A Phenomenological Study on the pre-migration traumatic experiences of international students in their home countries, their decision to study abroad and their coping mechanisms post-migration.

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ABSTRACT

International Student Migration is regarded in the migration literature as a route many students use to further their education abroad. Likewise, the study of international students’ experiences are often concentrated on their experiences abroad and how they adjust or cope with the cultural differences in the host countries. However, there are international students who have pre-migration traumatic experiences in their home communities which impact upon their decision to migrate and how they cope abroad. As such the aim of this paper is to shed light on this phenomenon by doing an in-depth analysis of international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences and highlighting how having these experiences impacted on their decision to study abroad. This paper also explores the different coping strategies they use to cope with their contemporary daily lives post-migration. The study revealed that International students have various traumatic experiences in their home countries; pre-migration traumatic experiences such as physical violence, discrimination, sexual violence were highlighted as factors that influence the migration decisions of international students. Additionally, pre-migration traumatic experiences affected the coping process of international students post-migration who go through a coping process both during and after the traumatic events. Different- coping strategies were used by international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences to cope with their contemporary daily lives post-migration such as social support, avoidance and attitude change.

KEYWORDS: pre-migration, traumatic experiences, phenomenology, post-migration, coping, international student, study abroad
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Introduction

International student migration has become one of the largest migration channels next to labor migration, family reunification and migration on humanitarian grounds (EMN Sweden, 2012). Consequently, in the past decade, there have been a steady rise in scholarly research geared towards understanding the migration flows and processes of international student migrants (Beine, et al. 2014; Bassey 2012; Findlay, 2010; Choudaha and de Wit 2014; Perkins and Neumayer 2014; Rodriguez Gonzáles, et al. 2011 and van Mol and Timmerman 2014). However, there still remains a large gap in international student migration literature concerning the phenomenology of pre-migration traumatic experiences of international students in their home countries and its impact on their migration decisions as well as their coping strategies post-migration.

Unequivocally, this topic in migration studies is often studied in relation to refugee populations who are forced outside of their country of origin by traumatic experiences of conflict, violence and persecution (UNHCR, 2016). Additionally, statistical research often point to the high frequency of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) refugees often experience post-migration (Schweitzer et. al., 2011; Bhui et. al., 2003; Kinzie, 1988). According to David et. al (2008) traumatic experiences not only affects an individuals’ psychological well-being but also their overall well-being. A few Studies also show that the effects of traumatic experiences often have the ability to impair the individual and change the way they interact (Briere & Scott, 2006; Carlson & Rosser-Hogan, 1993; Porter & Haslam, 2005). Consequently, previous research have established that being subjected to or witnessing traumatic events is a common experience among involuntary migrants. However, even though international student migrants are classified as ‘voluntary migrants’ their experiences in their home countries are not limited to voluntary circumstances (Kirkegaard et al., 2016).

As a result, this paper explores this phenomenon in relation to international student migrants at Malmö University who have pre-migration traumatic experiences in their home countries. Currently, research on this subject is non-existent within the literature as international students are not often studied as vulnerable subjects with traumatic experiences. As such there is very little knowledge or information available about the pre-migration traumatic experiences of international students, its effects on their decision to study abroad and their coping strategies post migration.
Purpose of Study
The focus of this study is to shed light on the phenomena of international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences and to provide in-depth information on the migration decisions and post-migration coping strategies of international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences.

Research Questions
The following questions were formed to help guide the researcher in this study; with focus on international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences:

1. What kind of traumatic situations have they experienced from their country of origin or from other places before entering Sweden and enrolling at Malmö University?
2. Have pre-migration traumatic experiences had an impact on their decisions to study abroad and if so; what kind of considerations have been made for taking the decision to study outside of their home country?
3. With their pre-migration traumatic experiences in mind; how do they cope with their contemporary life as international students at Malmö University?

Delimitations
The study is delimited by the fact that while there are other categories of migrants with pre-migration traumatic experiences; this study only focuses on the experiences of international students who are studying ‘degree programmes’ at the GPS Department, Malmo University. This is to emphasize that at the end of their studies they would be awarded a degree. This study is further delimited by this as it does not take into account other categories of international students such as exchange students or study abroad students. Based on this, this study recognizes that no generalizations can possibly be made based on the findings. This study is further delimited by that fact that the interest of the study resides solely with experiences of the informants with pre-migration traumatic experiences in this study and their understandings of the impact of these experiences on their decision to study abroad and their coping strategies post migration. The primary preoccupation of this thesis is to share the lived experiences and the stories of the study’s informants as such generalizations will be delimited to other students.
with similar experiences or who can relate to the meanings and themes depicted from their stories.

**Definition of Terms**

For this research, a clear understanding of exactly what stance or viewpoint the researcher is using is necessary, as such, before we proceed with the research certain keywords must be identified:

- For the purpose of this study, an international student is a student who migrates for the purposes of study or to pursue higher education (UNESCO, 2018).

- Traumatic experiences refers to stressful life situations which are very shocking and upsetting that may cause psychological damage, threat or injury to the individual or their loved ones who has experienced it (Healthline, 2018). These traumatic experiences may include but are not limited to:
  - Natural disasters (Climate-induced disasters)
  - The sudden or violent death of a loved one
  - Witnessing violence
  - Financial difficulties (Financial Crisis)
  - Physical or sexual assault
  - Physical, emotional or sexual violence
  - Conflict or war-zone experience
  - Terrorist incident
  - Political discrimination

- Decision to study abroad - This refers to the motivating factors for migrating for the purposes of studying.

- Post-Migration - This refers to occurrences after migration (www.dictionary.com, 2018).
Pre-Migration - This is used in reference to the human geography definition which means events that occurred before migration (www.dictionary.com, 2018).

Coping Strategies - This refers to the behavioral and psychological measures individuals use to overcome, reduce, or mitigate stressful events. In this thesis we will explore the problem solving and emotion-focused coping strategies used to regulate or alleviate stressful circumstances or events (The Regents of the University of California, 2008).

Literature Review

The literature that addresses the pre-migration traumatic experiences of international students in their home country, its effects on their decision to study abroad and their coping strategies post-migration is next to non-existent in international migration studies. Therefore, a variety of literature on pre-migration traumatic experiences in relation to forced migrants and the coping strategies of forced migrants in the host country is explored to establish a framework for this study. The literature related to international student migrants’ migration decisions, experiences and coping strategies is also discussed in order to develop a general idea about the discourse on international student migrants in migration studies. The ultimate aim of this review is to highlight the gaps in the literature and to highlight the contribution of this thesis to the already existing discourse.

International students’ migration decisions

There is an excessive literature on student migration flows, which is often filled with explanations based on the perspectives of neoclassical economic theories. These theories propose that individuals will only choose to migrate if the benefits of them migrating significantly outweighs the cost (Borjas, 1990; Massey, 2005). However, these simplistic cost-benefit theoretical models cannot and does not effectively explain the migration decisions of international students. Consequently, in recent years new theories have presented challenges to these neoclassical perspectives, but even with these new contributions the motivation for international student migration remains to be a relatively under-theorized area of research.

Pundits have hypothesized that migration decisions are often followed by the consideration of an option to stay somewhere and in making that decision economic factors are primary, social networks secondary and insider advantage (inherited amenities & public safety conditions) are considered as tertiary factors. Borozan and Bojanic (2016) postulated that there
were three categories of theories which attempted to explain the migration decisions of university students: firstly, the neoclassical approach which is primarily based on economic factors; secondly, there are other theories that focused on migrants who are primarily a user of internal amenities and public goods offered by a certain location. The paper argued that people are more like to move to locations that have the amenities and public goods that are not available in their home countries. Thirdly, there was a third stream of theories that focused on migrants as the producer of his own household goods and services. Thus, a location that can enable the production of the best combination of household goods and services would be the most attractive destination for a student migrant. Coherently, all three of these factors were proposed to play an important role in migrants’ strategic decision to stay or to emigrate (Borozan et al., 2016). New theories have proposed the impact of class reproduction, family influence, social networks, and attainment of social and cultural capital, migration opportunities, geographical proximity, colonial ties, and desire to learn new languages, climate and common language, on the migration decisions of international students. Moreover, other theories have proposed that push factors influencing student mobility are linked to the fact that students cannot access equivalent higher education opportunities in their home countries as such they strategically engage in a conscious pursuit of advantage (Beine, et al. 2014; Bassey 2012; Findlay, 2010; Choudaha and de Wit 2014; Perkins and Neumayer 2014; Rodriguez Gonzáles, et al. 2011 and van Mol and Timmerman 2014). Conversely, it is important to distinguish student migrants from other categories of skilled migrants as there is a certain advantage that comes with being a student migrant. As such in the literature international student migrants are regarded as being a part of the ‘desired migrant elite’; which are distinguished by the fact that education is not only a reason for travel, but it is a necessary precondition for them travelling (King and Raghuram, 2013; Murphy-Lejeune, E., 2002; Raghuram, 2013). However, this does not negate the fact that student migrants are also involved in labor, family migration and often fall into ‘unwanted’ categories such as refugees.

Overview of Research in the Field

International student migrant experiences and Coping Strategies
Studies on the experiences and wellbeing of international students are limited to their experiences abroad and the challenges that they face such as cultural adjustment in the host
country (Chiang, 2014; Gunawardena and Wilson, 2012). Sandhu (1994) focusing mostly on cultural adjustment in the host country examined both the interpersonal and intrapersonal factors that contribute to the psychological distress of international students. The study concluded that a large majority of students from underdeveloped countries often struggle to adjust to life in the host country. Accordingly, Gonzales (2006) posited that many international students are especially subject to stress in their first-year which can cause declines in mental and physical health. Moreover, contemporary research on international students’ experience abroad have prioritized the sense of well-being and self-esteem as well as the physical wellbeing of the international student and the sociocultural defies to their adjustment (Ward et. al. 2008). Unequivocally, adjustment, acculturation and adaptation have been heavily cited in the literature in reference to international students’ experiences. Consequently, many of the challenges proposed in the literature that deals with the coping strategies of the international student is in relation to culture shock (Campbell & Li, 2008; Sawir et al., 2012). Language barriers (Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2011) and academic stress (Phakiti & Li, 2011; Sawir et. al, 2012).

