see their property confiscated without notice. Syrian refugees who could not pay the exorbitant fee lost the legal right to property they were forced to leave during the war (Newlines Institute, 2023).

Inside the country, the situation remains grim. The conflict has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands, including civilians and the fighting factions. Ongoing conflict has significantly damaged the nation's roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, and homes. People can't access essential services due to the widespread devastation. With many businesses and industries damaged or disrupted, the nation has experienced high unemployment and widespread poverty. The February 2023 earthquakes further exacerbated the situation inside Syria, affecting around 8.8 million people and destroying homes and vital infrastructure (UNOCHA, 2023).

All of this fuelled a large movement of Syrian refugees towards Europe. At the same time, Europe's asylum policy regarding Syrians has been largely based on a grading of its border, which turned a million Syrian refugees into 'irregular' migrants who gambled their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea to seek protection in Europe. When, in August 2015, EU states ceased enforcing the Dublin Regulation, which requires asylum seekers to apply for protection in the first EU country they enter, it became possible to arrive in Greece and seek asylum elsewhere in EU. Between August and December 2015, more than 400,000 refugees landed on Lesbos, a Greek island, and nearly half of them were Syrians (BBC News).

European countries hosted around 1 million Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees, with the 70 per cent being hosted in two countries only: Germany (59 percent) and

Sweden (11 percent). Most of them arrived via the Eastern Mediterranean route, beginning their journey in Turkey and entering Europe through Greece, or via the Central Mediterranean route from Egypt to Italy (UNHCR, ODP).

The Mediterranean Sea is deemed the deadliest sea crossing; in the last couple of years, it is sea from which the largest number of casualties and missing people have been registered (Buchholz, 2023). Although the entire clandestine journey is filled with risk, most deaths occur while crossing the sea (IOM, 2023). It is estimated that the number of losses is higher than reported, as registration only happens when a body is found. More than 3000 refugees drowned in the Mediterranean in 2015 alone, trying to get to the shores of Europe. The bodies pulled out of the Mediterranean reached 5000 in December 2016 (IOM, 2023).

Theoretical framework

Individual risk perception and behaviour: Embedded agency

To understand individuals' risk perception and behaviour, researchers have traditionally relied on social psychology, using methodological individualism (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2015). By focusing on cognitive factors that influence individual risk perception, it demonstrated that people frequently make errors when comparing and evaluating risks as they develop mental shortcuts, to simplify risk evaluation, which can lead to perceptual distortions (Kahneman et al., 1982). The psychometric paradigm, in search for universal rules that govern peoples' decision, has faced criticism for neglecting the social and cultural factors that shape risk perception (Ripple, 2002). As a result, a new stream of risk research has emerged, aiming to bridge the gap between individual perceptions and socio-cultural influences. This shift introduces the cultural theory of risk and moves the focus toward the mezzo-level (Brawn, 2016).

Accordingly, anthropologists and cultural sociologists suggested that societal reactions to risks were shaped by dominant cultural belief systems. They argued that these cultural prototypes, which apply to larger social groups, can help predict how individuals respond to risks (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982). Douglas shifted the risk debate from technical assessments to social meaning, opening the door for anthropological, sociological, and interpretive approaches to risk (Jackson et al., 2006). However, the theory has not been free from criticism. One major critique centre on the "stability" assumption, which suggests that an individual adheres to a single, stable cultural type (Bohol, 1996). Critics argue that people can simultaneously subscribe to different cultural traditions depending on the context, such as work, home, or religious adherence. The theory's assumption of stability also implies that a person's cultural base remains unchanged over their lifetime, which many see as an oversimplification (ibid). Furthermore, Douglas's approach interprets culture as an additional and independent, not as a general underlying factor (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2015).

New developments in social and cultural approach to risk: Unstable intersection of individual, social and cultural

The theory of risk moved beyond its pioneers. This thesis is anchored in new developments stemming from socio-cultural and sociological in general approaches to risk and uncertainty that continues to develop in manifold interesting directions.

Unlike behavioural approach to risk that is successful in reconstructing the nature of individual judgement biases, new avenues of (interpretive) sociological risk research contributes to fleshing the variations in judgement due to social environments (Brown, 2013). According to Brown (2016), key tendencies are cantered around a socialized individual as an analytical orientation. In a broader sense, the desirability of risk taking depend on individual preference, social context and cultural affiliation. In other words, “humans do not perceive the world with pristine eyes, but through perceptual lenses filtered by social and cultural meanings, transmitted via primary influences such as the family, friends, subordinates, and fellow workers” (Dietz et al. 1996, p. 46 in Renn, 2008).

Our development of risk perception is not a tidy process; it often involves competing strategies about the world, each with distinct logics and rationalities underpinning our understanding of risk (Lupton, 2023). These strategies are typically categorized into two approaches commonly referred to as cognitive rationality and non-rational approaches (Zinn, 2008). This division reflects the contrast between objective knowledge informing rational strategies and subjective factors such as hope, belief, and faith associated with non-rational approaches to understanding risk. The distinction between these two strategies has led to the lay-expert debate in risk research. Accordingly, rational strategy includes logical reasoning and waiting pross and cons. For its stemming from calculative engagement with facts and experience based on expert opinion, it is considered superior (Lupton, 2023). This is contrasted with lay people's approach, which is seen as subjectively distorted (Zinn, 2008, p. 440), Zinn (2016) argues that this dichotomy fails to recognize the benefits of non-rational strategies, which enable individuals to act when faced with limited possibilities for a positive outcome or when control over the course of action is limited.

In response to the rejection of layperson risk understanding, sociologists have sought to demonstrate that lay perceptions of risk are founded on sources of knowledge that should be acknowledged as being equally important and rational as scientific expert assessments (Lupton, 2023). In this context, Zinn (2011) argues that what seems to be a nonrational decision can be based on rational cognitive practices. Nonrational activities have their own rationalities when dealing with the risks and opportunities, which Zinn (2020) called "reasonable" to distinguish them from the economic utility approach and the techno-logical concept of rationality. In certain contexts, a nonrational approach can be superior to the orthodox notion of

rationality, especially in situations characterised by a lack of knowledge, restricted control over the present and future, and changing interests and values (Zinn, 2020). Therefore, even apparently irrational responses to uncertainty, such as faith-based responses, could have practical functions in the management of risk and uncertainty.

