Afghan Women in Sweden:

A Qualitative Study of Their Socio-Cultural Integration and Sense of Belonging

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Abstract:
This study aims to investigate on the social and cultural integration experiences of Afghan women in Sweden, in terms of their social networks and their socio-cultural practices. In addition, this paper questions where the Afghan women feel belonging to and what factors shape this sense of belonging. For this reason, a qualitative methodology is applied and the data is compiled through semi-structured interviews with ten Afghan women residing in Malmö, Sweden, with using both focus group interviews and individual interviews as the data collecting procedures. The concepts of socio-cultural integration, sense of belonging and social network have been utilized as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study. With regards to social networks, this research intends to investigate on the social interactions of the participants with people of their own ethnic group and also with Swedes. Regarding the socio-cultural practices, the eating habits and the holiday celebration and participation of Afghan women participating in the research are examined as indicators of their cultural integration. The findings of the study reveal that language proficiency is considered as the key factor for socio-cultural integration among the participants. In general, the participants experience different levels of social interactions both with other Afghans and with Swedes. The study also shows that while the participants are committed to the Afghan cultural practices such as eating Afghan foods and celebrating their holidays, they also welcome some of the Swedish cultural practices. In addition, mutual respect has a fundamental place in Afghan women’s interactions with the host culture and values. Moreover, the participants of this study experience different notions of belonging, and factors such as their family ties, safety, and discrimination vs. acceptance shape their feeling of belonging to both Sweden and Afghanistan. In general, the findings of this study confirm Beg’s statement (2005) that Afghan women are not a homogenous group, and experience different varieties of socio-cultural integration and different notions of belonging.

Key words: Afghans, Afghan women, integration, socio-cultural integration, acculturation, sense of belonging, social network, Sweden
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1. Introduction:

For centuries, the Afghan population has faced turmoil and chaos in their country. Especially in the past few decades and because of the Soviet-Afghan war and the Civil Wars in the country, a large population of Afghans left Afghanistan and took refuge in different parts of the world (Bergman, 2010, p.21). Although the majority of Afghans settled in the neighboring countries of Iran and Pakistan, many of them migrated to other regions (Nourpanah, 2010, p.52). Within the European countries, Sweden has for years been one of the main destinations for these Afghan migrants, and Afghans have continuously been among the largest migrant populations who seek a new home and a new life in Sweden (IOM, 2016).

Currently, there are big communities of Afghans residing in Sweden. For these immigrants who have come a long way from their homeland, the dominant lifestyle, culture and values in Sweden are very different to that of their own (Nourpanah, 2010, p.4). Building a new life in Sweden with such social and cultural differences can be challenging for Afghan immigrants (ibid). Coming from distressing backgrounds, these immigrants seek a peaceful and successful life in the new country. Accordingly, Hou, Schellenberg and Berry explain that socio-cultural integration and building a sense of belonging to the host country are key in having a positive resettlement experience (2017, P.2). For this reason, I find socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging as important factors that need special attention.

My interest in choosing the Afghan immigrants as the topic for investigation stems from two reasons. Firstly, coming from Iran, and due to the similarity of culture and language, I find myself very familiar with the Afghan context. This helps me be more understanding of the Afghans’ situations, and be able to build a positive relationship with this group in order to conduct my study. Secondly, although the Afghan people are among the largest migrant population in Sweden, I believe that there have been not enough researches dedicated to the Afghan population in this country. Conducting a study on the Afghan people in Sweden could benefit this group in different dimensions such as providing them a context where they can express themselves and have their voices heard, and also providing a condition where the rest of the society becomes more familiar with this group.
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**Aim of the study:**

This research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural integration of Afghans in Sweden, and to investigate on the sense of belonging among them within the Swedish society. In order to fulfill this purpose, I have decided to emphasize on the Afghan women as the target group for this investigation. For this reason, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1) From a socio-cultural perspective, how do Afghan women experience integration in the Swedish society in terms of social networks and socio-cultural practices?

2) Where do Afghan women feel they belong to, and why?

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative investigation has been implemented through semi-structured interviews with ten Afghan women who reside in Malmö, Sweden, with using both focus group interviews and individual interviews as the data collecting procedures. The participants of this study consist of both Afghan women who came to Sweden directly from Afghanistan, and Afghan women who have lived in Iran for a few years before eventually moving to Sweden. The concepts of integration, socio-cultural integration, social network and sense of belonging have been defined and utilizes as the theoretical framework of the study.

**Delimitations:**

In conducting this research, a few delimitations were set upon the study. Firstly, I decided to delimit my investigation only to the female Afghans. A few reasons for this are that as a woman, I found it interesting to know more about their experiences, and also I found it more accessible to contact with Afghan women within a shorter amount of time. In addition, I believe that it could be more beneficial to conduct interviews with the same gender participants in this research. It should be mentioned that it is not the intention of this study to explore the role of gender within the integration field. However, I am aware that such incorporation would also bring a new light into this field. Secondly, this study adopts a qualitative approach, through conducting semi-structured interviews. Due to the lack of time and the scope of this research, the samples under investigation were limited to ten participants, and I was unable to conduct more interviews from more participants. Thirdly, my study is delimited to investigating on the Afghan women residing in Malmö, where I also live. This allows me to conduct face to face interviews with the
participants. Fourthly, this paper intends to look into the integration experiences of Afghan women from a socio-cultural perspective. While I am aware of the importance of other integration perspectives such as economic integration and political integration, due to the scope of this research, my paper is restricted to Afghan women’s social and cultural integration and their sense of belonging within the Swedish society. Lastly, this study aims to investigate on socio-cultural integration on the micro level and based on individuals’ experiences. Therefore, the role of the ‘structure’ or the macro level such as governmental policies will not be examined in this study.

Structure of the thesis:

This study consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction of the study, chapter 2 contains a brief explanation of the contextual background of the study, chapter 3 is dedicated to the previous studies done on the same topic, chapter 4 contains a description of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study, chapter 5 discusses about the research method with ethical reflections, chapter 6 presents the findings and analysis of the study, and chapter 7 consists of the concluding remarks followed by suggestions for further researches.

2. Contextual background:

In order to have a better understanding of the socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging among Afghan women in Sweden, it is important to firstly understand the context of where they come from. For this reason, this section will firstly provide a brief overview of Afghanistan and its people. Secondly, the history of conflict in Afghanistan will be provided. Thirdly, the migration patterns of Afghan immigrants around the world in general, and with a focus on Iran and Sweden in particular will be presented.

Afghanistan: An overview

Afghanistan is located in Southern Asia, and is entirely landlocked by Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and a small part of China (Runion, 2007, p.2). According to the United Nations data, the population of Afghanistan was estimated to be more than 35,500,000 people by the year 2017 (UN, 2018). The official languages of Afghanistan are Dari
and Pashto, however, since different ethnic groups live in Afghanistan, other languages such as Uzbek and Turkmen are also spoken (Runion, 2007, p.6). Although various ethnic groups with their unique cultural characteristics live in Afghanistan (ibid), the common culture in Afghanistan and among all these groups upholds collectivist values and is strongly family oriented (Bhanji, 2011, p.1), to the point that “the family is the single most important institution in Afghan society” (Dupree, 2002, cited in Nourpanah, 2010, p.47). Moreover, Islam is deeply rooted into the Afghan culture and “the Muslim faith can be found in every facet of life” (Runion, 2007, p.8).

**History of conflict:**

Throughout the history, Afghanistan has faced centuries of conflicts and chaos (Runion, 2007, p.1). From foreign invasions, to decades of civil wars, Afghanistan has not rested from distress for a long time (Runion, 2007). During the past forty years alone, Afghanistan has undergone The Soviet-Afghan War from 1979 to 1988, followed by Afghan Civil War from 1989 to 1992. The Soviet invasion and the Civil War in return made Afghanistan become “a breeding ground for terrorist training camps” (Runion, 2007, p. 119) and fostered rebel groups such as Mujahidin to gain more power and bring chaos to the country (Runion, 2007, p.119-121). This chaos led to the rise of terrorist groups such as Taliban which took control over the majority of Afghanistan, bringing one of the darkest periods of the Afghanistan history (Runion, 2007, p.120). This is followed by the entrance of the US troops inside the Afghanistan territory in 2001 (Crawford, 2016, p.1). Between 2001 and 2016, around 30,000 Afghan civilians are estimated to have been killed directly in conflicts (Crawford, 2007, p.9). Reports and data suggest that during the past decade, violence has increased instead of declining (Crawford, 2016, p.2). This violence does not only take place in conflict areas of Afghanistan but even “in the areas “controlled” by the government” (ibid).

**Afghans’ migration patterns:**

The violent events and distress in Afghanistan have resulted in wide emigration of Afghans from the country to different parts of the world. Studies suggest that at least a third of all Afghan population have at some point in their lives experienced displacement from their homes (Bergman, 2010, p.21). Over the past 30 years, Afghanistan has been the largest source country
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of refugees worldwide, only taking the second place recently and after Syria (Skodo, 2018, p.2). It is estimated that the Afghan immigrant population is between 4 million to 6 million people (Hakimzadeh, 2016).

The Middle-East and Southern Asian regions are where Afghans are mostly settled (Nourpanah, 2010, p.52), and the vast majority of them are especially concentrated in Iran and Pakistan, which is mainly due to ‘geography’, ‘religion’, and ‘social and cultural proximity’ (Marchand et al., 2014, p.57). Other countries of destination for Afghan refugees are ‘United States’, ‘Canada’, ‘Germany’, ‘the Netherlands’ and ‘the United Kingdom’, and the settlement of Afghans to these countries is often permanent (Marchand et al., 2014). Since 2002, approximately 4.7 million Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ voluntary reparation programme, but the frequency of returns have varied during the years, with a decrease during 2013, and a drastic increase in 2015 (UNHCR, 2015). It should be mentioned that the vast majority of these returns have been from refugees settled in Pakistan, and due to the decline of tolerance of the presence of Afghan refugees (ibid).

**Afghan immigrants in Iran:**

Afghans comprise more than 90 percent of the total immigrant population living in Iran, with an estimate number of 620,000 visa holders, and between 1.5 million to up to 3 million undocumented Afghans residing in Iran (UNHCR, 2016). Contrary to the open policies towards Afghans during the Soviet-Afghan War in 1979 and the Afghan Civil Wars in 1992, Iran has implemented strict and exclusive policies towards them especially in the past decade (Hakimzadeh, 2006). Refusing to offer them identity documents and permission to permanent stay (Nourpanah, 2010, p.53), mass deportation and expulsion of Afghans, prohibiting them from residing in certain provinces, and deprivation from education and working in certain fields are among discriminatory policies that have been implemented by the Iranian government (Shami, 2012). The Afghan immigrants have also been ascribed with stereotypes and negative traits by the political accounts and media (Nourpanah, 2010, p.53).

Since 1992, a number of repatriation programmes have been implemented by the Iranian government, in order to encourage and even pressure Afghan immigrants to return to their country (Hakimzadeh, 2006). While these programmes were successful in increasing the number
of Afghan immigrants’ return to Afghanistan, many Afghans remained in Iran (UNHCR, 2016). In addition, due to continuing fear of violence and persecution in Afghanistan, many of Afghans left Iran for different European destinations rather than returning to Afghanistan (ibid).

**Afghans in Sweden:**

Within the European countries, Sweden is one of the main destinations for Afghan migrants (Marchand et al., 2016). In 2015, an estimated number of 42,000 Afghan immigrants sought asylum in Sweden (Smith, 2016). Within the past few years, Afghans has been among the top four groups of immigrants seeking asylum in Sweden (Migrationsverket, 2018). Many of these Afghan immigrants are from the population that previously resided in Iran and Pakistan, but due to not being formally recognized and not having stable opportunities, they migrated to Sweden (ibid). During the past few years, Sweden has taken a turn into more restrictive migration policies towards asylum seekers in general, and Afghan asylum seekers in particular, thorough implementing repatriation programmes for the Afghan asylum seekers (Smith, 2016; Bergman, 2010, p.24).

### 3. Previous Researches:

Due to the increase of immigration from the Third world countries to the Western countries within the past few decades, the subjects of cultural and social integration and sense of belonging have become of great importance within scholarly articles and researches (see for instance van Tubergen, 2006; Birka, 2013). Regarding the case of Afghan immigrants, most articles dedicated to this group have studied Afghan migrants’ integration in Canada as the receiving country (see for instance Nourpanah, 2010; Beg, 2005; Dossa, 2008). On the other hand, not many articles have concentrated on the Afghan population in Sweden. Overall, scholars have different approaches towards the socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging among the immigrants. The following section presents some of these different approaches.

In her article, Nourpanah investigated on the socio-cultural integration and identity formation of Afghans in Canada (2010). Through semi-structured interviews with ten Afghan refugees, Nourpanah examined how they identify themselves within the new society, and how they adapt
themselves to the new country with such cultural differences from their country of origin. Her study is driven by Antony Gidden’s structuration theory which investigates on the “relationship between individual action and social structure” (2010, p.29). Nourpanah approaches refugees in her study not as passive and victimized persons, but as “knowledgeable agents … who assess their conditions and act appropriately to achieve their desired goals within the framework of these conditions” (2010, p.31). Furthermore, Nourpanah follows Gidden’s approach to culture as a structure which is both “enabling and constraining” (2010, p.36). It can be utilized by migrants to construct their identity and as a mean of expression, but also functions as a constraining device that prevents the migrants from fully integrating to the new society (ibid). However, for Nourpanah, culture is not a fixed concept and cannot be mapped to a specific territorial space, but is a ‘fluid concept’ that is under control of individuals to modify it in accordance to their desire (2010, p.40). The findings of her study reveal that the Afghan refugees utilize culture as a mean of agency and of shaping and retaining their identity. Although the subjects of Nourpanah’s research have not built a wide Canadian network, or do not participate in Canadian cultural activities, they have a strong sense of belonging to Canada, and consider it as their home (2010).

