“Our souls are there, we are returning someday” – Young Palestinians in Sweden reflecting on ethnicity as an aspect of identity

Elvira Korp

Spring 2018: IM245L
Abstract

This thesis examines how Palestinian ethnicity is negotiated and embodied in different contexts by young people with Palestinian background in Sweden. It is based on semi-structured interviews and uses Social Identity and Self Categorization theory. A main result is that the Palestinian ethnicity of the respondents play an essential role for their identity building, regardless of context. While being “Palestinian” is fore-fronted by all the interviewees as central to their identities, they ascribe somewhat different meanings to the concept of Palestinian-ness - what actually makes them “feel Palestinian” or can claim a Palestinian identity. Further, the interviewees’ perception of how Palestinian-ness is generally regarded in different contexts matter. Lastly, their notion of Palestinian ethnicity is strongly connected to the Palestinian territory and the historical-political situation and conflict with Israel. Together, these themes show the complexity of identity and ethnicity, however, the interviewees relation to their Palestinian background is solid.

Keywords: Palestinians, Sweden, Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorization Theory, Ethnicity, Identity
Comment of gratitude

I want to express my great gratitude to the interviewees who generously shared their personal experiences, thoughts and time.
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International Migration and Ethnic Relations
Bachelor Thesis
Elvira Korp 199505097882
15 credits Spring 2018
Supervisor: Jason Tucker
1. Introduction

This thesis is covering the aspects of identity, self-categorization and ethnicity in relation to the concept of social identity for young Palestinians living in Sweden. The research examines how the interviewees identify themselves in their in-group in different contexts. It looks at how ethnicity and identity is being negotiated in different contexts and is doing so by looking at the case of young people living in Sweden with a Palestinian background. The group of interviewees chosen exemplifies how the construction of identity is being processed and how identity changes in different contexts. These contexts may be connected to migration, political changes in Palestine and turning points in the lives of individuals. The focus of this research is on when identity building is important for the interviewees and what factors that are most important in the process of building identity.

This study focuses on social identity as a concept, and how factors such as identity and ethnicity are being negotiated and constructed. Therefore, it this looks at how the chosen group of interviewees are constructing identity. Furthermore, this research is looking at how identity and ethnicity is something highly contextualised, that is being shaped by events, timelines and experiences.

The theoretical framework is based mainly on two theories: Social Identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner & Reynolds, 2012). However, it will be complemented by theoretical aspects of ethnicity.

The results suggest that ethnicity is central for identity-building. It furthermore examines other factors that are of significance for young Palestinians living in Sweden.

There are often discussions of Palestinian-ness in Sweden in social media and on other platforms, such as blogs for Palestinian rights. This demonstrates how the issue of identity is of importance for Palestinians in Sweden and therefore, it is of interest to examine the centrality of Palestinian-ness. This research aims to fill in the empirical gap of information on the research about young Palestinians and their relationship to their social group in Sweden. The reason for choosing the age group, is that interviews with people from a wider age range may result in viewpoints and experiences that are too vast for a research of this scope to analyse properly.

In line with constructivism (Moses & Knudsen, 2012), this research argues that identity is
something constructed by people, instead of something fixed, and that identity is a fluid concept that changes and forms throughout a person’s lifetime.

This subject is strongly connected to the paradigm of intersectionality, which looks at how power structures in society are affecting people in marginalised groups (Hankivsky, 2014). I had expected that these factors or aspects of identity would be highlighted by the interviewees as a response to my more general questions about their identifications, but these expectations were not met, since all the interviewees focused very strongly on ethnicity, or more precisely, Palestinian-ness, as the utmost central factor of their identity.

The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews that were analysed in a qualitative manner. By analysing the data through the lenses of the theoretical frameworks, four different themes regarding social identity emerged.

1) Palestinian-ness as an essential part of identity,
2) The meaning and grounds for being Palestinian,
3) The negotiation of Palestinian-ness and self-categorization in different contexts
4) The significance of the territorial bonds to Palestine and of the current and historical political situation in the region.

1.1 Research Questions

In order to examine the seemingly complex identity issues of Palestinian-ness, the main research question of this study is ‘How do young Palestinians in Sweden view their identity as being part of a social group? As a tool to answer the question, three sub-questions have been developed. These are: 1) What notions of Palestinian-ness are conveyed by the interviewees? 2) What role does ethnicity (being Palestinian) play in the interviewees’ construction of self in different contexts? 3) How are notions of Palestinian-ness on the one hand, and of Palestinian-ness as part of identity-construction on the other, affected by the interviewees’ migration background?
2. Background

Since the war in 1948, which led to the creation of the state of Israel, Palestinians have been a people scattered all over the world. As many as two thirds of the Palestinians living on the land fled as consequence of the war (Hourani, 1991). Most of the diaspora after 1948 ended up in neighbouring countries, such as Lebanon and Syria (Harms & Ferry, 2012). However, Palestinians are to be found almost everywhere in the world. The uprooting of Palestinians has led to them being exposed to various contexts that has granted them different legal statuses in their countries of exile. Consequently, these statuses have to a large extent prevented Palestinians from being mobile and has prevented them from keeping connections with their homeland (Shiblak, 1996).

2.1 Comment on the Right of Return

Keeping in mind the fact that Palestinians are a people that are scattered, often with a complex migration status, having a strong sense of Palestinian-ness is seemingly important as a unification tool. Also, the fact that there are many debates around Palestinians rights and justices, may be a reason for their strong sense of belonging. Palestinians have now, for generations, waited to return to their homeland. As Mason (2007) argues, these legal frameworks have created a complex identity for Palestinians living in other countries, as they also connect to their country of residence. At the same time as people tend to gain a connection to the country which they are born and raised in, Palestinian-ness and the hope of to one day return to their homeland seems to be consistent among Palestinians in exile (Mason, 2007).

