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While we are waiting

Uncertainty and empowerment among
asylum-seekers in Sweden

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Foreword

This is a study of how asylum-seekers experience waiting for a decision. Interviews were conducted in two Swedish towns during 2003. During these fieldworks, there were several people that helped anchor the study locally. Among these I would especially like to thank Lotta Lidén in Gothenburg and Katrin Rogulla in Uppsala.

The persons that made the study possible, however, were the asylum-seekers. Living in a difficult situation, the informants of this study went out of their way to tell me their stories and to illustrate them with pictures. They entrusted me with their thoughts on their past, present and future. For this I am thankful.

A short guide to the contents of the report: The two first chapters present the institutional context, methodological considerations and a short discussion on the theory of waiting. Readers who are most interested in seeing what the asylum-seekers told about their experiences can go directly to chapter 3. This is followed by a discussion and a list of selected findings. I have included an appendix which gives an account of the photo-method used in the study. Finally I give a few examples of the pictures that the asylum-seekers took.

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Oslo, May 2004

Jan-Paul Brekke

The ambivalence of asylum policies

All asylum-policies are characterized by ambivalence. Its role is to handle the arrival, screening, initial integration or return of people that seek protection in a country other than their own. When a person arrives and announces himself as an asylum-seeker, he does not know whether he will be granted permission to stay or will eventually have to go back. Neither do the authorities. The uncertainty connected to this process has a long list of consequences both for the asylum-seeker, as well as for the authorities organizing the process. Seen from the perspective of the asylum-seeker, the authorities of the exile country can give shelter from prosecution or choose not to believe or accept her story and turn her down. Ambivalence also marks the situation for the receiving state; for the authorities the asylum-seeker is either someone who is to be shut out and returned to their country of origin, or he is a potential new citizen. Until a decision is taken and given effect, both parties have to cope with a situation of ambivalence and uncertainty.

This report focuses on the situation for the individual asylum-seeker during the waiting period. In order to understand the individual's situation, however, attention has to be given to the surrounding context. A part of this is the authorities and their strategies for handling the waiting period. The study also has an instrumental side in that the understanding of the asylum-period will be seen in relation to the later integration in the exile country or the return to the applicant's country of origin.

There are two main questions that are asked in this study: How do asylum-seekers experience waiting for a decision in their asylum case? What are the consequences of this period on later integration or return?

In Sweden, as in many countries in Europe, these questions came to the front as the number of asylum-seekers waiting for a decision rose dramatically in the first few years after 2000. At the end of 2003, some 40000 applicants were spread across the country with undecided cases. One consequence of this was that the asylum-period was prolonged. This in turn meant an increase in the 'costs' connected to the application process for both parties involved. The financial cost for the Government of providing housing and food, but not less important – a serious increase in the burden on the individual asylum-seeker.

Parallel to constant efforts to shorten the processing period both in Sweden and elsewhere, attention has been called to what happens during this initial phase. This opens up for seeing the handling of asylum-seekers as a *comprehensive process*. From the day of arrival, a process of orientation, qualification and integration starts and continues until the individual is cleared for further residence or returns to their home country. Of course, the asylum-process can also be experienced as a negative period by the individual – one of *dis-orientation*, *dis-qualification* and *dis-integration*. The point is simply that the quality and content of the waiting period, is important.

It is in the interests of the Governments to secure that the asylum-seekers who are ultimately going to stay in the exile country will start orienting themselves towards an entry into the labor market as early as possible. The applicants that face a negative decision and a future return to their home country will, it is suggested, be most successful in returning if they have used the waiting period to prepare for that outcome. A strong and resourceful individual will have the best chances of succeeding be it in the exile society or her home country. It is however unclear how a reception policy should be formulated that simultaneously prepares the individual for integration and repatriation. In order to do so, one needs to understand the psychology and sociology of waiting. In addition to increasing the understanding of the phenomenon of waiting, the project seeks to identify the possibilities and limitations of empowerment¹ and integration of this vulnerable group.