Similarly, Dossa also insists on the importance of human agency and recognizes the research participants as “producers of context specific knowledge” (2008, p.10). In her research, Dossa investigates on the everyday life of Afghan women in Canada through interviews and self observations. For Dossa, the ‘normal practices’ in the everyday life of Afghan women includes their food, prayers and their transnational kin networks (2008, p.16). Regarding these activities and their relation to Afghan women’s self identification, Dossa explains that “In their everyday lives, the women endeavored to create a space where they could claim an Afghan-Canadian identity, however fragmented and uneven it may be” (2008, p.17). Such an approach suggests on the importance of the women’s agency and conscious behavior during the construction of their identity in the new community.

A research conducted by Beg (2005) focuses on the cultural, social and economical integration of Afghan women in Canada. Beg investigates on the life experience of Afghan women through the Feminist Standpoint theory. According to Beg, this framework gives validity to those “suppressed by the dominant class” (2005, p.48) and allows the researcher to view “women’s
reality and as such has the potential to illuminate women’s agency” (2005, p.47). The Feminist Standpoint theory puts women at the center of the research and reveals that women are not a “monolithic group” and their experiences are “multiple and contradictory” (ibid). In other words, each woman has different experiences and different approaches towards certain events, and according to Beg, factors such as ethnicity, race, class, economy and sexual orientation have impact on the women’s social positions (2005, p.49). The result of her study confirms the Feminist Standpoint theory’s statement regarding the Afghan women as a non-monolithic group with different experiences and opinions who actively control their life situation and have agency in their social settings. Beg’s research reveals that “integration is not a linear process and does not occur at the same rate for all individuals”. Each person might experience different levels of integration within certain amount of time, and each might become integrated in one aspect of their life but not in other ones (2005, p.109).

In a similar manner, Hosseini-Khaladjahi investigates on the Iranians’ economic, social and cultural integration in Sweden (1997). For this reason, the data is collected though structured interviews driven form comprehensive questionnaires (Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997, p.192). In total, 373 Iranians have been interviewed, and the findings of the collected data are also compared to the data collected from other minority groups. Regarding Iranians’ cultural integration, Hosseini-Khaladjahi’s research is based on the assumption that their commitment to Iranian culture has a negative effect on their acculturation process in Sweden (1997, p.86). The finding of Hosseini-Khaladjahi confirms these hypothesizes that commitment to Iranian culture results in more cultural distance with the Swedes, which in return, results in a less social interaction with the host population (1997, p.97). Also, Hosseini-Khaladjahi believes that a person is only fully acculturated if s/he identifies with the host population instead of the country of origin, and has a sense of belonging to the host country (1997, p.77). In this regard, the finding of the study suggests that sense of belonging to Sweden is especially lower for Iranians who are still committed to Iranian culture and values (1997, p.102-103). With regards to social integration, Hosseini-Khaladjahi explains that having a family from Iran in Sweden has decreased the Iranian immigrants’ social integration since “it abets the preservation of Iranian culture in Sweden” (1997, p.136).
4. Theoretical framework:

The concepts of integration, socio-cultural integration, sense of belonging and social network are adopted as the conceptual frameworks in this research and in order to analyze the finding of the study. This chapter will present a description of these concepts.

Integration:

The increase of immigration especially to the Western European countries has resulted in an increase of discussions about integration of immigrants among humanitarians, politicians, and scholars (Algan et al., 2012; van Tubergen, 2006; Schunk, 2014). While the integration discourse has been utilized in large number of migration researches, due to the subjective nature of integration, it lacks a persistent and a precise description (Schunk, 2014). The following section attempts to explain the concept of integration from different points of views.

In general, integration is considered as a “complex social process” that refers to the “gradual adaptation of migrants” to the receiving society (Latcheva and Herzog-Punzenberger, 2011, p.123). Similarly, Spencer defines integration as:

“Processes of interaction between migrants and the individuals and institutions of the receiving society that facilitate economic, social, cultural and civic participation and an inclusive sense of belonging at the national and local level” (2011, p. 203).

While all these factors are interconnected (Spencer, 2011, p.123), due to the objective of this study and in order to answer the research questions, this paper will mainly look into the cultural and social participation and the sense of belonging among the Afghan women in the research. According to Schunk, integration can be approached from a micro and macro perspective (2014, p.11). From a micro sociological perspective, integration is an “individual process”, whereas from a macro perspective, it is the relation between the minority groups and the native majority groups (ibid). Van Tubergen also refers to the micro perspective as the individual level in integration, and explains that the macro level in integration is involved with the minority and majority communities, the country of origin, and the host country (2006, P.88-92). The two
perspectives are complementary and essential in understanding the integration process of the migrants (Schunk, 2014, p.11). However, due to the scope of the study, this research will mainly concentrate on the individual level of integration.

According to Latcheva and Herzog-Punzenberger, the process of adapting to the new society is not unilateral, but a “reflexive process of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ and therefore it is of prime importance to scrutinise what kind of feedback processes immigrants experience” (2011, p.124).

Latcheva and Herzog-Punzenberger explain that several factors such as education, occupation, social contacts, institutional participation, family and psychological health are influential in the coping strategies of migrants during their life span, and are determining factors in the integration process of migrants (2011, p.123). Additionally, Latcheva and Herzog-Punzenberger assert that integration cannot be treated as a dichotomous concept or an assured final stage. On the contrary, the integration process is “a complex dynamic involving individuals and societal structures with potentially ever-changing outcomes” (2011, p.122). This means that one’s stage of life and level of integration should not be treated as integrated vs. not integrated, but as a gradual process that exists in a spectrum.

It should be noted that the term integration is frequently accompanied with the terms assimilation. The term assimilation is usually defined within the socio-cultural context and refers to the condition in which, the original social and cultural values of the minority groups disappear, and the migrants fully adapt to the new community’s values (Algan et al., 2012; Schunk, 2014). In such cases, any differences between migrants and natives become invisible, and migrants become “undistinguishable” from the rest of the population (Schunk, 2014, p.11).

While the concept of assimilation refers to the condition where the process of adapting to the new culture is merely the migrants’ responsibility, integration refers to a reciprocal relation between the migrants and the natives, in which, both groups interact and adapt themselves to the other’s cultural values. However, due to the scope of this paper, this study will mainly examine integration from the immigrants’ side, with the awareness that integration is a “two way process” (Voltanen, 2008, p.64).
Social and cultural integration:

While integration is a multi-dimensional term that can be explored from different perspectives, since the aim of this research is limited to the social and cultural integration of Afghan women in Sweden, I intend to look into the concept of integration through the socio-cultural lens.

Cultural integration/Acculturation:

Cultural integration is defined as the cultural and behavioral changes of the individuals, and the acquisition of the knowledge about culture, values and language of the new society (Birka, 2013, p.39-40). One way of understanding the notion of cultural integration is through the definition of acculturation. Powell (1880) introduces the term acculturation as the transformation of the migrants’ way of thinking and culture due to their interaction with other cultural groups (cited in ILIE, 2013, P.84). For Berry, acculturation is “the process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between cultural groups and their individual members” (2004, cited in Wohlfart, 2017, p.17). In the same respect, Schunk refers to acculturation as the “acquisition of the receiving county’s language skills, cultural knowledge and norms” (2014, p.11).

Within migration studies, the distinction between acculturation and cultural integration is blurred. For instance, while Valtonen uses the terms interchangeably (2008, p.63), Wohlfart makes the distinction between the two terms, referring to acculturation as “the meeting of cultures” and socio-cultural adaptation as “an outcome of acculturation” (2017, p.20). In this regard, Berry (1997) suggests that integration (especially within the socio-cultural context) is one of the strategies employed by migrants to acculturate themselves to the new culture (cited in Wohlfart, 2017, p.22). According to Berry, through this strategy, the migrants select and keep “some degree of their original cultural traits while simultaneously attempt to interact with other cultural groups” (ibid). It should be noted that in this paper, I have utilized the terms acculturation and cultural integration interchangeably with the awareness that some scholars have distinguished the terms from each other.

Among scholars, several factors have been identified as indicators of acculturation. In this regard, Akhtar emphasizes on the importance of ‘friendship and socialization’ as well as ‘food’

**Social integration:**

Social integration is defined as the immigrants’ interactions and connections with members of the host country (Schunck, 2011, p.264). Scholars have determined several indicators to operationalize social integration. According to Hosseini-Khaladjahi, ‘friendship relations’, ‘interrmarriages’, and ‘membership in voluntary organizations’, are the three most suitable indicators that can define social integration among immigrants (1997, p.131). To these indicators, van Tubergen adds ‘language proficiency’ (2006, p.7), and Fokkema and de Haas add ‘the feeling of belonging’ as determinants of immigrants’ social integration that can positively affect immigrant’s socio-cultural integration (2011, p.3). On the other hand, contact with the country of origin can affect social integration indirectly, by its negative effects on acculturation, and directly by reducing the psychological need for creating a friendship network and association with the members of the host population (Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997, p.129).

It is assumed among scholars that social integration facilitates cultural integration (van Tubergen, 2006, p.191). In other words, immigrants who have successful interactions with people of the majority population are more likely to accept and welcome the values and norms of that society (ibid). Accordingly, studies have utilized the concept of social integration and cultural integration as two interconnected aspects. In this regards, van Tubergen defines socio-cultural integration as:

“Two closely related aspects of immigrant integration: social integration (the extent to which immigrants interact socially with natives), and cultural integration (the degree to which cultural values and patterns are shared among immigrants and natives” (2006, p.7).
According to Hosseini-Khaladjahi, “acculturation should precede the stage of social integration” (1997, p.122). This is because according to him, acculturation in the new society is independent of the social integration of immigrants. One can be culturally integrated, but keep the intimate relations to the persons of the same ethnic group. On the other hand, social integration is dependent on the acculturation of immigrants since “every intimate relation requires not only a common language but also a degree of subjectivity (Hosseini-Khaladjahi, p.121).

Overall, according to Algan et al. (2012), social and cultural factors can be determinant in the other dimensions of integration such as the socio-economic integration of the minority groups and their labour market performance. Additionally, social and cultural diversity could have a great impact on the “sense of community and social solidarity” of the receiving country. Hou, Schellenberg and Berry also suggest that the migrants’ socio-cultural incorporation are essential for their own ‘well-being’ and the receiving country’s ‘social cohesion’ (2017, p.1).

**Sense of belonging:**

The importance of immigrants’ socio-cultural integration has led scholars to pay more attention to immigrants’ sense of belonging in the new country as well (see for instance Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997; McCoy & Kirova & Knight 2016; Chow, 2007). These two concepts are often interlocked and one is dramatically related to the other (ibid). However, despite the importance of sense of belonging on the immigrants’ socio-cultural integration in the new country, there are insufficient attempts from scholars to address this matter, or to define what sense of belonging means (McCoy & Kirova & Knight, 2016, p.22 & 35). In the following section, firstly the concept of belonging will be defined and secondly, discussions about its indicators and determinants will be presented.

In general, to belong somewhere is human’s fundamental need and motivation (Chow, 2007, p.512). According to Capra and Steindl-Rast “‘I belong’ means ‘Here I find my place’, ‘That is it’ and at the same time, ‘Here I am’” (1991, cited in Chow, 2007, p.513). Birka also asserts that the feeling of belonging refers to “individuals feeling themselves to be an integral part of the whole” (2013, p.55). This feeling of belonging is especially vital for increasing the individual’s feeling of trust, having positive feelings about oneself and feeling committed (Chow, 2007, p.512). In should be noted that sense of belonging is not mainly about the self identification of
immigrants to the new society and feeling attached to the host country, but is also greatly tied with the immigrants’ feeling of being accepted by the host society (McCoy & Kirova & Knight 2016, p. 34).

Every immigrant might initially face the challenge of finding themselves uncertain of where they belong to (Chow, 2007, p.512). In this regard, Birka discusses about the concept of ‘elective belonging’ which refers to the individual’s attachment to a chosen location (2013, p.58). This is especially the case for the first and second generation immigrants.

Scholars have considered the immigrants’ sense of belonging as an important indicator for their socio-cultural integration (Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997, p.90-93; McCoy & Kirova & Knight 2016, p.22; Orton, 2012, p.27). In this regard, while McCoy et al. refer to it as a “benchmark” for integration (2016, p.34) Wu et al. addresses the sense of belonging as a “barometer of social cohesion and social integration” (2011, p.374). In fact, some suggest that the primary definition of integration is the need from all diverse members of the society to share a feeling belonging to that place (McCoy & Kirova & Knight, 2016, p.34). Ager and Strang share the same view point, suggesting that integration is ultimately about belonging (2008, p.178).