Furthermore, the right to return for Palestinian refugees displaced in neighbouring countries have been under discussion for a long time. This was first described in a resolution, namely the Resolution 194 (III). Palestine - Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator from the 1940s, saying that:

Refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which,
under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible - United Nations (UN)

The Right of Return has not been implemented. However, many Palestinians are using the international law to back up their arguments for Palestinian right to return (Lawand, 1996). Furthermore, there are scholars and activists that are arguing for not calling Palestinians that are exiled ‘diaspora’ since that takes the focus off the right to return, and instead, they argue that they should be considered exiled Palestinian refugees (Arar, 2006; Peteet, 2007). These factors demonstrate how complex the Palestinian situation is. According to previous research, a group, whether it is ethnic, religious or in minority, tends to have a strong sense of belonging, especially if the group historically or currently are facing hardships, such as conflict or discrimination (Hylland Eriksen, 2004; Lawler, 2014).

2.2 Palestinians in numbers

According to the Swedish Central Bureau of Statistics, approximately 7300 Palestinian-born people were living in Sweden 2017 (SCB, 2017). It is important to state, however, that there is a much larger number of Palestinians in Sweden. As the Migration Agency do no systematically record Palestinians as such, the exact number of Palestinians in Sweden is difficult to estimate (UNHCR, 2016). However, it is widely known that Sweden along with Germany (Migration Policy Center, 2017), is one of the countries in Europe holding the largest number of Palestinians, something that is evident in the large community of Palestinians which can be seen in the numerous Palestinian community groups. The fact that Palestinians therefore are a large ethnic group in a relatively sparsely populated European country, their identity building in Sweden is of interest.

In 2011, the war in Syria erupted, displacing millions, and still to this date creates devastation for countless human beings (UNHCR, 2018). A large number of the people forced to flee the conflict in Syria, were Palestinian. As much as over 500,000 Palestinian refugees were estimated to live in Syria before the breakout of the war, and approximately 120,000 of them have now been forced to leave the country as a consequence of the war (UNRWA, 2018). An additional number of 280,000 Palestinians are estimated to be internally displaced.
in Syria (ibid).

Due to these historical events, many Palestinians find themselves in a complex migration situation, compounded by many being stateless as a result from citizenship legislations in the neighbouring Arab countries, where most Palestinian refugees can be found (Shiblak, 2006).

As argued by many scholars, a sense of belonging to your kin is an essential part of a person’s identity often intensifies when belonging to a group that has been exposed to hardships such as, in the Palestinian situation, occupation, displacement and war (Hylland Eriksen, 2004; Lawler, 2014). In light of this, it is of interest to examine exactly how much Palestinian-ness means to people who are currently living in exile somewhere else, in this case, Sweden. In order to fully understand this issue, a thorough look at the already existing literature on the subject, is provided.

3. Literature Review

When looking at previous research on the identity of people with a migrant background, including Palestinians in exile, there is plenty of material on various populations and theoretical perspectives. However, the focus that this research will undertake, namely the one of young Palestinians and their identity in relation to social identity and self-categorization in Sweden, is something that to my knowledge, has not specifically been researched.

In this section, I will summarize existing literature on theoretical aspects and literature relevant for this research. Firstly, the studies done on the more general concepts of identity and ethnicity will be brought up. Secondly, an attempt to mention the most essential studies on Palestinian identity in general will be made. Finally, there will be a section on how this research connects to the previous literature.

In the literature on the subject of identity and ethnicity, there are generally two different perspectives. Firstly, there are the ones emphasising the importance of ethnicity (Lawler, 2014; Khalidi, 2010; Hylland Eriksen, 2004, Modood, 2007). Secondly, there are the ones arguing for the problematization of putting too much emphasis on ethnicity, since this normally has the consequence that other important factors, such as gender and class, face a risk of being diminished or even ignored (Anthias, 2011; Brubaker, 2004). Therefore, the ideas of what is of importance in the process of identity-building, tends to be quite divided.
should be noted however, that these studies are from different disciplines, and have applied vast range of theoretical frameworks, which also makes them deviate from each other.

The work of Hylland Eriksen (2004), named *Røtter og føtter: identitet i en omskiftelig tid*, is of great importance for this study, as he is not only looking at identity and ethnicity, but how they are of significance for each other, especially in social groups that have been or are facing hardships. This is essential for this study and is an argument used to explain the phenomenon found in the data analysis.

In the case of literature written on the specific subject of Palestinian identity, however, the emphasis on the importance of ethnicity as a building block in identity is to be found in the vast majority of the studies (Khalidi, 2010; Loddo, 2016; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016).

There is also a number of studies done on Palestinians in exile, with a greater focus on issues such as statelessness, right to return, and receiving country (Shiblak, 2005; Sayigh, 2013; Loddo, 2016).

Some previous research has been undertaken on this issue. For example, one such piece of importance in relation to Palestinian identity is the rather extensive study on Palestinian identity from a historical perspective, conducted by Khalidi (2010), which argues that national identity is something that is highly constructed. Loddo (2016) researched identity-making among Palestinians in Britain, which, like this research, looked at how different places affects identity. However, her focus is more on mobility and rooting (ibid).

The article *On the threshold of statelessness: Palestinian narratives of loss and erasure*, written by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2016), examines how Palestinians are negotiating their identity in relation to their statelessness and the impact of the label they get. Social identity and how people categorize themselves could be closely linked to labelling and therefore, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh’s (2016) article looks at factors that are interesting for this research. However, the difference is that social identity is not something fixed, but changes depending on context, throughout time, and through other various factors, something that the article does not examine, but which this research touches upon briefly.

When reviewing the literature on Palestinian identity, it is evident that a vast range of research is done. I have however not come across any studies that adopt Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory in the pursuit to explain Palestinian identity and
moreover, not in Sweden.

