Nature and Networks

Experiences of Nature-based Integration in Sweden

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Abstract
Nature-based integration projects present nature and green spaces as an arena for interaction and integration between immigrants and native-born Swedes, and amongst immigrants of different backgrounds. To explore this, the study looks at experiences of NBI projects from the perspective of immigrants who have moved to Sweden and started the process of settling into the new society. The concepts of social networks, as well as structural, cultural, interactive and identificational integration were applied to view the interviewees experiences of nature-based integration activities in Sweden. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight immigrants’, about their participation in NBI projects in Sweden, and how they describe their experiences and perceptions of nature and social interactions. The findings were that time spent in nature was experienced as beneficial for the individual by contributing to their psychological well-being and providing opportunities for socialisation. Nature in Sweden was depicted as vast, accessible and inclusive when compared with their countries of origin. Interactions and new diversified social networks provided information exchange and novel knowledge. This was seen as one of the entry points to society, and another way in which to understand Swedish cultural traditions, as nature was generally perceived as important in Swedish society. The final results showed that participation in nature-based integration activities was able to contribute to their structural, cultural and interactive integration, but could not be linked to their identificational integration in Sweden.

Keywords: Nature-based integration, Sweden, Immigration, Social Networks, Integration
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1. Introduction

As a South African moving to Sweden, one of the first things that I encountered was a natural environmental awareness; seasons and the climate was often a talking point in conversations with new acquaintances, and being outdoors while the sun was out seemed like an unspoken rule. Co-workers at the restaurant, where I got a part-time student job, would talk about successful and exciting foraging trips, and name the different plants and mushrooms and berries to pick. When one of my friends discovered that I liked hiking, I was instantly recommended a place to go and explore, and that I should be on the lookout for a certain small orange berry (or fruit, I can’t remember) that grows on a dry-looking bush; the name of the plant I soon forgot, but the berry tasted delicious. I realised that in my home country, and anywhere else I’ve travelled, such information and tips about the immediate nature areas and plants was not so plainly and widely brought up in conversation. This inspired a curiosity about the role of nature in the experiences of people moving to Sweden and entering the Swedish society.

Roughly just over a century ago, nature became importantly linked with the Swedish self-image, as a national landscape was increasingly valued and protected, and depicted as culturally significant through literature and the arts at the time.\(^1\) Decades later, it has become a much more subtle, and perhaps subconscious part of Swedish culture for the majority of the population. However, as foreigners moving to Sweden, it can be one of the more distinct aspects of the new host society and environment that one encounters. In Sweden, there are a number of initiatives with the aim of involving immigrants and native-born Swedish in activities surrounding nature and the environment.

Nature-based integration (NBI) activities present nature and green spaces as an arena for interaction and exchange between immigrants and native-born Swedes, and amongst immigrants of different backgrounds. Spending time in nature is also claimed as a way for people to improve their health and well-being. Here, nature appears to play a strong role in society, as seen through some of the cultural values, traditions and policies such as ‘Allemansrätt’. To explore this, the study looks at experiences of NBI projects from the perspective of immigrants who have moved to Sweden and started the process of settling into the new society.

1.1 Aim & research questions

The aim of the research project is to explore the role of nature-based integration projects and activities for the social integration of immigrants in Sweden. The study looks at 8 different immigrants’ participation in NBI projects in Sweden, and how they describe their experiences and perceptions of nature and social interactions. The aim of the study is to analyse whether their experiences in nature, and related social networking played a role in contributing to their social integration in Sweden. And if so, in which ways. This study does so by posing the following questions in relation to immigrant integration in Sweden:

1) What role, if any, has participation in NBI activities played for their experiences in and around nature?

2) Which types of interactions and networks have taken place through participating in nature-based activities, if any?

3) How have these interactions and networks contributed to their social integration in Sweden?

1.2 Delimitations

The primary delimitation is the specific selection of NBI initiatives in Sweden. The NBI initiatives and projects that I selected each had different objectives. One project is connected to language learning and education, and was a class excursion; another was vocational training and certification in nature-guiding, yet another was a recreational and leisure group for youth and young adults. Regardless of the type of project, the only requirement for this study was that the project focuses on nature and outdoor activities, and involves the participation of immigrants in Sweden. Another delimitation is about the sample group; the interviewees are immigrants that were not born in Sweden, but rather were raised in another country before moving here, and have resided in Sweden for 5 years or less. The length of residence in Sweden is important to consider as it could impact the responses and perspectives of the interviewees, regarding social integration and Swedish society.

It is increasingly difficult to use the term ‘immigrant’ in a way that does not become problematic. The term immigrant is often associated with ‘foreigner’ in a way that perpetuates the ‘us-and-them’ discourse. It is also difficult to link it to ethnicity, as this runs the risk of introducing an ethnocentric conception of ‘immigrant’ within the context of Sweden. Ethnocentrism is a concept that points to how an ethnic group extends from itself what the
norm is, and considers other ethnic groups as abnormal. Therefore, during this study, I have chosen to use the term ‘immigrant’ to refer in the most neutral and technical way possible, simply to people that have moved to Sweden. Similarly when I talk about ‘native-born Swedes’ I refer to anyone that was born and raised in Sweden, irrelevant of their ethnicity or race.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of an introductory section stating the context and aim of the study; followed by a discussion of the conceptual framework and methodology in order to situate the study. The analysis section presents the material and my interpretation thereof, and aims to conclude with some insights gained in the field of nature-based integration, specifically within Sweden.

The analysis and interpretation of the data is discussed through the lens of the conceptual framework. This means that key themes that emerge from the interviews are understood in terms of practices in nature, perceptions of nature and society, and participation in society. through different forms of social integration. Practices in nature vary across educational, recreational and vocational foci, and occur in different ways. Perceptions of nature are discussed through immigrant perspectives; and related to cultural and traditional contexts. Social participation as a channel of integration is understood through the stories told, and examples given by the interview respondents.

2. Contextual background

2.1 Nature and Identity in Sweden

Today, over 75% of the population in Sweden live in urban areas, while 23% live in areas close to the countryside. Most people’s everyday contact with nature, whether in parks or nature reserves, happen in the near vicinity of their homes. The role of nature in the Swedish self-image appears to be unique, and becomes one of the aspects of culture and tradition that visitors or immigrants to Sweden encounter. Eliasson and Lisberg Jensen’s work, titled ‘Naturens Nytt’ considers how nature has become to be such a strong part of the Swedish self-image by thinking through the cultural and historical depiction of nature in Sweden since the age of

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2 This was discussed in an academic book on immigrants’ outdoor habits in Sweden: Ebba Lisberg Jensen and Pernilla Ouis, *Det Gröna Finrummet: Etnicitet, friluftsliv och naturumgångets urbanisering*, (Stockholm: Carlssons, 2014), 42-44.

3 Read in one of the Previous Literature articles included in this study: Ebba Lisberg Jensen, *Gå Ut Min Själ* (Östersund : Statens folkhälsoinstitut, 2008), 8.

Linnaeus. The text describes how starting from the 1800s (into the early 1900s) nature in Sweden became significant in two ways: [1] it proved central to the rapid industrialisation and increased production; and [2] it provided a new way of expressing culture, and linked it to the Swedish nationality.

Of particular interest to this study is the second point, that of nature being related to cultural identity and a Swedish self-image. Eliasson and Lisberg Jensen describe the process in which nature in Sweden became linked to the cultural and national identity. Looking at the depiction of nature through canonical literature of the time, referred to as ‘sverigelitteraturen’, appears to show how a nationalisation of nature occurred. This is referred to as ‘naturnationalism’, and occurred through the adoption of nature into the cultural identity and self-image of the Swedish population. Major writers and definitive works of the time are also linked to the process of imagining a ‘Swedish national-landscape’ that led to a ‘naturnationalism’. In this way, ‘sverigelitteraturen’ is argued as instrumental in the formation of the Swedish self-image, as the writers and literature portrayed Sweden through ‘sverigelitteraturen’ and evoked a public image of Sweden as a nation where nature was important and valued.

Eliasson and Lisberg Jensen explain how Swedish values of nature were discovered not just in the literature, but also through composers, sculptors, artists, even architecture and carpentry developed a recognizable Swedish style inspired by plants and trees found in the forests. A common historical narrative was created during that time, to emphasise an image of the Swedish people, the land and the self. This process made a link between Swedish nature, culture and nation. Finally, ‘sverigelitteraturen’ appeared to contribute to a nationalisation of nature in various ways. It articulated and defined nature as precisely ‘Swedish’; relating cultural development to nature, and the public mentality to the ‘Swedish’ climate. “Det svenska landskapet är inte bara ett objektivt fenomen ’där ute’, det består kanske minst lika mycket av de inre bilder vi bär med oss om hur landskapet ser ut och, inte minst, hur det bör ser ut.”

The author explains that the Swedish landscape is not just an objective phenomenon ‘out there’ but also consists at least of images and ideas that we have in our minds about how the landscape looks, and how it should look. Here the author is saying that the nature in Sweden is more than

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5 Ibid., 20.
6 Ibid., 20.
7 Eliasson and Lisberg Jensen, Naturens Nytt, 21.
8 Ibid., 26-27.
9 Ibid., 51-53.
just an environment and climate, it is part of the process of cultural and national identity formation, carrying historical meaning for the Swedish self-image.

2.2 Immigrant integration in Sweden

Another contextual aspect of this study, besides the depiction of nature in Sweden, is about the system set up to receive and incorporate new-comers and immigrants into the country. Within Sweden, immigrant integration currently takes the form of the ‘introduction plan’ (organised and implemented by Arbetsförmedlingen) focusing on education and employment capacity-building. The ‘introduction plan’ as immigrant integration is largely one-sided, as it directs the duty and expectations on the immigrant to adapt and adjust towards and into the Swedish society. The current integration programmes equate the perceived success of immigrant integration with entering the labour market and getting a job. This reduces the understanding of integration, and exposes other challenges such as networking and inclusion as Swedish companies instead fill their vacancies through informal networks, contacts via friends or colleagues, and existing employees. This makes supposed ‘successful integration’ difficult if it is so heavily weighted on obtaining a job and penetrating the labour market.

Acquiring Swedish language and literacy skills is targeted in the ‘Svenska för Invandrare’ (SFI) programme, implemented by the local and regional government. It aims to develop immigrants’ Swedish language ability, both orally and written, and to provide what is supposedly a ‘cultural knowledge’ of Sweden in order to better enter the labour market. One of the key challenges immigrants experience in acquiring and practicing Swedish language, is obtaining the opportunities to speak and practice their language comprehension. This is due to relatively high levels of segregation in schools and housing which limits interaction held in Swedish.

The social integration of immigrants is left up to their language skills, informal social networks and exposure to communities and organisations. Other initiatives have developed to target social integration, where the ‘introduction plan’ falls short. For example Malmö Stad hosts the

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12 Ibid., 7.
13 Ibid., 8.
project ‘i Malmö mötes vi’\(^{14}\), where newly-arrived immigrants are paired up with someone who has lived in Sweden for more than 15 years, according to their interests and personalities. The goal is to create networks, exchange cultural knowledge, socialise and develop Swedish language skills.

NBI initiatives in Sweden also aim to contribute not just to labour-market integration and further education, but also to offer a social interaction opportunity, between immigrants and native-born Swedes and amongst immigrants of different backgrounds, through outdoor activities. NBI initiatives in Sweden have developed in many forms. SFI classes have arranged excursions\(^{15}\) to practice Swedish language while exploring the outdoors. Recreation and adventure activities aimed at the youth are held by one of the biological and nature museums\(^{16}\), where native-born and immigrant youth participate in outdoor activities together. Nature-based activities have also been used to develop labour market integration as in initiatives training for potential vocations in nature reserves\(^{17}\), as well as capacity-building in forestry, farming and small-scale food production. The Swedish department of forestry (Skogstyrelsen) has a skills-building and job creation programme\(^{18}\) were training and certification in using chainsaws provides newly-arrived migrants with labour-market opportunities within the field of nature and the environment.