Building a shared sense of belonging among all different groups within the county is a challenge that diverse societies often face (Wu, Hou and Schimmele, 2011, p.373). This is especially because lack of sense of belonging could result in creating parallel communities (Birka, 2013, p.149). Sense of belonging among newcomers and immigrants is especially important for the host country in order to build and maintain social cohesion (see for instance Hou, 2017; Birka, 2013; Orton, 2012). This however does not mean that immigrants are required to have a sense of belonging only to the receiving country. According to McCoy, Kirova & Knight, individuals may feel belonging to multiple communities and societies at the same time (2016, p.35).

Scholars have identified different factors that play role on the feeling of belonging among individuals. For instance, Ager and Strang consider ‘committed friendships’, ‘links with family’, and ‘a sense of respect and share values’ as the main variables that affect the sense of belonging among immigrants (2008, p.178). Hosseini-Khaladjahi also shares this view point that enjoying a sense of belonging to the host country entails immigrants’ respect and adherence to the dominant values and norms (1997, p.93). In addition, Hosseini Khaladjahi also asserts that mastering the
language of the host country is another requirement for the immigrants in order for them to be able to identify themselves as part of the new society (ibid). For Wu, Hou and Schimmele, sense of belonging is involved with feeling accepted and “feeling secured and at home” (2011, p.374). They further suggest that ‘trust’, ‘cooperation’ and ‘social ties’ are important variables that are positively correlated with the feeling of belonging among the immigrants (2011, p.388). Gualda also identifies variables such as, ‘language’, ‘social relations’, ‘the degree of trust in others’ and ‘family’ as indicators for measuring the immigrants’ sense of belonging (2011: 22). In a similar manner, Orton (2012), and de Haas and Fokkema (2011) also emphasize on the importance of family with regards the sense of belonging among immigrants. In addition, Hou, Schellenberg and Berry emphasize on the importance of cultural maintenance and social participation on the sense of belonging of the immigrants (2017). In this regard, they operationalize the immigrants’ maintenance of their heritage culture as “a sense of belonging to the country of origin” and the immigrants’ social contact and participation as “a sense of belonging to the [receiving country]” (2017, p.2).

Among the various factors mentioned above, the importance of social relations is shared among scholars, and is considered as one of the key factors for sense of belonging to the new country. For example, wider interaction with other members of the society, which indicates social integration, is considered as a decisive factor in developing a sense of belonging to the new society among immigrants (Orton. 2012, p.27). Nonetheless, Hamaz and Vasta assert that unlike the popular opinion, individuals’ sense of belonging to a country in not necessarily dependent on their social contact with the dominant population, and migrants with no interaction with the out-groups can feel as much belonging to the host country as the ones with higher social interactions (2009, p.11).

Moreover, while the mentioned variables can positively affect the sense of belonging among immigrants, both theoretical and empirical studies suggest that exclusion and discrimination are negatively correlated with feeling of belonging to the new society (McCoy & Kirova & Knight 2016, p.35-36; Latcheva and B. Herzog-Punzenberger, 2011, p.132).
**Social network:**

As mentioned previously, one important factor that affects the socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging among immigrants is the network they have built and the interaction they have with other members of the society (see for instance van Tubergen, 2006; Esser, 2006; Ager and Strang, 2008). For this reason, a brief description of the concept of social network is provided in this section.

The term network is defined as “types of interpersonal contacts”, which include family and relatives, different communities and any other contacts that build the individual’s social relationships (Daming and Jie, 2010, p. 28). Vasey also defines social networks as “dynamic ties maintained through social interaction” (2015, p.5). Within the migration studies, scholars have also referred to social networks as sources of social capital for immigrants (Daming and Jie, 2011; Ryan, 2008). This is because these networks can provide different types of support for immigrants. For instance, social networks are especially helpful in facilitating immigration, providing care, finding jobs, housing and transmitting information (Vasey, 2015; Daming and Jie, 2011; McMichael and Anderson, 2004; Ryan, 2011; Boyd, 1989). In addition, the existence of these networks can increase the well-being and a sense of belonging among new migrants, and decrease the effect of negative experiences (McMichael and Anderson, 2004, p.88-89). In a broader sense, the supports that social networks can provide for immigrants consist of “emotional, informational and instrumental supports” as well as supports concerning ‘companionship’ and ‘socializing’ (Ryan, 2008, p.674).

With regards to social networks, scholars have distinguished between bonding ties and bridging ties (Vasey, 2015; Ryan, 2008; Ryan, 2011; McMichael and Anderson, 2004). Bonding tie refers to the “intergroup connections” (McMichael and Anderson, 2004, p.89) or the ‘strong ties’ that immigrant have with people who are similar to them (Ryan, 2008, p. 676). On the other hand, bridging ties refer to “inter-ethnic ties” (Vasey, 2015, p.5) or the ‘weak ties’ that immigrants have with people who are unlike them (ibid). Forging weak ties with people outside one’s social circle can provide necessary information and support for immigrants that people belonging to the strong ties category may not be able to provide (Ryan, 2008; Vasey, 2015). In general, it is
argued that bonding ties are necessary for ‘getting by’ and bridging ties are essential for ‘getting ahead’ (Ryan, 2011, p.710).

According to Ryan, maintaining strong ties and having restricted contact with people of the same ethnicity is often considered as a disadvantage for immigrants’ integration, and “can foster ghettoization” (Ryan, 2008, p.675). On the other hand, Building weak ties with other members of the society can facilitate integration (ibid). However, immigrants’ ability to forge such links with people outside their circle may depend upon conditions such as language skills, and lack of such skills can prevent immigrants from building such links (Ryan, 2008, p.677).

4. Methodology:

This study is based on the philosophical assumption of social constructivism, which suggests that meanings are “constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Creswell, 2002, p. 10). A constructivist study puts the focus on the ‘context’ in which the individuals live in and attempts to understand and interpret experiences and the process in which they are shaped through the individual’s perspective (Creswell, 2002, p.9). This study is also involved with socially constructed concepts such as integration, and sense of belonging. Throughout the study, I intend to look for the meanings and experiences from the participants’ points of views, and follow the assumption that our understanding of the world is “inevitably our construction” and that such construction cannot claim “absolute truth” (Maxwell, 2013, p.35).

In this chapter, the methodological framework of the research will be provided. According to Perri 6, methodology is not merely about the method or a technique used in the research, but it is much more about “how well we argue from the analyses of our data to draw and defend our conclusions” (2012, p.11). Hence, this chapter includes several discussions about the research design, including an explanation of the appropriate method utilized for answering the research question, followed by a detailed description of the sampling criteria and sampling technique and an explanation of the interviewing process conducted for the purpose of this thesis. Furthermore, I will discuss about my role as the researcher, and the ethical issues considered during my research process. Lastly, the validity, reliability and generalizability of the study will be examined.


Qualitative research:

This paper takes an inductive approach, starting with questions, and attempting to answer them through the help of the theories that are developed in the course of the data analysis (Silverman, 2013; 6 and Bellamy, 2013). In order to gain a better understanding of the socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging among Afghan women in Malmö, Sweden, this paper takes a qualitative approach through interviewing ten participants and considers this approach as a suitable method for collecting the required information. This is especially because unlike quantitative studies that are involved with numbers and statistics, qualitative researches intend to gain a deeper understanding of the issues (Maxwell, 2002, p.23; Weiss, 1994).

According to Creswell there are numbers of conditions in which, utilizing a qualitative method becomes the most appropriate approach (2007, p. 39-40). For example, qualitative research is best suited when we need to explore a group of people or population, and/or when we aim to understand the context and the setting that these people and their addressed issues belong to (2007, p.40). Also, a qualitative approach is appropriate in case “a complex, detailed understanding of the issue” is required, which is only achievable through direct talking to targeted people (Creswell, 2007, p.40). Lastly, qualitative research is fitting for conditions when quantitative measurements and statistical analysis cannot give us the needed information or answers. For example, individual differences and people’s interactions can only be captured through a qualitative approach (ibid). In the same way, this thesis is also concerned with a particular group of people and the social and cultural context they belong to. In addition, this study aims to understand Afghan women’s socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging.

Scholars have explained certain characteristics of a qualitative approach. In this regard, Creswell suggests that a major characteristic of the qualitative approach is that the researcher collects information from directly talking to individuals and with a “face to face interaction” (2007, p.37). Taylor, DeVault and Bogdan also explain that in a qualitative method, the researcher approaches the real world, and in a natural setting in order to find answers to his/her questions. The qualitative researcher is concerned with “the meaning people attach to things in their lives” and the way individuals think and act in the course of daily life (2016, p.7). In the same respect, this study seeks the answers from exploring real individuals, their life experiences and their
interpretations of the events. A number of Afghan women have been interviewed in this research in order to learn about their socio-cultural integration experiences and their notion of belonging. Moreover, a qualitative study attempts to develop a holistic and complex image of the issues and events. This means that different perspectives and multiple factors must be taken into account.

**Semi-structured interviewing:**

In a qualitative research, several methods can be utilized in order to collect the desired data. Depending on the characteristics of the study, the researcher may decide between interviewing, observations and looking into document archival records etc to gather information (Creswell, 2007, p.132). In this thesis study, the semi-structured interviewing method has been selected as a proper way of data collection. According to Weiss, interviewing helps the researcher to learn more about people’s perception and interpretation of life events, their cultural values and the ongoing changes they encounter over the course of their lives and how it shapes their thoughts (1994, p.1-2). This method rallies on a small sample, but can prepare enough information for developing a detailed interpreting and analysis of the issues in question. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are especially beneficial for this study since they can provide a deep understanding of the topic in limited time (Bernard, 2006, p.212). For a semi-structured interview, the researcher uses an interview guide in order to cover the questions and points that need to be covered, but will come up with more follow-up questions depending on the received answers (ibid). The interviews can take place individually between a researcher and an interviewer or as a focus group with a researcher and more interviewers participating at the same time. In my research, both individual interviews and focus group interviews were conducted.

**Focus groups:**

During a focus group interview, the researcher is able to have an in-depth interview with a group of people at the same time. The researcher often guides the session through certain sets of topics, and sits back and observes the interaction between the participants (Mason, 2002: 64). The goal of the focus group is to let participants discus matters with each other and each bring different dimensions of the issues that not all participants might have thought about (Taylor, DeVault and Bogdan, 2016, p.132). One advantage of the focus groups is that they consume less time than individual interviews (Gray et al., 2007, p.362). Regarding the present study, due to time
limitation, I would not have been able to interview with all the ten women individually. Hence, I conducted two focus group interviews along with four individual interviews. Each of the focus groups consisted of three participants, and although three interviewees might be a small number for a focus group, I believe that this number was more suitable for in-depth interviews in my research. In this regard, I agree with Bloor et al. that having fewer people in the focus groups gives enough time and space to each participant to express themselves and take part into the conversations (Bloor et al. 2001, p.26-27).

In order to maximize the outcome of the interview session in focus groups, Mason suggests not to pre-script the entire session, rather “take cue from the ongoing dialogues” about what to ask the interviewees later, and follow the flow of the conversations (2002, p.64). This can help the researcher to gain knowledge about issues that s/he did not anticipate (ibid). Following this suggestion, I guided the focus group sessions by bringing up particular topics, and let the participants interact with each other and express their own perspectives. This method was beneficial since much of the data I collected during these sessions were from the issues the participants brought up throughout their interactions with each other. I would not have been able to receive the valuable responses from a scripted and fixed interview.

While focus groups are beneficial to qualitative studies, one of its negative aspects is that the participants’ responses to the issues may not be completely independent. Their responses might be affected by other participants’ responses, and they might answer to the questions differently than they would have in an individual interview session (Edmunds, 1999, p.8). Nevertheless, I believe that the benefits and advantages of the focus groups take over this disadvantage.

**Sampling criteria:**

First and foremost, I should note that this study focuses on women, firstly because as a woman myself, I am interested to know more about Afghan women’s experiences in Sweden. Secondly, I believe that communicating with the same gender could be more advantages in conducting the data specifically in this study. This is because of my own familiarity with the Afghan women’s conditions and also with taking into consideration that the Afghan participants might feel more comfortable to communicate with the same gendered interviewer. In addition, having an easier
access to Afghan women as participants for this research was also effective in making my decision to concentrate only on women.

In this study, a purposeful sampling was utilized for finding the Afghan women to interview with. According to Gray et al. (2007, p.105), a purposeful sampling is a way of sampling in which, the researcher “purposefully selects certain groups or individuals for their relevance to the issue being studied” (Gray et al., 2007, p.105). For the purpose of my thesis, ten women from Afghanistan were interviewed. In order for me to be able to have face to face interviews, all the Afghan women who participate in this study reside in Malmo. These women have lived in Sweden for at least six years, and have their Swedish permanent residency. The six years limit of stay in Sweden and the Swedish permanent residency was specified since the aim of this study requires investigating of individuals who are to some extent settled in Sweden, so that they can relate to the discussions about socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging. Moreover, I decided to restrict the participants to the ones who can speak Dari. This was decided since as a Persian speaker, I could be able to communicate with the participants without the need for a translator.

It should be noted that one major disadvantage of purposeful sampling is that there is no assurance that the participants are the representatives of the population specified for the study (Gray et al., 2007, p. 105). However, taking this disadvantage into account, I still believe that this way of sampling the participants suits the characteristics of this study.