There have been a few literature that have explored the traumatic experiences of international students; however, as above mentioned it is generally directed at their experience abroad. Wright, Smith and Freyd (2016) in an online survey of 173 university students who had studied abroad found that many of the participants were exposed to at least one traumatic experience including natural disasters, sexual assault and unwanted sexual experiences. These traumatic experiences are found to be correlated to instances of traumatic distress, PTSD, depression and other forms of mental illness among students (Hawdon and Ryan, 2012). From this overview it is safe to assume that there is a gap in the literature investigating the traumatic experiences of international students in their home countries and the potential challenges they encounter in the host country as a result. As such it is crucial that the needs, perceptions and experiences of international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences be represented in the literature.

Student migrants and forced migrants experiences and coping strategies: The Differences
In migration studies there is a dichotomy between voluntary migrants who are considered to have a great level of choice in their migration decisions and involuntary who are characterized as forced migrants. However, according to Van Hear (1988) it is seldom that a migrant is totally a voluntary or involuntary migrant. In the literature forced migrants are characterized as coming
from countries affected by war and severe conflicts and upon arrival to their host country are granted the right of non-refoulement (Ehntholt & Yule, 2006). Student migrants on the other hand are characterized as having chosen to migrate for the purposes of studies and as such are not offered any protections or provisions under international law. As a result of the different motivations of these two groups, forced migrants are regarded as more vulnerable and researchers have been more interested in investigating the psychological effects brought about by the experiences of war and trauma of forced migrants (Ibanez & Velez, 2008). According to McBrien (2011) forced migrants develop physical and psychological problems due to their pre-migration traumatic experiences. Consequently, the sense of loss and trauma have a psychological effect on forced migrants even post-migration in the host country. That is why understanding the coping strategies of forced migrants have been prioritized in the literature.

Pre-migration traumatic experience
In migration studies pre-migration experiences often refers to events that occurs in the home country before migration. Due to war and conflict many forced migrants often experience personally or witness a plethora of traumatic events in their home countries pre-migration. These traumatic experiences often lead to the development of mental issues and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that have a detrimental impact on their health and wellbeing. In this regard studies on pre-migration experiences have mainly focused on individuals with a refugee background (Schweitzer et. al., 2011; Porter & Haslam, 2005; David et. al., 2008). Despite this fact, Castaneda et. al. (2017) have suggested that efforts to identify pre-migration potential traumatic experiences should not only target refugees and asylum seekers but all migrants coming from conflict backgrounds.

Coping Strategies Post Migration
The majority of the literature on coping strategies post migration focuses on individuals with a refugee background living in the host country. According to Bhugra and Jones (2001) when refugees arrive in the host country they are faced with many challenges in adjusting to a new culture. Among some of the difficulties they encounter are: Social isolation, homesickness, culture shock, bereavement, assimilation, stagnancy, poverty and depression. These are issues which distress refugees post migration and impacts the quality of their experience post-migration (Bhugra and Jones, 2001; Keyes & Kane, 2004; Miller, Worthington, Muzueovic et al., 2002). In a study of Bosnian refugees in Chicago; Miller et. al. (2002) found that the level of trauma involved in the pre-migration experiences of the refugees was directly connected to their ability to cope post migration in Chicago. Evidently, post migration adjustment and
distress was also found to be taxing on both the physical and mental wellbeing of the refugees in the host country. Unequivocally, it was concluded that the post-traumatic stress and other mental distress experienced by refugees was connected to the physical and psychological trauma experienced by refugees pre-migration (Kinzie et al., 1990; Bhui et al., 2003). Post-traumatic stress disorder is very prominent among refugees with pre-migration traumatic experiences and studies have shown the detrimental impacts traumatic pre-migration experiences have on the post-migration wellbeing of migrants. This is corroborated by qualitative studies which have explored post-migration distress among refugees. One such study is Fanzel, Wheeler and Danesch (2005) research which explored the prevalence of mental illness among 7000 adult refugees resettled in western countries. It was found that refugees are ten times more likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder than other people in the general population within their aged bracket. Additionally, it was found in a study exploring war-trauma, torture and post-migration conditions it was found that refugees are more likely to develop mental health disorders (Keller et al., 2006). Studies exploring the coping strategies of refugees have highlighted religion, attitudes and beliefs to be among the coping strategies used by refugees (Sweitzer, Greenslade and Kagee, 2007). In a study performed on 13 Sudanese refugees in 2007 to measure their coping strategies and resilience. Religion, family and community support were found to be essential coping strategies employed by refugees (Sweitzer, Greenslade and Kagee, 2007). Welsh and Brodsky’s (2010) qualitative study on the coping strategies of 8 Afghani women with experiences of violence and immigration found that problem-focused/active coping, emotional social support and perception coping were salient coping strategies.

Theoretical Framework of Traumatic experiences, Migration Decisions and Wellbeing

In order to be able to comprehend how traumatic pre-migration experiences can influence the students’ choice to study abroad and their post-migration wellbeing the following theoretical perspectives explored in this section will be incorporated in the analysis of the data.

Migration Decisions - PUSH and PULL Model

The push and pull model, initially developed to explain the migration flows of individuals (Lee, 1966), is often cited when exploring the migration decisions of international student migrants. The model proposes that there two categories of factors that explains migration flows, push and pull factors: one that pushes migrants from their home countries to
study abroad and another that pulls migrants to a particular country. Since this study is more concerned with exploring the pre-migration traumatic experiences and its perceived impact on their decision to study abroad: the push factor aspect of the model will be more effectively explored. According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) push factors refer to various domestic characteristics such as the availability and accessibility of education in the home country, economic capabilities of the home country, quality of education and availability of opportunities. From a theoretical standpoint this model proposes some very valuable explanations, however, with many limitations (Li and Bray, 2007). Effectively, it cannot account for the unique role that the experiences and characteristics of international students play in their migration decisions.

Theory of Coping

According to Conway and Terry (1992) delineated the theoretical approaches to coping into three categories: coping as an ego process, coping as a trait and coping as a dynamic process (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). According to Folkman and Lazarus (1988) coping is not only a response to stressful situations, however, it is influenced by an individual's psychological assessment of an event which influences an emotional action or response (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988). In this study this theory is used to assess how international students respond to their pre-migration traumatic experiences.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) posits that coping is a relationship between an individual and the environment where the individual psychologically assesses why and to what extent the relationship between him or her and the environment is stressful, which influences a process where the individual tries to manage the emotions aroused in him or her in relation to the environment. This process is called cognitive appraisal where the individual seeks to categorize his encounter in the environment and the significance of this to his or her wellbeing (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Three appraisals make up this process primary, secondary and reappraisal: Primary appraisal is the initial judgment by an individual of a stressful event as either being irrelevant, benign or stressful. Secondary appraisal refers to the reactive process which evolves the evaluation of the benefits and consequences of a particular coping strategy. Finally, reappraisal involves the continuous reassessment of the environment or the effectiveness of the coping strategies (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). These three appraisals will be effective in assessing how international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences cognitively decide on particular coping strategies. This will be an analytical tool to show how the act of
migrating to a new environment psychologically affects the coping strategies of the informants in the study.

Unequivocally, it is proposed that depending on the situation or event, there are different set of strategies that can be utilized to cope with different situations. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed emotion-focused coping or problem-focused coping as two strategies that can be used to cope with situations. These are the strategies which will be explored later in the analysis to assess the findings of this study. Unequivocally, emotion-focused coping strategies are focused on internal emotional states rather than external situations which trigger emotional responses. This kind of coping strategy is often employed when after a cognitive appraisal of the situation it is found that nothing can be done to change the harmful, threatening or threatening environmental conditions. This coping strategy mainly is used to change the individual's emotional response to the issue by employing wishful thinking, avoidance or minimization. The findings of this study will be assessed to decipher which among the three emotion-focused responses is used as a coping strategy by the informants in this study.

On the other hand, problem-focused coping strategies involves strategies used to directly change the external stressors through action. This strategy is often chosen when after an individual's cognitive appraisal of the situation they find that it can be fixed. This involves acquiring new skills, participating in new activities or finding hobbies to create joy and excitement or developing new habits. In response to stressful life events individuals often employ both emotional-based and problem-based coping strategies (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980). Additionally, there are some coping strategies that fall within both categories such as social support which is both an emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategy.

All these concepts will be used as an analytical tool to assess the coping strategies used by international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences post-migration. The findings of this study will be tested against the tenets of this theory to ground it within the literature.

**Methodology**

As a research method, phenomenology refers to the understanding of subliminal meanings and exploring the core of experiences as well as how individuals make sense of an experience. Frankly, it is how individuals construct the meaning of the human experience (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenology was coined by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and is utilized both as a research method and a philosophy too; however, in this study, it is primarily used as
a method. Cohen and Ornery (1994) identified three schools of phenomenology: descriptive, interpretive and the Dutch school of phenomenology which incorporates both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. For this study, a descriptive phenomenological methodology was chosen which combines the methodical, systematic and critical philosophy of Husserl to identify and comprehend the psychological essences, patterns and structure of an experience (Giorgi, 1989). Unequivocally, a qualitative descriptive approach was used to gather data related to the pre-migration traumatic experiences on their migration decisions and their coping strategies post-migration. This approach was chosen because of the descriptive nature of this study. Qualitative descriptive is effective in discovering the: who, what and where of experiences or events and in providing information from informants regarding phenomena which are inadequately understood (Kim, Sefcik and Bradway, 2016). Unequivocally, this approach will be advantageous in that it will be a germane and suitable method to achieving the aim of this study which is to describe this particular phenomenon of international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences and to gain further insights on the migration decisions and post-migration coping strategies of international students with these experiences. Although this approach is advantageous; because it is descriptive the researcher will not be able to determine a cause and effect relationship (Creswell, 2014). This means that if the informants in the study shares that because of their pre-migration traumatic experiences they decided to migrate and provides an in-depth account of how it has affected their coping strategies post-migration, the study will not be able to conclude that pre-migration traumatic experiences actually did have any effect on their decision to migrate or coping strategies. However, the objective of this study is not to highlight any correlations, however, to shed light on this phenomenon and to provide further in-depth information on the migration decisions and post-migration coping strategies of international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences with the hope of inspiring further studies on this topic. Consequently this method is also disadvantaged by the fact that the informants to the study may be reactive and as such this may compromise the credibility of the study (Bernard, 2013). This means that the informant because they know they are being observed they may not respond truthfully to the questions posed to them. In light of this disadvantage the informants in this study were interviewed more than once. Additionally, among the major criticisms of qualitative approach is the subject of reliability and validity. These issues are later discussed in the study under the heading “Trustworthiness”. Moreover, though the generalization of this study may be limited; generalization is not the main aim of
qualitative study rather it is to explore and comprehend certain phenomena and cases (Bryman, 2008).