Most of the studies done on Palestinian identity have emphasised a specific group, such as Palestinians exiled in Syria and Lebanon (Al-Hardan, 2016; Hanafi, 2012). This study instead uses theoretical frameworks to help explaining and understanding the identity construction of the interviewees. Therefore, the group of interviewees has not been narrowed down to Palestinians from a specific region or with a certain background. However, the interviewees are from a certain age group, as this narrows down the research to identity building within a generation.

In summary, this research has multiple studies as precursors, both from the theoretical aspect and from the Palestinian point of view. Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory has been used to describe phenomena within marginalised groups. However, none of them has to my knowledge been used in the case of people with a Palestinian background in Sweden.

4. Theoretical Framework

This section will lay out the theoretical perspectives and notions that are central to the study. Firstly, there will be a discussion on the Social identity approach, namely two of the theories within this approach; Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory. Secondly, there will be a section on the concept of Ethnicity, discussing the fluidity of the concept.

4.1 Social Identity Approach

In order to understand the complex concepts of identity and ethnicity in the case of Palestinians, the data will be analysed by means of the Social Identity approaches, namely the theories of Social Identity (SIT) and Self-Categorisation (SCT). Social identity theory was originally developed by Henri Tajfel, proposing that the identity people attribute to themselves is based on the social group in which they belong. Tajfel (1974) also argue that social groups, for example social class, family, etc, which people belong to, are an important source of pride and self-esteem. Belonging to a group give us a sense of social identity and
belonging to the social world. Therefore, it examines and tries to explain the phenomenon of intergroup behaviour. Furthermore, the theory argues for the existence of the concepts of in-groups and out-groups, with in-groups being individuals within the social group, and the outgroup being the rest (Tajfel, 1974).

This theory, however, does not originally cover the aspects of categorization. Consequently, a theory closely linked to it was developed, the self-categorization theory. Since they have many key assumptions in common, these two theories are often used together, under the term Social Identity Approach (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Hogg & Terry, 2000).

According to SCT, humans are acting both as individuals and as social groups. Turner and Reynolds (2012) argue that a person can act as an individual in one context, but in other situations the belonging to a social group might be of a greater importance. SCT theory thus highlights the flexible and fluid nature of peoples’ general perceptions of themselves; as an individual or as part of a group. As strongly as a person in one instant may feel as an individual first and foremost, in the nest they may feel just as strongly that they are defined by their belonging to a group.

As the founder of the theory, John Turner argues, social categorization also means to identify with people within the group. Perhaps most importantly, this theory addresses the question of how individuals can act and think collectively as a part of a social group, and what implications this phenomenon have for a persons’ identity (ibid).

4.2 Ethnicity

A concept of significance in this research is ethnicity, as Palestinians are normally considered an ethnic group. Ethnicity is a vast concept, and in line with many notions of identity, it is often conceptualized as fluid by many scholars. As the term started being used widely in the 1970s (Fenton, 2010), the definitions of the concept have been changed and varied throughout time. In the current study, I will employ the definition of ethnicity as described by Fenton, 2010. He argues that ethnicity is something socially constructed, a social identity that is mostly connected to common background and culture. He brings this further by saying that ethnicity can be defined as a “social construction of descent and culture” (Fenton, 2010:3).
In modern research, there is even a discussion on ethnicization or racialization, the process in which something becomes ethnic, or is being made ethnic. This is often done as a power tool for social groups to gain or maintain power by having a strong sense of unity (Meer, 2012). This proves further that ethnicity is a concept which is more complex than just something shared by people with common culture and/or traditions and is thereby crucial to look at when examining social identity.

4.3 Conclusion
The theories above are looking at social groups, they are strongly correlated to the concept of ethnicity. As the aim of this research is to discover how the interviewees belonging to different social groups are affecting their identity, these theories are a natural choice. As Ford and Harawa (2010) argue, ethnicity has historically gone from being seen as biological, while most scholars now argue that it is something socially constructed, and something shaped throughout time. For instance, traditions that have been seen as ‘ethnic’, have often been proved to be a relatively new phenomenon (Ford & Harawa, 2010).

As the research argues that ethnicity is socially constructed, it is a central concept to bear in mind when employing the theories of choice. Finally, as ethnicity indeed is a complex concept, it is of interest to look at what the interviewees consider that their ethnicity means, and how they relate that to other Palestinians.

5. Methodology
As the purpose of the current study is to explore a phenomenon in a social context, and from the participants’ points of view, I considered qualitative interviews as the most appropriate means for producing or collecting data. With more time, supplementing the interviews with e.g. ethnographic observations would enable even deeper analyses, and a broader understanding of the phenomenon in different contexts of which the participants are part. Consequently, the findings of this study will be based on primary data. The interviews were semi-structured, in-dept with six participants, three males and three females. The interviews
lasted for approximately 45 minutes with each participant, all in an environment chosen by the interviewees in order for them to feel comfortable.

The questions asked focused on the life and background of the interviewees, and how their Palestinian-ness was shaped and changed in different, specific contexts.

The method chosen is an accurate way to gather information about people’s life stories, perceptions and opinions. As stated in the article written by Mason (2004); “A more standardized and structured approach might overly impose the researcher's own framework of meaning and understanding onto the consequent data” (Mason, 2004: 2). If the timeframe and scope would have allowed it, conducting more interviews would have been good, since it would provide multiple sources of data on the same theory. Mason talks about this further: “Semistructured interviewing alone can produce only partial interpretive understandings and can be usefully supplemented by other methods, such as those that can extend the situational dimensions of knowledge, including participant observation and visual methods” (Mason, 2004: 2).

When collecting and analysing the data, there were some evident patterns and themes of importance that were emerging.

Since semi-structured interviews allow for a narrative approach, where the interviewees are talking in a more unstructured manner, rather than answering straight questions, the data collected through the interviews were analysed by looking at trends and patterns that occurs among the interviews, for instance definitions of Palestinian-ness or use of specific words. The method allows for a wide range of aspects in the phenomenon studied to be examined. The research question is of such complexity, examining fluid concepts, that the material needs to be examined in an in-depth manner. It is evident that using interviews is a good method in order to avoid misunderstandings and missing out on important information due to poorly formulated questions.