Furthermore, Zinn (2016) introduced the 'in-between' strategy, comprising instinct, trust, and emotion. Brown (2013) termed it *mixed rationalities* as it blends knowledge acquired from past events and inevitable leap of faiths that characterized decision among based on instinct, thrust and belief. This strategy is neither fully rational nor fully irrational; it can be based on knowledge, albeit not scientific knowledge, and it can combine some features of irrational approaches, such as being influenced by personal context, hope, and beliefs.

Lupton (2013) also contested the notion of a 'rational' way of responding to a definable risk, as practiced in calculative risk research. In the context of the blurring the line between the rational and irrational approaches to risk understanding, she (2003) argued that complimentary to the calculative approach, relying on subjective factors help people actively engage in the risk-taking. This is because our experiences and judgments are inherently intertwined with our embodiment in the world. Subjective factors interact with people's calculative reflection and in the process, they configure each other (2013). Going further, Lupton deemed that understandings of risk constantly configure and is configured in interactions with social and cultural processes, personal experiences, material objects, and the dimensions of space and time. The assemblage of these factors is fluid, suggesting that individuals situated differently can arrive at distinct understandings of risk and respond to it in varied ways (Lupton, 2013).

People engage in risk-taking for diverse reasons, spanning from fundamental needs and material aspirations to the desire for social acknowledgment, a sense of self-value, and the sheer pleasure of embracing uncertainty. These motivations for risk-taking often intertwine. Zinn (2023) identified three primary functional categories of risk-taking: when it becomes a goal in itself when it serves as a method to achieve an objective, and when risks are assumed in reaction to vulnerability. This classification is based on the motivation that is understood as a general driver of risk (Zinn 2017). Unlike motivation as a personal characteristic, this classification is based on social motivation as being shaped by actual social context and social experience.

Socio-cultural research yielded multitude of concepts related to risk some of which are in harmony and others in conflict with each other. However, what is common is the definition that desirability or undesirability of outcomes, estimation of probability as well as formulas to combine these two aspects depend on individual preferences, social context variables and cultural affiliation.

Epistemological position(s) in socio-cultural research of risk

In socio-cultural literature there is a range of the epistemological positions on risk that are taken up, with some falling more towards a relativist, and others more towards realist approach, yet others somewhere in the middle (Lupton, 2023). For social constructivist, the focus of research is on how concepts of risk are part of lived experience, logics and perspectives. It highlights the importance of understanding the embeddedness of perception of risk. In this thesis the risk is conceptualized as follows: it is based on objective facts about danger and hazards, however, perceived and responded to in particular ways according to structural, social and individuals' properties. According to Lupton, this can be described as a weak social constructionism thesis. Yet, the thesis is leaning further towards constructionism in the premise that when dangers and hazards are identified, it is not the end of the process. In Lupton's (2023) words: "Risks are mutable, contingent upon further acts, framings and practices, they are unstable" (p. 39).

The socio-cultural approach suggests that risk perceptions often differ among individuals in different contexts, leading to conflicting understandings and responses to risk. This thesis adds to this understanding by demonstrating how an individual's risk perceptions can vary due to subjective factors that are influenced by the socio-structural environment. It also shows how risk perceptions can be fluid, changing depending on whether the individual is considering risk for themselves or assessing risk for others. Finally, it highlights a dynamic and constructive coexistence of various rationalities and logics related individuals can employ in the face of risk. This research is built on the intersection of emerging migration literature that emphasizes the role of subjective and ideational factors in socio-cultural research on risk, and which connects variations in risk judgment to individual preferences shaped by social environments.

Methodological consideration

Choice of method

As narrative inquirers, we need to hold open and make visible the ways that participants, and we, struggle for the coherence, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. We must, in the composing, co-composing and negotiation of interim and final research text, make visible the multiplicity, as well as narrative coherence and lack of narrative coherence, of our lives, the lives of participants, and the lives we co-compose in the midst of our narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013).

Personal narratives come in a variety of forms. This thesis is based on topical stories, restricted stories about one specific moment in time with a plot, characters, and setting, but doesn't encompass the entirety of a person's life (Mueller, 2019).

The choice of narrative inquiry as the method for this thesis was an intuitive one, as it aimed to understand and interpret the lived experiences of Syrian refugees on their journey to Europe. In general, narrative inquiry shifts the focus from the *general* and *universal* to the *local* and *specific* (Clandinin, 2013), a shift that is necessary to capture the unique value of experiences in specific settings, involving particular people (ibid). Accordingly, the empirical articles constituting this thesis are focused on richly detailed insights, revealing individuals' experiences as interpretive realities derived from micro-contexts, rather than macro-structures.

Using narratives of 'a socially positioned actor' is critical, as they can expose the diversity of experiences in migration (Brettell, 2016, p. 42). Moreover, according to Yin, narratives leave room for participants to challenge conventional generalizations and social stereotypes (2019). In addition, temporality, which in this study involves situating migration across past conditions and present moments, is a universal feature of narrative (McAlpine, 2016). Finally, peoples' accounts allow for the exploration of both conscious and subconscious reasons for migration and the interplay between driving factors.

Participants' profile

The thesis is empirically informed by the narratives of Syrian refugees who arrived in Europe from the Middle East via the Mediterranean, known as the deadliest migratory sea route. It is based on 35 narrative interviews, 10 women and 25 men. The social profile of the participants can be roughly divided in two groups. With the exemption of 3 participants (two men and one woman) who were underage at the time of the journey and who travelled with their parents, there are two distinct groups of participants: The first is people who were single in their early twenties when they migrated and the second is those who were already parents at the time of migration and were in the age range from their thirties till their late forties when they arrived in Sweden. Roughly 70% of the participants had the protection status in their first country of asylum (Turkey and Lebanon) before the sea crossing; the stay in those countries lasted from three months up to three years. The participants arrived at Europe during 2012-2016, when various migration policies made the journey a different experience. At the time of the interview, the participants had different statuses in Sweden and Denmark; some resided on permanent residence permit, the majority had temporary permits, while few of them were fully nationalized Swedish and Danish citizens. However, the common factor among them all is that they all travelled from the Middle East to a particular locality in the European continent in (partly) clandestine way facing high risks.