**Sampling technique:**

According to Taylor, DeVault and Bogdan, potential participants can be located through checking with friends and relatives and approaching agencies and organizations (2016, p. 108). To find participants for my research, I reached out to my social network in order to be connected to women from Afghanistan who meet my sampling criteria and are willing to participate in my research. The aim and the objectives of my study were presented to my network in order for them to share this information with potential participants, so that they know beforehand what they can expect from the interview sessions. Through this way, two participants were introduced to me and were interviewed. The rest of the participants are students of a public school (folkhögskola) where Swedish language courses are provided for immigrants. In order to find
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interviewees who meet the sampling criteria, I contacted a teacher who helped me with finding the right participants.

The interviewing procedure:

As mentioned in the previous section, two of the participants were introduced to me by my social network. I contacted each of them separately and appointed a time for meeting. One of the interviews took place on a mutual friend’s apartment, and the other two took place in a café house; both of these places were suggested by the interviewees themselves. For the other eight participants who were students, the interviews took place in their school’s empty classrooms. These interviews consisted of two focus groups; each consisting of three participants, and two other individual interviews.

Before starting the interviews, the participants were asked whether they agreed and felt comfortable to have their voices recorded. One of the focus groups and two of the individual interviewers expressed their discomfort in being recorded. For these interviews, I made sure to keep notes of the conversation, and write down verbatim as much as possible. For the other interviews which were recorded, I did not make notes of the whole conversation, but paid attention to the body language and face expressions and made sure to keep note of them.

As mentioned previously, the semi-structured interviews were selected as the way of collecting the data. For this reason, I prepared a few number of questions to ask from all the participants, and depending on how the discussions were going, new topics and questions followed up. All the interview sessions, including the focus group interviews went very friendly, and when the conversations were going off the topic, I did not immediately interrupt, but tried to follow Weiss’s suggestion to keep control over the interview process and shift the conversation gradually back to the topic of the research (1994, P.78-79).

The focus group interviews took place between the participants’ study sessions, and therefore, there was time limitation for conducting the interviews with these groups. The length of the focus group interviews was approximately 45 minutes, while for the individual interviews there was no or less time limitations and each of these interview sessions took about 40 minutes for each individual.
Role of the researcher:

Within the field of qualitative research, scholars have emphasized on the importance of the role of the researcher on the outcome of the study. In this regard, Maxwell recognizes the researcher as the instrument in the qualitative study (2002, p.20), whose role is “inextricably part of the phenomena” (2002, p.24). For Maxwell, the researcher’s ‘personal properties’ are important components that will shape how they “conceptualize the study and engage with it” (2002, p20). Accordingly, as the researcher of this study, my own personal properties such as my ethnic background, my values and beliefs and my life experiences in general will shape how I view the discourses and the participants under study, and that what I write is a reflection of what I have interpreted based on these properties (Maxwell, 2002: Grbich, 2004: Creswell: 2007). Hence, while I intend to take the role of an observer in my research, I am also aware of the subjectivity that I bring to the research. Being self-conscious and paying attention to this effect instead of neglecting it can help me be able to see past my own “subjective knowledge” (Miller and Glassner, 2011, p.141) and keep control over it instead of letting it control the result of my study (Maxwell, 2002, p. 24). In this regard, scholars recognize ‘reflexivity’ as an essential element in qualitative researches. Grbich explains reflexivity as “viewing the self and the processes of data collection and interpretation in a critical and detached manner ‘through internal dialogue and constant (and intensive) scrutiny of “what I know” and “how I know it’” (2004, P.71).

Following Miller and Glassner’s viewpoint (2011, p.136), I find it necessary to make the subjectivity in this study visible to the readers and conduct an honest and transparent research. Similar to the target group under study, I am an immigrant woman living in Sweden for more than 7 years. As an immigrant, coming from a country with very different culture and norms than Sweden, I do have knowledge based on my own experience about the topics of sense of belonging and socio-cultural integration. In addition, my country of origin shares common cultural heritage with Afghanistan, and due to the similarities of religion, culture and norms, I am familiar with the socio-cultural context of Afghan society. In this regards, I agree with Miller and Glassner (2011, p.141) that having similarities with the group under the study or having lived their life experiences to some extent is beneficial in truly understanding them and making legitimate claims. Hence, my knowledge about the experiences of Afghan women whom I interviewed is an advantage to my research, and if this understanding didn’t exist, I probably...
wouldn’t have been able to grasp the depth of the issues my participants brought up. This however does not mean that I will allow my experiences to take control of the research process. Throughout the interview sessions, I made sure to separate my own experiences and understandings of the issues from my participants’, and be open to discussions that are new to me or that contradict with what I have anticipated. According to Creswell, the qualitative researcher has to “keep a focus on the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research” (2007, p.39).

In addition, I believe that my ethnicity and background as an Iranian had an impact on how the participants responded, and if the researcher of this study came from a different ethnic background, the responses could have differed. For example, three of the participants have had experience of living in Iran for a few years and since I am Iranian, they automatically brought up discussions about the discriminatory experiences they encountered in Iran and compared their situation in Iran with their current life in Sweden. This research probably would have lacked this beneficial information if I as the researcher were not Iranian. However, I was aware of the disadvantages of my ethnic origin on this study as well. Due to the different levels of discrimination that exists against Afghans in Iran, I was aware that my background as an Iranian could cause distrust among the participants or could effect on how they might feel and respond during the interview sessions. I was mindful that from the participants’ perspective, I might come from the position of power; both as an Iranian and as the researcher of the study. In this regard, I agree with Maxwell (2013, p.80) that issues such as the power gap between the researcher and the interviewees could result in an uncomfortable and unproductive interview session. To avoid this, I followed Maxwell’s suggestion to anticipate the potential concerns that the interviewees might have, and try to address and solve them. Therefore, to prevent the feeling of power vs. subordinate relationship, it was firstly essential for me to be conscious about it, and secondly to avoid bringing up delicate questions or any behaviors that might feed to this feeling (ibid). Throughout the interview sessions, the participants didn’t show any feeling of unease and distrust, and I got the impression that they felt comfortable enough to express themselves.
Ethical consideration:

Ethical principles play a predominant role in all studies and researchers are ought to pay attention to the ethics in the pursuit of their research. From the selection of the particular topic, to conducting the interviews, to analyzing the data, the researchers shall frequently ask the question of whether they are drawing upon an ethical and moral guideline or not (see for instance Ryen 2011; Neuman, 2014). By following this procedure, I made sure to adhere to the ethical guideline of a qualitative research throughout my study.

Although ethical rules shall be followed from the beginning to the end of the study, most scholars have specifically emphasized on the considering ethics in relation to the participants of the research (see for instance Ryen 2011; Neuman, 2014). In this regard, among scholars, three key ethical concerns are frequently addressed: the full consent of the participants, confidentiality of the participants identities, and preventing any harm caused against the participants and the group under investigation (Ryen, 2011: Rossman and Rallis, 2012: Neuman, 2014). Accordingly, these ethical rules were taken into consideration in this study as well. During the sampling process, the main aim of the research was fully explained to persons who introduced me to the participants. This way, the potential participants were informed about the purpose of the research and could decide whether they are willing to participate in it or not. In the beginning of the interview sessions, again I explained who I was, what the purpose of my research was, and why I needed their participation. The participants were assured that their participation is voluntarily and that they can withdraw from the interview and leave at any time they wish; or if they later decided to withdraw from the research, they can contact me and express their dissent from being part of the study.

While I find it necessary to have the interviewees’ complete consent in participating in the study, I came to the conclusion that providing a consent form, and requesting their written consent may cause discomfort and reluctance from the interviewees. In this respect, Rossman and Rallis assert that “in some cultural context, having to sign one’s name or put one’s mark on a piece of paper is highly suspect … [researcher] can, quit naturally, explains the assurance of informed consent and obtain agreement orally” (2012, p.74). Following this assertion, I informed the participants about the nature of the study and the rights they hold, and the participants expressed their consent
orally. Furthermore, it was also important to have the participants’ consent on having the conversations recorded. For this reason, I explained to the interviewees that the recorded conversations were merely for my own usage; no one else but me would listen to them, and they will be deleted right after I was finished with the study. Most importantly, they were informed that if for any reason, they do not wish to be recorded or that they may feel uncomfortable, their voices will not be recorded and I will keep note of the conversation instead. One of the focus groups and two other participants from the individual interviews expressed discomfort from being recorded, and therefore, I took note of these whole sessions instead. In regards to the anonymity of the participants, they were informed that their identities are protected in the research, and their names will by no means be revealed to anyone. For this reason, throughout this research, the participants were given fictitious names.

An ethical research is one that prevents any harm caused against its participants (Ryen, 2011, p.419). This harm could appear in different forms. The participants’ consent to take part in the research, and the confidentiality of their identity are examples of how to prevent harm against the interviewees. Beside these, the relationship between the participants and the researcher is of great importance. Throughout the interview sessions, I was careful not to disrespect the participants in anyways, or create and cause any misunderstanding. I was aware that an ethical research is built upon mutual respect, and I made sure to create a respectful relationship with the participants.

**Reliability, validity and generalizability:**

Similar to the ethical principles, the reliability and validity in the research are essential areas of concern that need great attention from the researcher. For the study to be reasonable and convincing, it needs to follow principles that increase its reliability and validity (Silverman, 2014:198). In this section, the extent of reliability and validity in this research will be evaluated.

**Reliability:**

In general, reliability refers to “the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions” (Silverman, 2014: 108). To put it simply, a reliable research is one that will show the same
results and interpretations if repeated again (ibid). Due to the subjective nature of qualitative researches, and the subjectivity that I bring to the study, I believe that in case other researchers attempt to repeat it, they will most probably come up with different results and interpretations. Hence, as much as I try to stand objective, the inevitable subjectivity that exists in such qualitative researches decreases the reliability of this study. In this regard, I agree with Taylor, DeVault and Bogdan (2016, p.10) that achieving perfect reliability in qualitative studies is impossible. This is especially because reliability is mostly concerned with measurements and calculations which are properties of quantitative studies (Silverman, 2014, p.108-109). On the other hand, qualitative researches are involved with meanings, experiments and interpretations, properties that cannot be measured (Taylor, DeVault and Bogdan, 2016: 7-9).

This does not however mean that the qualitative researcher shall be unconcerned about reliability; but that a different approach is needed to achieve reliability. For Silverman, a central way of increasing reliability is associated with ‘low-inference descriptors’ which involves “recording observations in terms that are as concrete as possible, including verbatim accounts of what people say… rather than researcher’s reconstructions of the general sense of what a person said” (2014, p.109). In same respect, in order to rule out the influence of my personal perspective during the reporting process, I have recorded half of the interview sessions, with keeping in mind to report facial expressions which cannot be recorded. For the other half of the interviews, I kept verbatim note of the conversations, being careful to use the participants’ words instead of mine. While it would have increased the reliability of my study to record all the interview sessions, due to some of the participants’ lack of consent for being recorded, the ethical considerations were taken more seriously than the reliability of the study.

According to Silverman, other ways of increasing the reliability of the study are creating transparency throughout the research process by describing the research strategy and the method used for data analysis comprehensively, and also creating ‘theoretical transparency’ by “making explicit the theoretical stance from which the interpretation takes place” ( 2014, p.108). Following this solution, I have also attempted to make this research transparent through giving detailed description of what method will be used, why I chose the specific method, and how the data will be analyzed. In addition, by being transparent about subjectivity that exists in this research, I tried to make this study more reliable. Also, by providing a full description of the
theoretical framework of the study, I tried to elucidate the production process of particular interpretations, and increase the reliability of my study.

**Validity:**

Validity is referred to “the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (Silverman, 2014, p.115), and as Maxwell explains, it depends on “the relationship of your conclusions to reality” (2013, p.105). According to Maxwell, two broad types of threats are mainly raised in regards to the validity in qualitative researches: ‘the researcher’s bias’ and ‘reactivity’ (2013: 107). This however does not mean that the researcher is required to exclude personal perspectives and personal concerns in order to validate the results, but that s/he shall be aware and recognize the subjectivity that s/he has brought to the study. Maxwell explains that understanding how the personal values influence the conclusions of the study and “avoiding the negative consequences of these” are essential for a valid research (2013, p.108). Similarly, this research is inevitably influenced by my own personal concerns and perspectives, and I do not deny or neglect this influence. As I have previously explained, I am aware of that my personal properties could affect the research process and the finding of the study. However, I attempt to look for answers from the participants’ understanding of the issues, and not to involve my perspectives on how I interpret their responses. In order to prevent my perspectives and positions about issue to impair the interviews especially in case the participants are holding an opposing view from mine, I followed Maxwell’s suggestion to explicitly indentify my own position in the research and be aware of this throughout the interview sessions (2013, p.21). This way, I manage to separate my own position about the issue for the participants’ position and their understanding of the issue.

The other threat to the validity of my research is reactivity, which is referred to “the effect of the researcher on the individuals studied” (Maxwell, 2013, p.107). In qualitative studies and especially for interviews, the researcher will inevitably influence on how the participants respond to questions. According to Maxwell, the reactivity does not necessarily casus negative consequences, but it is essential to recognize its effect and to be aware of how it affects the interview outcomes (ibid). In the same respect, I am aware of my role on how my participants respond during the interviews. The reactivity in my study can specially be spotted on the way my participants have responded during the interviews in accordance to my national origin as an
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Iranian. I cannot avoid this effect, and I do not find it damaging to my research. However, I find it essential to be conscious of this reactivity, and to prevent the potential negative effects. For example, as mentioned previously, my nationality could cause distrust among participants. To avoid this, I needed to be aware that such threat exists, and to behave in a way to prevent this feeling.