In Sweden, most projects aimed at integration use language training, networking and labour-market penetration as a means to an end. This study considers the role of nature in the Swedish society, and considers whether “[…] a connection to nature can be a channel to Nordic culture and language.”\(^{19}\), thereby contributing to social integration in one form or another.


\(^{15}\) In Skåne this initiative is facilitated by Stiftelsen Skånska Landskap, and is called ‘Naturen som Arena för Integration.’ Information about it can be found at: https://www.skanskalandskap.se/aktuellt/nyheter/naturen-som-arena-for-integration (Accessed 11 February, 2019) and https://www.skogssallskapet.se/kunskapsbank/artiklar/2017-03-23-skogen-som-arena-for-integration.html (Accessed 11 February, 2019)

\(^{16}\) Biotopia in Uppsala holds youth activities for non-native and native-born Swedes to interact and have fun together, in ‘Äventyrgrupp’. http://www.biotopia.nu/hitta-ut/aventyrgruppen/ (Accessed 5 February, 2019)

\(^{17}\) Landsbygdsnätverket and Hushållningskapet working on projects under the umbrella initiative ‘Grön Integration’: http://www.landsbygdsnätverket.se/vadarlandshygdsnätverket/verksamhetsomraden/integration.4.7/2f685151ee2c8738d485e.html and https://hushallningssallskapet.se/tjanster-produkter/foretagsutveckling/landsbygdsutveckling/gron-integration-2/ (Accessed 5 February, 2019)


Within the broader perspective, the EU governance bodies are under increasing pressure for emphasising nature-based solutions to social and economic challenges. This is due to the global narrative towards environmental sustainability as our economies and societies continue to grow, as summed up in the United Nations’ Agenda 2030, outlying the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 SDGs support and encourage governments, businesses and civil society who simultaneously target environmental, economic and social challenges; highlighting the interconnectedness of these three aspects of global development. In searching for innovative and relevant approaches to immigrant integration, nature is then seen as an ‘obvious’ tool for integration in Nordic countries.\textsuperscript{20} This highlights the greater relevance of nature-based activities and initiatives.

3. Previous research

As a point of departure for this study, I took the Nordic Council of Ministers’ publication on ‘Nature-based Integration’. The work considers nature as a tool towards immigrant integration, and explore the ways in which this occurs, as well as better understanding how immigrants use nature, and the role of nature and outdoor recreation in facilitating immigrant’s integration to host societies. The study occurs specifically in the Nordic region providing a perspective relevant to the Nordic cultural and environmental landscape. The study gathered and evaluated, through a series of workshops, various different NBI projects throughout Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. The NBI projects included also had educational and vocational training aspects, such as skills-building around swimming and safety, or certification in using a chainsaw and other forestry equipment, to introduce potential professions.\textsuperscript{21}

It was found that the organisers of the NBI projects considered certain aspects as opportunities to develop immigrant integration. One aspect was increasing awareness of the recreational uses and accessibility of nature, green areas and cultural landscapes; another aspect was increasing knowledge of the psychological and physical benefits of nature. The main barriers to participation and success of the projects were found to be about accessibility and awareness by


\textsuperscript{21} Pitkänen et al., \textit{Nature-based Integration: Nordic Experiences and Examples}, 16-17.
immigrants. Studies showed that insufficient knowledge of access, rules and regulations in public nature spaces was one of the main obstacles. The study ultimately collected the observations and opinions of those who organised or facilitated the projects; finally the study acknowledged that there remained a gap in the information of the immigrants’ own experiences, perspectives, and contributions towards the projects.

The follow-up study aimed at better defining nature-based integration through the perspectives and practices of those involved in the projects. The key questions of the study were about how the project or activity specifically contributed to integration, what role nature played in the project, whether nature was central to the activity or it could have taken place elsewhere. “It was emphasised that nature is not only an arena or a base for activities that can lead to integration – knowing the (local) nature is integration in itself.” This study demonstrated that NBI is as much about nature itself as it is a tool for immigrants to participate in the host society.

Lisberg Jensen and Ouis compiled a work focusing on investigating cultural backgrounds on outdoor habits. The book talks about the concept of ‘friluftsliv’ as how you relate yourself to being outdoors, what you do there and how you think about it. Through qualitative mixed methods, interviews and other in-depth fieldwork, the authors immigrants’ relationship towards and within nature around Malmö. Finally, outdoor recreational habits and preferences for nature were seen to vary across different cultural backgrounds.

A reflection on patterns of behaviour and traditions, such as grilling, swimming, foraging, focuses on certain meanings, such as on relaxing, on solitude or on being together, on the experience and process of food as in the case of grilling. Picking berries and mushrooms was expressed with a positive attitude, however many interviewees expressed that people who are not from Sweden don’t really forage because they are not sure which berries or mushrooms are poisonous and which are edible. Lisberg Jansen and Ouis talked about an ‘ecological literacy’ which refers to the ability to read a landscape, move in it and use the right natural materials in

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22 Ibid., 22-24.
23 Sandra Gentín et al., Defining Nature-based Integration: Perspectives and practices from the Nordic Countries, (Helsinki: Reports of the Finnish Environment Institute, 2018), 12.
24 Ibid., 13.
25 Ibid., 16.
26 Lisberg Jensen and Ouis, Det Gröna finrummet, 80-82.
the right ways (such as knowing which mushrooms are poisonous and not to eat). They explained that, similar to book-literacy, there is no clear border of whether or not you can read, rather about a comprehensibility of new information.27

Further, the idea that peace and quiet from nature can be beneficial to mental health is investigated; the idea that green areas are good for people’s health and well-being has often led to urban planning to incorporate urban green spaces in order to encourage better public health, and provide varied recreational opportunities.28 Lisberg Jensen and Ouis however, find the ideas of what a calming and restorative environment, and which qualities it should have, is very much socially constructed and dictated by cultural norms. “You talk so much about how it is in the forest, in nature and on the lake. There you get calm for the soul and experience peace and quiet. In my home country we go to church. Is that the same thing?”29 It is not obvious that everyone should feel calm and peaceful when outdoors in nature. Many people expressed fear and anxiety at the thought of being in nature in Sweden, and going out into the ‘dark, cold, forests’.

Adevi and Grahn investigate the different reasons for different preferences for landscapes.30 The question whether the preference is innate and independent of culture or socialisation, or whether it is exactly due to childhood associations and meaning-making processes that were learned. Their study included a questionnaire completed by two-thousand people in Sweden, as well as a smaller qualitative group of nineteen people. The findings were that childhood landscapes were the most preferred before other landscapes. This means that landscapes - being familiar or foreign, preferred or not- were not innate, but rather constructed through cultural traditions and symbols, and social norms and values. Not all nature is experienced in the same way, and certainly not by everyone.

Lisberg Jensen also compiled a review of previous studies on the health effects of outdoor activities in nature.31 The aim of the study was to investigate the relations between health, outdoor activities and nature, primarily in the context of Sweden. This work comments on the

27 Ibid., 106-109.
28 Ibid., 120-121.
29 Ibid., 125-127.
31 Lisberg Jensen, Gå Ut Min Själ.
claims and uses of nature for physical and psychological well-being, both for the individual but also for the society through public health. The research method was a literature review, and consisted of extensive literature searches and reviews within the field. The commonly assumed benefits of outdoor recreation were described as follows: [1] for the body, movement and coordination through physical activities like football or climbing; [2] to contribute to safety and survival through swimming; [3] to educate and develop an appreciation for nature (‘the outdoors’) through activities like hiking and camping; and [4] to strengthen mental stability and offer alternative surroundings and a different pace compared to the competitive ‘rat-race’ business world. Outdoor life was portrayed as providing a form of relaxation that is helpful in achieving emotional stability. With this assumption, the study aimed to understand why and how nature could be beneficial for health.

The authors’ analysis discussed a number of themes such as a feeling of belonging, identity and integration; well-being, rest, recovery and the natural environment; as well as outdoor life, ecological literacy and sustainable development. People, place and time were seen as factors that create sense of belonging; and that having a sense of belonging, included having an ‘internal map’ of an area, which could be both experienced and imagined, as long as it helped you to identify with your surroundings. Further, 1880-1920 was described as a time when the myth of a special ‘Swedish’ nature was established, when the landscape became an icon for Swedish identity.

Mental health and physical health were seen as linked. Therefore, embodied experiences in ‘near-nature’ can also be seen as affecting the psychological. The study found that the qualities that attracted those to the outdoor environment were; [1] stillness, peace and quiet; [2] an element of wildness in order to experience a fascination for the natural environment; [3] biodiversity, so that the site offers a variety of fauna and flora; [4] space played a role, either through feeling sheltered like in a forest, or free like on a beach or with wide endless horizons; [5] accessibility for all and inclusivity; [6] a ‘garden of Eden’ character, meaning to be able to feel completely safe to be yourself and abandon vulnerability; [7] festivity, and opportunities for fun, for example grilling; [8] a cultural background, place with a link to history which arouses a feeling of the passing of time.

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32 Ibid., 8-10.
33 Lisberg Jensen, Gå Ut Min Själ, 14.
34 Ibid., 19.
There were many studies highlighted which showed that staying in an outdoor environment has good effects on stress, lowers blood pressure, improves higher concentration ability etc.\textsuperscript{35} Finally, the study noted that despite the difficulties in measuring and proving the results, the claims of a connection between time spent outdoors and increased health and well-being was evident.

4. Conceptual framework

There exists an obstacle within the field of nature-based integration, that definitions and concepts are not always used and understood contingently, thus the challenge is to find a common definition of the key concepts.\textsuperscript{36} The term ‘integration’ is not always understood consistently or used coherently, and what constitutes as ‘nature’ is seldom clear. This research cannot generalise the meanings of the terms ‘nature’ or ‘integration’; however the conceptual framework establishes and clarifies how these terms are used within this study. The conceptual framework contains my understanding of ‘nature’, as in the Swedish context; how I identify ‘integration’; and the use of ‘social networks’ as a theoretical perspective within which to observe interactions, ties, activities, behavioural patterns, and social capital.

4.1. Clarification of term: Allemansrätten

‘Allemansrätten’ as the ‘Right of Public Access’, is a usufructuary right in Sweden. This means that it is a civil law that refers to the right of an individual to access and use the property of another, on the condition that the property is not thusly impaired or altered. The responsibility is summed up by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (Naturvårdvärket) as ‘Don’t disturb – Don’t destroy’.\textsuperscript{37} This right is completely separate to a right or claim of ownership and dominion. Conceptually, ‘Allemansrätt’ is understood as a way of opening land and place for recreational use, thereby creating more inclusive and accessible public spaces.\textsuperscript{38} The right

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{37} The full right and responsibility of ’Allemansrätt’ can be found at: http://www.swedishepa.se/Environmental-objectives-and-cooperation/Swedish-environmental-work/Work-areas/This-is-the-Right-of-Public-Access/ (Accessed 5 March 2019)
states that anyone may roam freely in the countryside, free access to parks and reserves, and staying overnight with some conditions.

The right of public access allows for recreational activities, such as hiking, skiing, fishing, horse-riding, foraging, and picnicking. The restrictions of the right ensure that no fauna or flora is disturbed or damaged through people’s activities; and that landowner’s ground, resources and property is protected and preserved. Allemansrätt en makes nature that much more accessible and inclusive for all. Studies show that ‘allemandsrätten’ has strong support among the Swedish public, for the purposes of public access for outdoor participation. It is reminiscent of historic ties to the land, and portrays nature as a part of the cultural heritage of Sweden. The distinctive relationship between human, community and natural surrounds is protected through social values and official policy such as the right of public access; and the role of nature is in one way uniquely significant for the Swedish cultural identity.