Participants recruitment strategy

The participants were first reached out to via social media or encountered by chance. These chance meetings happened in a variety of places, such as Syrian eateries, cultural events, taxi rides, or through shared networks of friends and coworkers. Another way of recruiting participants was via FB groups gathering Syrians. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, often over tea in a café in a coffeeshop. Some participants welcomed the author into their homes, offering Syrian treats and introducing the family members. A few preferred Zoom interviews due to their busy schedules.

Although approaching community organizations to recruit participants would be a time-saving solution, the author declined such an opportunity and instead approached potential interviewees individually, in person, or via social media. This is because securing an interview via an organization with gatekeepers bears a risk of compromising the primary ethical condition of research: voluntary consent. During the initial observation in an identified community centre, the power relation between the gatekeeper and potential participants posed a concern regarding the ability of members to decline or accept participation in the research autonomously.

Research ethics

The Swedish Ethical Review Authority, Government Office of Sweden, granted the ethical approval for the research. In addition to formal approval, the research followed the premises of virtue ethics. One of the main pillars of virtue ethics is the relational approach (researcher/participant) taken during data collection (Shampoo & Khin-Maung-Gyi, 2022). All interviews are a potentially emotional experience for participants, and this is especially the case when they account for their harrowing experiences. An interview can be an affirmative occasion that leads participants to confront their past, which they may not have done before. However, invoking the past can trigger feelings of fear, shame, or anger in participants (Michael & Irvine, 2008). In those instances, the ethical approach should be based on emotional rather than abstract principles (Shampoo, 2015). Accordingly, the 'ethics of care' with a focus on compassion and the relationship between the author and the participants was a leading principle in this study's data collection process.

All interview data were anonymized, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym, often chosen by them. None objected to the interview being recorded. A few reiterated their desire to have an unrevealed identity, while others reported that they would not mind revealing their full identity. Those in the latter group expressed their desire to assert their life story as a testimony to a dark place and time and to their strength in the face of such circumstances. One participant had accounted for his migration experience to a few researchers before this study. For the rest, the interview was the first time they shared their story for research purposes. The interview surfaced an amalgam of emotions and states of mind; the beginnings of the interviews were coloured with sadness, including crying, confusion, despair, and almost disbelief, as they reviewed the challenges they had been up against. The closing of the conversation was generally more positive when the participants often evaluated their lives after migration and their achievements in their host country with pride. As part of ethical considerations, participants were provided with written information notifying them that if they experienced traumatization after the interview, professional assistance was available. The contact details of a psychologist affiliated with the research project were shared. No participants have sought this service.

While the ethical approval process mandated measures aimed at protecting participants from re-traumatization, the source of trauma was conceived solely as the distress of recalling and recounting the perilous journey. However, during the interviews, it became apparent that the interview also evoked a flashback to the asylum interview at the Migration Office. I observed that participants became tense, striving to recall and relay every factual detail—down to the day, hour, and minute—as if they believed I, like the Migration Office, might penalize them for any memory lapse or discrepancy that could jeopardize their asylum application. Recognizing this, I reassured them that I was not interested in logistical details and

that they could omit precise references to time and place. I emphasized that my interest lay in the emotional and cognitive dimensions of their stories.

Notably, the ethics review did not consider the potential for re-traumatization of the researcher exposed to traumatic narratives. It included no provisions for supporting the researcher's well-being, despite the application noting that the researcher had experienced forced displacement.

Data analysis

Empirical studies

The thesis is built on inductive strategy that is characterized by five stages: 1) data observation, 2) finding puzzle, 3) suggesting an assumption, 4) engaging with multiple theories and constructing dialog among them so to 5) prose final explaining (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

The empirical studies are based on 35 narrative interviews lasting from one hour to four hours. Data collection and transcripts were run in parallel, which enabled the author to adopt the collection method when the points raised required further clarification. The interview transcription was done in MS Word document in a denaturalized way since the author transcribed them from Arabic (the language of the interview) into English. All participants except tow had no objections to being recorded.

The participants were asked an opening question: *Can you go back in time when you started considering the migration to Europe?* the participants interpreted their pre-migration reasoning regarding facing the risks of the journey. At the end of the linear narrative, they were encouraged to reassess those risks at the present moment by asking question: *What is worth it? Would you advise it to others in similar situation?* The process was flexible, and the participants were able to add angles to the story that they deemed important.

It is important to note that all transcription was conducted solely by the researcher, without assistance from external individuals or transcription software. This practice supports the authors' alignment with the view that transcription is a deeply interpretive act, and the same stretch of talk can be transcribed differently depending on the investigator's theoretical perspective, methodological orientation, and substantive interest (Raisman, 2008).

The data analysis followed the form of narrative coding or narrative analysis advanced by Reissman (2008) that is quite different from grounded theory approaches. Instead of breaking data into categories and codes in a reductive way, the focus is on s preserving the structure and meaning of the story — what is

called a 'case-centred' approach. Accordingly, the text (interview) was organized into a series of thematic stanzas, or meaning units, and each stanza was given a title.

The analyses of the papers I and II have a strong temporal analysis. In the first set of stanzas focused on the process of forming risk judgments that informed the decision-making before migration. The second theme is the reassessment of the risk take, typically found at the conclusion of the narratives. The contradictions that emerged between these two points in the narrative served as the focal point for analysis and discussion. Contradictions that emerged between first and second set of stanzas, which is a temporal split between the pre and post migration related narrative. In the spirit of abductive coding, the puzzle sought the engagement of diverse theories and /or concepts to proposed explanation. The paper III had a distinct analytical technique whereby the stanzas were divided in two sorts: risk understanding according to rational calculative mode of thinking and approaching the risk in a fatalistic way with the help of religion. The paper is based on three interviews that are turned in three case studies that traced the sequencing of the two strategies and their interplay, whereby each of the case study offer a distinct process. The analysis of each case study was organized along the same elements (scene setting in terms of time/place and characters and situation), complicating action (plot with turning point), evaluation (participants' comment on the action, which is the core of the narrative) and coda.