**Generalizability:**

According to Maxwell, generalization refers to “extending research results, conclusions, or other accounts that are based on a study of particular individuals, settings, times, or institutions to other individuals, settings, times, or institutions than those directly studied” (2013, P.119).

The generalizability of a qualitative research is especially dependent on the sampling techniques that are used, and whether the samples under the investigation are representatives of a wider population (Maxwell, 2013, p.119; Mason, 2002, p.195). As I mentioned earlier, in this research, the participants have been selected through the purposeful sampling. While this way of sampling suits the characteristics of this research, one drawback of this technique is that it cannot reassure that the participants are representatives of the specified wider population (Gray et al., 2007, p. 105). Hence, I do not claim that the ten Afghan women whom I interviewed are representatives of all the Afghan women living in Sweden, but that they may show tendencies.

Also, I paid attention to the sampling criteria in order to have a rather homogeneous sample of people. However, I agree with Maxwell that ignoring diversity and overemphasizing on common characteristics decreases the generalizability of the research (2013, p.119). Therefore, I provided sampling criteria but did not overemphasize on the samples’ homogeneity.

With all these being said, my main intention is to understand about cultural integration, and sense of belonging from the lens of the ten Afghan women who participated in this study without insisting to generalize the findings to the rest of the Afghan women population in Sweden.
Participants:

This section presents a brief introduction of the participants of the study:

**Sahar** is a 44 years old single mother and has three children. She moved to Sweden eight years ago and currently works part time as a tailor at home.

**Arezo** is a 32 years old single mother and lives with her two children. She lost her husband in Afghanistan and moved to Sweden six years ago. She currently studies Swedish in school.

**Fatima** is 48 years old and lives with her three children and her husband. She lived in Tehran, Iran for four years before moving to Sweden to join her husband. She currently studies Swedish in school.

**Sara** is a 39 years old woman who lives with her three children and her husband. She moved to Sweden to join her husband six years ago, and is currently a housewife.

**Shila** is 39 years old and lives with her two children and her husband. She moved to Sweden with her children to join her husband six years ago and currently studies Swedish in school.

**Diba** is 45 years old and lives with her two children and husband. She lived in Iran for five years before moving to Sweden with her husband six years ago. She currently studies Swedish in school and participates voluntarily in an Afghan community organization.

**Shirin** is 52 years old and lives with her daughter’s family. She moved to Sweden seven years ago and is currently looking for a job.

**Leila** is 35 years old and lives with her children and husband. She lived in Iran for five years before moving to Sweden with her husband, and currently studies Swedish in school.

**Mina** is a 40 year old woman who lives alone. She moved to Sweden seven years ago and currently studies Swedish in school.

**Parisa** is 30 years old and lives with her children and her husband. She lived in India for one year before moving to Sweden with her husband. She currently studies Swedish in school and voluntarily participates in an Afghan community organization, as well as different meetings related to refugee assistance.
6. Findings and Analysis:

This study aims to investigate on the socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging among Afghan women in Sweden. Based on the research questions, the findings of this study are divided into two major themes of 1) socio-cultural integration and 2) sense of belonging. This section is dedicated to explaining the findings and the analysis of the findings based on the previous researches done on the same topic and the theoretical framework of the study.

Socio-cultural integration:

Based on the study’s aim and also the discussion that emerged during the interviews with regards to socio-cultural integration, the findings of the study are divided into three categories: language, social interactions and socio-cultural practices. The following sections will discuss these categories in details.

Language:

The importance of language in the process of integration in the host society has been strongly insisted on by scholars (see for instance Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2005; Esser, 2006; van Tubergen, 2006). In fact, according to van Tubergen, language proficiency is “a core element of immigrants’ socio-cultural integration” (2006, p.20). For the participants of this study, language is both an obstacle and a facilitator when it comes to socio-cultural integration. Depending on their level of Swedish proficiency, their approach towards language differs from each other. The following sections demonstrate these different approaches.

Language as an obstacle for socio-cultural integration:

For the participants who believed to lack Swedish language proficiency, language played as a barrier which separated them from the rest of the society. For example, for Sahar, who does not speak Swedish, language is a burden:

“I have been here for eight years, but I still don’t speak [Swedish]. I feel bad about it. When I go out I don’t want to talk to anybody. If someone comes to talk to me I just want
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to leave. I don’t even want to go out because of this [...] you know it makes me feel bad. I feel like it’s a weight on my body”

Considering the fact that language is the basic medium for communication (Esser, 2006: 11), it is not surprising that lack of language skills can result in limited communication with others and feeling of isolation. Not being able to communicate in the language of the host country, or in the case of this research, Swedish, decreases the chance of having intergroup relations, and consequently decreases the socio-cultural integration of immigrants (Esser, 2006: 11)

The participants who believe to lack Swedish language skills show the feeling of guilt for not being able to communicate in Swedish after several years of living in Sweden. When I asked them about the Swedish language, these participants mostly expressed their frustration with learning Swedish and not being able to speak. In this regards, Sahar explains that although she feels the need to learn Swedish, she finds the language so difficult that she believes it is impossible for her to someday communicate in Swedish. Sahar further asserts that she sees language as the one and only obstacle for her socio-cultural integration, and explains that if she could speak the language, she could become more familiar with the Swedish culture, and interact with Swedes:

“So far what I know about Sweden is what I hear from my teacher and other Afghans. If I could really understand what they say then I could for example watch TV, or have Swedish friends. But now I feel left out”.

This is also the case in Beg’s research on Afghan women in Canada, which reveals that low language skills have hindered Afghan women to socially and culturally integrate themselves in Canada (2005, p.80-82).

Different reasons such as limited time to study and not having an opportunity to practice Swedish outside school have emerged as the reasons behind these participants’ limited language skills. For example, Arezo states that her lack of Swedish skills stems from limited time to study and not having a partner to practice with:

“We come to school and we speak a little bit, we speak Dari most of the times […] I don’t speak with people outside because I can’t. At home I don’t have much time to
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study; I take care of my sons. When I want to practice with them they laugh at me (she says while laughing). They say mom, don’t speak Swedish! You speak funny (she laughs)

This can be explained through the statement that “immigrants’ proficiency in the destination language is considered a function of the amount of exposure to that language. Immigrants learn a new language by opportunities to hear, study, and use the language” (van Tubergen, 2006, p.40). Arezo believes that not knowing Swedish is the main problem when it comes to socio-cultural integration. She asserts that in order to know more about the culture, she needs to have Swedish friends, and in order to have friends, she has to speak their language. She further expresses her wish to have Swedish friends with whom she can practice her Swedish:

“Honestly I think if I had daily interaction with Swedish people, I could learn the language fast. But to have interaction with them, I need to know their language first”.

In this regard, while lack of language skills negatively effects social integration of immigrants, limited intergroup interactions can also hinder language acquisition of immigrants (Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997). Thus, lack of language skills and limited interactions with Swedes both negatively amplify each other. Participants with lower language skills believe that not knowing Swedish resulted in their isolation from the Swedish society, and at the same time, not having contact with Swedes have caused their language proficiency to remain in a low level.

**Language as a facilitator for socio-cultural integration:**

For the participants who speak Swedish on their daily basis, language functions as a facilitator in becoming integrated into the Swedish society. For instance, Leila states that knowing the language provided her an opportunity to become familiar with the Swedish context:

“When I started understanding them and talking to them, I realized how nice they were, and how similar we are. Before that, it felt like we are from different worlds. But now I see them as one of us, or I am one of them (she laughs) […] speaking the language really helped me to create a place for myself here”.

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This is of course not surprising that the participants who obtained language skills have a more positive approach towards the role of language than the ones who still lack language proficiency. Another example is Parisa who has a positive experience with the Swedish language:

“I had a friend who spoke good Swedish. She became like a translator to me. Then little by little their words became familiar to my ears, so I learned it from listening to them […] I speak broken Swedish with Swedes, but my [Swedish] friends encourage me and say I speak very well […] the good thing here is that however you talk, they understand, and they encourage you a lot. They want to pull you up, not to push you down.”

Regarding her experience with acculturating in the Swedish society she asserts that “when you know the language, you can know about everything and do anything. But first is the language”. Additionally, For Parisa as she asserts herself, language provided confidence in regards to social interactions. In a similar manner, Beg asserts that language acquisition increases self-esteem and functions as an empowering tool for immigrants because it “[improves] their ability to communicate and to become active participants in society” (2005, P.82).

In general, the participants considered language as the main important tool for increasing cultural integration (whether as a barrier or facilitator). In this regard, Mina states:

“Everything is about language. If I want to learn about the Swedish culture, I have to know Swedish. For example I can learn about their culture from TV. So I should know Swedish to watch TV. If I want to learn about their culture, I should talk to Swedish people and learn from them. So I have to speak Swedish. Everything is about the language”.

This statement exemplifies Esser’s assertion that language is “a valuable resource, through which other resources can be obtained and in which one can choose to invest” (2006, p.11). The findings of Beg (2005) and Hosseini-Khaladjahi’s studies (1997) also reveal that, language becomes a tool through which, the immigrants can access other resources such as the labour market and the social network.
Language as a tool for defending rights:

One major discussion that emerged during the interviews was the assumption that without Swedish skills, the participants are unable to defend their rights or enjoy their rights to the fullest extent. This important role of language for the participants is reflected in Shila and Diba’s experiences with lack of language proficiency. For Shila, not knowing the language is not only an obstacle for socio-cultural integration in the Swedish society, but also makes her feel like she cannot defend herself in special situations:

“One day I went to social service office and my officer was an Iranian woman. She disregarded me and didn’t help me. I tried to talk to another Swedish officer instead, but I didn’t know Swedish to express myself [...] That’s why I say again now, language is very important. I didn’t know the language to explain to the Swedish officer about what happened, and so they believed their colleague, not me. I couldn’t do what I went there for. I became so sad because they couldn’t understand what I meant, and I couldn’t defend my rights. It made me feel really terrible, really really terrible (she says sadly)”

In a similar manner, Diba who lived in Iran for five years before coming to Sweden explains about the importance of knowing not only the language, but also the culture, values and relations:

“When I was in Iran, I didn’t have any rights. But I knew the language and culture, and I knew how to approach people and how to behave. So I managed to take care of things with begging them, swearing them to god, or any other way. I was able to do things that I didn’t have the rights to do, because I knew how to convince them. When I came here, I didn’t know the language, the culture and the people. I have my rights here but I couldn’t get them because I didn’t know how to express myself. Now I feel more in control because I can express myself, even if I don’t speak perfect, I can get my rights now”

This point of view reveals that from Shila and Diba’s perspective, knowing the language and the people provides them an opportunity to protect themselves in situations like the ones mentioned above. For them, lack of language and social skills leads to losing control of their life, and becoming dependent on others to help them in different daily situation. Hence, for the
participants of this study, language is considered as not only a barrier or a facilitator to socio-cultural integration, but it is first and foremost a primary necessity in order to survive in the new society. In this regard, Beg explains about the importance of knowing the language as a “survival skill which is crucial for functioning and daily living” (2005, p.82). For the Afghan women in Beg’s research, similar to the participant of this study, proficiency in the host country’s language enables them to “articulate their rights” and assert their opinion in the destination country (2005, p.82-83).

It should be noted that not all of the participants share this viewpoint. For example, Fatima has a different opinion regarding the necessity of language in articulating or defending one’s rights. She believes that one does not have to know the language in Sweden to be able to get their rights. Fatima disagrees with Diba’s assertion in the focus group session:

“No I don’t agree. Here is not like Iran. Here they give you all your rights, even if you don’t know you have them. This is my experience; they informed me about everything, all the rights that I possess. And we can always have translators. I never spoke Swedish with them but I never had any issues”

Overall, the findings of this study are in line with the assertion that language is a predominant factor that affects the socio-cultural integration of immigrants (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2005; Esser, 2006; van Tubergen, 2006), and suggest that language has a prominent role when it comes to socio-cultural integration of the Afghan women participating in this study. Among the participants, language was seen as key in acculturating themselves into Swedish society, and having an active social interaction with Swedes. Accordingly, van Tubergen states that “immigrants are said to be more socially and culturally integrated in the host country when [they] speak the destination language well” (2006, p.7).

Social interactions:

While several variables have been determined as indicators for social integration, the scope of this study does not allow for investigating on all of them. For instance, none of the participants in this research are married to a non-Afghan husband. Hence, this research will not include an investigation on the marriage patterns as an indicator of social integration among the Afghan
women. Consequently, I followed Hosseini-Khaladjahi’s study to only consider the friendship relations and social interactions as the most suitable variable for measuring social integration among Afghan women in Sweden (1997). By social interaction, scholars mostly mean interacting with members of the host population (see for instance Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997). However, due to the importance of the in-group societies in the immigrants’ socio-cultural integration (Nourpanah, 2010; Beg, 2005), I will investigate on the participants’ interactions firstly with other Afghans, and secondly with Swedes. It should be noted that by the term ‘Swedes’ this study means individuals who the participants themselves identify as Swedes.