The increase in arrivals sent the European governments looking for restrictive measures. In Sweden these came in the form of proposals by the Government to the Parliament at the start of 2004 (Gov.prop.03/04:50 and 59). Parallel to this development on controlling the number of arrivals, there was an interest in the qualitative side to the challenge of a prolonged asylum-period (SOU 2003:75). It was said to be a win-win situation, in that both Governments and the asylum-seekers would benefit from an increased understanding of the asylum-period.

The interest for understanding the dynamics of waiting came primarily from actors on the European level, but was embraced at the national levels. The initiative to both the activities to be studied in this report came from the European Equal program, with financial backing from the European Social Fund. The program was established by the European Union to combat discrimination and inequalities in the labor market. It involved the effort of member states to encourage innovation in the handling of asylum-seekers transition from arrival, screening and through to a position in the host society,

1. Empowerment is to be understood as the process of individuals (re)gaining control over their life in such a way that they are able to actively influence central factors in their surroundings.

or in the case of rejection – a positive return to their home country. Good examples were to be spread to the other member states as a step on the way towards a harmonized European reception policy. These efforts ran parallel to the strenuous process towards a common European asylum system (CEAS) in 2003 and the first half of 2004.

The actual testing of new forms for making the waiting period as smooth as possible was done by the Equal Program in the form of so-called *development partnerships* (DPs). These were local and regional public, private and non-governmental organizations making coordinated efforts to promote and facilitate the introduction of asylum-seekers and so-called newly arrived (Swedish: Nyanlända).² Development partnerships were in operational in all the EU member states in 2003 and 2004.

In Sweden four DPs were spread across the country. They included activities like the rehabilitation of traumatized refugees, rehabilitation through educational and training measures, competence building for asylum-seekers aged 16-18, and finally new methods for increasing integration in the labor market. The content of two of these four will be described more in detail below.

One central premise that the DPs had to fulfill in order to receive financial support was there should be several partners responsible for the project. Both local government and non-governmental organizations had to be among the participants. The need for cooperation among partners from different parts of society that come into contact with asylum-seekers had already been established. A series of different public authorities had made a principal agreement to seek closer cooperation in the field of handling the waiting period.³ In Sweden, this show of good will from the very top of the institutions involved in the handling of asylum-seekers meant that the local initiatives in principle at least, would have optimal points of departure.

This piece of research is part of a small group studies that are set to follow different sides to the DP's activities. Under the cap of the Swedish National Thematic Group (on asylum) one study focuses on structural aspects of how the reception of asylum-seekers is organized. Maria Appelqvist at Malmö University is conducting this study. In addition, all DPs have evaluators that follow their development.

2. The group 'newly arrived' included both asylum-seekers waiting for their cases to be decided and persons who had already been given permanent residence. The first group is the focus of this report.

3. The participants in the over-arching agreement (Överenskommelse om utveckling av introduktionen för flyktingar och andra invandrare (16.01.2003) included: The National Labor Market Board (Arbetsmarknadsstyrelsen), the National Integration Office (Integrationsverket), the Swedish Migration Board (Migrationsverket), the National Board of Education (Skolverket) and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities (Svenska Kommunförbundet).

The present study focuses on the asylum-seekers. Together with a study conducted from a psychological angle by Rudi Firnhaber (2004), this study will seek to give at least a starting point for the understanding of waiting under the special exile conditions.

The two development partnerships

The first development partnership I visited was *Arrival Gothenburg*. The DP consisted of five NGOs, the City of Gothenburg and the regional office of the Swedish Migration Board. Four of the NGOs were religious organizations. Several of the involved partners were already cooperating when the Equal project was launched.

The project was an answer to the question: What would be the ideal introduction program for asylum-seekers? People that work with organizing the public activities for this group in Sweden constantly have to take financial and other limitations into account. With backing from Equal in addition to local partners, the Arrival Gothenburg project put together a program under more generous conditions.