The interview guide captured descriptions based on the following three themes: pre-migration traumatic experiences, the decision to study abroad and coping strategies post-migration. Towards this aim, a phenomenological research methodology was selected because the objective was to ‘describe how this phenomenon is consciously experienced and explained by the respondents' (Giorgi, 2012). This research method was useful in identifying the meaning and significance of the experiences of a sample of international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences at Malmö University and how these pre-migration traumatic experiences have influenced their decision to study abroad as well as the coping strategies they use post-migration mitigate, alleviate or offset the stress induced by those experiences. The objective of using this method was to make their experiences as sensible, near and recognizable as possible to be able to extrapolate meanings from them.

This was to be done by following the four main principles of phenomenological research:

1. Nature of the conscious experience of the international student – according to Smith and Fowler (2006) because phenomenology deals with examining a specific phenomenon as experienced by individuals, it is important to consider the nature of conscious experience and its potential to impact on the research. Consequently, in conducting this study the researcher attempted to discover the ‘true conscious experience' of a sample of international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences in their home countries. Through the interview process, the researcher investigated their experiences to understand their perspectives on the traumatic experiences they had in their home countries and on how it affected their decision to study abroad and their coping strategies post-migration. To effectively capture their conscious experience, the researcher observed the respondents' verbal and non-verbal responses and used follow-up questions to garner a deeper understanding of their experiences.

2. The concept of intentionality- this refers to the phenomenological concept that every human experience is tied to an act of forming an inseparable connection with the world (van Manen, 1990). This refers to the directedness of the content of an individual’s thoughts (what he/she is thinking of and about?) with reference to something, objects, events or experiences in the world (Charles, 2017). Of interest in this study were each
student’s thoughts, which were directed towards their home countries with reference to the pre-migration traumatic experiences they had there as well as how this experience in their home countries is tied to their decision to study abroad. Additionally, their coping strategies post-migration.

3. Importance of Individual context- It is important to listen and understand the perspectives of the individual behind the narrative. As such listening to the responses of each student in this study provided great insight into how each student in this study experienced pre-migration traumatic events in their home countries and how it affected their decision to study abroad as well as their coping strategies post-migration. Giving the unique and sensitive experiences of each student their responses in the interview provided me with a deeper understanding of their pre-migration traumatic experience as well as contextualized the perceived impacts of their experiences on their decision to study abroad and on their coping strategies post-migration.

4. Situatedness of the human experience- According to Pollio et. al. (1997) it is not only important that we emphasize that there is a problem, but it is also important that we highlight the uniqueness of the problem in the way it is experienced by the individual. As such the onus is on the phenomenological researcher to be interested in the interviewee and the embedded meanings in his/her responses. This research study worked towards compiling phenomenological data related to the unique perspectives of international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences in their home countries and how the effects of these experiences on their decision to study abroad as well as to explore their coping strategies post-migration. Towards this effort of situating their human experiences, a series of interview questions and follow-up questions were created to gain data related to this objective.

**Role as a Researcher**

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is as an instrument of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This means that data is collected by the researcher in contrast with quantitative research where other instruments such as surveys are used to obtain data. As such for reliability purposes it is important that the readers of this thesis be aware of any biases, assumptions, expectations, and experiences the researcher may have.

I came to Sweden in 2013 as an international student motivated by my experiences of trauma in my home country. International student migration was a way for me to temporarily get away from my life situations in my home country, and this had a lot of detrimental effects
on my well-being post-migration. I have learned over the years that traumatic experiences have a way of traveling with the individual and no matter how far away you go from the place of trauma or how much time has passed you can never be the same having had those experiences. Consequently, this is why this phenomenon is of such stark interest to me as I have lived it and therefore, have direct knowledge and experience of this topic. I would like to share the stories of other international students who have fled from traumatic experiences in their homeland through the globalized educational system and to explore how it affected their decisions to study abroad and their coping strategies post-migration. Unequivocally, my connection to this research topic and familiarity with the feelings and situation of the informants in this study contributes to my position as a researcher. Moreover, because of my shared experience with the respondents, they were more comfortable and willing to share information about their experiences.

Consequently, as qualitative researchers, the narratives which are shared with us are inevitably influenced by our role and experiences as a researcher in relation to the interviewees. As such while the proximity of this subject is advantageous to my role as a researcher, it also is disadvantageous as it creates room for questions about possible bias. According to Heugten (2004) in order to avoid bias, a researchers' subjectivity must be repeatedly be intensively scrutinized and questioned (p. 208). As a result, in the process of conducting this research, I have made it my point of duty to create distance between myself, the researcher, from the research topic and the informants involved in the study. Effectively, in carrying out this research, I drew upon the criteria proposed by Guba (1981) for a trustworthy research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. All of which will be discussed in further detail later on in this thesis under the heading ‘ethics and reflexivity'.

Informants

This phenomenological study focused on data obtained from an intentional sample of students with pre-migration traumatic experiences in their home countries studying at the Department of Global Political Studies, Malmo University. Malmö University was founded in 1998 and is Sweden's ninth largest University and boasts a student population of approximately 24,000. Among this population, approximately 1,800 are International Students who have the option of studying up to 16 different programmes in English. 9 of these programmes are offered by the Department of Global Political studies (GPS). Consequently, a total of Five Malmö University international students from the GPS Department participated in the semi-structured in-depth interviews between the fall of 2017 and the winter of 2018. These informants were
sourced through a method of sampling McMillan and Schumacher (2006) calls ‘purposeful sampling. This was a technique used to select a sample population based on the characteristics of a specific group of individuals which matches the attributes of the phenomenon being studied.

Consequently, the identification of the participants for this study was executed with care to maintain the privacy of the participants. During the fall of 2017, the researcher visited all English taught programs at the Department of Global Political Studies, Malmö University: Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS), International Migration and Ethnic Relations (IMER) masters and bachelors, International Relations (IR), Human Rights (HR), Global Political Studies (GPS) masters and bachelors and European Studies. During the researcher's classroom visits, the researcher presented the research topic and solicited participants to be involved in the study. The researcher asked all the students in the class visited that if they wanted to share the traumatic experiences they have had in their home countries to write their emails on a sticky note and discretely submit them. In total over twenty-two (22) individuals from all the classes visited submitted their email addresses for them to be contacted to participate in the qualitative interviews. The individuals were then contacted by email later to reserve a time and place to conduct the qualitative interviews. Out of the twenty-two (22) individuals that were contacted twelve (12) responded and confirmed. Out of these, seven students either (1) subsequently declined to be interviewed or (2) revealed that they were not a conflict-induced student migrant. Thus, in the end, five (5) interviews and follow-up were conducted between fall 2017 and winter 2018. As a group, these five study participants had the following characteristics: there were four females and one male, who were from countries such as Georgia, Iran, Greece, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan. All the study participants identified themselves as a student migrant and all of them had pre-migration traumatic experiences in their home countries which involved direct/or indirect violence as a result of a political, social and armed conflict.

Data Collection

Data were collected during the fall 2017 and Winter 2018 semesters and incorporated student interviews, as well as follow up interviews, with each participant to gather information related to their pre-migration traumatic experiences in their home country, and its impact on their decision to study abroad and their coping strategies post-migration. Five (5) interested students with pre-migration traumatic experiences in their home countries were interviewed in-person at Niagara, at the Department of Global Political Studies, Malmo University. These
interviews were followed up for credibility and reliability purposes. Subsequently, the participant interviews were transcribed.

**Interviews**

A semi-structured interview protocol was formulated for use in conducting face-to-face interviews with the study participants who consented to be interviewed. Smith (2006) suggests that using a semi-structured interview guide is effective in enhancing the reliability of a qualitative study. Consequently, this was one of the primary reasons a semi-structured interview protocol was chosen for this study. According to Pole and Lampard (2002) this is an appropriate tool because the semi-structured nature of the interview guide allows for important theoretical issues to be covered while providing room for the interviewees to stray from the guide and express themselves freely. It is acknowledges however that due to the phenomenological nature of this study an unstructured interview protocol would have been ideal; however, a semi-structured framework was used so that the questions in the interview could be posed to the respondents in a structure suitable to them. Consequently, just like any other approach semi-structured interviews does have its limitations in that it creates an opportunity to ask leading questions. However, in order to maintain interpretative validity the researcher avoided as best as possible leading questions (Given, 2008).

The interview guide consisted of demographic questions and questions surrounding themes such as their childhood, experiences of different forms of violence, forms of conflict experienced, the choice to leave for studies, and life in Malmo (see appendix). The questions were developed to get a deeper understanding of the international students' traumatic experiences in their home countries. They were developed from the review of themes mapping their journey from being in their home country, pre-migration events leading to their decision to study abroad in Sweden and their experience in Sweden based on the traumatic experiences they have had in their home countries. Consequently, study participants were invited to reflect freely and openly on each theme. The interviews provided a deep analysis of the participants' overall experiences. It is important to mention that the interview guide served as a guide rather than a fixed guide for each interview. As such, there were times additional questions were asked to clarify or to expand upon the responses of the respondents in acknowledgment of the phenomenological approach used in this study. According to Smith and Fowler (2006), a phenomenological interview should focus on the conversation of the respondents' experience with the phenomenon of interest as well as to allow room for expression. The interviews on average took sixty minutes to be completed and were recorded. Each interview started with a
thorough explanation of the research project to each student as well as a guarantee of their anonymity and permission to record the interview was requested.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis in this study will be done using Giorgi (2012) descriptive phenomenological psychological method. This method uses a five-step method of data analysis based on some principles of phenomenological philosophy. In each step the researcher will explain thoroughly the procedure:

1. Before analyzing the data, the researcher bracketed his experience by setting aside any previous knowledge or relationships he had with student migrants with pre-migration traumatic experiences.