Another important issue to bear in mind is that interviews are examining fluid concepts, such as human perceptions, and they are not producing hard facts, but instead are representing perceptions of experiences (Silverman, 2006). As Byrne (2004: 182) notes;

> Qualitative interviewing is particularly useful as a research method for accessing individuals’ attitudes and values – things that cannot necessarily be observed or
accommodated in a formal questionnaire. Open-ended and flexible questions are likely to get a more considered response than closed questions and therefore provide better access to interviewees’ views, interpretation of events, understandings, experiences and opinions … [qualitative interviewing] when done well is able to achieve a level of depth and complexity that is not available to other, particularly survey-based, approaches. (2004: 182)

5.1 Data production
The selection of interviewees used the snowball-technique, where gatekeepers of the target group were personal contacts and thus introduced me to additional interviewees. This method is effective to use when the target group of interviewees is decided in beforehand, as it then is easier to find suitable people within the group of interest for the study (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004).

In-depth interviews were conducted with the interviewees following an interview guide. Questions were designed for narrative answers, where the interviewees could talk about different contexts in which different aspects of their identity mattered. As the method is semi-structured interviews, I want to emphasise that I am aware of that interviews bring a risk of partiality, since it is examining perspectives and ideas of people.

The places in which the interviews took place, were meeting rooms at university, and in a common room related to the workplace of two of the interviewees. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Notes were also taken throughout the interviews to register potential factors that the recording may not have caught, such as face expressions or other contextual aspects. The interviews were carried out in English and Swedish, depending on the preferred language of the person interviewed.

5.2 The Interviewees

All the interviewees are of Palestinian background, living in Sweden, and between 20-35 of age. The reason for this specific selection of respondents is two-folded. Firstly, people with the same background (Palestinians) and age span, narrows down the research in general, and opens up for the possibility to apply the study on other
contexts. Furthermore, interviewing people from the same generation, makes it easier to draw conclusions on the result, as people from more than one generation may provide vastly different viewpoints and experiences, something that this paper does not have the scope to analyse properly (Silverman 2006). Secondly, the fact that the interviewees still have diverse backgrounds makes it possible for them to shed light on different aspects of the phenomenon of social identity and self-categorisation. The diversity in the group enhances the possibility that data can shed light on different aspects of how young Palestinians in Sweden construct their identities and how they self-categorise. This makes for a multi-dimensional understanding of the phenomena, but also for finding common themes that seem common for young Palestinians regardless of e.g. their gender, migration background and current life situation.

All interviewees live in a small city in Sweden. Three of the interviewees were born and raised in Syria, with family which fled the war in Palestine. Two of them are originally from the Gaza strip, and one was born in Lebanon, though, spent most of his life in Sweden. All of the interviewees hold university degrees. The family situation varies between them, as some of the interviewees have all or parts of their family in Sweden, while others do not. Furthermore, all of the interviewees have a legal status in Sweden, either in the form of a permanent residency, or citizenship. More information about the interviewees cannot be provided without the identity of the participants being compromised.

5.3 Processing the material

In order to analyse the result, several steps needed to be taken. The analysis included the following steps: Firstly, a thorough review of the material was done, catching the essence of each interview. To get a full image of each interview and to interpret individual statements in contexts, I worked with the interviews separately at first. During the transcribing process, a search for patterns and themes was done by looking at similarities and differences in the interviews. Also, a search for re-occurring words, anecdotes, themes or patterns was conducted. For example, all the interviewees were using the word “proud” to describe their feelings towards being Palestinian,

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which was taken into consideration in the analysis. Finally, these patterns and themes were being analysed and related to the theories in the research.

It should be mentioned that coding of this type of material cannot provide the entirety of a story, but only parts of it (Silvermann, 2006). The difficulty of drawing generalisations is evident due to the relatively small number of interviewees, along with the fact that their stories are highly subjective. However, as stated before, the method is suitable for gathering valuable information about people’s perceptions and stories.

The reason for picking the methodology of choice was that there are no fixed, hard facts that are supposed to be uncovered, but is instead arguing that we can look at discourses and perceptions in a research. As Silverman (2006) argues, “interviewers and interviewees are always actively engaged in constructing meaning” (Silverman, 2006: 126). This means that there are no real facts, but rather different discourses or accounts that have derived in social contexts (ibid). This also goes for the ontology, that from a constructivist perspective argues that people have different perceptions of the world and the truth, depending on factors such as culture, experiences and ideological backgrounds (Moses & Knudsen, 2012). Therefore, it is of importance to emphasize that this research is seeking to examine what discourses that are occurring in the context of the study, instead of presenting facts about the world. This is also true for the epistemology, that when figuring out what can be known, constructivists argue that it is essential to keep in mind that knowledge is highly contextual (Ibid). The research has therefore chosen to ontologically and epistemologically follow the constructivist approach, as the research questions are designed to shed a light and attempt to explain a phenomenon, rather than answering straight questions with hard facts.

5.4 Ethical Considerations

The interviewees were informed of the ethical principles of research in beforehand, to make sure that all aspects surrounding their participation in the research was
consensual. Firstly, as the interviewees are sharing personal thoughts, it was of essence to make sure that the interview data is completely anonymous. This is done by giving each participant a pseudonym in the text. Also, all information that could reveal the identity of the interviewees have been removed. Secondly, it was made clear that the interviewees at any time could withdraw themselves from participating, without having to give a reason. Furthermore, they were informed about that if there are questions or a situation during the interview in which the interviewee was feeling uncomfortable, they had the right to not answer. Finally, the interviewees had the right to look through their own interview in order to make sure that everything in there is accurate and naturally, to look at the end result of the research (Silverman, 2006).