Interaction with Afghans:

In general, the participants state that they have a strong network within the community of Afghans all over Sweden. This strong network consists of friends, family members and relatives. With regards to finding friends, school is among the most efficient places for the participants to find friends and build a network. Also Sahar, Arezo, Shila, Shirin, Leila, and Sara state that they had families or relatives who lived in Sweden before they migrated to Sweden, and they have a close bond with each other. For them, their bonding ties function as a social capital in providing accommodation support, emotional support and exchanging information (Vasey, 2015; Daming and Jie, 2011). These participants assert that without their family network, they would not have migrated to Sweden in the first place. This is for instance true for Sahar who asserts:

“I didn’t know anything about Sweden. We ended up here because my relatives lived here, otherwise I wouldn’t have dared to come”.

Leila also states that without her social network, she could not survive in Sweden:

“I don’t know what we would do without them [...] my relatives encouraged us to come here. They let us stay with them when we had no place to go. They helped me when I wanted to go to doctor, and when I needed anything [...] we didn’t know anything about here when we came. They guided us”

As we can see, for Leila, her network has a multi dimensional function. From giving information and encouraging her family to migrate, to providing accommodation, and guidance, Leila’s network has an essential role in her living experience in Sweden. In this regard, Vasey explains
that the immigrants’ social networks are especially useful in easing their entry and “reinforce[ing] different migratory routes” (2015, p.2), which is exactly how social networks have functioned for Leila.

While these types of support are beneficial for increasing the survival chance of the Afghan women in the new society and improving their life conditions, some of the participants emphasize on the importance of their social networks in providing emotional support. Not feeling alone, having somebody to rely on during hard times, being there for each other, and spending free times with each other are parts of discussions about emotional support that these participants brought up. This is especially evident in Mina’s experience with her in-group networks:

“When I came here, I felt so lonely. I had my relatives but they lived in another city. I felt very lonely. I felt like I need to talk to someone who speaks my language and feels my pain […] now I have good friends, and I feel like we have each other’s back. If I feel down, I call them and they invite me and they cook for me”.

This supports Akhtar’s view on the in-group networks as “emotional refueling” functions that can give comfort to the immigrants (2011, p.86). Ryan also emphasizes on the importance of the bonding tie for the emotional support for immigrants which are especially helpful in “combating homesickness and loneliness” (2008, p. 674). Other studies have similarly suggested that more contact with other members of the same group positively correlates with emotional health and well-being of the immigrants (Cheung and Phillimore, 2013, p.29-30; Beg, 2005, p.99).

Arezo however states that she still doesn’t have any friends, and the only interaction she has with people is when she comes to school. She explains that she is shy and even in school she doesn’t talk much with others and asserts that her lack of interaction with others has caused her to feel lonely and depressed:

“I want to make connection but something holds me back… no one can feel my pain, but I feel so lonely. Sometimes I feel so sad, but I’m glad I have my sons, otherwise I would have died”.

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It can be speculated that as Arezo herself asserts, her lack of communication have resulted in her un-well state of mind. However, one person is too few to draw any conclusion, and generalize this case.

Although in-group networks can provide support and improve the immigrants’ well-being, with regards to their role on the socio-cultural integration of immigrants, Hosseini-Khaladjahi claims that having a tight bond with members of the same ethnic group can negatively affect social integration and acculturation (1997, p.129). This is firstly because it directly reduces “the psychological need for creating a friendship network and association with the members of the host population” (Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997, p.129). Secondly, according to van Tubergen, “language learning and usage is to some extent inhibited by exposure to the in-group” (2006, p.25). Since language is at core of social interaction and acculturation (van Tubergen, 2006, p.20), inhibiting language acquisition can hinder socio-cultural integration of the migrants. The finding of this study supports this claim to some extent. Arezo, Shirin, Shila, Mina, Sara and Sahar state that their social interaction is limited to their in-group networks. These participants are exactly the ones who have not acquired sufficient language proficiency according to themselves. Although we cannot draw the conclusion that close bond with other Afghans have hindered them from learning Swedish and creating a network of Swedish friends, we can consider this as a possible explanation. However, this does not necessarily mean that not having close bond and interaction with members of the same ethnic group will positively affect the socio-cultural integration of immigrants. This is especially not the case for Arezo, whose lack of interaction with other Afghans is not followed by more interaction with Swedes.

Interaction with Swedes:

Leila, Parisa, Diba and Fatima state that they have interactions with Swedes. These participants are the ones who have acquired language skills and can communicate in Swedish. As mentioned in the language section, these participants believed that their language skills played a vital role in building a wider social network, and making friends with Swedes.

Their network of Swedes consists of their neighbors, social workers they have met during their waiting time for acquiring permanent residency, and people they met in School. The degree of closeness between these women and their Swedish networks varies. While Fatima’s interaction
with Swedes is limited to daily conversations with her neighbors, Parisa explains that she has a wide interaction with Swedes, consisting of her neighbors, people from the organization she voluntarily works in, and teachers in school who she continued her contacts with:

“I have so many friends, so many relatives, and so many Swedish friends, maybe more that Afghan friends [...] I am very social, everywhere I go I make friends”

When asked about where she made friends with Swedes the most, she responded:

“Maybe you’ve heard of Asylgruppen¹ […] when we had our negative answer from the migration office, people who volunteered in Asylgruppen really helped us. They demonstrated for us in Malmö. They were the best help we got […] housing, food, and support, everything we got was from there. I made so many friends with them. I mean close friends, best friends”.

In this regard, the bridging ties that Parisa has build for herself have functioned as a social capital that provided her varieties of support. As mentioned previously, scholars have suggested that strong ties will provide immigrants with supports in order to help them ‘get by’ and the weak ties help immigrants in ‘getting ahead’ (Ryan, 2011, p.710). For Parisa however, her inter-ethnic relations also provided her supports such as informational and accommodation support which are expected from in-group relationships.

In addition, Parisa explains that her Swedish friends were great help for her Swedish learning, and at the same time asserts that knowing Swedish helped her find many more friends and build herself a wide social network. This supports the statement that language proficiency and social integration are interconnected, and improving one can positively affect the other (Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997; van Tubergen, 2006). However, Parisa, as she states herself, is a friendly and social woman. Within the first minutes of talking to her, I could speculate that her personality could be one important factor that has affected her social interactions. Language, of course is a crucial tool for the social integrations of immigrants such as Parisa. However, other factors such as personal characteristics can effect ones’ interactions with either Afghans or Swedes as well.

¹ Asylgruppen i Malmö is a non-profit organization, that aims to help and guide refugees.
This is also true about Arezo, who believes that her personality and shyness have hindered her from making friends with both Afghans and Swedes.

Furthermore, Diba also explains that she has built a good relationship with Swedes:

“I have a Swedish friend who was my son’s social service officer. She is like a family to us, she is like my sister. I invite her to my home and she invites me to hers […] I have other friends too. For example I go out walking with my Swedish neighbor. She even one day came and took my son to the hospital when I needed a ride”

Diba further emphasizes on the importance of reciprocity in relationships:

“They’ve been great help for me and my family. But I also try to do something nice for them. Maybe I don’t have much to offer but for example sometimes when I cook food, I take some of it to my neighbor’s door, and offer it to her. She becomes so happy! If I could do more, I would, but this is all I could do for her so far”

Coming from a similar culture, I understand the tradition of offering food to neighbors, which is very common within the Afghan and Iranian culture. This tradition is mostly practiced by neighbor who don’t know each other much, in order to build a relationship, and also by friends, as a sign of respect and kindness. Interestingly, Leila also reacts to Diba’s story in the focus group, and states that she practices this tradition as well:

“I also sometimes cook food and bring to my neighbor’s door. This is how we became close actually. My neighbor says that she loves our food […] she says I should open a restaurant, so she can eat my food whenever she wishes to, not when I make it for her (she laughs)”

Leila further explains that she cooks and offers food to her neighbor in an act of appreciation for her helps, especially because Leila’s neighbor helps her in babysitting her daughter when needed. Leila asserts that her relationship with her neighbor is similar to the relationships she had in Afghanistan, where neighbors would come by each others’ door for example if they ran out of an ingredient, and borrow from each other. Coming from similar culture, this feeling of closeness is not strange to me and I believe that having such relationships similar to the relationships one
would have with people of the same ethnic group suggests that a strong bond is made and can indicate social integration.

Overall, one decisive factor regarding the social and cultural integration of immigrants is their interaction with other members of the society (van Tubergen, 2006; Esser, 2006; Nourpanah, 2010). Interacting with members of the same minority group as well as the members of the host population has shown to positively affect the immigrants’ life experience in the new society (Nourpanah, 2010; Beg, 2005). As Hou, Schellenberg and Berry state, integration “entails both acting engagement with the receiving society and strong attachment to own-group cultural heritage” (2017, p.2). The participants of this study show varieties of social interactions. While some participants’ social network is limited to people of the same ethnic groups, others show a wider social interaction which includes members of the dominant society. Both types of interactions function as a social capital in providing varieties of support. Among scholar, such interactions especially with people of the host population are considered as “a bridge to acculturation” (Akhtar, 2011, p.91).

**Socio-cultural practices:**

Among scholars, few cultural practices have been identified as indicators of the socio-cultural integration of immigrants (Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997; Beg, 2005; van Tubergen, 2006). In this regard, three of the most suitable indicators of cultural integration are considered to be ‘eating habits’, ‘holiday celebration and participation’ and ‘religious practices’ (see for instance Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997; Beg, 2005). Due to the scope of this research, only the ‘eating habits’ and ‘holiday celebration and participation’ of the participants have been taken into consideration as indicators of their cultural integration. However, discussions about religious practices and discussions about mutual respect have also emerged during the interviews, and will be presented in the following sections as well.

*Eating habits:*

According to Hosseini-Khaladjahi, the shift in migrants’ own eating habits to the host society’s eating habits is considered as the last stage of acculturation (1997, p.92). This is especially because the food consumed within the household of the immigrants is a “private and personal
character compared to other cultural items which are more or less collective” (Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997, P.92). In case immigrants change their eating habits to the eating habits of the host country, this can be considered as a significant indicator of cultural integration (ibid).

For the participants of this study, Afghan food is an in important part of their culture. They express their admiration for Afghan cuisines which are a constant in their food table. Fatima, Parisa, Shirin and Leila also explain that food preparation is their responsibility at home, and assert that they voluntarily take this responsibility. For instance Parisa explains that:

“My husband offers help sometimes. He says “let me do some part at least”. But I tell him that I don’t need his help. If he wants to help he can wash the dishes (she laughs). He cannot cook they way I approve; we have the experience from before (laughs). So I cook myself”

Similarly, cooking is a voluntarily activity for Fatima, who explains that preparing food brings her feelings of nostalgia and peace:

“I always cook. I never let my family eat old food; I make fresh food every day. And you know our food is not like other foods. It takes time to prepare. It can take half a day. But I cannot complain because I love cooking, it’s so relaxing [...] I love the smell of our food [...] it reminds me of the time in Afghanistan”

Accordingly, Akhtar explains that food has a nostalgic value attached to it, which brings memories of not only families but especially “the local homoethnic community” (2011, p.93-94). Fatima’s explanation about the nostalgic characteristic of food is not an exception. Other participants also express their love for Afghan food because it is one of the only ways they can feel attached to their past. This is for example true for Arezo:

“When I cook [Afghan] food, I remember my mom. She taught me how to cook [...] when for example I make Halwa², it reminds me of her because she made it a lot [...] It brings back memories”

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² A sort of sweet confection made in various ways across the world.
In this respect, Dossa’s study also reveals that to the immigrant Afghan women in her research, Afghan food brought back the memory of their homeland. According to Dossa, preparing ‘authentic’ food evokes a ‘nostalgic gastronomy’ of Afghanistan (2008, p.17). Sutton also explains that:

“Familiar food habits help them [migrants] retain a significant aspect of their sense of ethnic identity; ethnic food represents a symbolic and cultural connection with the country of origin...For example, the smell of food can evoke memories on which identities are formed” (2001, cited in Nourpanah, 2010, p.66)

The role of food for the Afghan women is not restricted to bringing nostalgic attachment to the homeland. According to Nourpanah, one way that Afghan women attempt to express their cultural identity is especially through recreating Afghan foods (2010, p.43). It can therefore be assumed that food is not merely food. It is one’s culture, and a tool that can be utilized in order to manifest ones cultural identity. This can especially explain the participants’ habit of sharing food with neighbors. For them, sharing Afghan food can mean expressing themselves as Afghans. Interestingly, I witnessed this attempt firsthand from one of my participants. Sara, whom I met in a mutual friend’s home, brought with her some Afghan Naan. She respectfully insisted me to try it: “once you try this, you will never eat other breads here [in Sweden]. Afghan bread is very delicious”. Sara explains that she usually bakes Naan herself, because her family members do not like the breads in Sweden, and mostly eat Naan instead. Sara’s family is not an exception in this regard.