2. The informant interviews were then transcribed simultaneously identifying all the important statements, meanings, meaning themes, and documenting a general description of the experiences of the participants.

3. The researcher read through the transcripts carefully and simplified it into manageable meaning units (Giorgi, 2009). As a researcher, one must review the narrative text in the transcript documents in order to grasp a full sense of the data and create codes in the margins to identify the indicators of experiences documented. This process is known as ‘horizontalization’ (Creswell, 1998) and the researcher used this as a measure to secure the trustworthiness of the study.

4. The researcher then transforms the meaning units identified into psychologically sensitive descriptive expressions. This made the data brief and directly highlighted the psychological aspects of what the participants said implicitly verbatim.

5. In the next step, the researcher reviewed the coded data to identify any patterns and significant characteristics which were later synthesized into a written structure of experience. Consequently, imaginative variation was used to erase the study participants from the framework of the study in order to determine if the phenomenon still held up on its own or would be compromised. The phenomenon did not remain largely intact after the administration of this process, which indicated that the participants were a crucial part of the framework of the phenomenon.

The profile of the informants was highlighted by printing and labeling the interview transcriptions with three category names (pre-migration traumatic experiences, Decision to study abroad and coping strategies post-migration) from the interview guide. In reviewing the labeled categories the researcher was able to get a good idea of the informants' responses.
according to certain topic or experience. Based on the data presented in these categories the researcher was able to identify certain similarities between the interviewees. This was later simplified into different themes. The applicable statements and expressions of each participant were analyzed and the themes that appeared more frequently were used as the themes represented in this study. After this interpretation phase, a general structure was created to synthesize the trends and the commonalities in the informants’ responses. After these themes were analyzed, I employed the use of imaginative variation to identify other possible meanings through the process of imagination, using different perspectives, roles and points of views (Moustakas, 1994). Subsequently, the themes extracted from the interviews were checked and balanced against the interview transcriptions to see if the informants’ views were represented effectively and consistently. A participant profile was then created for each of the interviewees which were used to identify prevailing themes. It is these prevailing themes that were used to discuss the research questions supporting this study.

**Ethical Considerations**

According to Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden (2004) ethical issues are present in any kind of research. Ethics pertains to doing good and avoiding harm (Orb et. Al, 2004, 93). Ethical concerns involves the researcher allowing the interview to freely express his/herself without trying to influence their responses or to solicit desired responses (Mertens, 2010). Additionally, this involves allowing the respondent to end the interview at any time, choosing not to respond to certain questions, allowing the interviewee to review his or her comments as well as to grant the interviewee the right to withdraw from the interview even after they have completed it. This study addressed these ethical concerns by explaining to each interviewee that they had all right to withdraw from the study at any time even after they have completed the interview. The interviewees were also granted the opportunity to review all the themes explored during the interview prior to ending the interview.

As a researcher, one must be aware of the sensitivity of the sample population (Mertens, 2010) and thus in conducting the interviews the researcher was very subtle and attentive to the needs of the interviewees. The researcher tried to build a friendly rapport with the informants for them to feel comfortable as such each interview begun with me treating each participant to a snack and coffee or tea. This encouraged openness and reassurance among the participants as well as set the tone for the interviews (Patton, 1990). Additionally, the researcher ensured to reassure each informant during every interview that strict confidentiality would be maintained in the resultant data.
Trustworthiness

It is always essential to discuss the concepts of validity and reliability, and because of the qualitative nature of this study it is necessary to clarify issues that may arise as a result of this method. Other aspects important for the objectivity will also be discussed such as credibility, and Transparency.

Reliability- The reliability the research refers to the ability of a study to be replicated under the same circumstance at another place or time. According to Lincoln and Guba (1982), a study that cannot be replicated is considered to be unreliable. Consequently, achieving reliability in qualitative studies is very difficult (Newman, 1999). However, (Smith, 2006) suggest possible ways in other maintain reliability in a qualitative study which are executed in this study. (Smith, 2006) suggest that the researcher should be transparent in explaining the research process and choice of theory so that the research can followed, understood and reproduced by others. Accordingly, this study maintained this by ensuring that the research was organized and detailed in outlining the research process. Additionally, (Smith, 2006) suggests interview guides are effective for enhancing reliability and this was used in this study.

Validity- According to Smith (2006) this refers to whether or not a study effectively measured what it set out to measure. The researcher is aware that in qualitative research validity is harder to prove, and as such this is why it is crucial that the observations made in a qualitative study to be suitable to the theories developed (Bryman, 2008). Effectively, the quality of the processes and design of a qualitative study will impact its validity (Pole and Lampard, 2002). In this study, this was maintained by giving a thorough description of the interviewees' responses, theoretical framework and the research design.

Credibility - According to Lincoln and Guba (1982) credibility refers to the believability of the study, how true are the findings and interpretations of the research. A variety of data sources, perspectives, theories, and literature were used to verify the data and to ensure credibility in this study. Additionally, to enhance the confidence in the findings of the study, the analyzed and coded interview transcripts were peer-reviewed. This ensured that the transcribed data were reviewed by an objective person who had the opportunity to highlight any themes that may have been ignored in the researcher's analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Transparency- Qualitative confirmability is essential in qualitative research: the burden of maintaining the level of objectivity to ensure this is placed on the data (Lincoln and Guba,
1982). In this study, multiple inquiries were done to enhance the credibility of this research as well as to improve the reliability of the findings. Based on this, the data produced from this research will be more conformable.

**Limitations**

While qualitative research provides for in-depth analysis of a phenomenon, there are methodological limitations in that the meticulous nature of the research design requires more time and effort (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, considerable considerations need to be made to the role of the researcher. To offset this limitation, I constructed a semi-structured approach with a few fixed questions to enable the informants experienced a consistent interview design (Patton, 1990). As above-mentioned the interviewees could review their statements after each interview was completed thus contributing to the validity and reliability of the study (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, while the research design incorporated in this research made an in-depth analysis of international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences and their perception of its effects on their decision to study abroad and their coping strategies post migration; the study is limited by its small study sample size. However, this was important for the phenomenological design which focuses on the experience of a few individuals to comprehend and to create inferences about a phenomenon involving many.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explained the methodological approach of the study and as this is a qualitative phenomenological study, in-depth interviews with five participants were heavily relied on. The research's data collection and analysis procedures have been discussed above as well as steps to ensure that the research maintains a level of objectivity. Additionally, information was provided about the role of the researcher and the limitations of the research. In the coming chapters a presentation of an overview of the findings of this study is done; followed by a thorough discussion of the themes highlighted and a theoretical analysis the findings produced from the coding of data from qualitative interviews. The final chapter provides implications for the field of international student migration and conclusion.

**Findings**

This chapter focuses on the experiences of five international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences studying at the Department of Global Political Studies, Malmö
University and is divided into two sections. The first section will give an overview of the students, their background and characteristics; this will be done to decipher their similarities and disparities. This overview will be followed by a description of the pre-migration traumatic experiences of the participants as shared by each participant. In this section the responses of the participants will be categorized according to three research questions asked in this thesis. This is done in order to highlight various themes which emerged from the data collected, which will later be explained:

- Pre-migration traumatic experiences of international students.
- Decision to study abroad.
- Coping Strategies of International students’ with pre-migration traumatic experiences.

**General Overview of Informants**

The international students in this study were students from the Global Politics and Societal Change and International Migration and Ethnic Relations academic disciplines (see Table below).

**Table 1: Descriptive information about the Informants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Semesters studied in Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latoya</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheree</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An overview of the Informants Experience of Trauma

Latoya and 2014 armed conflict in Ukraine:
Latoya is from a war affected city in Ukraine, which is now considered to be Luhansk Republic. When asked about her background she describes her childhood as being different from other people. She attributes this to the huge Russian influence she had growing up in Luhansk Republic. She grew up with her grandmother who is from Russia and her disabled mother who was born in Ukraine. Latoya, who later moved away from Luhansk when she was 16 to move to Kiev in order to further her education describes having a relatively nice life in Ukraine with very few major difficulties. She shares that when the conflict started she was 19 and with it she lost her grandmother who was then living in Luhansk with her disabled mother. Latoya recounts that in the beginning of the conflict she spoke with her mom and grandmother and they told her everything was fine. However, after a few days passed their phones became disconnected and she was unable to get in touch with them. In the interview she shared that she remembers getting a call one morning from a random individual who told her that her grandmother had died. She shared how shocking and emotionally distressing this was for her as the person did not share the details of her grandmother’s passing or how long she had been dead. She relates her traumatic journey from Kiev to Luhansk to rescue her mother and the experience she had along the way. Latoya recounts now even years after the conflict that she still tries to come to terms with the trauma of losing her grandmother and her journey to get to Luhansk to rescue her mother.

Sheereee and 2009 Presidential protest in Iran:
Sheereee is from Iran and was born into a Muslim family. Sheereee expresses that in Iran women are often faced with demeaning circumstances and in our interview she sheds light on her
experience as a woman in Iran and the trauma she experienced as a result. She was in a very somber mood for much of the interview as she described her life in Iran and what it was like for her constantly being subjected to demeaning gender-based rules. For Sheeree, growing up in Iran, there were many rules she had to adhere to that her brother who was three years younger did not have to. After starting to watch foreign movies, she began to be bothered by the realization that many of her fundamental rights were being denied. Because of her rebellious nature she shared that she was arrested a few times for not being properly covered. Sheeree was detained for the first time at twenty years old for choosing not to wear her hijab and growing up, she was constantly being told how to dress, how to behave, how to act, how to speak and she always felt it was unfair and unjust. As a result, she was always protesting and for this reason it placed her in a lot of volatile situations, mostly involving the police. This is the reason behind much of her trauma. Sheeree shares that she had other encounters with the police before but this was the worst of them all and this was right around the time she decided she wanted to migrate to Sweden.

Natasha and 2013 Gay Rights Rally in Tbilisi:
When asked about her background Natasha shares that ethnically speaking her background has always been an issue because for the most part she is Georgian, however, she has Russian blood from her mother’s side of the family. Natasha reflects that she does not quite fit well with other Georgians mainly because of their harsh views on homosexuality. She describes that growing up was very tough for her as a result and that she struggled with depression. Natasha shares that because she identifies herself as a ‘lesbian woman’ this has always been an issue of conflict for her as she has always felt like somewhat of a misfit in Georgia. She describes that being a lesbian is among the primary things about her but it took her a very long time before she was able to accept her sexuality. It was not until later in Natasha’s life that she had the courage to come out and embrace who she is. This inspired her activism and LGBTQ work which led her to become among the first open lesbian in Georgia to be televised on public television. While, coming out gave her much confidence and she was finally able to live her life. It was also the cause of much trauma and turmoil in her life.