5.5 Role of the researcher
As in qualitative interviews, there is a significant amount of interaction between the researcher and the interviewee, rather than one party solely giving information to the other, it is important to have the role of the researcher in mind as they in all cases of qualitative research, will affect how the research is shaped (Moses and Knudsen, 2012).

Firstly, being a non-Palestinian doing research about Palestinians can be problematic, especially as the identity issues examined are highly affected by the conflict and occupation of Palestine, in which I have no first-hand experience. Here, my position on the Israel/Palestine conflict is of importance to consider. Therefore, it is safe to say that there are aspects to this matter that I as a researcher may not understand, and furthermore, might not think of examining. The role of the researcher will be mentioned further in the analysis as it is of importance to keep in mind in one of the themes in specific.

5.6 Reliability and Validity
When doing any sort of research, it is essential to show the reliability and validity of the research. In this paper, it has been acquired by following the directions of
Silverman (2006). He argues that in qualitative research, it is possible to increase reliability through transparency, both in the way which the research was carried out of the ‘theoretical transparency’ (Silverman, 2006:281).

This research is proving its reliability by clearly demonstrating how the material was gathered, and how the interviews were carried out. Also, by carefully showing how the theoretical aspects were being used and interpreted, there is a theoretical transparency in the research.

Validation in qualitative research is strongly related to coherence, by looking at the answers of the interviewees in contexts. Silverman (2006) argues for the use of respondent validation, which is to take back the findings to the subjects. This has been done during the interviews, validating the answers by confirming what the interviewees are saying, and asking follow-up questions to make sure that nothing is misunderstood (ibid).

6. Results

The following section demonstrates the findings of the paper and uses the theoretical framework to make understanding of it.

6.1 THEME 1- Being Palestinian is fundamental to my identity

All of the interviewees underlined the centrality of their Palestinian-ness in their identity, regardless of their migration history and background. This seems to be strongly connected with the political situation as well as the hardship that Palestinians have been and are still facing, as all of the interviewees were reflecting upon their Palestinian identity in relation to the occupation.

Furthermore, four out of six of them argued that being Palestinian is the only thing that matters when it comes to identity, regardless of context. Nour expressed the centrality of her Palestinian-ness by describing how she actively reminds every one of her and her family’s identity.

“I feel that being Palestinian in Sweden is something different than being Palestinian in Palestine. There, you are being Palestinian by nature and being there, you don’t need to say”
I’m Palestinian and the beliefs there are united, and the thoughts are united. Okay, the ways are different, but there is a ground between everyone. There are basic things, things in common. And so your work is focused on another thing, bigger goals, but here it is something about identity saving. I need to remind everyone all the time, myself, my kids, all the time that we are Palestinians. We are Palestinians, don’t forget that. Our land is there. We are grateful to this land and we are living here, and we are good citizens here, but we are from there. Our souls are there, and we are returning someday. So it’s another issue here.

(Nour, interview with the author)

This importance of Palestinian identity is clear, not only from the way all of the participants described it, but also, how they in their everyday life express their Palestinian-ness or do small things to maintain their Palestinian identity in Sweden. As an example, Ahmed talked about how he takes the opportunity to bring awareness to people and brings competing narratives to the history of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and that it for him is not only a way to make people more aware of the Palestinian political situation, but also a way for him to feel connected to his Palestinian-ness.

“One time when I was at the Red Cross, I saw that they had flags from different countries, and among that, the flag of Israel. So I went up to them and told them that you are the Red Cross, you know what this means for Palestinians. So in that way I showed that I am Palestinian. These small things matter a lot to me.”

(Ahmed, interview with the author)

One way in which this theme has been discovered, was by asking the interviewees how they introduce themselves when meeting new people. This proved to be a good way to find out how the Palestinian-ness is central for the identity of the interviewees. Looking at whether they presented themselves as Palestinian, Syrian or in another way, proved to be an effective

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1 Interview in English. Interview with Nour on the 19th of April, 2018.
2 Interview translated from Swedish by the author. Interview with Ahmed on the 19th of April, 2018.

“En gång var jag på Röda Korset och såg att de hade olika länder flaggor, bland annat Israels. Så jag gick fram till dem och sa att ni är Röda Korset, ni vet vad det hör betyder för Palestinier. Så på det sättet visade jag att jag är Palestinier. Sådana här små saker är viktiga för mig.”

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way to uncover the importance of identity in relation to social groups. For instance, only Omar of all the respondents answered that he usually does not call himself Palestinian, whereas all of the others claimed to do so in nearly all contexts (See theme 3). However, he did state that he is proud of his Palestinian background, something that is of importance when looking at social identity.

Here, it is possible to apply all of the theoretical concepts presented. Initially, the findings in this theme are strongly connected to social identity. All the interviewees are expressing the importance of their ethnicity, and furthermore, that there is a need to identify as Palestinian in an “active” manner, which is to do things actively to feel more connected to the Palestinian background. As Tajfel (1974) argues, belonging to a group can be strongly connected to a person’s identity. This can explain the fact that the interviewees are demonstrating that feeling part of the group of Palestinians is the very core of their identity.

Furthermore, as Tajfel (1974) touches upon, belonging to a group provides a self-esteem and pride to people and their identity. This can be seen through the interviews, as all of the participants use the word ‘proud’ when describing how they feel about their Palestinian background.

Also, self-categorization is crucial in this finding. The interviewees saw their Palestinian-ness as the main element of their identity. Turner and Reynolds (2012) argue that self-perception can go from an “I” to a “we” when it comes to social groups in certain contexts. Therefore, when interpreting the interviews, the political situation that has affected people with Palestinian background, is clearly a factor that has led to a great sense of affiliation, leading the interviewees to feel strongly connected to their social group.

6.2 THEME 2 – What makes me a Palestinian?

The second theme intertwines strongly with the first one, as it is examining further what the centrality of being Palestinian means to the interviewees. Here, we look at what the interviewees consider that being Palestinian means. For instance, who the interviewees are referring to when saying ‘we’ about the Palestinian group.