When I asked the participants whether they prepare and eat Swedish food, Azita, Shirin, and Fatima were negative. In one of the focus groups, the participants joked by asking what I mean by Swedish food because for them Swedish food mainly meant potatoes and meatballs. Diba laughs and states: “Swedish food doesn’t have any oil in it; we put so much oil in our food. We like it this way”. In supporting Diba, Fatima states that Swedish food is not hers and her family’s taste, and that “Afghan food is something else”. Regarding this, Akhtar explains that “[immigrants] come to believe that the food from the region of their origin is “the best.” The local food is no match to it. Even the local preparations of the immigrants’ original recipes fail to

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3 The national bread of Afghanistan, and commonly baked in Afghan households.
meet their idealized image of them” (2011 p.94). This often happens due to a nostalgic impulse (ibid). This is interestingly true for Fatima who strongly insisted that if I want to test Afghan food, I should try homemade Afghan foods, because “restaurants here make the worst Afghan foods”.

Although the participants enjoy and consume Afghan food, some participants assert that their children enjoy Swedish food more that Afghan food. One example of this is Shila’s children:

“I and my husband eat Afghan food. But our children like Swedish food more. They even like these instant soups that are in those packages (laughs). My son doesn’t like the pasta I make. He says I want it the way they make it in school, and I don’t know how he means […] He says the food in school is better. He doesn’t like rice, he only like pizza and falafel and things like that”.

As Shila’s experience indicates, the younger generation is more inclined towards Swedish foods. For Shila and her husband however, Afghan food is much more preferred.

Moreover, the participants assert that although they favor Afghan food, if offered Swedish food, they will eat the food in an act of respect. Parisa for example explains that when she is invited to Swedish gatherings, she will be respectful and eat the foods. However, she says that trying to be respectful has one time made her eat a big plate of raw fish even though she hated it. This type of behavior is by no means new to me. Coming from similar culture, I understand Parisa’s act of respect. In addition, although Afghan food is more popular among the participants than Swedish food, it is common among the participants to change the Swedish recipes to make something that is more matching to their taste. Using Afghan spices in Swedish dishes is a common practice that participants do. One example of this is Diba who asserts:

“We are starting to like [Swedish] meatballs. But I make it with our own spices. I make it in our own way. It’s no longer Swedish (she laughs)”.

In this case, although the participants have included Swedish dishes on their table, they have changed it in accordance to their own taste. Dossa’s study shows a similar attempt, in which, Afghan women attempt to use Afghan items in order to create Canadian dishes (2008, p.17). I
believe that these attempts are important in showing that different cultural traits from two distinct societies are mixed by individuals to create a new design.

In general, as can be seen from the participants’ assertions, Swedish food has varieties of meanings for the participants. For example, while Fatima and Dibá consider meatballs and potatoes as the main Swedish dishes, for Shila, pizza and falafel also fit into the category of Swedish foods, and Parisa considers raw fish as a Swedish food. In this regard, it important to note that in a global world of today and especially in Sweden with a multicultural society, it is difficult to know what Swedish food actually is. As a result of globalization, different food cultures have blended and overlapped with each other, and different cuisines have worked their ways into the national foods of other countries (Global Gastros, 2018). Food is no longer tied down to one place, and a dish can be as common in the country it originated from as in another country far away (ibid). Hence, the notion Swedish food is flexible; it can refer to very different things, and is not restricted to very fixed dishes with fixed characteristics.

Overall, food plays a special role in participants’ daily life, in making them nostalgic, giving them comfort, and connecting them to their homeland. This supports Akhtar’s assertion that “Food is of such great emotional significance. Apart from being a life-sustaining necessity, it is a link to relational scenarios and self-object narratives imbued with positive emotions” (2011, p.95). Although Afghan food is at core of the participants’ eating habits, the participants show a notion of openness towards Swedish foods as well. According to Hosseini-Khalajahi, “the private nature of eating habits makes it an important indicator of acculturation” (1997, p.92). This however does not necessarily mean that no change in eating habits of immigrants indicates low acculturation. According to Cardona, “food habits are one of the last cultural traits to change in the context of migration” (2004, cited in Nourpanah, 2010, p.66). Hence, change in eating habits and food consumption requires more time.

*Holiday celebration and participation:*

Holiday celebration and participation is another important indicator of immigrants’ acculturation (Hosseini-Khalajahi, 1997, p.92). In order to examine acculturation, two indicators can be decisive. Firstly, the degree to which the immigrants celebrate their own holidays, especially religious ceremonies, can reveal how attached they are to the culture of their origin (Hosseini-
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Khaladjahi, 1997, p.92-99). Secondly, the degree to which they participate in the host culture’s ceremonies and celebrate their holidays is positively correlated with the acculturation status of the immigrants (ibid).

Among the participants, the most important holiday is Nowroz⁴, and they celebrate it with family and friends. This is especially true for Leila, Parisa, Fatima, Shirin, Shila and Sara, who not only make their 7sin tables⁵, but also participate in community ceremonies for celebration of Nowruz. For instance Parisa states that:

“We celebrate the New Year every year. We will never miss it […] and now I am very very exited that Nowruz is coming […] I already arranged my 7sin and cannot wait to celebrate”

Mina and Arezo however assert that they have not made the 7sin table within the past few years, and rarely participate in such ceremonies. For both Mina and Arezo, not being surrounded by relatives and family is the reason why they do not celebrate Nowruz. Mina for example states that these ceremonies are not enjoyable for her:

“I don’t really enjoy it. For Nowruz, everybody is with their families. I only have friends, and most of my friends celebrate with their families. They tell me to join them, but I don’t feel very comfortable”

Other Afghan holidays are not celebrated among the participants, but some state that they would participate in ceremonies such as Charshanbe Suri⁶ only for fun. Regarding religious ceremonies, participants such as Arezo, Fatima, and Shirin also state that they practice fasting during Ramadan. This fasting however remains in an individual level, and they do not celebrate it with the Afghan community.

Regarding celebration of Swedish holidays, Shirin, Sahar, Parisa, Fatima and Shila state that they do not celebrate at home, but participate in ceremonies held by other communities or their friends. For example, Sahar asserts that she enjoys the Christmas Eve ceremony very much, and

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⁴ New Year, celebrated in countries such as Iran and Afghanistan.
⁵ Symbolic arrangement of seven items as the New year’s ritual.
⁶ Celebrated on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year.
always participates. She further explains that her son has asked her whether it is okay for him to participate in Christmas ceremonies:

“My son asks if it’s okay to go to church for Christmas celebration. He likes their celebration and songs. He asks if it’s a problem. I say no, you can go. It’s no problem, church is a similar place like our mosques; there is no difference”

Sara also mentions a similar issue:

“My son’s school celebrates Christmas. They take them to church. My son asks me if it’s haram to go to the church. I always say of course not. It’s not haram (she laughs)”

Diba, Leila and Mina state that they actually celebrate Christmas at home. In this regard, Leila explains that even though they do not have a Christmas tree, she and her kids have made a Christmas tree out of paper for this year’s Christmas and might consider buying an actual tree next year. Diba states that during the first years that she came to Sweden, her neighbor gave a Christmas tree as a gift, and from then she always celebrates Christmas and puts on the tree. She further shows me the photo of her last year’s Christmas tree from her cell phone. Similarly, Mina states that she put on the Christmas tree and invites home friends who live alone just like her for the Christmas Eve dinner:

“Every year I put my tree, I put the presents, I prepare my Julbord, and I invite friends. Not the ones who have their families here, I invite the ones who are alone. And I cook them some Qabili palau”

Mina’s Qabili palau on the Julbord brings everybody including herself to start laughing. However, I believe that it shows something significantly interesting. As I mentioned earlier, food is an important cultural trait (Nourpanah, 2010, p.58). In the same respect, celebrating holidays are of great importance (Hosseini-Khaladjahi, 1997, 90-95). The fact that food is usually an important part of celebrations makes them interconnected. Serving Afghan food for the Julbord means taking a section of each of the cultural practices, and mixing them together to create something new, which is exactly what cultural integration is about. In this regard, Sardinha

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7 Swedish Christmas table
8 A well-known and common Afghan dish
Aida Abedin explains about the notion of “cultural mixing” which refers to the process, in which, the immigrants ‘re-work’, ‘reform’ and ‘reconfigure’ the cultural aspects of the host country into a new “hybrid culture” (2009, p.59). Through this, both cultures of origin and host country are mixed and practiced which brings harmony to the settlement process, “without assimilating or abandoning the past” (2009, p.60).

It should be noted that for these participants, Jul and the New Year are the only Swedish holidays that they participate in. Other Holidays such as the Midsummer celebration are not part of the ceremonies they participate in.

**Mutual respect:**

While mutual respect has not been emphasized on as an important indicator to cultural integration among scholars, the participants’ responds during interviews made it inevitable for me to include a section dedicated to this. In addition, I also believe that mutual respect actually plays an important role in the acculturation and social integration of immigrants.

Throughout the interviews, the discussions about respect repeatedly emerged, and the participants explained that respect is the most important and vital treatment they offer to Swedes and expect from them. For the participants of this study, respect, being open minded, and positive are at core of any social interaction and relation. Beg’s study also shows the same results in which Afghan women emphasize on the importance of “being open-minded and having a positive attitude” (2005, p.6).

Diba for example states that having such different cultures and traditions can make it hard for the two groups to live together. However, she believes that the one and only solution is to “respect one another”.

Regarding mutual respect Shila also asserts that:

“Being open minded is very important [...] if I want to be accepted the way I am with my background and with this [hijab], I should accept them how they are too. For example if they want to drink alcohol or wear any clothes they want, we should respect that”
Leila in the same manner explains that:

“For example, if I go to the doctor and he brings his hands to shake with me, well I have my scarf on, I have hijab, but I will shake hands with him. If a person from my own culture and religion sees this, they will say why did you do that!! But I say when the doctor respects you to shake hands with you and greet you, you shouldn’t reject him. This is about respect [...] it doesn’t matter if they are men or women, if you reject their hands, it is disrespectful”

Diba in the focus group agrees with Leila:

“For Swedes, this means respect. They are not trying to offend you. I also think you should shake hands with them [...] but when they see that you have your hijab on, they shouldn’t bring their hands to shake with you; they should respect you as well. I still don’t think that they mean to disrespect anyone, but it’s good if they pay attention to these things too”

In her article, Beg (2005) emphasizes on the importance of ‘respect’, ‘understanding’ and ‘tolerance’ as decisive factors in cultural integration (2005, p.23). For Dossa, cultural integration is a reciprocal process which “enables migrants and the host society to find an opportunity to make their own distinctive contributions to one another” (ibid). The participants of this study also consider these variables as necessities in their interactions with other members of the society, and show a great level of agreement and respect to the dominant norms in Sweden. In this respect, Hosseini-Khaladjahi views the agreement to the dominant values as one of the predominant factor in the immigrant’s acculturation (1997).

**Sense of belonging:**

As mentioned previously, sense of belonging is one of the main elements that determine acculturation. In fact, as mentioned by McCoy, Kirova & Knight, “integration is ultimately about belonging” (2016, p.34). Although scholars have identified several indicators that affect the sense of belonging among immigrants (see for instance Chow, 2007; Birka, 2013; Ager and Strang, 2008), the intention in this study is to examine what factors affect the sense of belonging specifically among the participants of this study from their own points of views. During the
interview sessions, three main discussions emerged which according to the participants, affected their sense of belonging to Sweden: family ties, safety, and discrimination vs. acceptance. The following section is dedicated to explaining these factors and the role they play in shaping the participants’ sense of belonging.

*Family ties:*

The findings of this study suggest that family ties are one of the dominant factors in determining the sense of belonging among the participants of this study. This is the case for both the participants who still have family members in Afghanistan, and the participants who have all their family members in Sweden. Examples of participants who have family members in Afghanistan are Shila, Parisa and Arezo, who express their sadness for leaving members of their families back in Afghanistan. For example Shila asserts that:

> “I miss my sister a lot. I also miss my nephews and my father […] when I hear something has happened there I always worry about them. I picture in my mind that god forbid, they are hurt […] I have my husband and my children here, and I am here and safe, but my mind is there […] until I don’t see them here, I don’t allow myself to enjoy this life”

Shila expresses a feeling of guilt for enjoying the life in Sweden, which according to Rodriguez is common among immigrants who left their loved ones back in the country of origin (2008, p.82). This feeling of guilt is visible in Parisa as well. Parisa worries for her mother and father and says that she is constantly in contact with them:

> “My husband says that I haven’t left Afghanistan emotionally. He thinks forgetting the past life makes it easier to live here. I don’t disagree but I think it’s impossible, at least for me […] my parents are old, and sometimes I feel guilty you know? (says emotionally) […] I am satisfied with my life here, but my mind is in Afghanistan, no maybe not in Afghanistan, but with my mother and father. There is a saying you know, it is ‘home is where your parents are’”

As both Shila’s and Parisa’s statements reveal, leaving Afghanistan and moving to Sweden did not result in them cutting ties with Afghanistan. On the contrary, they assert that their living experience in Sweden is affected by this, and they are emotionally attached to Afghanistan. This
however does not necessarily negate their sense of belonging to Sweden. Parisa explains that she feels belonging to both Sweden and Afghanistan and says that once her parents are with her, she will eventually be able to let go and “leave Afghanistan emotionally”. For her, Afghanistan is all about her parents and according to her, her parents are the main ties that connect her to Afghanistan. This is true for Shila as well, who states that “once my family members are with me and are safe, I will give my heart to Sweden (laughs)”.