4.2. Nature

Nature is often conceptualised in terms of generalising binaries dividing ‘tame’ from ‘wild’; ‘nature’ from ‘culture’; ‘civilised’ from ‘savage’; and ‘organic’ from ‘man-made’. Nature is understood as a green environment built up by fauna and flora, as opposed to a man-made environment that is built up by pre-constructed materials and designs – the ‘city’ versus ‘wilderness’; the imagined edge between the forest and the last row of houses. Practices and human uses of nature blurs these lines, where gardening for example, plays between man-made and nature. Nature is then, not necessarily a distant, overgrown, unfamiliar or inhospitable place – but also found in simply planting and tending to a garden, or a city park with benches to sit under the trees. Practices in nature support the tactile value of experience. Nature provides a strong tactile experience, often in opposition to the heightened sensory stimulation found in urban areas. In this way, the understanding of nature and outdoor activity in this study includes a walk in the park, or grilling near the beach with friends, not only more strenuous hiking or camping trips. The focus is then on the experience of being outdoors as the goal.

40 Per Eliasson and Ebba Lisberg Jensen, Naturens Nytta.
41 Lisberg Jensen, Gå Ut Min Själ, 9.
Further, the role of the embodied experience is important here in understanding why it is more beneficial to physically be outside, than compared to watching a National Geographic documentary in your home for example. The stimulation of all your senses creates an associative experience\textsuperscript{42}; this means that the sound of the birds chirping may distract you from stress and anxiety and relax you, then when you are in a stressful situation again you remember being outdoors as relaxing because you associate it with peace and quiet where you can hear chirping birds. Nature is seen to be a sit of, and providing, the physical environment to experience calming and relaxation.

Smaller towns in the countryside are more dependent on climatic and environmental factors because they are surrounded and immersed in vast spaces of ‘nature’. Small towns often establish and survive from farming, fishing, logging, mining and so forth, which is understood as their (man-made) relationship with nature. Bigger cities often build parks and recreate or imitate spaces of nature observation and conservation, to provide more interaction between man and nature. Nature conservation for outdoor recreation, biodiversity and habitat preservation points to the what, why, where and for whom nature is protected in rural or urban areas.\textsuperscript{43} Nature as consciously engaged with and entered into, is experienced as valuable for embodied and sensory experiences providing psychological, physical and social benefits.\textsuperscript{44}Here the understanding of ‘nature’, and what counts as outdoors in nature, overlaps across urban green spaces, such as parks and gardens, as well as nature reserves in/around built-up areas, and further on to bigger areas of wilderness and national parks. This means that the size and density of the urban area often affects what we consider as ‘nature’.\textsuperscript{45} Parks in cities may provide people with an outdoor in nature feeling, while in smaller towns surrounded by bigger natural landscapes, the trend may be more to going just outside the town instead of to the park.

Conceptually, since we are biological organisms and part of the animal kingdom ourselves, humans remain dependent on nature for existence.\textsuperscript{46} Nature is all around us and we are involved

\textsuperscript{44} Riika Puhakka et al., “The Health and Well-being Impacts of Protected Areas in Finland,” Journal of Sustainable Tourism Volume 25, Issue No. 12, (2017): 1830-1847
\textsuperscript{45} Lisberg Jensen, Gå Ut Min Själ, 9.
\textsuperscript{46} Ammi Kullander and Pia Widegren, Natur och Friluftsliv (Falköping: Bonnier Utbildning, 1997), 48.
in natural ecosystems in the way that has shaped our social ecosystems and development of
civilisations across the globe, and throughout history. The environmental landscape and
climate that directly surrounds us is important as it shapes the traditions and modes of
sustenance that we have developed. We draw inspiration and material from the natural world. Nature, whether conceptualised as ‘wild’ and ‘savage’ and opposed to humans as ‘socialised’
and ‘civilised’ - or linked to our species holistically as part of biodiverse ecosystems on which
we depend for our survival - plays an undeniable part in our everyday lives both at the
individual level, as well as communally.

4.3. Integration

Integration is understood as a process of gaining experiences and exchanging knowledges; it
is manifested in various types and depths of relationships that are built between people of
different groups, backgrounds and identities. Integration can very simply be understood
through the root meaning of the word: ‘inter’. It means among, or between, and is then
negated by the term segregation, which refers to separate or divide. The conceptualisation of
integration then is that different parts are bound together to one whole functioning body. This
is also opposed to the term assimilation, where the smaller part must adapt and change itself to
the bigger part in order for one, whole body to emerge. Integration requires adaptation from all
parts: regarding populations in Sweden, integration is not only about immigrants, but also
requires that native-born Swedish adapt themselves to an increasingly diverse society.

Within this broad spectrum of interaction and exchanges, between segregation on one hand and
assimilation on the other, integration is often thought to neither isolate nor assimilate one group
from another. “[…] definition of integration: the process of becoming an accepted part of
society.”

This conceptualisation of integration is open because it is considered a process,
instead of an end point. Neither does it allocate requirements for what it is to be ‘accepted part
of society.’ This occurs in different ways; legally or politically, socio-economically, culturally,
or associatively.

47 Ibid., 121-123.
48 Margareta Popoola, Integration, en samtidsspegling: En översikt (Stockholm: Svenska Kommunförbundet, 2002).
49 Lisberg Jensen and Ouis, Det Gröna Finrummet, 44-45.
The study is located within the field of ‘integration’ studies, and hones in on the role of nature in the broader, social integration of immigrants. Through the questions raised in the interviews - around social interactions and different relationships, or feelings that become associated with different aspects of nature and society in Sweden, as well as the exchange and sharing of their own language and traditions – examples and instances of what integration in the social sense could look like for the immigrants is identified. “As soon as immigrants arrive in their new country they have to secure a place in the new society, both in the physical sense (a house, a job and income, access to educational and health facilities, etc.), but also in the social and cultural sense.”

A clear and consistent understanding of what integration signifies in this research is based on some social outcomes of immigrants’ practices and participation in nature-based activities and projects.

Four basic forms of integration are used in this study to analyse the interview data: structural, cultural, interactive and identificational integration. They are each linked back to socialising in Sweden from the perspectives of the immigrants. [1] Structural integration refers to the access that immigrants have to public institutions and societal resources such as labour, education, health services and recreational opportunities. [2] Cultural integration is about the immigrant gaining knowledge and competences in cultural aspects, common practices and general rules of behaviour. Cultural integration enable them to navigate their new host society. [3] Interactive integration refers to the networks, relationships, friendships and other socialisation aspects that immigrants are able to build in order to be included in the networks of the society. [4] Identificational integration refers to the emotional bonds, attachment and sense of belonging that immigrants experience towards the new social groups and places. The integration aspect of nature-based integration, thus refers to the immigrant’s capabilities in becoming active members of their society; whether through structural, cultural, interactive or identificational integrative processes or instances. This study focuses on the experiences and stories shared from participating in nature-based integration, and how this can affect their social networking and integration through structural, cultural, interactive and identificational perspectives.

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51 Ibid., 141.
52 Wolfgang Boswick and Friedrich Heckmann, Social Integration of Immigrants: Contribution of Local and Regional Authorities (Dublin: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2006) 3.
53 Friedrich Heckmann and Dominique Schnapper, The integration of immigrants in European Societies: national differences and trends of convergence (Stuttgart: Lucius and Lucius, 2003)
54 Gentin, Defining Nature Based Integration, 17.
The four forms of integration as outlined above was developed by Heckmann and Schnapper and consequently views integration as more dynamic. The tempos at which the different forms of integration occur are different, some happening faster than others. For example immigrants can be structurally more integrated, participating in and accessing public services, but less identificationally integrated, such as not having much feeling of belonging or affiliation with the larger, host society. Therefore integration in this study is viewed as processual and dynamic, made up of many parts, and understood within the forms of structural, cultural, interactive and identificational integration.

4.4. Social Networks

In this study the theoretical framework of social networks becomes useful in understanding how activities and interactions relate to integration and social impacts. Since this study focuses on the social aspects of integration, a deeper look into what makes up social relations and interactions is required. Through the use of social networks at the micro-level, I aim to use experiences located in NBI projects to show the effects on integration at the person-to-person level. Social life is made up by various networks and relationships between individuals and groups. The first and simplest example of this is between two individuals, where the individual is called a node within the network. Their interaction and exchange creates a tie, which is the relation between them. The ties that they have with other individuals, creates the network, the community or society. In this way, these networks are social, although the nature of the relations (or ties), and their intensity, do vary.

Examples of relations are friendships, kinships, collaborations, trade ties, exchanges of trade or resources or information, and so on. The nature of a relation between two nodes can be categorised into four broad types: similarities, social relations, interactions and flows. Similarities refer to relations of affiliation; social relations are defined by roles such as friendships or colleagues; interactions derive from specific contexts or occurrences; while flows depict exchanges or transfers between nodes. The ties/relations are also analysed in

57 Ibid., 12.
terms of their ‘reciprocity’, ‘intensity’ and ‘durability’. Reciprocity comments on ties of exchange, whether the exchange or transfer is directed or undirected, whether it is both ways or one-directional. Intensity of ties is about the level of commitment and complexity of the relationship. Finally, durability considers how long-lasting and persistent the tie is, for example kinship ties may last life-times, while other ties survive for only one or two interactions.58

Ties are further conceptualised as having ‘Bridging’ and ‘Bonding’ functions within the social networks, as described by Robert Putnam’s work ‘Bowling Alone’. 59 “Moreover, bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves.”60 Bonding ties are between nodes with similar group memberships, identities and affiliations. Bonding ties are generally stronger ties and reinforce homogeneity and social structures. Bridging ties on the other hand are weaker ties, and occur between nodes that are more different, distant and have fewer interactions. Bonding ties often share many nodes, meaning that individuals all have the same friends in common for example; while bridging ties, link to external nodes and networks, such as meeting someone outside of your usual groups. Bridging occurs over ‘weak’ ties because they link you to distant acquaintances with different networks than yourself, while bonding reinforces ‘strong’ ties as you are deeply linked to close family and friends who have a similar social identity from yourself.61

The Strength of Weak Ties (SWT) theory explains that ‘weak’ ties can be more beneficial and resourceful, than ‘strong ties’, in progressing and increasing social status and capital.62 The theory argues that strong ties between two nodes demonstrate that their networks generally overlap, while weak ties between two nodes introduces them to new information and opportunities that they do not find in their closer, everyday networks, exactly because they do not overlap and share relationships. This implies that often, ‘weaker’ ties are more useful and resourceful than ‘stronger’ ties, when trying to move through social networks and structures. Strong, bonding ties contain knowledge you already know, while weak ties exposes you to new networks that your strong ties have not accessed.

60 Ibid., 22-24.
61 Ibid.
The value of weak ties is useful for this study, in looking at contributions to social integration, because of the implicit value of networks for social capital and thereby social integration. Social networks are considered building blocks making up social capital. Ties, both strong and weak, provide social and cultural capital, and diversified networks provide a broader range of ties. This contributes to integration as social capital is conceived of as the benefits derived from networks in accessing the new society, more resources and information. In studying NBI projects in Sweden, the conceptual framework forms the basis of the analysis in describing the meaning and use of ‘nature’ within the context of Sweden. Additionally a conceptualisation of social integration is provided in terms of structures, culture, interactions, and identification that immigrants experience in a society. Finally the link is made using social networks to demonstrate the use and effects of ties and relationships of various forms derived from participation in the NBI activities.

4.5. Social Networks to Social integration

Similarly, language cafes at libraries offer explanations of the ‘strength of weak ties’ in bridging and contributing to social capital, and thus increased social integration. Johnston considers the uses and effects of conversation, and the interactions and ties that are created through conversation, as fostering integration. The author discusses how this occurs through expanding the social networks and increasing the social capital of the individuals by increased knowledge and information as well as language skills. This demonstrates how such interactions with weak ties act as bridging, and thus contribute towards integration. Johnston describes how the provision of opportunities to practice language skills, exchange information and knowledge through informal conversations, as well as the space to interact socially with Swedes, contributed to the social capital of the immigrants. The social capital is understood as the gained knowledge of the new society, as well as the expanded and diversified social networks.