Adam and Greek Financial Crisis 2009-2017 -
Adam is from Greece and identifies as Greek. When asked about his background he shares that he had a fun childhood and financially his family was well off because both his parents worked. However, this was because there was no financial crisis when he was growing up. Adam shared that before the financial crisis life was optimistic and he was very happy. Even during the first
five years of the financial crisis everything was perfect but after some time passed life became worse. Though Adam realized that it was not his family alone that had been impacted as a child it was very hard to see how finance broke his father and broke the happy home he had. Adam describes the impact that experiencing extreme poverty as a result of the financial crisis had on his well-being. Adam shares that his experience of being bullied made him think so low of himself and the fact that his family was experiencing hardships at the same time made him extremely depressed and suicidal. He shares that the trauma from those experiences still lives with him today and he blames everything that has happened to him on the financial crisis.

Fatimah and experiences of political oppression and sexual violence:
Fatimah is from Azerbaijani, she identifies as Azerbaijan but ethnically she says she is Turkish. Overall, she recognizes herself as a global citizen but do not mind being referred to as a Turk. When asked about her background she states that she has never felt safe in Azerbaijan. She describes Azerbaijan as a very rich country because of its natural oil resource. However, the country is riddled with political strife because of the dictatorship, she shares that people are more likely to be sent to jail for having counter political opinions than for serious crimes. She shares that although there has been a ceasefire the government uses this ongoing conflict with Armenia to prevent reforms in areas such as human rights. For someone very outspoken about human rights and actively involved in NGOs that targets these questions it puts her in a very precarious situation. Fatimah shares that she has always feared that if she continued to stay in Azerbaijan she would be eventually jailed for sharing her political opinion and for speaking in opposition against the regime. She describes that frustrated with the social injustices and mentality in her country it had always been her dream to go abroad. Fatimah also shares her experience of being a victim of sexual violence, which sparked her involvement in the Me Too Movement. She shares how living as a woman in Azerbaijan made her a target for male predators. Fatimah shares how this experience affected her wellbeing and how she grew weary of always looking over her back.

Research Themes
In this section, I will discuss the themes that were extrapolated from the interview transcripts. Each themes will be presented and their subthemes which were developed during the data analysis process. Selections from the interviews were chosen to highlight the respondents’ experiences and provide examples of the sub-themes within each category.
Table 2 below outlines the research questions and the themes that were highlighted during the data coding process:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Pre-migration Traumatic Experiences of international students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subthemes</td>
<td>cultural violence, physical violence, armed conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2</td>
<td>Decision to study abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3</td>
<td>Coping strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subthemes</td>
<td>Social Support, attitude change, avoidance,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pre-migration Traumatic Experiences of international students**

Participants described the various forms of pre-migration traumatic experiences they have and how it changed their lives. The explanations given by the participants indicated how they recognized, defined and experienced traumatic events in their home countries. The similarities among the participants are that they all share traumatic experiences and many of them have experienced the same type of trauma. Unequivocally, participants in this study expressed a variety of traumatic experiences that they faced before they migrated. As such this theme is divided into four sub themes which represents the prominent traumatic experiences that came up among participants when describing their pre-migration traumatic experiences. These are cultural violence, physical violence, and armed conflict.

**Cultural Violence**

Among the participants experiences of cultural violence was identified as a prominent theme mentioned. Cultural violence refers to any aspect of a particular culture that can be used to legitimize violence in a direct and structural form. The interviewees shared experiences of being exposed to cultural violence used to justify gender-based violence and inequality. These are the narratives of the interviewees:
Sheeree

Sheeree is from Tehran, Iran and was born into a Muslim family. Sheeree expressed that in Iran women are often faced with demeaning circumstances. She described her life in Iran and the cultural violence she was exposed to. She postulated that growing up there were many rules she had to adhere to that her brother who was three years younger did not have to. After starting to watch foreign movies, she began to become bothered by the realization that many of her fundamental rights were being denied. Because of her rebellious nature she had many hostile encounters with the police. She recounted being arrested on multiple occasions for not being properly covered.

“... compulsory hijab was the law of the land in Iran at that time and we... women were compelled to conform to a conservative dress code which included wearing a headscarf to cover our hair... I felt that these strict restrictions on women were unnecessary so i decided not to wear my hijab in protest and I was arrested by the police. I remember being taken to a detention center at the age of 20 for the first time feeling like a criminal because i did not want to conform to some stupid patriarchal rule”

Sheeree expressed that:

“In Iran I was treated like a second class citizen. The older and more aware i became the more I knew that many of my fundamental rights were being denied... However society chose to ignore that as a woman I had control over my own mind and body ...”

She shared how stressful this was for having to be live under such restrictive gender rules and how being arrested affected her mental and emotional well-being. As she grew older she developed a strong dislike for the police, and how the Iran culture treated the women in its society.

Fatimah

Fatimah also shared the same narrative of experiences of cultural violence, Fatimah is from Azerbaijan, she identifies as Azerbaijani but ethnically she says she is Turkish. Overall, she recognizes herself as a global citizen but do not mind being referred to as a Turk. When asked about her experiences in her home country she recited that she had never felt safe:
Fatimah identified this as a form of cultural violence as she believed that the laws in Azerbaijan do not fully protect women’s rights:

“It is hard living in a country where you do not feel protected by the law... so even if you are exposed to violence if you report it to the police there is no guarantee that they will remove the threat. In my culture sexual assault is very common; I even had an interview with BBC in regards to the #Metoo Movement... if you live in my country and you are women you will encounter sexual harassment at least once in your lifetime... I have faced it many times especially in the bus where men have sexual harassed me touching me without my permission then becoming upset if i deny their advances....”

Fatimah shared that even to walk to the supermarket a woman is bound to encounter sexual discrimination from men. She later says that gender based discrimination is embedded in her culture which targets women and say that the woman's place is in the home and relegate them to certain roles. She shared this was a major reason why she wanted to study abroad.

Natasha

For Natasha her experience of cultural violence was based on the inequalities her culture imposed on her as a result of her sexuality. Natasha who identified herself as a lesbian spoke about the fact that her struggle is compounded by the fact that not only is she a woman but she is also a lesbian.

“I have had to struggle a lot with my identity because there is this narrative that a real Georgian cannot be gay, It is even worse when you are gay and you are woman because then the discrimination is two-folds... the most difficult thing is to be yourself... and because of the pressures of this I have actually contemplated suicide on many occasions...”

Natasha further shared that because of this she does not fit well with other Georgians, so she has always felt isolated.
“In Georgia there is this superficial tolerance of the other... which means that if you feel that your identity as a Georgian is threatened by another social group then it means that it is okay to respond with violence”.

She described her rough childhood and how hard it was coming to terms with her sexual identity in a culture that was against it.

“I have a wide range of bad memories growing up trying to figure out who I am... It's a really interesting thing before and after I came out as a lesbian. I always knew that gay people existed. I knew that it was wrong so I didn't come out to anyone until later in life. Growing up there was no information about gay people but the more information I got the more I started to think that maybe something was wrong with me. For this purpose, I probably spent my childhood being depressed... I was in a very dark place for much of my teenage years...and coming to terms with my sexuality was very hard for me. Gender wise, Georgian society had a very polarized definition of gender but I never thought of myself in terms of gender and I had doubts about my gender. For this purpose, I was closeted for most of my teenage times.”

Physical Violence
The interviewees expressed personal experiences of physical violence in their home countries and reported having volatile experiences where they were either slapped, had objects thrown at them and/or being beaten. The following narratives reflect the theme of physical violence:

Sheeree

“The first time I was physically assaulted it was by a police officer; I was not wearing my headscarf and I was manhandled by him in a very viscous manner... it was probably because I was not cooperating but the way he treated me was still not justified…”

Sheeree recounted being detained for the first time at twenty years old because she refused to wear the hijab. She stated that growing up she was constantly being told how to dress, how to behave, how to act, how to speak and she felt it was unfair and unjust. She had always been a woman of protest and for this reason it placed her in a lot of volatile situations mostly involving the police. In 2009, she was physically attacked and assaulted by the police during the 2009 presidential protest in Iran:
“The protests began following the announcement that incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won majority votes in spite of the fact that there were many irregularities involved in the election process. I remember being frightened… myself and others were running from the police into alleys trying to find somewhere to hide until the police went away. I remember hiding in someone’s garage for about 10 minutes and when I went back to the main street, I was accosted by a police officer who then proceeded to beat me with his baton”

Sheeree had other encounters with the police before but she stated that this was the worst of them all and this was right around the time she decided she wanted to migrate to Sweden.

“That experience left me both emotionally and physically scarred. I will never forget it”

Fatimah

Fatimah’s experience of physical violence came in the form of sexual assault; she described it as physical violence as it left her with physical scars. She recounted her experience of being unwilling forced to take part in sexual activity.

“I remember being sexually assaulted one evening… I was even almost raped on one occasion when I was walking home from work one night… a man grabbed my arm and tried to force me to have sex with him and I had to fight him off ….. I am very glad I am quite strong …. For that reason I am really lucky that I was able to escape with only a few scars and bruises because otherwise it would have been a worse situation… I would not wish this type of physical violence on anyone and it is for this reason I feel really concerned for my sister as she is not that strong…”

Fatimah expressed that this experience has lived with her until this day and that being in Azerbaijan she grew weary of always watching over her back because the man was never caught and she was afraid that he may try again.

Adam

Adam’s experience of physical violence came in the form of bullying from his peers who would physically attack him almost every day at school as well as being physically assaulted by an unknown assailant.

“As a child growing up in a home being faced with lots of financial hardships this eventually takes a toll on you… I feel the anxiety and uncertainty I face today is as a result of my childhood
and what was happening within my family as a result of the financial hardships we were facing. The stress it caused within my family caused my parents to fight and argue a lot and the problems at home were made to be more difficult because I was being constantly bullied at school... there was a point I was being beat up every day ... when I went to the teachers and principals, however, they did nothing ... and I felt like I could not speak to my parents as they had enough to deal with.... those were some stressful times”

He shared that these experience of bullying were extreme and affected him so much that he was quite suicidal for many years.