Generally, a stanza encompasses a piece of the story that reflects a specific cultural, emotion or political context. For example, in paper I and II, the initial stanzas were focused on the understanding of risk taking through personal aspirations and desire for one's own life transformation (paper I), and parents' commitment to children and parenthood ethics (paper II). Later stanzas were focus on participants' reflection of the migration from 'here 'and 'now', i.e. years after the migration embedded in the host country context.

In this thesis, the narratives (lived experiences turned into text) were approached through a modified hermeneutic method, as suggested by Wiklund et al. (2002). While hermeneutic epistemology traditionally anchors understanding in the text itself, this thesis involved interpretation emerging through two phases. The first phase involved a "naïve" interpretation of the text and its structural analysis. The second phase built on this, with interpretations derived from the text and reflected upon in relation to the context, the participants, and the theoretical framework of interpretation. Rather than describing 'what is going on', the thesis focused on processes in which the meaning of the researched phenomenon was constructed (ibid).

In a similar vein, Reissman (2005) introduced a complementary strategy focusing on both 'what' (thematic analysis) and 'how': 'what' refers to the actual content of the data collected, while 'how' pertains to the way the story is presented, including voice, intonation, and facial expressions, as discussed by Creswell and Poth (2023).

Although all three empirical studies concentrated on the content (what), the style and delivery aspects (how) also contributed to the overall interpretation in each study. The dairy that I was keeping during each interview help connect the verbal content with the participants' facial expression, changes in tone, cry, silence or looks.

Furthermore, in addition to temporal perspective, the story line in the articles has the aspect of interaction between personal and social. For example, participants risk understanding is moving back and forth between individual motivation and aspirating, societal and families' roles and boarder structures (war, marginalizing, and poverty). Finally, the third is the place-related aspects (i.e., comparison of risk understanding between home country, temporary asylum and host country).

Every article details the corresponding analytical technique and coding process that has taken place.

Mapping the Evidence: A Scoping Study of the Literature

The scoping study is based on 26 articles retrieved from five data bases. The review explores and analyses existing literature to deepen the understanding of the connection between risk perception and clandestine migration through the lens of subjective and ideational factors. To that end, it examines empirical studies—both qualitative and quantitative—that approach clandestine migration through the concept of risk perception to explore and explain migration decision-making.

The review is guided by the following question: What *subjective factors* such as states of mind and emotions, which are deeply personal and contextually grounded and ideational factors such as beliefs, values, and norms, which are embedded in societal and cultural systems influence migrants' risk perception and migration outcomes?

Scoping studies typically do not include evaluative assessments of the field or offer recommendations; however, this study extends its scope by incorporating preliminary evaluation in terms of clarifying key concepts and constructs as well as trends in methodologies. Finally, it suggests potential directions for future research field development.

Research validity

Since the goal of narrative research is to uncover and interpret intriguing, hidden insights rather than simply reaching saturation, the process doesn't end when we answer the research question. Instead, it continues until a new, insightful question emerges—one that would not have arisen without hearing the narratives (Tight, 2023). As Tight (2023) notes, it is more important to have a portion of the interviews that reveal interesting information than merely to reach saturation.

In similar vein, when writing about reflexive thematic analysis, researchers (Brauna and Clarke, 2022) encouraged others to use *reflexive thematic analysis* given that meaning is generated through interpretation of, not excavated from data, and therefore judgement about how many data, and when to stop data collection are inseparably situated and subjective and cannot be determined (wholly) in advance of analysis. Therefore, instead of pursuing saturation rule of stopping data collection when the collection and /or analysis of addition data adds nothing new to the piece of reach, the process of analysis was oriented towards the signals related to adequacy and comprehensiveness of the results. Being inductive, exploratory research, this is an adequate approach when the research participants' group is not homogenous, and subject of study is not narrowly defined ahead of research.

In determining a sample size, the author was led by the position that for qualitative inquiry, and narrative inquiry in particular, an emphasis should be placed on the quality rather than the quantity of the interviews (Kvale, 1996). Hence, the adequacy of the sample is not determined predominantly by the number of informants, but by the appropriateness of the data (O'Reilly and Parker, 2012). The aim was to gather a sufficient depth and richness of information of data as a way of describing the phenomenon being studied. Consequently, the thesis aimed at building an explanation 'through a deep exploration of how processes work in certain context, under certain set of circumstances, and in particular set of social relations' (Mason, p. 29 in Baker et al., 2012). Accordingly, processes were explored in its complexity, acknowledging the contingency of different contexts. Based on this logic, arguments arrived at in the thesis are based in an understanding of particularity, rather than based on general patterns.

In the spirit of Mason's argument (ibid), the number of interviews conducted for the empirical studies was determined by the ability to creatively analyse them, to avoid running out of time and failing to do them justice analytically. Hence, producing sound, quotative insights was prioritised over attempting to mimic a qualitative 'representative' logic (ibid).

This thesis is grounded in an interpretive and investigative logic that seeks to explore the complexity and richness of participants' migration experiences. It places particular emphasis on understanding how different contexts shape individual interpretations and meaning-making processes. For instance, it considers the intricacies of parenthood within the context of forced migration—a domain where emotional, moral, and practical concerns converge in highly individualized ways. This 'idiographic' approach, rather than aiming to build arguments based on general patterns, constructs its analysis through an in-depth understanding of experiences and situated meanings (ibid).

In the spirit of narrative inquiry, the empirical papers followed a case study logic focusing on particularities and context, whereby the findings should not be generalized to the population, but to the theoretical propositions (Reissman, 2018).