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64 Ibid., 70-72.
5. Methodology

Through the methodology of the study, I acknowledge my position as researcher, and explain why a qualitative research method is most appropriate. The material for the study was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted through contacting various NBI projects and initiatives in Sweden. The methodology aims to transparently describe the process of the study in order to increase reliability.

5.1. My role as a researcher

To account for the biases that I bring to the study, which could affect the interpretation and findings of the data, the research requires me to be self-reflexive and consider my preconceptions and positionality as researcher. Similarly to the interviewees, I am not originally from Sweden; I am neither ethnically Swedish nor is my first language Swedish. I enter the society as a foreigner, and adapt my outside-in perspective with each new encounter and interpretation of the culture and the country. I have spent the majority of my first months in Sweden attending SFI classes, working part-time student jobs with Swedish employers and colleagues, and taking part in some of the integration-focused programmes of the Swedish Red Cross as well as Malmö Stad.

I grew up in a city surrounded by mountains and ocean, where my leisure time and recreational activities were spent outdoors hiking, swimming, and camping. This is characterised by a ‘friluftsliv’ lifestyle, although I only learned that term after I moved to Scandinavia. As I started building networks and exploring the society, I sought out opportunities for outdoor recreational activities, and aimed to make social ties around it. I arrived in Sweden with the presumptuous stereotype that Scandinavians are ‘outdoors-ey’ people, and that I would integrate easily since I have similar interests. Therefore, I am biased to the ‘outside-in’ perspective of Swedish traditions and values, and biased to the notion that nature and time outdoors is beneficial to the individual and society.

Coming from a different climate and natural landscape to that of Sweden, I have had to adapt as much to the natural environment as the social one. Therefore, when informants explain their experiences and perceptions of encountering Swedish nature and outdoor practices, I interpret and understand their words through my own associations and observations picked up while interacting with the Swedish society and environment myself. My positionality has
undoubtedly guided my research questions, the way in which I collect and interpret interview responses, as well as how I formulate the data in terms of the chosen conceptual framework.\textsuperscript{66} The interviewees also responded differently to me as I have also immigrated to Sweden within the last 5 years, as it seemed easier for them to communicate the experiences and perceptions of moving to Sweden when they recognised that I too had recently gone through similar events, such as attending SFI classes for example.

5.2. **Social Constructionist view**

The reflection on my position as researcher within this particular study depicts a social-constructionist view. I acknowledge the meaning I have created of NBI, through my experience of nature and outdoor activities, and building social networks in Sweden. The constructionist standpoint is about creating meaning through your experiences and interpretations of the world and society around you. Meanings are thus socially constructed, and interactions are dependent on cultural and socio-political contexts.\textsuperscript{67} The subjectivity of this perspective, and the claim that meaning is socially constructed, thus requires an analytical stance on human and social practices.\textsuperscript{68}

My writing as the researcher is a construction of the interviewees’ own constructions. This does not decrease the value or truth of the study; nor does it render the study fictional\textsuperscript{69} – rather it provides an in-depth account and understanding from the interviewees, also called a ‘thick description’ of the material. The way in which the interviewees make sense of their social ties and of their surroundings helps me to gain an understanding of the meaning of these relationships and contexts that they inhabit.\textsuperscript{70}

5.3. **Qualitative study**

The notion of ‘thick description’ refers to our construction of others’ constructions; our understanding of how other people understand things.\textsuperscript{71} ‘Thick description’ is useful in social

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 157.
\textsuperscript{69} Somekh, 35.
science studies, because general concepts and impalpable ideas (such as ‘integration’, ‘experience’ or ‘society’ in this study) are ambitiously argued in order to make mere occurrences more scientifically valid or useful.\(^{72}\)

The research is qualitative because in the attempt to interpret the interviewees’ perspectives and experiences; it regards the material collected as both valid and informative; thus contributing to further knowledge and understanding in the research field. Qualitative studies focus on a more in-depth investigation of one, or a few particular samples – as opposed to a broader observation of many samples which is quantitative\(^{73}\). The qualitative approach allows me to collect data face-to-face\(^{74}\), as well as gaining a deeper understanding of the material. This in-depth material is gained through further enquiry about the motives, perceptions and reflections given by each interviewee. These contribute to the ‘thick description’\(^{75}\) interpretation of the material; it contextualises interviewees’ experiences and provides a more detailed and nuanced understanding.\(^{76}\) I focus the study on qualitative and in-depth interviews and material. In this way, I hope to better reflect on my presence in the interviews and analysis, and to better observe the embodied responses from the interviewees.

5.4. **Inductive approach**

The research is primarily inductive in nature, as I started with an interest in the experiences and effects of NBI projects. Inductive research methods are where we “examine a particular aspect of [social] life and derive our theories from the resultant data.”\(^{77}\) I started setting up interviews and concentrated on what I wanted to learn from the interviewees, rather than setting out to prove theories about NBI. I first worked to clarify and word the questions so that the study would remain relevant to the research aim. I read through previous literature on similar studies, but only formulated the conceptual framework after I had conducted the interviews. I could do this by using the most interesting and immediately striking responses from the interviewees. I tried to understand what they were describing, within a larger social or

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 28.


\(^{75}\) Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 12-14.


behavioural understanding. This led me to the theories that I present in the conceptual framework section, and subsequently implemented in the analysis of the material. Inductive reasoning is used to highlight reasons and tendencies, rather than making cause-and-effect links or predictions.\textsuperscript{78} The conclusion is formed inductively because it is based on the material gathered and the subsequent interpretation and analysis of the findings.

5.5. Access to the fieldwork

I did an initial search to identify NBI projects currently underway in Sweden, and started to contact the different organisations that were responsible for the NBI initiatives. I approached them with a short presentation of myself and the research project as described in the interview guide I sent them. I enquired about the possibility of doing interviews and started setting up interviewees as soon as I had the potential interviewees’ contact details. I did not delimit the NBI projects or the interviewees except that the interviewees had to have immigrated to Sweden and the project had to focus on NBI. I conducted 9 interviews within the sample ground\textsuperscript{79}; 7 were in-person, while 2 were done telephonically due to time and budget restrictions to travel. The interviewees were spread out across Sweden as follows: 3 were in county 1, 4 were in county 2, and 2 were in county 3. I do not identify the details of where the interviewees are, neither which organisations that provided helped me to reach them, to respect the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees.

Having a smaller set of data makes it more difficult to make broader claims linking nature-based activities and social integration within Sweden. The aim of the study was not to have broad generalizability, but rather to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences specific to the interviewees.

The interview guide was helpful to set up the interviews, as it stated the intentions of the research, and explained what role the interviews would play in the study. This ensured a mutual understanding\textsuperscript{80} between myself as the researcher, and the potential interviewees and project organisers. Through the interview guide I explained generally what the interview will be about,


\textsuperscript{79} A 9\textsuperscript{th} interview was done, but the interviewee has lived in Sweden for over 10 years, and I decided not to include the interview in the analysis due to the 5 year residence delimitation.

\textsuperscript{80} May, \textit{Social Research}, 140.
why I had approached them for an interview, and clarified that they will be kept anonymous, have access to the thesis after I have submitted it, and that I wanted to voice-record\textsuperscript{81} the interviews for increased accuracy afterwards. For the in-person interviews; I suggested a few dates for the interviews, and tried to secure a place to meet the interviewees. One interview occurred at the public library, two others occurred at the working places of the interviewees, and three more occurred at the SFI school after class. The flexibility in where and when the interviews would take place aimed to ensure that they would feel comfortable and respected. On average, the interviews lasted between twenty minutes and one hour.

5.6 Interview Language

The language that the interview was conducted in was also chosen by the interviewee. This was because I could not assume that the interviewees would feel confident enough in English that they are expressing themselves accurately. Instead, I offered English as one option since it is my mother tongue and the paper was to be written in English. The other language option was Swedish. This ended up being a good compromise because it forced us to keep the language at a basic level, where questions were simply and clearly worded\textsuperscript{82}. At any point of misunderstanding, the interviewee and I asked for clarifications, to explain what the other meant, and tried to describe how we had understood each other. This proved to strengthen the communication between us, because both I and the interviewees did not speak Swedish as our mother tongue, but had that in common. We had all gone through the same SFI (Svenska för Invandrare) education to learn the Swedish language, and consequently learning Swedish ideals and values as taught and portrayed by various SFI teachers in class materials and discussions.

Translation however, was not considered due to limited resources and containing its own limitations: “The challenge of using translation in research is that the translator talks for the interviewees and the original meaning might get lost”\textsuperscript{83}. Follow-up questions and prompts were rather used to investigate further or clarify when I suspected that some information was going astray, or being miscommunicated and misunderstood. The primary purpose for myself as the interviewer, was to obtain sufficient information with which to inform the research questions and aim of the study.

\textsuperscript{81} Drever, Using semi-structured interviews in small-scale research, 10.
\textsuperscript{82} Drever, Using semi-structured interviews in small-scale research, 29-30.
\textsuperscript{83} Kate Maclean, “Translation in Cross-Cultural Research: An Example from Bolivia,” Development in Practice Volume 17, Issue No. 6 (2007), 784.
5.7. Sample group

The interviewees of this study constitute the sample group, and are identified through carefully selected and relevant sample criteria. Through contacting different organisations who have NBI initiatives I was able to use the ‘snowball sampling’ technique to approach people for the interviews. Snowball sampling is where you approach the first accessible or main individuals connected to the case you are interested in, then after initial engagement with them and further enquiry into other individuals also involved in different ways or at other levels, you have contact with potentially more individuals to gain a wider view of the case you are interested in. I identified various projects and found contact details on their websites to send the first introductory email. I enquired whether they knew of anyone who could help me and who I should be in contact with. Very shortly I was put in touch with individuals who were appropriate for the sample group, as well as others who had experience in working or research within the field of NBI. For the SFI group interviewees I first contacted the regional foundation for the landscape and SFI teachers who were involved in arranging the excursions, then I attended two of the outdoor excursions where I approached SFI students. I briefly explained the purpose and method of the interviews to them, and asked if they were interested in being interviewed.

The primary criteria was that the individual must have participated in a NBI project or activity in Sweden. Further sample criteria was that the interviewees do not originate from Sweden, but have moved from another country and resided here for five years or less. “Immigrants are not a homogenous group, and the various groups of immigrants have different needs and capabilities that affect their integration process.” The time residing in Sweden was set in order to get a relatively comparative understanding of the time spent in the society and the social integration that pre-exists their participation. There was no requirement set on the gender, or any other form of identity, of the interviewee; rather I aimed to interview between 5 and 10 individuals. This wide range of sample criteria was chosen for maximizing variation.

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84 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 158.
5.8. Coding the data

Practically, the interviews were voice-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The benefits of voice-recording was that it allowed me to pay full attention to the interviewee, to the conversation and their non-verbal gestures. I wanted to be freed from note-taking to accurately capture everything they had said, and how it was expressed. Voice-recording also prevented me from slipping in my own words for the words of the interviewee.\(^{89}\) Transcribing the voice-recording allowed me to listen multiple times to the interviews, each time picking up more ideas. This provided a more attentive and careful analysis of the material as I was able to pick up on smaller details and anecdotes that I missed during the first listening.\(^ {90}\)

In starting to analyse the material, I used the technique of coding in order to easily conceptualize of the information.\(^ {91}\) This was done by first listening to the interviews again and taking brief notes of key themes or concepts that emerged as major findings. I listened multiple times to the same interviews in order to think more carefully through each answer and explanation, and started identifying the themes and information, under keywords / concepts that I noticed emerged from their responses.\(^ {92}\) The findings of the interviews are presented and discussed in the analysis section of this study.

5.9. Ethical considerations

In considering the ethical aspects of using information from people for this research project, I aimed to ensure their informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and the usability as far as possible, and access to my paper if they desired.\(^ {93}\) Their informed consent was obtained through the interview guide that they read and usability was ensured where I maintained that they could decide at any point to not be included, or not have any of their interview material used in the study. Anonymity is maintained by providing false names to the interviewees throughout this study, as well as excluding the naming of places and organisations that I was in contact with. Confidentiality is kept through safeguarding their details, information and interview material, and passwords are required to access the documents pertaining to this study stored on my personal computer.