One way in which the interviewees define Palestinian-ness is exemplified by Omar, who feels hesitant telling people about his Palestinian-ness. Furthermore, as he is the only...
Interviewee not calling himself Palestinian at all. Therefore, it is of interest to examine his perception of social identity in this theme as well.

“Yes, I am proud that I am Palestinian, but I can’t say that I feel like I am. I am from Syria and I don’t have anything from Palestine”.

(Omar, interview with the author ³)

Omar’s statement shows that his definition of being Palestinian, is strictly correlated with the land as such. As he says that he does not have anything from Palestine and therefore, cannot claim that he is, he shows that to him, being fully Palestinian entails having a direct contact with the territories in one way or another, for example through having family ties there or being born in Palestine.

The statement of Omar is an example of self-categorization. Omar expresses that he is Palestinian, although he does not feel Palestinian, as he was born in Syria. It is clear that Omar feels a bond to his social group, however, not as strongly as the other interviewees, as he expresses his relationship to Palestine as more individual than the other interviewees. As Turner (1998) argues for the fact that the group identity varies in different contexts, what Omar expresses can be interpreted as self-categorization, as he talks about feeling a bond to his social group, even though he sees himself as more Syrian.

When looking at what the interviewees elicited in their descriptions of Palestinian-ness, it is clear that it does not imply anything related to traits, such as common characteristics. Instead, the interviewees emphasized their common history, as Omar demonstrated.

Another person reflecting upon this, is Aisha.

Yes, I feel proud that I am Palestinian. I don’t know, maybe… just that I am from Palestine makes me proud. I also feel… I don’t know, all Palestinians feel that way, so I don’t know why, but I feel that all Palestinians are strong. We have it in us… all Palestinians have a passion to save their country

(Aisha, interview with the author ⁴).

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³ Interview in English. Interview with Omar on the 19th of April, 2018.
⁴ Interview in Swedish. Interview with Aisha on the 19th of April, 2018.
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Aisha discusses what being Palestinian means in a slightly different way. Like Omar, she does tie Palestinian-ness to the land, as she talks about the need for Palestinians to save their country. This is of interest since it demonstrates a clear pattern where the interviewees put emphasis on that being Palestinian has more to do with the territories and being from there, than for example a common culture. Moreover, she also describes Palestinians as strong, as people with a passion for their land. This further strengthens the connection to the land for the interviewees.

Another factor that underlines what Palestinian-ness means for the interviewees, is the fact that the majority of the interviewees feel that Palestinian-ness is something given to people, as an aspect of the identity that they are born with. This adds another level to the centrality of the identity for the interviewees, as they then do not see it as something constructed, but rather as something acquired by birth. Fatima talks about this in relation to her children, who like her, have never been to Palestine.

“My son isn’t from Palestine, but he can feel it. Maybe when he was born, that he felt it already then. That it comes to the children.”

(Fatima, interview with the author)

Here, it is of importance to look at ethnicity as defined in the theory section. This draws on an understanding of ethnicity as being something constructed and furthermore, is being strengthened in certain situations. Therefore, when examining what the interviewees are claiming as important in their identity as Palestinians, it is of interest that they do not bring up common traits or a shared culture, but rather seeing the occupation as a “glue” to keep the
sense of belonging. Thus, in the interviewees’ constructions of Palestinian identity, the geopolitical conflict stands out as a corner-stone.

6.3 THEME 3 - Foregrounding and downplaying my Palestinian background in different contexts

In light of the first theme, another finding of importance arose, namely the one of the Palestinian identity in relation to different contexts. As the data unveiled the importance of Palestinian-ness for all the interviewees, a relevant question emerges: Do the interviewees express their Palestinian identity to out-group members, and in contexts where it might lead to political tension or debate? This theme is closely intertwined with the first one, as it looks at the consequence of the first finding.

All the interviewees have experienced times when they feel that being Palestinian might be perceived as something negative, mostly in the case of being in Lebanon. Negative experiences include discrimination, for example in the form of being denied a job, which happened to Ahmed. In fact, all of the interviewees gave examples of times when they had felt that a suspicion had been directed towards them as Palestinians. They felt that this had to do with preconceived images of Palestinians. Another aspect of negativity was perceived rudeness from people that they have had encounters with. This can be seen as a clear-cut example of discrimination, as the interviewees were feeling that they were treated in a certain way, solely based on their Palestinian background and what people in out-groups perceive that being Palestinian means. Khaled showed an example of this, by talking about how he was treated with suspicion and rudeness by an out-group-member after telling the person about his Palestinian background.

However, when it comes to whether the interviewees avoid telling people that they were Palestinian or not in depending on contexts, the opinions and experiences deviate. Some of the interviewees claim that they under no circumstances would be reluctant to tell people about their Palestinian background, and even feel that tension is a chance for them to talk about Palestinian-ness and the situation for Palestinians. The following quote demonstrates that despite of, or perhaps even as a result of negative reactions, some interviewees feel that they want to talk about their Palestinian-ness. Nour reflects upon bringing awareness of the
situation for Palestinians by talking about her identity, regardless of if she feels that bringing up her Palestinian background might cause negativity:

“I’m telling everyone that I am Palestinian. I want everyone to know that there is a land called Palestine [...] When I am sitting next to a person who doesn’t know anything about Palestine, I want to explain. They need to know more about Palestine.”

(Nour, interview with the author)

A final aspect of this theme is how social groups are reinforced under the pressure of negativity from out-group members. When asking the interviewees whether they have ever felt negativity directed towards their person because of their Palestinian-ness, all said yes. As many marginalised groups, it is clear that Palestinians are being subjected to negative attitudes, something that is being reflected upon by the interviewees. As Hylland Eriksen (2004) argues, being subject to discriminatory behaviour, such as the ones described by the interviewees, tends to reinforce social identity connected to the in-group.