One way to consider the trustworthiness of narratives is to ask: *Do the episodes of a life story hang together?* However, studying traumatized lives, as is the case in this thesis, involves confronting ruptures in life that are reflected in people's narratives. In such circumstances, according to Riessman (2008, p. 190), the researcher may encounter “two selves” of participants, situated within two streams of memory. This is evident in this thesis, which seeks to illuminate the puzzle of incoherence in refugees’ narratives—risk understanding before and after the migration. Therefore, internal consistency in life stories may be unattainable. Instead, validity rests on the coherence of data interpretations, grounded in logic and theoretical consistency. Validity is further strengthened by searching for both convergence and divergence in data.

Across the three empirical papers, life stories and experiences are grouped according to thematic similarities. For example, in Paper II, all three groups of parents confront similar disillusionments; however, the analysis pays close attention to the divergences in how moral responsibility is experienced and articulated. Furthermore, the empirical articles in this thesis adhere to the validity criteria in narrative research, which emphasize the inclusion of nuance, outliers, and negative cases. To further strengthen validity, alternative interpretations are also offered to explore the underlying factors shaping the narratives.

As for the paper IV, which is literature review, the form of scoping study was the obvious choice given that the topic is an emerging and complex area of migration. This review involves the exploration and analysis of existing literature to develop a deeper understanding of the connection between risk perception and clandestine migration by intermedia of subjective factors. With that end, the review comprises empirical articles, qualitative and quantitative, that approached the migration via risk perception. This review engaged with an analysis of empirical studies providing valuable insights into the complex relationship between these factor

The research question was designed to be straightforward and is broken down into clear sub-questions. Additionally, inclusion and exclusion criteria were clearly established. The process was iterative, allowing for refinement of search terms and inclusion/exclusion criteria based on preliminary results and evolving understanding of the topic. Data were charted and mapped thematically to ensure a structured approach to synthesis, which supports analytic validity.

It contributes to the line of research demonstrating the influence of subjectivity on risk perceptions related to migration showing that ideational factors influence risk perceptions and subsequent migration behaviour, in conjecture with safety and socioeconomic circumstance.

On the author's positionality

For researchers in the social sciences, self-reflection on their positionality is both a prerequisite and an ongoing process for identifying, constructing, critiquing, and articulating their positionality. Simply stated, reflexivity is the concept that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their own presence in their research, seeking to understand their role in and influence on it (Cohen et al., 2011). Some aspects that shape a researcher's positionality are culturally ascribed or generally regarded as fixed, such as gender, race, skin colour, or nationality. Other aspects, like political views, religious orientation, and personal life history and experiences, are more fluid, subjective, and contextual. A researcher's positionality affects access to research participants, influences the research process (e.g., the nature of questions asked), and colours the interpretation of findings.

A researcher's positionality is often examined through the insider-outsider prism. An 'outsider' researcher is typically seen as part of the majority population, conducting research on a specific immigrant group, while an 'insider' researcher is a migrant or a descendant of migrants conducting research within their own immigrant group (Carling, et al. 2014). This dichotomy is evidently based on ethnonational identity, which is a significant aspect of a person's identity.

However, a researcher's positionality, being context-specific and relational with respect to participants, cannot be easily categorized into these two groups. Each researcher's identity encompasses multiple markers across different levels, resulting in a complex blend of similarities and differences with their participants. This combination makes each researcher's position unique. Thus, the insider-outsider divide is dynamically constructed during interactions with participants, and researchers' positionalities may shift from one context to another.

I do not fit neatly into the categories of outsider or insider researcher; instead, I believe to occupy an in-between position. As a Bosnian pursuing a PhD with a focus on Syrian refugees in the EU, I consider myself an 'explicit third party' (Carling et al. 2014, p. 49), as my identity is clearly distinct from both the participants group and the majority population. Nevertheless, my explicit third-party position is complemented by *flexible forms of insiderness*. One such form is the *honorary insider* status, granted to a researcher who can transcend ethnonational boundaries through skills such as language proficiency (Carling et al, 2014).

As an Arabist specializing in Arabic language and culture, I was well-positioned to mingle in Syrian social circles in Sweden and Denmark. This connection allowed me to introduce myself and my research through informal conversations, giving participants a chance to reflect on the research topic and gauge my approach before deciding whether to participate in an interview. Occasionally, participants who initially showed hesitation about sharing their stories would change their minds as our conversations progressed.

It was evident to them that I am not a native Arabic speaker, not only due to my accent but also because I speak Modern Standard Arabic language. The latter is not typically used in everyday life; it is reserved for official events, media, and religious contexts. While many Arabs may not be fluent in it for daily conversations, it holds significant symbolic value as a representation of their civilization and unity. As the Middle East has become a strong point for international interventions—military, political, and humanitarian—the number of foreigners speaking Arabic has risen. However, most of these foreign speakers use colloquial dialects and it is usually verbal capacity only.

When I addressed the participants in standard Arabic, written or spoken, it often piqued their initial curiosity and opened the door to interviews. Additionally, introducing myself with my quintessential Arabic name further sparked their interest. This mutual curiosity between myself and the participants helped facilitate numerous interviews in a relatively short period. Based on this experience, I suspect that my ability to engage potential participants might have been less effective if I were conducting research with Bosnian refugees.

My status as an immigrant in Sweden created a sense of shared experience with the participants, giving me a form of "proxy insider status" (Carling et al., 2014). Although my research focused on past experiences and events, participants' views and assessments of their past were influenced by their current situations. During the interviews, they were encouraged to reconsider their migration decisions from the perspective of their lives in Europe, rather than solely through the lens of their experiences in Syria and the Middle East. My position as a migrant in Sweden allowed me to access their more candid reflections, which might not have been as openly shared with a native Swedish researcher.

Disclosing my national identity implied the possibility that I had experienced being a refugee, particularly for those over 40 who could recall news about the Balkan wars in the 1990s. While such experience did not influence access to the participants, it did affect how I conducted interviews and analysed the data. While being a refugee from Bosnia in the early 1990s differs significantly from being a Syrian refugee today, both groups share the harrowing experience of seeking asylum. One key difference is that Syrian refugees often risked their lives by crossing the sea to seek asylum, unlike Bosnian refugees. However, people sharing the refugee experience, regardless of the nature and scope of their hardships, connect on an emotional level.