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\(^{89}\) May, *Social Research*, 152.
\(^{91}\) May, *Social Research*, 152.
\(^{92}\) Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 186.
Additionally, the way in which I handled their interview recordings and data was compliant with the new GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) laws in the EU. I registered the data that I had collected according to the protocol at Malmö University\(^4\), through which I conduct this research. This was crucial to do since my data contains personal information of the interviewees that is able to be linked to them and make the interviewees identifiable as individuals. I had to clearly state the purpose of the data handling, and which data I needed to collect. How the information is stored and preserved or deleted was also declared according to the registration process. After full completion of this course, I will delete all records that I have of the research material collected; this further ensures their confidentiality as the information cannot be stolen from me.

### 5.10. Interview structure

I chose semi-structured interviews to set the general tone and open structure. I did this by formulating no more than 10 questions around the different aspects captured in the research questions. The questions focused on: the interviewees’ motivations and participation in nature-based activities; their interactions and relationships before, during and after the activities; as well as their experiences and general perceptions of nature in Sweden and its socio-cultural meaning. This was to understand better how they create and experience meaning in the social world.\(^5\)

For the actual interviews, I decided to start with one or two open introductory questions, allowing the interviewee to start talking about themselves and their experiences, and the nature-based activity. Thereafter I wanted the questions and answers to flow as a casual conversation, and to maintain flexibility in the interview through elaboration and allowing questions and answers to lead on to the next more naturally. The appeal of interviewing lies in the opportunity to find realities, and to discover narrative accounts of social settings\(^6\). In-person interviews were beneficial for my interpretation of the material, as I was observing the interviewee’s manner and body language as they spoke.\(^7\) The telephone interviews did not flow as much in

\(^4\) Explanation of the GDPR data registering process at Malmö University available at: https://www.mah.se/medarbetare/For-ditt-arbete/Juridiska-fragor/Datakyddsforordningen/Student-Checklista-for-personuppgiftsbehandling-vid-examensarbeten/


\(^6\) Silverman, *Qualitative Research*, 144-145.

\(^7\) Gentin, *Defining Nature Based Integration*, 1-3 and pp 7-8.
a conversational way as I was unable to observe body language and a lack of previous communication. Instead the telephone interviews were more structured according to the questions.

To discover the order and conditions under which events developed, I included ‘when’ questions.\textsuperscript{98} The last question was kept very open and general to maximise the opportunity for information and perspective from the interviewee. Questions such as “Is there anything else you want to say about this topic?” were used to conclude the conversation and conclude the collection of information.\textsuperscript{99} Here more information often emerged through anecdotes and side stories that the interviewees wanted to share with me based on their own experiences.

5.11. Validity and reliability

Most of the value in qualitative research as contributing to knowledge is how reliable the research method is, and whether the study is validly established. In order to increase reliability, I set out the aim, methods and steps of the research conducted. This means that another researcher could duplicate this study by following the method I have chosen, and that their research would be consistent with mine. However, in qualitative research, “As far as reliability is concerned, one cannot expect answers on one occasion to necessarily replicate those on another. The author explains that interview settings differ and the responses from the interviewees can change from one interview to the next.\textsuperscript{100} In studying people’s experiences and perceptions, reliability is subjected to personal uncertainty, change of heart/mind and different conditions under which interviews are conducted. The role of the researcher in the interview setting could also be seen to affect the interview material, as interviewees may feel more open to responding if they feel more comfortable with the interviewer. With this in mind, this study aimed to increase reliability by stating the full research process transparently, to account for the difficulty in the replicability of the research.

The validity of this study is shown in the relevance of the data collection method to obtain the material required to answer the specific research questions that I asked. Validity is strengthened in two ways: \textit{internally}, which relates to the causal relation between the findings and the material; and \textit{externally}, which is about whether the findings are valid to the larger population.

\textsuperscript{98} Silverman, \textit{Qualitative Research}, 302.
\textsuperscript{100} Silverman, \textit{Qualitative Research}, 154.
defined by the sample criteria\textsuperscript{102}. This study increases \textit{internal} validity in strengthening the causal inferences by trying to account for other variables at play in the findings. The \textit{external} validity of the paper is less emphasised as it could not be assumed that any claims of causality found in the sample group was transferable to the greater population of immigrants in Sweden. The study has a lower generalisability because it is not necessarily that the same findings will be found in another group or nature-based project. However, the aim of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of individual’s experience, rather than many accounts of NBI in order to generalise about the field. The relevance of the conceptual framework to the findings is known as the \textit{construct} validity.\textsuperscript{103} The conceptual framework was carefully chosen to address the specific aim of the study, while the interview questions were formulated to coherently match what the research questions were enquiring about. The interview questions were tested to ensure that answers pointed towards the research questions; and all interviews contained the same questions.

A final point on the validity of the study that I address in the analysis, is what role the method of interviewing plays in the material collected. This relates to whether the experiences and perceptions described by the interviewees are due to, or influenced by, the interview situation; or whether they are coherent with their everyday ideas and experiences.\textsuperscript{104} This relates back to the point about the sample group being potentially biased in how they view NBI, because they have been involved in it. Therefore, the interview material might reflect the certain perspectives of NBI specifically because the interviewees are aware of the aim of my study. However, through the interview questions, I tried to ask broader questions as well, around their experiences and relationships surrounding the activities, to gain the ‘other side of the coin’ perspective of their accounts.

\textsuperscript{102} Somekh, \textit{Research Methods in the Social Sciences}, 221.
\textsuperscript{103} Silverman, \textit{Qualitative Research}, 371.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 366 – 367.
6. **Interviewee profiles**
The list below briefly portrays the interviewees. The asterisk is to indicate that the names are not real.

Amir* is a male in his twenties from Syria. He stays in County 2, and has been in Sweden for 3 years, and is currently studying.

Adnan* is a male in his thirties from Kosovo. He stays in County 2, and has been in Sweden for 5 years.

Abdullah* is a male in his fifties from Syria. He stays in County 2, and has been in Sweden for 5 years.

Hassan* is a male in his twenties from Afghanistan. He stays in County 3, and has been in Sweden for almost 3 years.

Abbas* is a male over eighteen years old from Afghanistan. He stays in County 3, and has been in Sweden for almost 3 years.

Zafar* is a male in his forties from Lebanon. He stays in County 1, and has been in Sweden for 4 months.

Jack* is a male in his forties from South Africa. He stays in County 1, and has been in Sweden for 4 months.

Ethan* is a male in his twenties from Australia. He stays in County 1, and has been in Sweden for 4 months.
7. **Analysis**

The interview questions focused on three main themes: Firstly ‘In nature’ discusses the interviewees’ experiences and participation in nature-based activities and projects, as well as their perceptions of nature in Sweden, and how they described the nature and activities in their country of origin. Secondly, ‘Nature in culture and society’ was about their own understanding and experience of how nature is portrayed in Sweden, and how it is used, and which traditions, if any, can be found therein. The last theme, touches on the immigrants’ interactions and observations of social encounters through activities in nature, or the NBI project itself. This also included a discussion of whether, and if so, how they felt their own relationships and networks had changed, and their experiences of different social outcomes generally through activities in nature. The analysis section aims to present these three themes by categorising and discussing the interview responses within each one. The subsequent ‘Final discussion’ aims to connect the analysis to the theories on social networks and social integration, outlined in the conceptual framework, in order to understand better how NBI projects could be seen to impact social networks and integration of the immigrants interviewed.

Before the more in-depth analysis of the interview material, it is important to better contextualise the different interviews obtained through the three different NBI initiatives, and in three different counties in Sweden. The initial observations I made were that the aims of the different projects varied. The different NBI projects required different levels of participation from the various interviewees. The NBI activity in the County 1 group was an SFI class that occurred outside in nature, and lasted for one day. It was part of and included in their SFI education. Whereas, the NBI activities in the County 2 and County 3 groups contained more involvement, time and dedication from the interviewees. Their participation stretched over many days and lasted for longer periods of time. They sought out activities in nature, for personal interest, for physical health and mental well-being, and then became involved in the social aspect of the project. Additionally, the group in County 1 participated with the help of their SFI teacher and the nature guides from regional foundation for the landscape. They saw their SFI teachers every week day, and did not necessarily associate them with nature or the outdoors, while the nature guides from the excursion, they met only once. In County 2, the nature guiding training was arranged and facilitated by an organisation for nature conservation, and the person that the interviewees had the most contact with was Karin* (the asterisk indicates anonymization by a different name.) as instructor and organiser of the training. The
interviewees in County 3 participated in recreational activities, which was organised and led by Svea*, on behalf of one of the biological museums. The interviewees had the most initial contact with Svea, and in both cases good relationships between the interviewees and either Svea or Karin started to develop.

7.1. **In nature**

Interviewees talked about what they like to do in their free time, about why they participated in NBI activities, and about what motivated them to go out into nature in Sweden. They talked about their experiences of nature in Sweden, and compared it to how they experienced and interacted with nature in their country of origin. They explained what their ideas were of the climate before moving here, and after arriving in Sweden and how their activities in NBI projects affected how they saw the environment and climate. The psychological health benefits of being outdoors, as well as the social opportunities were the main motivators for activities in nature. Previous backgrounds and cultural associations with different landscapes was also seen to play a role in how interviewees experienced nature and landscapes in Sweden.

Most of the interviewees had heard about the NBI project through their SFI class. Adnan explained that he had been working in a different field, but was always interested in nature, and saw the opportunity with the nature-guiding course as a way to branch out and try something new.

“[…] I joined because I wanted to try something else.” *(Adnan)*

Amir explained that since participating in the NBI project, now during his free time he likes to go out into nature. He exercises at an outdoor gym area, and often goes out to get away from people and be alone. He described a big lake that he goes to a couple of times a week, and that he likes to row, and go hiking on smaller trails. Some interpreted ‘nature’ as green, forests and away from the city. Zafar stated that the outdoor activities he likes is in closer relation to the city, as compared to the SFI excursion that he attended in the forested nature reserve.

“uh yeah, more at the sea, more beach, not this nature of mountains.. I’m a city boy.” *(Zafar)*
Nature played a very specific role as it appeared to hold the characteristic of ‘peace and quiet’ that many interviewees were after. Amir said that when he started going out into nature he was thinking about other things, such as waiting for decisions on his asylum application. And that the value of being alone and isolated from busy cities or crowded landscapes helped in the feeling of tranquillity and peace that was so calming. He adds:

“So nature was a very good place to relax and lose all thoughts and stress. […] When I started to feel stressed, then I would just directly go out into the forest.” *(Amir)*

“You know, nature is better than medicine.” *(Hassan)*

Hassan also continued to spend time in nature for the psychological benefits of the quieter environment. When asked about what he likes to do in his free time, he answered:

“If I have free time I want to be in nature, for example: everyone likes grilling but not me. I mean I like grilling but mostly to go to an area to be quiet and look at the birds, and listen to water, such things, to be calm. […] when I have free time, I want to be in a place to be calm. Because you can concentrate a bit more, it helps with calming down your problems and something bad you have in life.” *(Hassan)*

Abdullah described specific activities as distracting, and combined it with humans’ physical senses being stimulated by sights and sounds and smells connected to being outdoors, for example; looking across a beautiful, peaceful panoramic view, or listening to water trickling in a stream.