Furthermore, Arezo asserts that her family is the only thing she has ever had. For her, whose relationships in Afghanistan were mainly limited to her family members, they hold a crucial role in her life. She asserts:

“I like Sweden, but especially my sons like it here. They have their friends here. But I miss my own family a lot. I miss them very much. Mostly my mother and my cousins, because we grew up together […] if I could, I would have brought them with me”

Arezo states that she still feels a strong connection and belonging to Afghanistan and her two sons are the only reason she feels partially belonging to Sweden. This suggests that for Arezo, the feeling of belonging to any place is greatly tied with her family’s situation. One explanation for this matter is that the Afghan culture is very family oriented, and endorses the values of collectivism (Bhanji, 2011, p.1). According to de Valk et al., “in more collective societies, kinship ties take center stage” (2011, p.295). Arezo’s sense of belonging does not arise from an individualistic mindset, but from the mindset of a person who puts family at the center.

Shirin also has a similar collectivist approach to family. For her however, it is different in a sense that her family members are living with her in Sweden, and therefore she sees Sweden as her home:

“When I left Afghanistan, I had all my loved ones here already […] I sometimes miss my home in Afghanistan and my neighbors. But I will stay here for the rest of my life […] where would I want to go? My family is here, my home is here”

Thus, for Shirin, having her family members with her plays an important role in feeling belonging to Sweden. This supports Ager and Strang’s assertion that family ties in the receiving
country are positively affective for immigrants in building their sense of belonging (2008, p.178).

In general, among the participants, family plays an important role in how they feel about Sweden and Afghanistan, and where they consider as their homes. Parisa’s mindset of home is where family is can be spotted among other participant as well. The participants with family members still living in Afghanistan are more inclined towards Afghanistan, and the participants whose family members resided with them, show a stronger sense of belonging to Sweden. this supports de Haas and Fokkema’s claim that immigrants with stronger social ties in the country of origin are more inclined towards their country of origin and are more likely to return to that country, while immigrants with stronger social ties in the recieving country are less likely to consider leaving the host country and more likely to feel belonging to that place (2011, p.774). Orton also asserts that family reunification is among factors that can facilitate integration and is important in building a sense of belonging among immigrants (2012, p.41).

Safety:

Safety and security were a common theme emerging during the interview sessions. According to the interviewees’ narrations, the issue of safety is one of the prevailing factors that affect the sense of belonging to Sweden among the participants. This is especially true for Sahar, Sara and Shila who suggest that feeling safe and secure is one of the reasons they have a sense of belonging to Sweden. In this regard, Shila asserts that:

“We did not feel safe in Afghanistan […] Here I feel like nothing can hurt my children. We have freedom, we don’t fear for anything. I don’t say I don’t miss Afghanistan, but I say that I settled here because here I feel free, I feel safe […] I like Sweden a lot for this”.

Sara shares the same feeling, and asserts that:

“Whenver Afghanistan is freed, I will return to my country. But right now Sweden has given me safety, we feel safe here contrary to Afghanistan, so I do consider this place as my home […] I can say Afghanistan is my first home and Sweden is my second home”.
Sara’s statement suggests that she still holds a strong sense of belonging to Afghanistan, but simultaneously feels belonging to Sweden. For Sara, Sweden is considered as a temporary home because it has provided her safety.

The importance of safety is also paramount for Sahar who asserts that she has experienced violence and danger first hand:

“I can say that we escaped. I took my children and ran away. People here have heard stories about Afghanistan and conflicts, but I have lived in it. Every day that my family was alive and not hurt, I thanked god and I prayed for the next day […] nothing like that happens here. I don’t worry for my children to go to school alone […] in this regard I can say Sweden has given me the security that I didn’t have for a long time in my country […] of course I want to build my home in a place that I feel secure and free, not somewhere we don’t know if we will die tomorrow or not”.

According to the Dutch Refugee Council (2001), “A home is a place of safety, security and stability, the lack of which was the main reason refugees left their country of origin” (cited in Ager and Strang, 2008, p.172). In both Shila’s and Shirin’s case, Sweden provides a more secure home for them, which increases their sense of belonging to this country. This endorses the statement that feeling peaceful and safe is paramount for immigrants’ to feel ‘at home’ in the receiving country (Ager and Strang, 2008, p.183; Hou, Schellenberg abd Berry, 2007, p.6; Wu, Hou and Schimmele, 2011, p.274). On the other hand, as mentioned by Ager and Strang, instability and feeling insecure decreases the life quality of immigrants and their well-being, which in return can decrease their sense of belonging to the country of residence (2008, p.183).

*Discrimination vs. acceptance:*

Discrimination is considered as one predominant factor that negates sense of belonging (McCoy, Kirova and Knight, 2016, p.35; Hou, Schellenberg and Berry, 2017, p.6). The topic of discrimination was brought up by the participants who have lived in Iran before moving to Sweden. The participants did not share any feeling of being discriminated in Sweden. Quite the contrary, for Fatima, Diba and Leila, lack of discrimination against them in Sweden was
mentioned as a reason why the felt a strong belonging to this country. They compared their current situation in Sweden with the discrimination they felt in Iran. For example Diba asserts:

“On security matters, Iran was good for us. It was not like Afghanistan where there is no security. But regarding our rights, it had nothing for use, we had zero rights. Here is much better, it’s very different […] let me say it like this, when we left Iran to come here we felt like we became free. I mean, we felt like we were freed from a cage. When I say freedom I mean in regard to our rights and dignity, not religion or our hijab because we have the same hijab and religion here as we had in Iran […] we feel much respected and free here”

Diba’s statement suggests that feeling safe is not only about physical securities, but also about feeling emotionally secured. Living in Iran already fulfilled her need for physical safety. Yet, this feeling of safeness was not sufficient for her to feel ‘at home’. This is supported by Ager and Strang’s statement that feeling secure and safe is not merely about physical violence, but also verbal abuse or discrimination can repel immigrants from building a sense of belonging to the country of residence (2008, p.184).

In a similar manner, Leila asserts that she feels much more respected in Sweden comparing to Iran:

“I don’t say everybody treated us badly, but most of the times we were disrespected. Here I feel respected. They don’t act like I have occupied their space. I don’t know, maybe someday somebody said something bad to me in the street or on the bus, but I didn’t understand what they said. In Iran when they disrespected us, we could understand (she laughs)”

As mentioned by McCoy, Kirova and Knight, “A sense of belonging seems to capture two related feelings. In part, it reflects the person’s sense of attachment to the country; but it also reflects the extent to which that person feels accepted by other denizens of the place” (2016, p.34). Leila’s experience in Iran shows that she did not feel accepted in Iran. On the other hand Sweden gives her the feeling of acceptance, and this in return, positively affects her feeling of attachment to Sweden. Leila’s assertion supports the argument that sense of belonging is a “two
way street”; if the host population generates discriminatory behaviors against the minority groups, the minority groups are very likely to generate a feeling of non-belonging towards the host country (McCoy, Kirova and Knight, 2016, p.44).

Moreover, Fatima states that even though she was more familiar with the lifestyle in Iran comparing to Sweden, she feels strongly belonging to Sweden:

“In Iran everything was familiar. The language, the people, clothing, food. Here all of these are different […] but I really feel belonging here actually. Because we are human and we should all be treated as human beings. This was not the case in Iran, but it is here”

Interestingly, the similarities of culture, traditions, and backgrounds of Iran and Afghanistan are not important factors for Diba, Leila and Fatima. For them a feeling of welcoming and acceptance is more vital in building a sense of belonging. Not feeling discriminated, feeling accepted, and being treated as human beings are discussions that emerged as reasons behind the strong attachment that Leila, Diba and Fatima feel in Sweden. This is in line with Latcheva and B. Herzog-Punzenberger’s claim that for immigrants who have experienced suppression as minorities before migration, non discriminatory treatments are decisive for their emotional attachment to the country of destination (2011, p.132).

The importance of feeling included and accepted instead of feeling discriminated have resulted in Diba, Leila and Fatima’s feeling of belonging to Sweden. Birka’s argument supports this:

“Perceptions of discrimination and belonging and social inclusion are interconnected, and through practices and experiences of social inclusion a sense of stake in the community and acceptance in society is created and maintained. For feeling of belonging, it is important for one to see himself as part of the social fabric” (2013, p.75).

This feeling of accepted is often rewarded by immigrants through committing to the new society’s common goals (Wu, Hou and Schimmele 2011, p.37). This is especially evident in Diba’s assertion that: “Swedish people welcomed us, and we will try to compensate to the best of our ability by being good citizens”.
In general, Diba, Leila and Fatima express a strong feeling of belonging to Sweden comparing to for instance Arezo, Shila, Sara and Parisa who express more belonging to Afghanistan. It is interesting to speculate whether Diba, Leila and Fatima’s stronger sense of belonging to Sweden may stem from their experiences of living in Iran, and the discrimination and the lack of belonging they felt in Iran in comparison to their experiences in Sweden; whereas for Arezo, Shila, Sara and Parisa, who came directly from Afghanistan and did not encounter such experiences, their sense of belonging is more inclined towards Afghanistan than Sweden.

It is important to note that while among scholars, social relations and social participations are dominant factors in building a sense belonging for immigrants, the participants of this research do not suggest that their social relations reflect on their sense of belonging. In a similar manner, Nourpanah’s study also shows that although the Afghan women in her study have not built strong interethnic relationships or do not participate in the dominant cultural activities, they still have a strong sense of belonging to their host country. In this respect, the findings of this and Nourpanah’s study support Hamaz and Vasta’s argument that the immigrants’ sense of belonging is not necessarily dependent on their social relations (2009, p.11).

Overall, the participants of this study had different notions of belonging, and different reasons were affecting these feelings of attachment. For the ones who had family members in Afghanistan, their sense of belonging were more inclined towards Afghanistan, and for the ones who had their family members in Sweden, they had a stronger sense of attachment to Sweden. Additionally, feeling safe and secure in Sweden emerged as an indicator that positively affects the participants’ sense of belonging to Sweden. Lastly, for the participants who have lived in Iran, their notion of belonging to Sweden was affected by the discriminatory behaviors they experienced in Iran. These experiences created a feeling of appreciation for the acceptance they claim to receive from the Swedish society and resulted in building a stronger sense of belonging to Sweden. It should be noted the participants expressed to have feelings of belonging to both Afghanistan and Sweden, with more inclination towards one or the other, which supports McCoy, Kirova and Knight’s assertion that individuals may feel belonging to multiple communities and societies simultaneously, without one repelling the other (2016, p.35).
7. Conclusion:

This study aimed to investigate on the socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging among Afghan women residing in Sweden. More specifically, this research firstly explored the socio-cultural experiences of the Afghan women participating in the research in terms of social network and socio-cultural practices, and secondly investigated on where these Afghan women feel belonging to, and what factors shape their sense of belonging to the specific place. The concepts of socio-cultural integration, social network and sense of belonging have been adopted as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study. Semi-structured interviews with ten Afghan women both through focus group interviews and individual interviews were conducted as the data collecting method, and the findings were presented and analyzed based on the literature review, and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study.

The findings of the study can be divided into two major themes of socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging. With regards to the participants’ socio-cultural integration, the findings can be categorized into three main topics of language, social network and socio-cultural practices. Firstly, the participants of the study considered language acquisition as key in their socio-cultural integration into the Swedish society. Depending of their language proficiency level, they saw language either as an obstacle or as a facilitator to their socio-cultural integration. In addition, another dominant discussion about language was its importance as a necessary tool for defending their right in the new country. Secondly, the finding of the study shows that interaction with other members of Afghan community is strong among the participants, but both in-group and out-group interactions exist. The language proficiency of participants especially is a decisive tool with regards to their interactions and friendships with other Swedes. In general, the social network of Afghan women was multi dimensional in providing them support in different aspects of their lives. Thirdly, regarding the socio-cultural practices of the Afghan women in this study, the findings revealed that Afghan foods have a special place on the participants’ table, but at the same time, some Swedish foods are gradually opening their ways in to their eating habits. Also, celebrating Afghan events and holidays are important for the Afghan women in this study, but they also participate in some Swedish celebrations such as Jul. In general, with regards to food and holidays, the participants have attempted to mix their own cultural traits with some of the
Swedish cultural traits. Moreover, the participants believe that having mutual respect is at the core of any of their social interactions.

In addition, regarding the sense of belonging, the Afghan women in this study expressed different variations of belonging to both Sweden and Afghanistan. While the participants were more inclined towards Afghanistan in case their family members lived in Afghanistan, the ones who had all their family members with them felt more belonging to Sweden. Also, the participants considered safety as one of the reasons why they felt ‘at home’ in Sweden. Lastly, feeling accepted by the Swedish society and not discriminated where among reasons that the participants, especially the ones who have experienced living in Iran, felt more belonging to Sweden.

In general, the findings reveal that the Afghan participants of this study are not a homogeneous group, and experience socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging differently.

Further studies:

This study can lead the way to further investigations. Firstly, I believe that investigating on the second generation of Afghan immigrants can provide interesting findings about their socio-cultural integration and sense of belonging. Secondly, while this research mainly used a qualitative method for gathering the data, I believe that a synergy of qualitative and quantitative research is beneficial in conducting a more comprehensive research. Thirdly, I believe that conducting a comparative study on the topic of sense of belonging between Afghan immigrants who come directly from Afghanistan to Sweden, and Afghans who have lived in other countries of asylum such as Iran before migrating to Sweden, could make a valuable and interesting research.


References:


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