“I remember I used to cry every night because there was a point in my life when I was constantly being bullied and being physically attacked by my peers... what is worse is that no one did anything to stop it...it really affected my self-esteem and the way I viewed myself...You think so low of yourself, you see life has this empty hole with no happiness... there were time I contemplated suicide because the stress of it was too much to bare and I had no one to talk to or help me...”

He explained that the trauma from those experiences still lives with him this way and he blames everything that has happened to him on the financial crisis.

“...The financial crisis was the beginning of all the bad things I have experienced in my life. It created a situation of continuous anxiety and mental distress for me where I felt like I was not allowed to dream...

For Adam the uncertainty the financial crisis made him lose hope about the future. He related that even in his later years while living in Athens that he was exposed to physical violence. He recounted being hit upside the head by an assailant while being robbed on the way home one evening. He reiterated that after that experience he never felt the same and his whole outlook on his surroundings was different.

“It is hard when you are the victim of any kind of violence... this man held me up with a knife and in that moment all I could say was please do not hurt me... luckily all he did was hit me in the head and took my belongings...”

Natasha
Natasha also shared her experience of physical violence. She shared her experience of being attacked by an angry crowd of anti-gay protesters. It was not until later in Natasha’s life that she had the courage to come out and embrace who she is. This inspired her activism and LGBTQ work which led her to become among the first open lesbian in Georgia to be televised on public television. While, coming out gave her much confidence and she was finally able to live her life. It was also the cause of much trauma and turmoil in her life.

“This was a source of pressure for me not only because of the aggression I was exposed to but also the pressure I faced as a result of the responsibility of representing the LGBTQ community in Georgia.”

She shares that this affected her seriously. Natasha recounts that because of her activism she has faced a lot of violence in the form of threats and aggression from random people. She was attacked in both in 2012 and the 2013 after organizing a peaceful demonstration in recognition of the International Day against Homophobia in Tbilisi. She describes being attacked by three radical religious groups in 2012 when she first organized the rally. However, when she organized the same demonstration in 2013, a crowd of 20,000 counter demonstrators showed up in opposition of her demonstration which had only 100 participants.

“I still remember it very vividly ... on May 17, 2013 where during our demonstration we were met by thousands of angry protesters, including several priests..... I remember them smashing the windows of the vehicle I was in with iron rods and pelting stones as the police tried to get us away in a minibus...I do not think I had ever been so terrified... I did not anticipate this at all... imagine being surrounded by a crowd of 20,000 angry people who had no reason to be mad at you but the mere fact that you want to live your life and be recognized as equals. This experience has stuck with me and I do not think I will or can forget the slurs... the objects being thrown and the terror in the eyes of my friends and colleagues”

Natasha described having to be evacuated from the area by the police. She was escorted on a bus however the crowd was so huge they blocked the passage of the bus and they began throwing stones and sharp objects in the bus.

“I remember we had to be escorted on a different buses and my buses was the last one, and when the crowd saw that we were getting away, they surrounded the bus I was in and started shaking it and throwing objects inside... breaking the windows ... I remember fearing for my life and praying to be able to get out of that space safe”
In the aftermath she got thousands of hateful messages in her inbox, and she became so burnt out and terrified that she basically decided to go in seclusion. She could not take public transportation for a long time because of that as it would be a trigger for her post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She said that after this experience she knew she had to leave Georgia.

**Armed Conflict**

Experiences of armed conflict was also another prominent theme among two of the respondents who expressed their traumatic experiences of armed conflict.

**Fatimah**

For Fatimah, although there has been a ceasefire the sounds of the bombs in the distance is still very fresh in her mind. She reiterated that the government in her home country have used the ongoing conflict as a form of oppression. She describes herself as someone very outspoken about human rights and actively involved in NGOs that targets these questions it puts her in a very compromising situation. Fatimah shares that she has always feared that if she continued to stay in Azerbaijan she would be eventually be jailed for sharing her political opinion and for speaking out against the government.

“... politically my country is in a dark state... at the moment the provision of education is an issue... they do not provide good education so more people are staying uneducated and this is contributing to the problems. Another issue is that in 1992 Armenia started a conflict with Azerbaijan and occupied 20 percent of Azerbaijani territories and so we have also a lot of refugees from these places.... we have in total 1 million refugees and we are in total 10 million so that means that 10 percent of our population are refugees from these places .. So we are also deal with this problem. And we, the people, try to raise the issue of human rights ... however, our President focuses more on the conflict rather than human rights issues...”

Fatimah describe the stressful events and the government responses to the conflict have been very traumatic for her growing up in Azerbaijan.

“The conflict has caused a lot of political instability which has continued to this day; in my country insurgents, sniper shootings and landmines present serious risks for us .... due to all the turmoil human rights is close to non-existent and we cannot even speak about it because our freedom of speech is restricted... if anyone is too outspoken they will be arrested or detained... I have had many friends who have been arrested for speaking about the political
situation... In my country I feel like I am not a person and my very basic rights are not respected ... I have lived a very insecure life in Azerbaijan... in a constant state of terror because of the bombs and the conflict... there is no peace”

Latoya

“My experience with armed conflict involved my experience in the late summer of 2014 while there was a full-fledged war in Luhansk Oblast ... I will never forget how terrified I was traveling there to get my mother... in that moment all I did not think about myself... all I could think about was to get to my mother... ”

Latoya shared that when the conflict started she was 19 and with it she lost her grandmother who was then living in Luhansk with her disabled mother. Latoya recounts that in the beginning of the conflict she spoke with her mom and grandmother and they told her everything was fine. However, after a few days passed their phones became disconnected and she was unable to get in touch with them. After a few days had passed, she remembers getting a call one morning from a random individual who told her that her grandmother had died. She speaks of how shocking and emotionally distressing this was for her as the person did not share the details of her passing or how long she had been dead. She was even more worried about her disabled mother, who is legally blind and the fact that she was all alone by herself in the midst of the conflict. After getting the news all she could think about was getting to Luhansk to rescue her mother and that is exactly what she did. Latoya described that at the time transportation was not available to get to her town and the borders were restricted so she had to hitchhike to get to her village:

“...there was military actions so I basically hitchhiked to Luhansk because there were no connections...no trains but there were some buses that took people to safer places. I did not care however, I just wanted to go get my mom and take her to live with me. The journey was very unstable...the border were restricted and there were no transport.... I had to take three cars to get to the border...from there I could hear sounds of explosion in the distance.... I must have went through about 14 border controls before i finally got to Luhansk. When I got to the city I was terrified because my mom was all alone and the thought of anything bad happening to her scared me... The city was empty... There were no cars... No people, no electricity... it was dark and really scary... however, when I got to my house I was happy to find my mom locked away in the apartment and safe... I was like mom take your stuff we are leaving now but
she did not want to leave... because for her it was her home and she did not want to leave her home... I had to convince her to come with me... she asked if we would return in a month or two and I lied to her and said yes but after we left that day we have never returned. This was in 2014, three years ago...”

After arriving in Kiev with her mother Latoya with haste got married to a guy from Kiev; however, her mom had to go through the process of registering as an internally displaced person which was a very humiliating process for both her and her mother.

“We had to prove her status and my mom faced a lot of difficulties with that. We faced a lot of problems getting support from the government... social security was very poor and if it was not because of me having a status as an official person from Kiev my mom would not be able to survive.”

Latoya added that life has not been easy for her, however, it could be worse if it were not for her registered status as a person from Kiev, she would be living in exile:

“I think I am very lucky to be registered in Kiev as I know that a lot of person from Donetsk have difficulties finding a job and finding an apartment because people will not allow them to rent an apartment or give them jobs because they are considered to be dishonest and there are lots of prejudice against them...”

Decision to Study Abroad

This was a common theme among all the respondents who shared narratives of how their experiences of trauma in their home country factored in their decision to study abroad. Below are the narratives of the participants reflecting how their pre-migration traumatic experiences influenced their decision to study abroad?

Fatimah expressed that her experience in her home country was factor in her decision to study abroad, she said:

“Educational migration has been a tool to get to a secure space... I think it was the best option for me as it is totally different if you come to Europe to work than if you come here to study. As a student migrant...my first reason for studying abroad was because i really wanted a good education but the second major reason was because of the insecurities i felt living in my country... It’s not only even about conflict or about the political situation but also we have a
very bad gender based violence... and it is very bad in my country because as people do not become educated they become worse... The new generation are getting worse and they are doing really bad things to women so even if you walk in the streets you feel insecure yourself because you do not know what's going to happen to you... and because I am a woman I feel even more insecure than any other...

Adam in expressing his decision to study abroad shared:

“Studying abroad for him was an opportunity to see a new place, to live in a new environment... I feel bad to admit that education was a means for me to escape the financial situation I faced in Greece but I can say it was a way to avoid it... the thing is I didn't come here only to escape but also to extract knowledge because first you must learn how to find knowledge or how to use knowledge.. So I want to combine this and try to see what I can do in order to make things better for my country with that knowledge...”

Natasha: in expressing her decision to study abroad shared:

“So my decision to come and study here in Sweden was totally influenced by these experiences and honestly my goal is to try and stay here as long as possible... I decided to study abroad because I wanted to get away from Georgia. Basically since 2009 I have been involved in lgbt movements and it is quite a claustrophobic space. I just needed to get away...”

Natasha wanted to be in a country that was less aggressive towards her and where she would be safe to live her life so she decided to come to Sweden to study. When asked how life has been for her in the aftermath, she describes:

“I am absolutely certain that this is one of the best decisions I have made in a longtime. Now I have a bigger excuse to detach myself from everything I went through in Georgia and even though I still care about the situation in Georgia and the people I left there I feel this sense of relief”

Sheereee: in expressing her decision to study abroad shared:

“My decision to migrate was not so much politics but it was more about the cultural pressures I faced and me being arrested for something as simple as not wearing my headscarf... this was very troubling to me and it had a negative effect on my psyche... I had always dreamed of running away from the pressures that the Iranian society placed on women ... I just wanted to
live alone, be able to do what I want and to be free from the pressure of having to be married
marry to anyone and from being judged the decisions I made. I didn’t think so much about where I
wanted to go... Sweden was never on my agenda but it was close to my brother... the tuition was
free... so it just happened. I never really never planned anything. After the incident my entire
move happened within a few months... I just knew I wanted to leave Iran ...