“To go and sit, and hike and eat and make a fire, and read a book a bit, and listen to this bird how it sings; its good I believe. […] and not only to get moving, for the physical health you can say, but also nature for better psychological health. They forget, they try to forget and remove thoughts about the home country - looking at the trees, they start to feel themselves a part of everything.” *(Abdullah)*

Nonetheless, the majority of the interviewees explained that one of their motivations for being outdoors was for how it made them feel, for the peace and quiet that calmed their minds, for the health benefits. The idea of landscapes being associated with certain feelings and memories
is discussed further below. Abdullah describes how he’s first impressions were not of ‘peace and quiet’ but rather an uncertainty and unfamiliarity with the Swedish climate:

“In the start I was scared for this climate. You know the area I came from in Syria, maybe you didn’t see snow every 10 years, or sometimes every 20 years” (Abdullah)

Amir described that at first he was scared and uncertain of nature in Sweden, he added that he is still a bit sceptic to go out alone when it is dark, so he mostly goes out during the day time. But living in a smaller town appears to encourage him to interact with and encounter the natural environment, and to discover that it is more than just dark and cold, but that the outdoors holds other possibilities than the towns:

“It’s all about the forest here. If you don’t go out, there’s only two streets you can walk through, or [be] at home. In summer there’s so much you can do, cycle, paddle canoe, fishing, etc.” (Amir)

Adnan also talked about his initial impression when reflecting on his adaptation to the climate and landscape. He thought that there were strangely long days in summer, and then really missing the sun during winter, comparing to what he was used to where he had moved from:

“I missed the sun, I had sun almost every day and it never happened that I didn’t see the sun for 10 [consecutive] days. It was interesting. I’ve had snow and cold so that wasn’t so difficult.” (Adnan)

Abdullah, who has a background of more than 25 years working in agriculture in his country of origin, felt uncertain and anxious about the new, unfamiliar landscape:

“But when you start to think of moving to Sweden, immediately you think of snow, and skiing, and cold and dark. […] so it wasn’t easy to come. Especially in the beginning. To come here to new society, new nature, new climate, its not easy.” (Abdullah)

On the other hand, Jack explained that the landscape and climate of Sweden was not one of the big adjustments that he had experienced when moving here. This is partly due to his experiences of previously visiting Sweden and already encountering the nature before
immigrating, but also due to his pre-existing experience of similar climates, having lived in Canada, London, and comparing it with Glasgow:

“I lived in Canada, so the cold didn’t really shock me, so actually the first time I flew over, it was actually snowing. So for me to see snow and be skiing didn’t really bother me, it was easier to adjust for me, really. It was better than Glasgow, should I say. At least you get seasons.” (Jack)

The difference in reactions to, and perceptions of, Swedish natural landscape and climate was seen to derive mostly from what the interviewees were used to before, and how much it differed from the landscape and climate in their countries of origin. Adevi and Grahn proposed that preferred landscapes was a cultural construction. The notion of familiar landscapes, and preferred landscapes is generally associated with the landscape of your childhood, or the one you are most used to. Thus, the conceptualisation of a natural environment as calming and positive can be neither generalised, nor universally applied. Jack described that the landscape was not too different for him, so he did not have to adjust much. While for Hassan, being able to find a similar feeling of the ‘countryside’, as he experienced growing up, was positive. The preferred landscape for Hassan is then the natural landscape as opposed to the urban.

“When I was in my country, we didn’t live in the city. We lived in an area that’s on the countryside. That’s why we liked being out in nature.” (Hassan)

In understanding perceptions and experiences of nature, the interviewees described and compared the landscapes in their countries of origin, with that of Sweden. Big differences in the landscape and climate were described by Ethan, who explained that the adjustment was one of his biggest personal struggles in moving to Sweden, as he was not used to it:

“oh extremely! So I lived in Port Hedland, which is like the definition of where the desert meets the sea, its 45-48 degrees in the summer with 100% humidity, and winters maybe get down to 25 during the day. The first time I came to Sweden […] it was 48 degrees for 6 days in a row back home, and we flew here and it was -4, so it was a huge change for me.” (Ethan)

Adevi and Grahn, “Preferences for Landscapes.”
Amir and Abdullah, talked about the difference in flora and how land is used differently. They come from the same country, and both described that there are more trees in Sweden, and more plants for agriculture and production in their country of origin. They also both touched on the accessibility of nature in their comparisons; describing decreased inclusive accessibility in their country of origin, and a prevalent accessibility and inclusivity in Sweden.

“There are areas around Damascus, but it’s not forest, it’s more like orchard trees, and the natural areas are diminishing, due to politics, so there are not many places. And they are not accessible to everyone, the rich and powerful, but not poorer, [working] class.” (Amir)

“And there is no forest in that area, only grain [farming]. There isn’t so many trees, and sometimes it is forbidden to grow trees there, so you could only grow grains, wheat, corn, cotton, lentils, etc. So there wasn’t as many trees and water and snow. […] I said that more than 70% of Sweden is forest, it means that it is near to all inhabitants, even those that live in the city. Here you can go only 5 minutes and then be out in nature.” (Abdullah)

Adnan liked being outdoors in nature before moving to Sweden; he lived near mountains and was often outdoors so it was nothing new for him. He described his first impression of the nature in Sweden as being really green, with a lot of trees, and vast. He added that:

“The difference is that here they take care of nature more, they use nature for many more different things. They make nature more available so people can come, they don’t do that in my or other countries. That was fascinating for me, that nature can be a place where we people can enjoy.” (Adnan)

Finally, the location where the different interviewees were played a role. The different perceptions of nature in Sweden, and the role that it plays in the social opportunities, varied from one of the biggest cities in Sweden, to medium and small-sized cities, to smaller towns surrounded by forest and limited transport infrastructure in and out of the town. This is further discussed in the analysis below, and is demonstrated in one response:
“Many newly arrived people are placed in the countryside where there is not much to do. So it is mostly about nature, if you don’t have a good relationship to nature, life becomes quite difficult for them [in the smaller towns]. You have to try being interested in nature, then it becomes easier.” [Amir]

Through the responses, the most common impression of nature in Sweden, after having moved and stayed here, was that it is experienced in three main ways. Nature in Sweden was perceived, and depicted: [1] as vast and pervasive, [2] as protected and valued, [3] as accessible and inclusive. These perceptions they elaborated on under the theme ‘Nature in culture and society’. In summary, despite the initial impression of the landscape and climate in Sweden as dark and cold, their subsequent experience of it, in comparison with what they were used to, is that it may be unfamiliar, but not necessarily restrictive or exclusive. A certain freedom is experienced, and associated with nature, portrayed through their uses of nature for recreation – where nature is seen to hold many opportunities for activities and interactions, particularly in smaller towns - as well as the benefits of mental well-being and peace and quiet they experienced.

7.2. Nature in Culture and Society

The perception of the interviewees that nature in Sweden is particularly more prevalent, protected and accessible than compared to in other countries that they’ve experienced, points to the question whether they thought that nature was important to Swedish society in general. Amir gives the example of many of his native-born Swedish colleagues and their activities and habits in relation to nature. He is staying in a relatively small town where the presence of nature in the society is much more evident than in the bigger cities for example.

“I think a big part of their lives is about nature in a way: having summer cabins, going to Götland, cycling around Öland, hiking various ‘leder’ [ex. Kungsleden], traveling north to Lappland, or Åre to ski.” (Amir)

He goes on to explain that in the countryside it is mostly about nature, and that there’s a bigger chance of meeting people there, because that is where most people spend a lot of their time. He extends the significance of nature’s role in the culture towards some of the creative and
narrative traditions of a society; in the mythology and folklore. This points to the perception of nature as generally being valued by the society:

“It’s also about mythology, it is very much related to the forest. Different figures, different stories set in the forest, there’s folklore about trolls [...]” (Amir)

Hassan, who stays in a bigger town in Sweden compared to Amir, also talks about nature as being more directly present in the urbanscapes, and that the way in which nature is protected and commonly respected points to a cultural appreciation of nature:

“Nature is one part of Sweden, it is one part of their culture. And they protect the forest as an important matter. It means that they think of everything, they don’t just think about people, they think about those small ants.” [...] “Sweden is totally green. You don’t find the forest between cities, you find the cities between the forest.” (Hassan)

Jack and Ethan, who have not stayed in Sweden for very long and arrived in January during the darker and colder part of the year, provided their impressions of the importance of nature in Swedish people’s routines, that seemed to change with the seasons. Both talked about nature being important for people as a place to get out and get sunshine (an important source of vitamin D) in summer, in a seemingly societal response to relatively short daylight hours during the winter. Jack provided an example of this mentality, by comparing it to other places that he has lived outside of Sweden:

“Summer time is out and about, you know, you’re in the forest, you’re camping at night, you’ve got all the facilities and that’s the thing, everything is provided, so people utilize it. It’s the mentality, a way of thinking. Compared to London people don’t go camping out in the forest. If you camp in the forest you’re either ‘an illegal’ or you’re not meant to be there, it’s just not the normal. Here it’s the normal.” (Jack)

“Well I’ve spoken to a fair few [Swedish] friends, from the football club, and they say it’s dark for so long, whenever there’s sun they want to eat out, they want to be out somewhere where they can be in the sun. They want to go out, go hiking, and do all the stuff you can’t do for 6 months of the year.” (Ethan)
However, the danger of linking a cultural appreciation of nature with the Swedish identity is that it produces a gross generalisation of what ‘Swedish’ identity is. This was highlighted in Adnan’s response, where instead of culture and identity, he talks about knowledge and interest in subjects of nature, which vary from person to person:

“It’s difficult to say if nature is a part of Swedish culture and identity. With youth it’s tough to see, but I do see it with older people” […] “and many adults know the flora, they know which trees are which; it’s fascinating that people actually do know what a flower is called. People can’t name many flowers in my home country. I noticed it [naming of plants] stays in their bodies no matter how interested in it they are.” (Adnan)

The question arises of whether a ‘typically Swedish’ love of nature, that can be contrasted to other’s countries’ or groups’ love of nature, actually exists. Adnan’s experience of a cultural appreciation of nature reflects that it is more difficult to claim today, than it was perhaps a century ago. However some features of what’s called the Linnaeus tradition remain; for example a common thing is to name plants, and that to know something about nature is widely associated by being able to name some trees or flowers, for example106. This knowledge and naming, is perceived by many of the interviewees as a love of nature, and in comparison to their countries of origin where it is not as prevalent as in Sweden, is then interpreted as part of the Swedish self-image or identity.

Nature was then seen as one entry point into Swedish culture and society, exactly because of the opportunities for new knowledge and language practice that it provides. Immigrants can learn Swedish, and Swedish speakers can learn languages from other countries. Abdullah described one of the aspects of his work as a nature-guide, guiding in different languages:

“We have a project, and there we try to gather Swedish people with new-comers and start to teach each other, what is this flora or fauna called in Arabic for example. Here the attempt is also to try to teach Swedish people in other languages, and start to open discussion between Swedish and new-comers […] then they start to talk about various habits that are found in Sweden, and in the home country.” (Abdullah)

The importance of learning the language of the host country is widely recognised in contributing to adaptation and integration. Language skills are often portrayed as a way to gauge integration levels. Abbas talked about encountering Swedish people while outdoors, and the need to speak Swedish if you wanted to strike up a conversation with them:

“If you can’t speak Swedish, you are forced to learn Swedish. If you know some Swedish people, you can’t just say to them ‘I can’t speak Swedish’, you have to learn. Try to speak Swedish [when you come across people], in nature you can get to know new people. (Abbas)

Learning Swedish was expressed by all interviewees as one of the most practical and urgent ways in which to settle in and become a part of the society in Sweden. Zafar presented learning the language as one of the ways in which he is settling down into a new place. Ethan elaborated that the attitude that people have towards him learning Swedish, and the encouraging help that he gets, plays a role in his motivation to keep trying even if he makes mistakes:

“It’s a new step, new country, new way of living, even language, but trying to learn.” (Zafar)

“They help with my Swedish, I try and talk with them but it’s still very basic at the moment. But they have no problems with me testing out phrases, they’ll correct me and they’re not an arsehole about it. They don’t berate me for speaking like a kid. Which is really, really good.” (Ethan)

Language becomes a bridge to interactions and social relations, as well as access to knowledge of culturally relevant information and norms of behaviour. The role of information exchange, between immigrants and native-born Swedes, is discussed below and introduced with Abdullah’s explanation of why offering nature guiding in many languages is important:

“They feel more at ease and calm if it is in their language, so they become so pleased [with the nature guiding], even in a little ‘easy Swedish’ to learn some Swedish in nature as well. For example, where can you make a fire; first you go to the nature reserve and read on the information board, because sometimes these boards, and [an awareness of] ‘allemansrätten’ open or restrict what you can do. You can make fires in
nature, but in this reserve it is forbidden.” [...] “Maybe it’s not easy with the language, but now we’re trying to write in different languages on the boards” (Abdullah)

Abdullah’s mention of knowing about ‘Allemansrätten’ and what it entails in practice, is a relevant example of the ways in which language and information go hand-in-hand to inform and communicate between immigrants and native-born Swedes. Through information exchange, nature emerges as a space to share traditions and learn about different cultural practices. The role of information and socialising, accessing and overcoming various obstacles, is highlighted by all of the interviewees.