The materials I provided to the participants did not immediately disclose my own refugee background. I chose to reveal this shared experience only when it seemed appropriate during the interviews, particularly when participants were discussing especially painful parts of their stories and showing significant distress. When their emotional responses rendered them silent, I would mention that being a refugee is also part of my identity. My intention was not merely to offer temporary comfort,

but to highlight that overcoming the stigma, shame, and judgment associated with being a refugee begins within the community of past and present refugees that we were forming through these interviews.

On the other hand, the loss of subjectivity and over-identification might be issues that come to the minds of those who would rather have a critical stand towards my position in the research. Being aware of it, I tried to mitigate the risk in a couple of ways. For example, keeping reflexive journal with my emotions and thoughts, was an important tool to self-reflect on analysis and discussions I was putting forward. Also, I often discussed the research with people who are from different walks of life and was open to challenges to my views and assumptions.

However, in doing so, I was not aiming to achieve objectivity by positioning myself as a *disengaged, disembodied* researcher (Raissman, 2008). Rather, I align with the idea explored by Finlay (2013) of *bodily empathy*. At its core, this concept suggests that our embodied, intersubjective horizon of experience allows us to access and relate to the experiences of others; it is through our bodies that we come to understand one another. This is particularly important in narrative research, which does not aim to uncover an objective truth, but rather to explore the meanings participants assign to their experiences—whether those interpretations are factual or -intentionally or unconsciously- distorted. According to Salmon, "All narratives are, in a fundamental sense, co-created," as the interpretation engage all of participants, researcher(s), and audience (in Raissman, p. 31).

Summary of empirical studies

Clandestine migration often involves high levels of uncertainty, particularly as the journey is unsafe and the destination often unfamiliar. Migrants seek ways to alleviate this uncertainty, and the study suggests that subjective interpretations and ideational factors help fill in the gaps where objective information and satisfactory level of certainty is lacking. Subjective factors often act as catalysts for migration decisions by providing migrants with the comfort needed to endure a journey. By giving meaning to potential adverse outcomes, they seem to better navigate the uncertainty and make more informed decisions about migration.

The empirical studies (Papers I, II and III) aim to shed light on how the Syrian refugees navigated and made sense of the risks taken to arrive to Europe via perilous jaunts over the Mediterranean route. The studies offer a window into subjective and ideational factors that shaped their risk perceptions and ultimately influenced their decisions to migrate. For example, participants' accounts highlight the powerful role of aspirations for life transformation, as explored in depth in Paper I, where migration was not merely a flight from danger but also a pursuit of renewal and dignity. In parallel, Paper II examines the profound sense of moral responsibility and ethical duty that parents felt towards securing better futures for their children.

Clandestine migration was not experienced as a shift across spatial and emotional landscapes, each influencing migrants' risk calculations in complex ways. The empirical studies illustrate that participants' understandings of risk were far from static. Risk perception emerged as a fluid and evolving process, continuously reinterpreted across time, space, and relational contexts. Participants reflected differently on risk depending on whether they were recounting experiences prior to migration or evaluating them retrospectively after arrival in Europe. These temporal shifts often revealed a destabilization of the values and assumptions that initially underpinned their risk-taking behaviours. For example, in Paper II, the parents' ethical duty to children's future was an unquestionable driver to take the risk even if that involved exposing the children to the risk. However, this value-based assessment was devalued after the migration. In this paper, an important analytical thread is the relationship between spatial experience and subjectivity. The findings reveal that space played a critical role in shaping how participants understood the risk taken.

In sum, rather than approaching risk as a fixed, measurable entity, the studies adopted a socio-culturally informed perspective, foregrounding how risk is perceived, experienced, and negotiated within specific personal, cultural, and temporal and spatial contexts. For example, perceptions of risk varied depending on for whom the risk was being considered participants made clear distinctions between the risks they were willing to bear personally and those they found acceptable for their loved ones, particularly their children, as evidence in paper I.

Crucially, the empirical studies challenge the enduring binary that frames risk perception as either rational or non-rational. As detailed in Paper III, the narratives uncovered a more intricate interplay between rational calculations—such as evaluating the odds of survival—and non-rational factors, including hope, desperation, faith, and moral obligation. These modes of reasoning coexisted dynamically and fluidly, defying simplistic categorizations and highlighting the necessity for more nuanced theoretical frameworks to understand decision-making under extreme conditions.

Paper IV situates these empirical insights within the broader scholarly conversation, offering an overview of existing studies on the nexus between risk perception and irregular migration through the optic of migrants' subjectivity. Although limited in number, empirical studies showcased different concepts that mediate risk judgement, alleviate uncertainty and give meaning to possible adverse outcomes of (unsafe) migration. They demonstrate that risk perceptions are not purely objective assessments based on factual information. Instead, they are deeply influenced by individual subjective experiences, beliefs, and emotions.

Taken together, the findings underscore the extraordinary complexity of decision-making processes among refugees undertaking clandestine migration. They reveal the difficult moral and practical trade-offs migrants must navigate when confronting life-threatening choices, and how deeply these choices are embedded in subjective experiences of hope, fear, obligation, and aspiration.

By emphasizing the centrality of subjectivity in shaping migration motivations and risk perceptions, this research offers a critical intervention in migration studies, challenging the predominance of structural explanations that risk overlooking the human dimensions of migration.

Moreover, the thesis contributes to risk research by advocating for more fluid and context-sensitive frameworks capable of capturing the evolving nature of risk perception. In doing so, it seeks to enrich our understanding not only of why individuals undertake dangerous journeys but also of how they live, reflect upon, and make sense of risk in the pursuit of new lives.