Latoya: She shares that the people or the things are happening in Ukraine were among the
factors that influenced her migration decision. She wanted to leave Ukraine to experience a
different space and education was a strategy for me.

“I decided to study “Global Politics” in Sweden because this subject is highly politicized in
Ukraine. I really wanted to get a master degree from a country that was not so biased when it
comes to political discourse and human rights. I wanted to get a break from everything I have
experienced in Ukraine, my work, my activism and the difficulties I face and study for my
master’s degree in a country where I could get to experience human rights in a form which is
very different from what we have in Ukraine.”

Coping Strategies
In order to cope with their life post migration, international students with pre-migration
traumatic experiences have to learn how to reduce the stress which results from the change in
their environment. This section highlights the themes that were extracted from the
participants’ interviews indicating the coping strategies used by the participants who have
lived in traumatic life situations. It was found that a variety of coping strategies are used by
them in order to overcome their painful experiences and adjust gradually to their new
environment post migration. These coping strategies are divided into four sub themes: Social
Support, avoidance, attitude change.

Social Support
This was a major coping strategy mentioned by all the interviewees. Social support for all the
participants represented support from immediate and extended social networks. All the
participants reflected that the social support received through these networks was very
important for mitigating or relieving their stress.
Latoya Mentioned how important it was to have the support of her mother and husband which she indicated was very vital for her livelihood and stability, especially now that she is in Sweden now without them.

“I do not know what I would do if I did not have my husband and my mother; the fact they supported me and was happy that I got the opportunity to study abroad made me very happy”

In answering to questions about her coping strategies post migration she shared that it is hard for her to not think about home and what is going on there:

“I know I have people back in Ukraine waiting for me .... So it hard to fully be at peace knowing that I have my mother and husband back in Ukraine.”

For Sheeree having social support from local ethnic and cultural groups was an effective coping strategy for her as well as having her brother so close by in Denmark.

“My first year in Sweden was very hard to cope ... I was so depressed and it really affected my studies ... I turned to my brother who lives in Denmark as a coping strategy at the time... I spent a lot of time in Denmark... I think social support has been a very important strategy for me especially in the form of local ethnic and cultural groups...”

Adam also shared that: “Being in touch with my family back home, console and comfort me, at the moment only this relieves my suffering”

Fatimah also expressed social support in the form of talking to family and friends as a coping strategy:

“I have a very good relationship with my family, they encourage me and help me to remain positive and motivated”

Avoidance
Avoidance was a recurring coping strategy that was identified among the interviewees. Avoidance was understood to be denial as many of the interviewees expressed that in order to cope they have decided to forget the stressful events they have experienced and move on.

Natasha reflected that she has chosen to ignore the past and just wants to move and focus on her future. This is how she stated she copes:
Natasha has this feeling of relief she shares that she still suffers from anxiety and every time she receives news from home or sees something on Facebook it is enough to trigger her PTSD. She says that she tries to stay away from Facebook and not to focus on it so much as it is better for her wellbeing.

“I have stopped looking on social media as every time when I go on Facebook there is also something to remind me about the situation I left behind and this makes it very hard for me to focus and to study. The way I cope is just to disconnect myself from what is going on and even though it is hard, I just focus on the here and now... so I cope by focusing on the present and the future...”

Natasha shares that this is the best coping strategy for her because if she were to try to face the situation it would be too painful for her.

“It is too painful to think about my experiences at the moment; maybe someday I will address them but for now avoiding it is my only solution... as there is nothing i can do about it... my hope is to learn as much as I can now and try to build myself up so i can make a greater impact later”

Latoya’s narrative also supported the theme of avoidance, she shared that her way of coping is to pretend that everything is okay as if she would allow herself to think about the past and everything she has been through it would totally destabilize her and she knows she has to be strong for her mother:

“I know that I need to be strong for my mom because if I am not strong she won't be strong... I do not have time to grieve i just need to be strong... I do not know if I have carried my experiences with me and if they impact my current wellbeing because I just try not to think about those experiences. I pretend as if they never happened... I try not to think about the war, Luhansk or the experiences I had because I am afraid if I do think about it... it would make me unstable and if I am unstable who will be there for my mother... anytime she starts to talk to my grandmother I always tell her not to because I do not want to bring it up... it will make things complicated... basically i think that these experiences are gone so I need to go forward.. I need to be positive for my future ... I do not know what I would do if I didn't have my husband, his family and my mom because without them I would be nothing.”

When Adam was asked about his different coping strategies post migration he also shared avoidance as among his coping strategies:
“My way of coping is just focusing on my studies and finishing school; I would love to learn as much as I can and see what I can take away from my experience here ... my hope is to apply the best of what I learn here and take it back to improve my country.”

Fatimah also expressed this theme in her narrative. She reiterates that her way of coping is just distancing herself from her country and everything that is going on there. She mentioned that she always tries to remain positive and even though studying ‘Global Politics’ makes it hard for her not to think about the issues in her country, it makes her realize that she is not the only one living in a country riddled with issues. She shared that she has gotten rid of her social media and stayed away from news from her country so as to not be drawn in to the issues that are still going on there:

“... four days ago my friend was arrested because of his political action... this makes it really hard for me to study and triggers my anxiety.... I mean I am 23 I just want to live my life and socialize with others my age ... I want to get rid of the bad things in my life as otherwise it will be difficult to study and to live my life happily. I was really happy that day I left to come to Sweden. I felt like I was in a prison and now I got a chance to leave this prison... I am really happy to be away even though I left my family... I was really just eager to leave.....”

She recounted that now she is so much happier and she feels safer. She would like to remain a student migrant for as long as possible and even possibly work in Sweden after her studies as that will provide her with more time away to heal and recover from the stressful things she has experienced.

Attitude Change
The interviewees expressed positive attitude change has being a coping strategy used by them post migration. The interviewees expressed this was a strategy used to let them focus on more solutions to the problem than focusing on their stressful situations.

Latoya in her narrative expressed ‘attitude change’ as a coping strategy in that she tries to think that it could be worse for her and focus on finding solutions for her and her family to have a better life. She reiterated migrating abroad to study was a means for her to better equip herself so that she could gain more opportunities. Her hope is to use the tools that she acquires in Sweden to create an opportunity for her and her family to migrate permanently.

“I do not think about the past as there is nothing I can do to change what happened, however i can focus on the solutions and that gives me hope... I do not see my far future in Ukraine,
however... I would like to migrate permanently but closer to my thirties when I have a good career, as I want my mom to be in a better place, and my husband... I want my children to experience a better place."

Natasha shared the same narrative she sees the events that have happened to her as learning experiences and though they were traumatic; she copes by reminding herself that she has a bright future ahead. Natasha tries to have a positive outlook as this is the only way she says she is able to cope as if she begins to think negatively she will fall into depression.

“I just want to live my life and focus on positive things... The way I cope is just to disconnect myself from what is going on in my country and even though it is hard, I just focus on the here and now... so I cope by focusing on the present and the future... trying to make myself better so I can in turn to do something later”

Adam’s coping strategy was also problem focused indicative of the theme ‘attitude change’ he mentioned that he has tried to become more optimistic- to focus on his future wishes and aspirations:

“My way of coping is just focusing on my studies and finishing school; I would love to learn as much as I can and see what I can take away from my experience here ... my hope is to apply the best of what I learn here and take it back to improve my country.”

Subsequently, when Fatimah was asked about her coping strategies post-migration she also mentioned ‘attitude change’ which she said happened the moment she left her home country:

“The first time they asked me how you felt in Sweden... my answer was that I feel really secure here... I really felt insecure in my country... you just feel like you are living between the bombs and your life is very easy to be lost... it is very easy to lose your life in my country and I felt very insecure for myself, my family and my friends... it was a really insecure place for me and I cannot really see my future there because I think if I stayed there my future would be very dark ... I imagine myself if I stayed in my country that after 10 years I would probably be in jail because of my political affiliation or dead just because of the bombs... so I cope by having a positive outlook and being thankful for my present opportunity....”
Conclusion
The themes discussed above highlights the pre-migration traumatic experiences of five international students studying in the GPS Department at Malmö University and how these experiences impacted their decision to study abroad and the coping strategies they use post-migration. The next chapter summarizes the findings from these themes and discuss them in the context of previous literature.

Discussion
This research study examined the pre-migration traumatic experiences of five international students studying at the GPS Department, Malmö University. Their experiences are both unique and identical to one another. The researcher in this study has attempted to the best of his ability to share the stories of these students as told in their own voices.

Summary of Findings
The previous chapter illustrated the findings of the data collected from five informants who are studying at the GPS Department, Malmö University. The informants shared their stories of pre-migration traumatic experiences and how it affected their decision to study abroad as well as their coping strategies post-migration. Three research questions were formulated as a guide for the two semi-structured interviews with each informant. The aim was to explore the pre-migration traumatic experiences of these international students and learn how these experiences affected their decision to study abroad and the coping strategies they used post-migration. This chapter will illustrate the summarized themes that developed out of the data captured from the two interviews with each informant and document collection procedures. The themes will also be situated and discussed within the context of the existing literature on international student migration, pre-migration traumatic experiences and coping strategies.

Summary of themes
The previous chapter discussed three major themes which developed from the data collected during this study. The three themes were a) pre-migration traumatic experiences, b) decision to study abroad, and c) coping strategies. The first theme was divided into three sub themes: cultural violence, physical violence and armed conflict. There were no subthemes for the second theme, which discussed the decision to study abroad. Lastly, the third theme was also divided into three sub themes, namely, social support, avoidance and attitude change. Some of the key highlights of the findings will be illustrated below:
International students have various traumatic experiences in their home countries.

Pre-migration traumatic experiences such as physical violence, discrimination, sexual violence and negative encounters are factors that influence the migration decisions of international students.

Pre-migration traumatic experiences affect the coping process of international students post-migration.

International students with pre-migration traumatic experiences go through a coping process both during and after the traumatic events.

Different coping strategies are used by international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences to cope with their contemporary daily lives post-migration.