“They don’t know what ‘reserve’ means, and is it free or cost money, or what or why.” (Abdullah)

“To access more information, mostly is about sharing announcements and information in an attractive way. For example when it starts to rain a bit, the majority of people want to stay home, it’s not nice to go out in the rain or snow. But when they have the right clothes, then they like it. There’s the expression: “There’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing.” [...] “I appreciate that the organisation [for nature conservation] came to the SFI class, and explained where you can get the proper clothing for a good price. Because not everyone gets that advice.” (Amir)

There emerges a spectrum in what ‘information exchange’ means: from sharing the names of plants of animals in Swedish and foreign languages, to an awareness of ‘Allemansrätten’ and its implications and implementation, to getting advice on where to go to buy good outdoor gear for a cheaper price. All interviewees agreed that having knowledge of the regulations that are applicable to different areas, as well as information or advice about maximising one’s possibilities in nature, was important. Further, when asked about any hindrances or obstacles that they have experienced regarding NBI projects, the resounding response was that obstacles to participating in nature-based activities was either a lack of information, or was due to a lack of information:

“Some paths are marked by red on trees, but when they see it they think ‘ah red! It is dangerous, it is forbidden to go in!’.” (Hassan)
“The hindrance is not having the information; not knowing that there are no dangerous animals, not having the information about which mushrooms to pick and which are poisonous or endangered.” (Adnan)

‘Allemansrätten’ was seen as an example of information that is culturally relevant. This is because it is not well-known by many immigrants, since very few other countries have similar laws; thereby it also became an important aspect of the information exchange that was found to take place in NBI projects. When asked about whether their awareness of ‘Allemansrätten’ helped them understand something about Sweden or nature in Sweden, their responses differed. For Zafar, the idea of ‘Allemansrätten’ and having more general knowledge is only useful insomuch as the knowledge is unique to Sweden. He described himself before as a “city boy” and thus information about regulations and rights in the cities and urbanscapes may have been of more interest to him:

“It doesn’t really help, but its good to know stuff, general stuff, and it is social. Especially because I don’t have it [allemansrätten] in my country.” (Zafar)

For Adnan and Abdullah, who are both working in the field of nature conservation, the idea of ‘Allemansrätten’ awareness was more pronounced:

“It’s very important to understand allemansrätten. We were not following it so much before, 4 or 5 years ago, so with allemansrätten its extremely important to inform people. […] We have ‘utomhuspedagogik’ to learn different topics, wood to make a fire, fire to cook food, and so on. Nature gives different opportunities, for example to meet new people, to learn new things, nature has no end.” (Adnan)

“[explain] For them what is allemansrätten, what they can do and what they can’t do, and it is in many languages […] No one is higher or more knowledgeable.” (Abdullah)

Hassan and Abbas highlight that having information, such as about ‘Allemansrätten’, emerges as one of the entry points into a society. Hassan explained the knowledge as another way to understand why the society functions in the way that it does; it gives one an idea of what is important to the society. Abbas explains that he moved to Sweden with no knowledge about
the place and society he was moving to, but that going out, and trying to inform one’s self plays a major role, as well as the host society being informed about the immigrants:

About information of the society as important key to accessing/entering it:

“What you can do and what you can’t do in the forest, so [there are] some rules, then you get to understand that people here in Sweden think about everything.” (Hassan)

“When I came to Sweden, I didn’t have anything, I didn’t know anything, I didn’t know how you can get a job, how you can come in to Sweden’s society. But I am someone that tried to get into the society, but there are many that really mean well for the society, but they don’t know what they can do, or how they can meet new people in the society. […] Also important, is that Swedish people must know new-comers aren’t dangerous.” (Abbas)

In summary, the interviewees perceived nature as being relatively important in Swedish culture and society, and many linked it to a sense of identity as one aspect of the Swedish self-image. Further, the opportunities to learn and practice Swedish in a different setting, and around different topics, proved beneficial in providing more information exchange. These information exchanges encouraged knowledge and awareness of rules and regulations and behavioural norms and expectations, and allowed the interviewees to understand certain aspects of the culture and society. This was commonly experienced as one of the potential entry points to the society.

7.3. Interactions and Social Networks

The novel knowledge gained from information exchanges and interactions are seen to be due to either once-off encounters or new acquaintances that were established around nature-based activities. This opens the discussion around the social interactions aspect of NBI projects, and as a few of the interviewees mentioned, was either one of the reasons that they first started going out into nature, or it was one of the reasons that they continued to do so. Abbas decided to join the recreational activities because it was focused around socialising outdoors, while Amir was with new friends who decided to make a trip, and was introduced to the possible outdoor activities through them:

“I am a social person, and thought about what to do to meet people.” (Abbas)
“Those friends and that moment was a first step to dare going out into nature.” (Amir)

Amir explained how he was first introduced to the activities and areas in nature around the smaller town where he was staying in Sweden. It was about two or three months after he moved there, that he went along with new friends. He describes that because of those friends, he discovered nature around the town, and that they showed him the lakes and “beautiful places” in the surrounding environment. He elaborated that he thought this was an important aspect for him and that it is good in the beginning to go with other people, to be able to learn about the surroundings and activities you can do.

Further, interviewees talked about specific people that they met and the ties that they made with them; often with the hosts of the activities, or the people who worked to organise the projects. Svea organised the recreational NBI activities that Hassan and Abbas took part in:

When you are alone, and go into the forest, you can’t meet someone to become friends; but when you go with [the NBI activity group] or such things like Svea has, in the beginning it can be a little difficult to know each other, but the second time and further on it can become better and better. You need friends and acquaintances for company, and it is a good start for those that come new in Sweden.” (Hassan)

“Didn’t know anyone when he moved here, but now I know many friends. I was alone before. […] It has changed a lot. I started two years ago with many youth, now I feel I get help from some Swedish people, for example Svea.” (Abbas)

I observed that there was often a person that played an important introductory role, and who also in some ways facilitated the process of ‘gearing up’ to go out into nature alone, or without them. This ‘gearing-up’ could be sharing information, or sharing resources to equip the interviewees in their own activities. Most of the interviewees talked about one person that played this ‘door-opener’ role, who was Swedish, and still features in their experience, if not as strongly as initially.

“I was in school, and they had activities out in nature, and to learn something about nature, for example when Spring started. We got to know Svea and we became friends. […] We are friends that’s why. When I started being friends with Svea, I started going
out in nature, and started getting to know how nature is in Sweden. Me and Svea - you can say that Svea is my best friend because, she is a part of nature, you could say that.” (Hassan)

“When I met Svea, [she] meant everything for me, [taught me] about all nature in Sweden and everything. I met many Swedish and now I know many Swedish people from the nature” (Abbas)

Karin worked for the organisation that facilitated the nature guiding courses. This is how Amir, Adnan and Abdullah got to know her:

“I have loaned a lot of clothing in the beginning, and still sometimes. Karin always has extra clothes with her.” (Amir)

“[about Karin] even if I am older than her, about 4 years, but we count her as ’mamma’ in this work.” (Abdullah)

These types of interactions could be considered as bridging ties, according to Putnam’s conceptualisation. Following Granovetter’s theory on the strength of weak ties, these ‘bridging’ ties are in fact beneficial for those that are new-comers to the society. It states that the new acquaintances outside of their usual networks constitute weak ties. For the interviewees, these weak ties are with Karin and Svea. The weak ties provide novel information and exposure to new and different networks. Svea and Karin performed these roles by informing about activities and different organisations, about accessible places in nature, about cultural traditions and behaviour (such as ‘Allemansrätt) and by providing practical help and assistance where they could. This new information and broadened networks , that they weak ties introduce, is useful for adapting and developing yourself in a new environment. In this way, the extra information and shared resources that Karin and Svea provided, resulted in ‘bridging’, as interviewees found these new networks and knowledge helpful to them in their interest in nature-based activities. The bridging that can occur through networks such as with Karin and Svea, is not restricted to the field of nature and outdoor activities. Ethan also found

108 Granovetter, *Strength of Weak Ties*
that weak ties, with new Swedish friends from his football club as recreation, functioned as ‘bridging’ and helped him enter into another aspect of the Swedish society, as a homeowner:

“We actually had one of the guys, whose a Swedish guy, he helped and came with us when we bought our apartment, and he helped to translate the documents, because it’s a law in Sweden that all documents and all speaking during those meetings have to be done in Swedish. So he came and actually took time off work, to help us, to interpret. And he didn’t want anything from it, he was just like: ‘Nah, Im just glad to help’.” (Ethan)

On the other-hand most of the interviewees also experienced that their other networks had been impacted in one way or another, by their participation in the NBI activities, whether directly or indirectly. The interviewees were asked how they think their relationships have changed since taking part in the activities, and their reflections on the question were all different.

Abbas thought of his relationships as the new networks that he built since moving to Sweden:

“[I] didn’t know anyone when I moved here, but now I have many friends. I was alone; it has changed a lot.” (Abbas)

Adnan experienced that his pre-existing relationships and networks had developed and been enriched:

“Yes, that’s interesting! Before my parents spoke to me about computers, now they speak to me about birds. The topics I talk to people about has changed. It’s so fun that I can talk about something else.” (Adnan)

One interviewee also talked about his pre-existing networks as having evolved by being able to bring in new information to the relationships. Another strength of weak ties, is that the novel information and networks gained from the bridging, is often relayed back into the strong, bonding ties. These are the relationships that are close, often from group membership and affiliations, and are thus reinforced. For Adnan, he was able to take his new knowledge and

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experience and share it with close family and friends. This enriching of the relationships allowed further bonding to occur.

Amir and Abdullah described changes in their thinking and how they saw the relationships and society around them:

“Now I understand why Swedish people love nature, why they like to go on short, quiet walks in the forest, that sometimes they don’t want to talk when they go out, some activities you just want to go out and enjoy the quiet. So now I understand that. You understand the mentality, through how they use nature, you understand their mythology, how nature was important for them historically, before they were very dependent on the forest. People were more closely tied to their small communities and neighbours, their relations were more closely tied to the forest. My relationships have changed actually, so I became closer to people when I became closer to nature.” (Amir)

“Yes, I think. Then I saw why these Swedish people are so kind, and helpful, and they want to help people. I discovered it is nature that is working, the green gives people psychological well-being, to be peaceful and calm. [...] so I discovered nature has an effect on people. I discovered why the most, I don’t say all, Swedish people are kind.” (Abdullah)

Abbas articulated that he himself has changed, and that he feels he has grown and developed as a person. He is taking on NBI projects of his own, including his own networks and extending out to others:

“In nature you can change so much.” [...] “I started with education, [an outdoor foundation], the education is about how you handle safety for children especially, and how you organise activities for children in nature. I started talking with [a culture foundation], myself, along with other Swedish people, we [plan to] get help from the Kommunen and do some activities for children.” (Abbas)

Adnan and Amir reflect on how they identify with the people around them, and whether they feel themselves more included in the people around them. Adnan talked about growing up in Europe and being able to share and recognize much of the ways of thinking that he encountered.
here in Sweden. Amir, described it as an evolving process, that he developed more of an affiliation to people here:

“...so I became closer to people when I became closer to nature.” (Amir)

The experience of feeling closer to people, or a part of the community, was not easily articulated by most interviewees. Instead they focused on the possibilities of interaction that existed. The opportunities to meet new people and engage with them was experienced as valuable in participating in the society and offered as an answer instead of talking about feelings of belonging directly:

“That you have the possibility to meet, there’s many different activities so you have the possibility. The possibility, that’s what is important.” (Adnan)

“...do you know when you are with many people and they ask questions or tell something, of the culture, or their activities, then you can understand how Sweden’s culture functions.” (Hassan)

However, these opportunities for interaction could take place outside of the natural environment, and have nothing to do with nature-based activities. Still, I interpret that nature plays its own unique role for the different interviewees. The findings do not claim that nature leads to social networking and interactions; rather that it is one of the contexts in which, and ways in which, it can occur.