The findings of the study suggest new avenues for the exploring risk rationalities in clandestine migration. The post-migration perception of the migration journey that is a subject of analysis as unjustifiably risky can be attributed to other factors, in

addition to the omission of desire as a powerful factor in the risk assessment. It can be attributed to the mismatched expectations and difficulties encountered in the host country related to legal status, social stigma, or family separation, to name a few. The migration benefits felt lower than expected can lead to an increase in the perception of risk. What also deserves to be unpacked in further research is a hypothesis that the nature of migration affects post-migration cognition. Even though a pre-migration goal might be achieved, the extreme experience over the journey can change people's perception of the value of the expected outcome. Therefore, a further investigation of how a traumatic migration can affect the migrant's risk and benefit consideration after the fact will illuminate the intricate decision-making in risky migration.

Table 1: Data and analytical techniques in the papers

	Title of papers	Data source	Research focus	Analytical angles in narratives	Theoretical streams
Paper 1	Risk perception and desire in decision-making: the case of Syrians' sea migration to Europe.	Narrative interview (31 out of total 35)	The discrepancy between individual rational for risky migration and the presumed rationale of others.	1. Temporal (pre and post migration) 2. Personal-social interaction 3. Place	Analysis based on the effects of the sociological concept of desire in risk perception formation and (re)assessment.
Paper 2	Complexity of parenthood in forced migration: Risks, commitments and dilemmas	Narrative interview (16 out of total 35)	Parents' contradictory risk assessments before and after the migration.	1. Temporal (pre and post migration) 2. Personal-social interaction 3. Place	Analysis anchored in the intersection of risk and moral theory, with a focus on risk imposing; comparison of calculative technical rationality vs 'private' rationality (subjective experience, beliefs and emotions) in risk perception.
Paper 3	Syrians' sea migration to Europe: "I carved out my chest to remove my heart and replace it with a stone. That is how I make decision to take the boat"	Narrative interview (3 interviews/ case studies typologized by theme)	Fluidity and blending of different decision-making rationalities over time leading up to migration decision and journey.	1. Temporal (Sequential interplay of diverse risk calculation strategies, with each step connecting to the next one) 2. Personal-social interaction	Analysis anchored in the dialogue between two streams of logics: material and spiritual strategies of risk navigation.
Paper 4	Role of subjectivity in shaping risk perception and influencing migration outcomes	Literature review (28 articles)	The influence of subjectivity on risk perceptions related to migration showing that ideational factors influence risk perceptions and subsequent migration behaviour, in conjunction with safety and socioeconomic circumstance.	N/A	N/A

Theoretical contribution

The socio-cultural approach to risk does not aim to identify specific risks that individuals face or are exposed to. Instead, it focuses on how risk is understood and perceived in an embodied and contextualized manner (Brown, 2013; Lupton, 2023; Renn, 2008). New development in socio-cultural field of risk established that risk perception depends predominantly on three factors: individual preferences, social context, and cultural affiliation (Brown, 2013). While cultural theory of risk emphasizes that cultural patterns shape how individuals perceive risk, sociological analyses link individual risk assessments to personal and social interests and values (Renn, 1992). Together, these factors form the socio-cultural approach, which suggests that risk perceptions often vary among individuals in different contexts, leading to conflicting understandings and responses to risk.

Starting from this understanding, the thesis further expands the premise of socio-cultural risk scholarship by shedding light on the relationship and mutual effects between social and cultural factors in the process of risk perception formation. One of the outcomes of this analytical approach is the uncovering of the primacy of social context within the given empirical setting over cultural affiliation.

According to cultural theory, cultural assumptions across social groups play a significant role in shaping ideas about risk and how to manage it (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2006). Although all participants shared a unified Syrian cultural background, sub-national variations within Syria are strongly pronounced. For example, distinctions exist between rural and urban populations, as well as between Christian and Muslim communities, and these variations were represented among the participants. However, no notable differences were observed across these cultural categories in participants' understanding and interpretation of risk.³

This thesis challenges the cultural theory position that an individual's deep-rooted connection to culture, tradition, and history—often conceptualized through notions such as class or habitus—predetermines how they perceive and respond to risks. Contrary to this view, the empirical studies presented here demonstrate that an individual's risk perception is fluid and shaped by contexts that are not necessarily embedded in deep structures such as culture and tradition. Even social environments

³ It is important to note that this observation comes from the data that is not meant to be statistically representative since this thesis is not variable based research.

that do not fundamentally define individuals—such as participants' experiences as refugees in Turkey or their (temporary) immigrant status in host countries—can significantly influence risk perception. Most participants, despite socio-cultural differences, shared a common rationale for facing the risks of the sea journey, grounded in the dangers they faced in Syria or the lack of prospects in the first countries of asylum (Turkey and Lebanon). Their perceptions of risk later shifted in line with changes in their socio-individual positions within host countries. Thus, as individuals navigate even transient social spaces, their perceptions of risk can evolve, while their deep socio-cultural rootedness appears to remain largely intact.

The main criticism of the cultural theory approach to risk perception concerns its assumption of stability (Boholm, 1996). This assumption presupposes that individuals adhere to a single, stable cultural type, and therefore their risk perceptions remain consistent over time. While this thesis challenges cultural theory, it does so from a different angle. It does not necessarily contest the stability of individual cultural frameworks by showing that risk perception can shift, which would follow the logic of communicating vessels. Instead, it argues that even when an individual's cultural framework remains stable, their risk perception can vary because of changes in more superficial social structures.

A clear illustration of this argument can be found in the analysis of the women participants in the empirical studies. Their decision to journey alone, often with children, was not widely approved by society or their families due to their perceived heightened vulnerability, which was tied to gender-related social status. The women themselves acknowledged this gender-based understanding of risk. However, these entrenched cultural beliefs did not prevent them from taking the journey without the company of related men. Moreover, there was no significant difference between how women and men articulated their understandings of risk. What caused their perception of risk to differ was their transition from one social condition (war and refugee precarity) to another (immigration to Europe) that were neither long-lasting nor deeply rooted. These findings support the view that even though contextually embedded, risk is not a fixed concept; rather, it is continuously shaped and redefined through interactions within the social world that imbues it with meaning (Lupton, 2023).