As mentioned, not all of the interviewees share Nour’s idea of bringing attention to their Palestinian-ness, in situations when it may cause unease or political tension. The background of the interviewees (whether they were Palestinian-born or been living in a second country for their whole life, such as Syria or Sweden) did not affect this. However, the interviewees have expressed that certain people seem to have strong feelings about Palestine and Palestinians in general. For instance, interviewees who had Lebanon as a transit country, all expressed feelings of being viewed in a negative light as Palestinians when residing there. Aisha expresses this by talking about how she in Sweden feels comfortable telling people that she is Palestinian, whereas in Lebanon, she refrained from doing so. When asked if there are situations where she does not want people to know that she is Palestinian, she answered:

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6 Interview in Swedish. Interview with Nour on the 19th of April, 2018.

“Jag säger till alla att jag är palestinier. Jag vill att alla ska veta att det finns ett land som heter Palestina. [...] När jag sitter bredvid en person som inte vet om Palestina, då vill jag förklara. De behöver veta mer om Palestina”

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"Only in Lebanon, not anywhere else [...] but here in Sweden, I want everyone to know that I am Palestinian."

(Aisha, interview with the author)

It is thus evident that all of the interviewees experience that being Palestinian might take on different meanings in different contexts. Furthermore, the fact that the expression of Palestinian-ness for the interviewees seem to have no ties to their migration background or connection to Palestine, demonstrates how fluid the concept of identity is.

When situating this within the theoretical framework of the research, it is of interest to look through the lenses of self-categorization. As Nour argues, Palestinian-ness is such a big part of her identity, that she feels the need to always show that she is Palestinian. Seen from a perspective of SCT, this demonstrates the importance of identifying with the social group, rather than as an individual to her, even when that has negative consequences, such as facing discrimination. This is possible to explain by the ideas of Turner (1998), who argues that social categorization is something that all people do, however, the context in which it happens, is what is of importance to examine to understand a phenomenon. For instance, the self-categorization that Nour does in situations where her Palestinian-ness may be perceived as negative, demonstrates how important being Palestinian is to her. Furthermore, as also pointed to by Hylland Eriksen (2004), feelings of marginalization make the sense of belonging to a group more important.

However, not all the interviewees felt that negativity towards Palestinians led to a stronger social identity. Some also said there are situation when they would feel reluctant to present themselves as Palestinians. This is of interest, since the interviewees choosing to not tell strangers immediately about their Palestinian background, also are the ones that expressed a slightly less strong connection to Palestine, for example by expressing that there are other important factors to their identity as well, while the interviewees who in all contexts introduce themselves as Palestinians, are the ones claiming that being Palestinian is the only thing that matters to their identity.

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7 Interview translated from Swedish by the author. Interview done with Aisha on the 19th of April, 2018. "Bara i Libanon, ingen annanstans [...] men här i Sverige, vill jag att alla ska veta att jag är palestinier."
In conclusion, from the perspectives and ideas that Turner and Reynolds (2012) have developed, it was of interest to look at how the interviewees chose to negotiate their identity in different contexts. As the theory argues, individuals may identify themselves as being in a group in certain contexts, while they identify more as individuals in others. When examining the perspectives of the interviewees, it is clear that to the majority of them, context does matter for how they negotiate their identity. However, the Palestinian-ness is still crucial to the identity of all of the interviewees.

6.4 THEME 4 – The geo-political conflict makes me feel more Palestinian
All the interviewees explicitly claimed that they feel Palestinian, regardless of their migration background, and in different ways reference this to the notion of the Palestinian territory. The majority of the interviewees have never set foot in Palestine, which does not seem to impact their sense of Palestinian-ness, since the sentiments towards Palestine of the interviewees that have never been there, did not seem to be any less than the ones born and raised there. The only exception is Omar, who never the less emphazised that his Palestinian-ness is important for his identity. This means that the interviewees generally feel a bond to their idea of the territory, and that Palestine is not only the origin of their ancestors but is of emotional significance. It is important to state here that since the majority of the interviewees have never been to the territory, they have an idea of what Palestine is to them, that not necessarily reflects reality. Even though this may seem odd, looking at it from the perspective of SCT, can be explainable. Turner (1998) argues that people can feel the experiences of others inside their social group, because what happens to others is also happening to themselves when they see themselves as parts of the same inclusive self-category. This can strongly then be connected to the occupation of Palestine. When the interviewees talked about the political situation in Palestine, they talked about it as if it was happening directly to them, which is one of the backbones of Turner’s (2012) theory. This is clearly demonstrated by Ahmed, who despite that he has never been in Palestine, and was born and raised in Syria, identifies himself as a Palestinian.
It doesn’t matter if you come from Gaza or Haifa. You are Palestinian and you come from Palestine, that is just the way it is.

(Ahmed, interview with the author)

This quote embodies an opinion shared by all the interviewees; the Palestinian ethnicity does not depend on whether you actually come from Palestine. Through the lenses of both SIT and SCT, this can be explained as a strong sense of belonging to the social group and moreover, to the physical place tied to the group. The bond to the place is not primarily a matter of where the individual was born or lived, but is connected to the history of the group, the ancestors. It shows the great importance of Palestine as a place, as all of the interviewees refer to it as, or a home to return to. This finding is in line with theme 2, that demonstrated how the territories and shared history, is what defines Palestinians according to the interviewees.

The following quote demonstrates how the territories are viewed as a home to the interviewees. As Aisha is expressing in the quote below, she sees Palestine as her main home, and a place to which she wants to go and furthermore, do something for.

“Yes, I am Palestinian and I am angry about the situation and Palestinians. We are suffering a lot. Palestine is my main country, my main home. I wish I could go there, even if I don’t have anything there. I wish I could do something for Palestine.”