“They sit in public areas and they are part of the area, not strangers. That is what I think is so important in the first step to integrate, to gather with people, with groups, in nature, and discuss. [...] But it’s also important to build bridges between the Swedish [native] and new-comers. Because its better, so that the Swedish people know what are the traditions these people have. [...] and they meet different Swedish people [in nature, on the walk] and greet them, ‘hej, hej’ and start to discuss. It is a safe space, nature.” (Abdullah)
“It’s amazing to meet new people, from all over the world, and Swedish people are amazing. You learn a lot, especially about the country, [it is] their country, so you need to learn from the local people.” (Zafar)

“If you have shared interested, then it becomes easier to meet new people, and easier to have something to talk about, about the trees and plants and weather. So yes, it’s a good place to meet people” (Amir)

The analysis started with a discussion of what the interviewees liked to do in nature, and why they spent time in nature and participated in NBI activities. Many stated that they like the peace and quiet of being outdoors alone. This solitude may have no direct social interaction or implication, however, through a process of self-reflection, and nature as a site to increase psychological well-being, immigrants are able to become aware of their integration and participation in the society in a different way. Integration as a process of adapting, and both conserving and giving up the old, occurs through this self-reflection. Nature can then also be seen as providing a space, an environment and materials, with which to learn new things, to be alone or to socialise and build networks, and through this to learn things about yourself, and about how you act and react in the new society.

8. Final Discussion

To summarise, the findings were that despite the often initial impression of the landscape as dark, cold or frightening, instead the experience of the natural landscape in Sweden is that it is vast and pervasive, protected and valued, and accessible and inclusive. The interviewees experienced that nature provided opportunities for both recreation and interaction; and the benefits they reported were of increased well-being through calming effects of spending time outdoors. Further, the interviewees perceived that nature was relatively important in Swedish society, and linked to identity through some of the traditions, myths and cultural values. NBI projects and activities also provided one more space and way in which to learn the language, and to learn a new vocabulary; as well as facilitating information exchange such as about ‘Allemansrätten’. This new knowledge was perceived as helping to understand certain aspects of the culture and society, and thus experienced as one of the entry points into the society.

8.1. **Structural and cultural integration**

The descriptions and experiences of the NBI activities and projects can be understood as contributing to the process of integration using the theoretical framework of the four forms of integration. The interviewees perceived nature as being relatively important in Swedish culture and society, and linked it to a sense of identity as one aspect of the Swedish self-image. Further, the opportunities to learn and practice Swedish in a different setting, and around different topics, proved beneficial and practical in terms of information exchanges. These information exchanges, encouraged knowledge and awareness of rules and regulations and behavioural norms and expectations, and allowed the interviewees to understand certain aspects of the culture and society. This was commonly experienced as one of the potential entry points to the society. The structural integration aspect refers to the access that immigrants have to public institutions and societal resources, while the cultural integration aspect is about the knowledge and competencies gained in the common practices and general rules of behaviour.\(^{111}\)

This occurred through language learning, information exchange and knowledge surrounding habits and regulations in nature in Sweden, which contributed to the structural and cultural forms of the integration process. Knowledge of language and of ‘Allemansrätten’ for example, contributed to overcoming many obstacles to structural integration; interviewees experienced increased accessibility to areas, services, recreational activities and sites, as they learned that nature is free of costs for example, or that with the right clothing you can hike in colder temperatures. Cultural integration was also increased in this way, as interviewees expressed that they could better understand aspects of the culture and way of thinking, as well as adapt their behaviour accordingly; for example not leaving gates open when they cross a gated field.

8.2. **Interactive integration**

Furthermore, the possibility to meet new people, and the relationships built through interactions with different networks, appeared to function as bridges.\(^{113}\) These ‘bridging’ ties and networks demonstrated the strength and value of weak ties. This occurred through the interviewees descriptions of ‘door-opener’ people, such as Svea and Karin, who provided them with information and helped them feel more equipped to go out into nature for their own recreation.

\(^{111}\) Wolfgang Bosswick and Friedrich Heckmann, *Social Integration of Immigrants.*

and interests. The interactions that the interviewees had with these people, introduced them to more networks and novel information, thereby functioning as ‘bridging’ ties. The value of these relationships was found in the exposure to information and the social networking, and points to Granovetter’s Strength of Weak Ties, which states that weak, ‘bridging’ ties, are beneficial in that they provide new information and other networks. The weak ties, in bridging the interviewees to new networks and information, are strong as they consequently contribute to the socialisation aspects of being included and participating in the networks of the society.

Additionally, close and pre-existing relationships were enriched and evolved, as novel information and experiences was spread over networks of close family and friends. These stronger relationships can be seen to be bonded through this. The bonding of strong ties occurred where pre-existing close relationships are further developed and reinforced, as seen with Adnan being able to talk to his family about new topics such as nature and the environment. The interactions and relationships developed through the interviewees’ participation in NBI activities included both bridging and bonding types of ties, as described by Putnam, as well as depicted the strength of the weaker ties, as theorised by Granovetter. Both of these aspects of social networks and interactions contributed to the interviewees’ interactive integration, as the interactive integration refers to the networks, relationships, friendships and other socialisation aspects.

8.3. Identificational integration

So far, the findings have pointed to structural, cultural and interactive aspects of integration, however the fourth aspect according to the theory, identificational integration, is much more difficult to evaluate or measure. The quote by Adnan, about feeling that he became a part of the community, is the closest example that this study would get to identificational integration into the society. However, within the research I cannot realistically, and do not, claim that this identificational integration is due to, or largely influenced by the nature-based activities. I do observe though, that the identificational aspect - Adnan saying that he experiences becoming a part of the community - is impacted by the other aspects and processes discussed in this paper, such as psychological well-being, information exchange, new language skills, exposure to

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114 Granovetter, Strength of Weak Ties.
116 Wolfgang Bosswick and Friedrich Heckmann, Social Integration of Immigrants.
different interactions and ties contributing to varied social networks. These make up an increased structural, cultural and interactive integration, and was added to by his involvement in the NBI field.

Finally, nature is not interpreted as the direct cause of any of the aspects of integration; however, through different experiences, nature and the activities and interactions related to it, have been one way in which three of the four forms of integration could occur. The only thing nature was experienced to directly contribute was a context. A context in which to improve mental health and well-being (which is valuable in and of itself) as well as the context of the natural environment unique to Sweden. This was perceived as meaningful because nature was seen to be generally valued in Swedish culture and society. Theoretically, new social networks and bridging, ‘weak’ ties can contribute to social integration; however I do not make a causal link between the context of nature, and increased social networks and forms of integration.

This study aimed to consider their experiences in terms of nature, networks and social integration, and now returns to the research questions. The first question was about the effect of the immigrants’ participation in NBI activities on their practices in nature, the second question asked which types of social interactions and networks occurred through the NBI activities, and the third question enquired whether these interactions and networks contributed to their social integration in Sweden.

The first question is answered in the structural and cultural integration that occurred through experiences of increased psychological well-being, and perceptions of nature is Sweden as largely inclusive and accessible; the second question is addressed in the bridging of weak ties that occurred through expanded networks, practicing language skills, and information exchanging; the third question is more difficult to answer, however the experiences of interactive integration can be seen to contribute to social integration, even if there is insufficient evidence to say that identificational integration exist was increased.

9. Conclusion
In conclusion, nature and nature-based activities in Sweden were experienced by the interviewees as increasing psychological well-being and providing a space to spend time alone, away from other people, or to go to socialise in a different way. Initial perceptions of the natural
landscapes and climate in Sweden were of cold, dark, unfamiliar environments and evoked some fear and uncertainty. Due to general preferences for landscapes, people are commonly more likely to prefer the landscapes that they were surrounded with in their childhoods, and are most used to. Despite this, the recurrent perception of nature in Sweden was that it is vast and pervasive, protected and valued, and accessible and inclusive when compared to in other countries that they experienced.

Interviewees perceived nature as relatively important in Swedish society, and seemed to link to a self-image and a certain mentality. This was explained by their observations of common habits and traditions, of a comparatively high level of ‘ecological literacy’, as well as through societal norms of protecting and sharing natural landscapes through regulations such as ‘Allemansrätten’. The participation in NBI activities were seen to provide opportunities to learn and practice a new vocabulary and the Swedish language, as well as facilitating information exchange and gaining new knowledge. The interviewees perceived this as contributing to understanding certain aspects of the culture and society, and thereby being one of the entry points. In this way their structural and cultural forms of integration was bolstered. The opportunity to meet new people, and the weak social ties and interactions that led to bridging and expanding networks, was experienced as helpful in accessing new information and networks. This appeared to contribute to interactive integration. However no clear link was found between participation in NBI activities and expanded networks, and a feeling of belonging or part of the greater society, as described in identificational integration.

Finally, this study considered the interviewees’ experiences of nature in Sweden, and nature-based activities through their depictions of; their practices and habits in nature, perceptions of the natural landscape and climate in Sweden, perceptions of the role of nature in Swedish society and different traditions. The study also looked at the different interactions and social networks that the interviewees’ talked about in relation to their participation in NBI activities and moving to Sweden. Finally, a reflection on the different ways and forms in which social integration can occur, specifically through NBI projects, was briefly discussed by the interviewees. The study provides a discussion on the different experiences and perceptions of immigrants from different origins, and having resided in Sweden for different lengths of time, regarding some of the different nature-based integration projects currently underway in Sweden.

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10. Future research: a reflection on gender

All of the interviewees being male must be taken into consideration, as their responses might have differed from those of females. As mentioned before, I managed to conduct one interview with a female, but due to how long she has been residing in Sweden, I was ultimately unable to include her interview material. At the start of my research I did not set out to interview only males, however the interviewees that contributed to this study are all males. Of the 9 interviews I conducted within the sample group, only 1 was with a female. I decided not to include her interview material in the analysis as she had been living in Sweden for longer than 5 years, and therefore fell outside of the delimitation. When I participated in the SFI excursions, I approached females to enquire about interviews as well as males, and the females reacted positively about being interviewed, but ultimately said that they did not have enough time because they had to go home and look after their children.

Through researching and reading through various literature on NBI, I discovered that the role of gender in immigrants’ participation in NBI is insufficiently studied. The interview I conducted with the female could be taken as a point of departure in a follow-up study focusing on the role of immigrant’s gender in NBI.

However, women and children were mentioned more than once in the interviews with males, and deserves its own discussion. Amir raised the point of there being a need to create more opportunities to socialise for the women and children, and the interviewee tries to make the link with nature, because it is free and contains many possibilities for activities that would function also as stimulation for both mother & child.

“[…] the information doesn’t always get to everyone, especially women. And women have free time because they have small children.” (Amir)

Adnan and Abdullah, working as nature guides in different languages, offer free excursions and activities aimed at women and children (but open to anyone to join) that are ‘pram-friendly’. I observed, through discussion and participation in NBI activities, that opportunities for women and children are relatively under-utilised within NBI projects. I was unable to discuss gender in this study, as the focus was rather on social networks, and I did not want to
insufficiently or ineffectively introduce the idea. This idea can pave the way for future research on the topic.
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