Connection to the literature

As illustrated in the review of the literature, there is no literature that addresses the pre-migration traumatic experiences of international students, its impact on decision to study abroad and the coping strategies used by international students with these experiences. In acknowledgement of this, the research findings will be discussed based on its connections with previous literature on international Student migration, pre-migration traumatic experiences and coping strategies.

Theme 1: Pre-migration traumatic experiences of international students

In the literature pre-migration traumatic experiences are attributed to refugees and the obvious distress that they endure dealing with the physical and psychological trauma in their home countries (Khawaja et. al., 2008; Bhugra & Jones, 2001). However, this study though limited in its scope, found that international student experiences are quite complex and wide-ranging. International students also have traumatic experiences that leave them at risk for physical and psychological distress. According to Castaneda et al. (2017) very few studies have attempted to compare the migration experiences of refugees, asylum seekers and voluntary migrants. Though this study did not embark on a comparison, the findings suggests that international students can share similar pre-migration experiences as refugees and other involuntary migrants. The informants to this study described their pre-migration experiences of trauma in their home, which included cultural violence, physical violence and armed conflict.
Theme 2: Pre-migration traumatic experiences and decision to migrate

The results show a strong link between pre-migration traumatic events and the decision to study abroad of the respondents involved in the study. From the semi-structured interviews conducted cultural violence, physical violence and armed conflict were found to be among the pre-migration traumatic experiences shared among the informants. It was found that based on these experiences the participants of this study were “pushed” to migrate abroad to study. These results are inconsistent with the literature which often does not associate these kind of experiences with international students’ migration decisions/intentions. Contemporary theoretical approaches that have sought to explain the factors that “push” international students to study abroad (Beine, et al. 2014; Bassey 2012; Findlay, 2010; Choudaha and de Wit 2014; Perkins and Neumayer 2014; Rodriguez Gonzáles, et al. 2011 and van Mol and Timmerman 2014) have often suggested factors such as the lack of access to higher education in the home countries, network effects, colonial ties, cost of living, geographical proximity, future income, the reported quality of universities, common language, desire to learn a new language, better climates and the educational background of the students’ families. Consequently, it is acknowledged that these findings do not offer any concrete rebuttals to the already established literature; it does contribute to a more nuanced perspective to exploring international student migration.

Effectively, in the divided field of migration studies international students fall into the category of ‘voluntary migrants’ and as such are not often explored in regards to pre-migration traumatic experiences, which is a well-studied characteristic of ‘involuntary migrants’ such as refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced peoples. However, the findings of this study though limited in its focus suggests that international students can also fall in between these two categories. Through a phenomenological study of a sample of international students this study was able to collect data that suggests that there are international students with traumatic pre-migration experiences who because of these said experiences were motivated to migrate.

Push-pull theory is among the most cited theory in migration studies used to explain migration flows. It proposes a variety of negative push factors in the country of origin juxtaposed with a number of positive pull factors that attract migrants to the host country. With reference to international students the push-pull model often proposes economic, political and social factors as push factors and comparative advantages to these factors as pull factors. The overall consensus with this model is that the more disadvantageous a migrants’ home country is the more likely it is that they will migrate. This model is consistent with this study in that it
supports the fundamental findings that because of the disadvantageous experiences of international students in their home countries they were motivated to migrate. However, this model is limited in the fact that it is an economic model and the traumatic experience induced movement of international students is quite distinct from economical motivated movements of other migrants. Consequently, international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences do not necessarily have the element of choice like other ‘voluntary migrants’. This is a gray area which the theory or the literature does not address. Nonetheless, the theory proves effective on a more general and simplified level as it predicates that migration flows are influenced by push and pull factors.

Theme 3: Pre-migration traumatic experiences and Coping Strategies post migration

In response to the pre-migration traumatic experiences of international students, this study was able identify some of the different strategies used by international students post migration to help them to cope: social support, avoidance and attitude change. This was in line with the theoretical framework used in the study which was that of Lazarus and folkman (1984) coping strategies which stipulates that based on a cognitive appraisal of their environment individuals choose a coping strategy. Two forms of coping are proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emotion-focused and problem-focused. Consequently, as the theory suggests these categories are not mutually exclusive. Based on the findings of this study, it showed that the respondents used emotion-focused coping strategies in using ‘avoidance’, problem focused coping strategies in using ‘attitude change’ as well as a mixture of both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies in using social support. Based on the findings and its correlation to the tenets of the theory it is indicative to the theory’s applicability to the observations of the study.

The study informants reported that during times of difficulty they would either turn to their networks for support (social support), refuse to acknowledge the situation by normalizing their traumatic experiences (avoidance) and deciding to focus on the future as there was nothing they could do about it or they would change their attitude about the situation, articulating wishes and aspirations for the future (attitude change). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as a process of perceptual cognitive and behavioral tactics in order to deal with the internal and external demands brought on by a traumatic event. Theoretically, it is proposed that coping is a process rather than an experience as such individuals may alternate between the different
coping strategies in order to cope with the trauma that they experienced. This is evident from the fact that many of the informants in the study expressed using different coping strategies to cope and were not exclusively limited to emotion-focused or problem-focused. The study found that among the respondents problem-focused coping strategies were used in the form of (attitude change), emotion-focused coping strategies were used represented by the theme (avoidance). Additionally, the study revealed that the respondents used both emotion and problem-focused coping strategies reflected in their used of social support to cope post migration.

Consequently, the findings proposed that each informants decided upon their particular coping strategies through a process of cognitive appraisal: meaning that the each of the informants to the study interpreted their experiences as traumatic and impactful on their well-being or future and as such cognitively selected measures to cope (lazarus, 1984). For example Latoya because of her experience of armed conflict in her home country which caused the loss of her grandmother and the events that ensued afterwards it made her cognitively aware of the threat of the situation she experienced in her home country (primary appraisal); and even though she is currently studying in Sweden she is still affected by the trauma of those events as such through a secondary appraisal based on the assessment of the resources that she has available to her fact she decided to cope by clinging to her family who provides social support, using avoidance to provide herself with some temporary escape from the issues waiting for her back home and by having a positive attitude (attitude change). This three step appraisal process was shown to be a key method used for dealing with stress among the informants which led to their choice of either problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies. Consequently from the findings it is illustrated that many of the informants shared similarities in the coping strategies they used: Social support (latoya, Adam, Fatimah, Sheeree), Avoidance (Natasha, Latoya, Adam, Fatimah) and Attitude change (Latoya, Natasha, Adam, Fatimah). It is also important to mention that while certain core strategies remained constant among the informants’ different experiences defined the cognitive appraisal processes of the informants in this study.

**Conclusion**

In the scope of the globalized educational system, international student migrants are very important in contemporary higher education; targeted viscerally by institutions with attractive incentives and internationalized educational programmes (Becker and Kolster, 2012). Consequently, in the dichotomy in migration studies between voluntary and involuntary
migrants: international students are often seen as the favorable of the two (voluntary migrants) and the elite among that migrant category. Therefore, issues deriving from traumatic experiences that often are attached or reflected upon in reference to ‘involuntary migrants’ are seldom explored or even mentioned in the discourse about international student migrants. Furthermore, the literature on international student migrants and their experiences have often focused on the student migrants’ experiences in the host country and how they develop ‘transnational lives’ (Waters and Leung, 2013, Vasquez, et Al. 2014, Chiang, 2014, Collins, 2012 and Daniel 2014). Few studies have attempted to explore the pre-migration traumatic experiences of international student migrants in their home countries and it affects their decision to study abroad as well as their coping strategies post migration. This study attempted to add international student voices with pre-migration traumatic experiences in their home countries to the literature to foster a more nuanced understanding of the impact of pre-migration traumatic experiences on their migration decisions and their coping strategies post-migration. Currently, there is no available data on these types of experiences and its impacts in relation to international students. Unequivocally, the ambition was to allow a few of international students with pre-migration traumatic experiences to share their experiences in the hope that migration scholars among others may become more conscious of this phenomenon.

Further Research

While the scope of this study cannot produce any general conclusions on the pre-migration traumatic experiences of international students and their decision to study abroad as well as the coping strategies they use to cope post-migration as a result of having these experiences. It does help to address a highly neglected area in migration studies as well as to highlight the need for further research considerations.
Hej!

I would like to thank you very much for your willingness to participate in my Master’s Thesis project which is a “A Phenomenological Study on the pre-migration traumatic experiences of international students in their home countries, their decision to study abroad and their coping mechanisms post-migration”. The results of this research will primarily be submitted in the form of a thesis as part of the requirement for my Masters programme in International Migration and Ethnic Relations at Malmö University, Sweden.

I would like to book a convenient time, possibly, where we could meet for the in-depth interviews. The interview will be semi-structured and will focus on a few themes on which you are invited to speak freely. The themes will cover issues such as the situation/your experiences in your home country, your choice to leave as a student migrant and your experiences arriving here in Sweden. I will also collect some biographical information about you but I want to make it absolutely clear that your confidentiality and anonymity will be totally guaranteed.

I would also like to note that during the interview process you may at any time choose to conclude the interview as well as that you have the right to withdraw from the interview even after it has occurred. We would also like to ask your permission to record the interview which will be solely used for methodological purposes. The interview will be transcribed and after which all forms of individual identification will be made impossible in the transcribed document used for data processing.

Bio

Name of respondent:
Pseudonym:

Age:

Gender:

Origins (place, ethnicity, and region or similar):

Guiding questions/themes

Childhood

How was your childhood—first memories, parents, siblings, school, happy

Moments, sad moments, death in the family/community, diseases, marriages, love?

Experiences of traumatic events

Symbolic, cultural, direct, physical violence?

Forms of conflict experienced

Student revolts, organized crime, threat of being drafted, underlying conflicts

(E.g. previous wars, identity based organized violence leading to problematic everyday life experiences?)

Choosing to leave for studies

At what moment did the option of leaving for studies become interesting? Were

There any obvious reasons—violence, imminent threat of war/conflict, state

Repression—or were the reasons more of unease, feelings of being doomed, suffocated etc.?

Life in Sweden - What kinds of coping strategies do you use to cope with the stress of being in a new environment having had such experiences?

xxxxx

End of interview

I thank you very much for your participation. The information you shared will be extremely valuable for the quality of my thesis. I also ask permission to return to you for future interviews.
References


Websites


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