(Aisha, interview with the author)

The quote above embodies the essence of SCT, as Aisha despite not having a concrete bond to the territories, refers to Palestine as her main home and that she refers to Palestinians as “we”. As the quote by Aisha demonstrates, being Palestinian is something shared with many people of which she has not met, sharing a land that she has never been to. Turner (1998) argues that when belonging to a minority group, there is an inclusive self that can be shared by all members of that social group. An example of this is if a person belonging to a social group is the subject of discrimination from an out-group member, it can be considered an abuse on all individuals within the social group. Consequently, Aisha is categorizing herself as a part of

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8 Interview in English. Interview done with Ahmed on the 19th of April, 2018.
"Det spelar ingen roll om du kommer från Gaza eller Haifa. Du är palestinier och du kommer från Palestina, det är bara så“.
9 Interview in Swedish. Interview done with Aisha on the 19th of April, 2018.
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the social group, in which her identity is strongly connected to the ethnicity of the group. How how space and place play a role in identity building and how a specific space can be of such strong emotional significance was also shown by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2016) in her study of Palestinians in Sweden and Great Britain. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (ibid.) found that her interviewees feel a strong sense of belonging to their social group, as all of them consider themselves stateless Palestinians, despite that many of them hold citizenship of other states.

6.5 Discussion
This research attempts to demonstrate how social identity and self-categorization affects young people with Palestinian background in Sweden by giving an empirical and theoretical angle to the subject. The data has been analysed with the theoretical framework and previous literature as tools to answer the research questions; How do young Palestinians in Sweden view their identity as being part of a social group? and 1) What notions of Palestinian-ness are conveyed by the interviewees 2) What role does (Palestinian) ethnicity play in the interviewees’ construction of self in different contexts? 3) How are notions of Palestinian-ness on the one hand and of Palestinian-ness as part of identity-construction on the other affected by the interviewees’ migration background?

The research has shown that Palestinian-ness is the very essence of the identity for the interviewees. Many scholars in more recent discussions, are arguing for the fluidity of identity. However, what this research has shown, is that in the case of the interviewees, it does not seem to be the case, but rather that the Palestinian-ness is an important part of the identity regardless of the context, something that previous research also has demonstrated (Khalidi, 2010; Loddo, 2016; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016).

Furthermore, the interviews have shown that the migration background of the interviewees seem to have very little to do with the identity construction for the interviewees, with the exception of Omar. However, the way that the Palestinian identity expressed by the interviewees varies, both between the different individuals, and in different situations. This is demonstrated in the third theme, which examines how different contexts affect how the interviewees chose to present themselves in different situations. This does not mean that the concepts of identity and ethnicity are not complex, but rather that the sense of Palestinian-ness.
for the interviewees is self-fixed rather than fluid.

Given the prolonged Palestinian conflict, there is much already written about Palestinian identity. However, none of the research that I came across in the process of writing this thesis has been looking at the subject through the theories chosen. As these two theories are closely intertwined, they are effectively used together, examining the existence of fluid identity and attempting to show how seemingly complex identity questions can be explained. Also, since the theories are looking at social groups, they are good as tools for examining how minority groups perceive their identity in society. Due to the theoretical frameworks and their relation to the social group examined, this essay provides a good complement to the already existing literature on Palestinian identity.

The theoretical concepts of this research have been able to explain the different phenomena found in the themes, showing that social groups play an essential role in the case of the interviewees. Furthermore, this is strongly related to the arguments of Hylland Eriksen (2004), explaining how marginalised groups often feel a stronger sense of belonging. This is further examined, by seeing similar patterns in the work of Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2016).

Connected to this, the findings in this paper demonstrate a societal dilemma. As an attempt to reach a more inclusive society, today’s discourse tends to avoid underlining the importance of ethnicity for identity building. The dilemma is then, which the findings of this research shows, that social groups can feel the need of expressing their ethnicity to bring awareness of their situation and to reach a feeling of pride, especially in contexts in which the social group may be marginalised. This further suggests that ethnicity indeed is a complex phenomenon and needs to be treated as such, especially in relation to social groups. This thesis therefore underlines the importance of recognising the complexity of social identity, as this can lead to a greater understanding for other social groups than your own on a societal level.

6.6 Method Discussion

Firstly, the researcher’s role as an “outsider” in relation to Palestinians, may affect the way that the interviewees discussed the issues. As a person not belonging to the social group, it is therefore important to keep in mind that the fact that I am an outgroup-member may affect the way in which the interviewees answered questions.
Another issue that should be taken into consideration, as mentioned before, is the one of to which extent interviews can provide the entity of a phenomenon (Silverman, 2006). As this study examines the perceptions of people, only using interviews as a method may result in not being able to capture the entity of the phenomenon studied.

If the scope of the research was bigger, an observational study or a comparison between social groups could shed a more nuanced light on the subject. However, the method of interviews proved to be a good way to capture the appropriate data, given timeframe and resources. Furthermore, the data collection was facilitated by the fact that the interviews were designed to fit the aim of the research.

7. Conclusion
This thesis has attempted to examine how young Palestinians in Sweden negotiate their identity in relation to their social groups in different contexts. Six participants with Palestinian background, however with different migration background, have been interviewed through semi-structured questions related to their background, migration and relation to the territories. Data analysis was then conducted by looking through the lenses of social identity theory and self-categorization theory. The research has shown various aspects that are important for the identities of the interviewees. Firstly, Palestinian-ness is crucial for all the interviewees as part of their identity, regardless of their migration backgrounds. However, different contexts affected the way the interviewees reflected upon their social identity.

It is clear that more extensive research is needed to fully understand the phenomenon, for instance by examining more factors that affect social identity and self-categorization, such as gender, religion and legal status.

As the thesis was being limited by time and scope, there are naturally aspects that could be improved and developed if the timeframe and scope were more extensive. For future research, it could be of interest to examine more aspects and consequently find more complex themes. Furthermore, a comparative study of different social groups would shed a more profound light on the social identity.
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