Another argument of the thesis operates at a lower level of analysis, focusing on individual preferences. The empirical studies of the thesis are grounded in the exploration of the role of subjective factors in risk assessment and risk-taking (Czaika 2021; Hagen-Zenker et al., 2023). Based on the observation of subjective factors such as the values that informed parents' commitment to securing a better future for their children, this thesis highlights how changes in context play a crucial role. While values are often considered sociologically stable and thus presumed to anchor consistent risk assessments across contexts, the findings of the thesis demonstrate that context can nevertheless shape distinct interpretations of the same risk, even when underlying moral commitments remain unchanged. For example,

the desire to be a virtuous parent led the interviewed parents to perceive the risks of the sea journey as reasonable and justifiable. This moral value played a central role in their initial judgments about the acceptability of risk. However, after the journey, the same value no longer served to justify the risks they had taken.

Furthermore, the thesis explored a broader debate about the nature of human reasoning. Generally, this debate is divided between two perspectives. On one hand, some argue that reasoning is solely based on rational thinking, which follows a slow, deliberate, and systematic process underpinned by logic (Zinn 2008, Lupton 2023). On the other hand, an opposing view contends that while rationality forms the foundation of our reasoning, it does not exclude non-rational elements. In other words, rationality serves as the basis for assessing phenomena, but the ‘raw material’ used in this assessment may stem from non-cognitive aspects of human experience.

Aligned with this debate, each empirical paper in this research explores how irrational or semi-rational elements can serve as a foundation for rational thinking when assessing the risks associated with migration journeys. In *Paper I*, desire—characterized by both emotional and cognitive dimensions—acts as a fundamental building block for systematic deliberation, which in turn informs decision-making. *Paper II* highlights how values and moral duty, as ethical and non-measurable elements, contribute to risk calculation and enhance the validity of risk assessments.

Similarly, *Paper III* demonstrates how spirituality is incorporated into the rationalization of risky decisions. Zinn effectively disrupts the dualism (2008) to introduce the spectrum, or the rationality that is called in between and non-rational ways of managing uncertainty. This thesis advanced the Zinn’s framework by exploring how distinct rationalities interact and influence each other during decision-making processes, and how their relative weight and perceived validity shift in the eyes of decision-makers.

In conclusion, the thesis supports the socio-cultural approach to risk theory that emphasises social contraction of experiences and understanding of risk and uncertainty, while stressing a significant role to individual and contextual changes. Hence, it takes the embedded agency as a key analytical orientation.

Practical considerations

The thesis highlights the lasting psychological scars inflicted by the traumatic refugee journey that continues to shape lives after resettlement in host countries. Beyond the immense stress of adapting to a new society, refugees often grapple with unresolved trauma from displacement, violence, and loss. This dual burden — the weight of past suffering combined with the pressures of present adaptation — creates complex layers of vulnerability that can hinder integration and recovery. It is therefore critical that support services in host countries are designed with a deep sensitivity to these realities. Programs should go beyond surface-level assistance and instead address the intertwined psychological, social, and emotional needs of refugees. Recognizing and actively responding to the invisible wounds of forced migration is not only a matter of compassion but a necessity for fostering true belonging, healing, and resilience among refugee populations.

While family-centred approaches are critical during the early stages of resettlement, it is equally important to recognize the evolving needs of individual family members over time. In the initial period, collective strategies that focus on the family unit can help create a sense of safety, continuity, and mutual support, which are crucial for navigating the overwhelming challenges of a new environment. However, as children adapt to their new surroundings — often more quickly than their parents due to schooling and social integration opportunities — the balance of needs within the family can shift dramatically.

As children stabilize, develop new networks, and gain a sense of independence, parents may find themselves grappling with new forms of isolation and role displacement. It is therefore essential that support services offer individualized care pathways that enable parents to rebuild their confidence, reclaim professional aspirations, and attend to their emotional and psychological well-being.

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Errata Sheet

This errata sheet lists all corrections to the thesis text, in-text citations, citation blocks, and reference list.

1. Text: Delete para. 3 on p. 17, as it duplicates p. 14, para. 2. Remove the words “In general” (p. 21, para. 1, line 2) and “Among” (p. 22, para. 1, line 4). On p. 12, para. 1, change “One has been published” to “Two have been published.” On p. 21, para. 3, replace “Waiting” with “Weighing.” On p. 35, para. 3, replace “Migration was not experienced” with “Migration was experienced.”

2. In-text citations correction (spelling/year). Boholm (1996) p. 20, para. 2; Brown (2016) p. 20, para. 1 & p. 21, para. 2 & p. 22, para. 1 & p. 38, para. 1; Braun and Clarke (2022) p. 30, para. 1; Bastide (2015) p. 16 para. 1; Czaika et al. (2021) p. 13, para. 1 & para. 2 & p. 14 para. 2 & p. 39 para. 3; Prothmann (2019) p. 14, para. 1; Renn (1991) p. 38, para. 1; Shamoo & Resnik (2008) p. 26, para. 3; Riessman (2005) p. 28, para. 4; Riessman (2008) p. 16, para. 1 & p. 27, para. 5–6 & p. 30, para. 5 & p. 34, para. 2; Shamoo and Khin-Maung-Gyi (2002) p. 26, para. 1; She (2013) p. 22, para. 2, line 3; Finlay (2013) p. 34, para. 2,

3. Citation blocks correction (spelling/year). Block I (p. 10, para. 1) includes Zinn (2016, 2023), Lupton (2013), and Taylor-Gooby and Zinn (2005). Block II (p. 13, para. 1) includes Carling (2002) and Prothmann (2019), delete Prothmann (2017) and Thornton (2020). Block III (p. 14, para. 2) includes van Bommel (2020), Tjaden and Dunsch (2021), and Tjaden (2023). Block IV (p. 15, para. 5) includes Prothmann (2017), van Bommel (2015) and Hagen and Ebaugh (2003), delete Thornton (2020).

4. Reference list: Several references were unintentionally omitted from the bibliography. A complete list of the missing sources is provided in *Supplementary Bibliography – Missing References* and should be considered part of the thesis reference list.

Supplementary Bibliography – Missing References

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