In line with the official guidelines of the EQUAL program, Arrival Gothenburg set out to prepare the participants for both possible outcome of their asylum process; integration or repatriation (Application ESF May 2002).

The operative side of the Gothenburg project was coordinated by the NGO-partner called Göteborgsinitiativet (Gothenburg Initiative). This organization was closely linked to another of the NGO partners, the local branch of YMCA (KFUM – KFUK). The lessons were given in a building belonging to this organization where the asylum-seekers also could meet and spend time together. The building also housed a secretariat that was in charge of coordinating and organizing the activities for the group.

The building in itself was an important part of the context for the project. The house was old and charming with a little patio in front. With several rooms at their disposal in addition to the main classroom, and with a small cafe open to all, the premises were well suited as a meeting-place.

The full-day course had 15 participants at the time I visited. The topics covered a wide range of relevant knowledge about their situation and the Swedish society in addition to learning the language. Time was set apart each week to discuss the EU and European issues. Arrival Gothenburg also organized field trips and were engaged in establishing contacts between the participants and the employers (WG Report Arrival Gothenburg 29.03.03).

The second DP I visited was called RE-KOMP and the activity where I did my interviews was located in Uppsala.⁴ The course was called *Breaking the code* (Swedish: Vi knäcker koden) and functioned as an integrated part of the local school's arrangement for newly arrived asylum-seekers.

The aim of this part time project was to help the young participants (aged 16-20) to quickly get a grip on their lives in Sweden. This involved helping them understand and enabling them to handle the challenges they were surrounded with as newly arrived asylum-seekers. In order to do so, the strategy was to focus on the unwritten rules and codes of the Swedish society. The student was to be made aware of the cultural differences that exist between his or her home country and Sweden.

The lessons were held by the teachers of native language, but were organized and planned together with the teachers of Swedish as a second language. This set up was chosen to secure that both cultural backgrounds were represented in this effort to quickly bridge the gap between the asylum-seeker's old and new environment.

When I presented this study to the group of teachers involved in the course, there were some skeptical voices. They wanted to protect their pupils from the possible strain of participating in the study – an understandable attitude given their fragile situation. Through a discussion of the rationale behind the research project and assurances that the individuals would be treated well, they all agreed to promote the study to their pupils. After the meeting the cooperation was seamless.

Design and methodology

The time frame of this study was twelve months and the study made use of several data sources. In addition to earlier research and relevant literature, written material from the DPs was used as data. This provided information on the organizational context for the asylum-seekers within the DPs, as well as on the individual experience of waiting.

In order to understand the local DP projects, a continuing contact was kept with key-staff and the project coordinators.

4. The abbreviation RE-KOMP is short for Rehabilitation and reorientation through the development of competence (Rehabilitering och reorientering genom kompetensutveckling). The umbrella of cooperating organizations and public institutions included: The Municipality of Uppsala (Uppsala Kommun), City of Malmö (Malmö Stad), County Council of Uppsala (Landstinget Uppsala Län), Red Cross (Röda Korset), NybyVision, SECA projectledning KB, the Migration Board Uppsala, and Sydvästra Skånes Sjukvårdsdistrikt.

The main source of information was however a series of qualitative interviews with asylum-seekers that were in some way connected to the various DPs. Informants from two of the four partnerships were invited to participate. Of the two that were not selected, one included refugees that had already obtained permanent residency, while the asylum-seekers connected to the other were invited to participate in Firnhaber's study (2004). To avoid burdening these from a second round of research they were excluded from this study. From the two remaining DPs a total of 15 informants participated in this project.

Both of the DPs were located in cities that are among the 10 most populated in Sweden. In Uppsala the project included a total of 15 participants aged 21 to 40, whereof 6 ended up as part of this study. In Uppsala the DP included around 20 youths between 17 and 20 years old. As in the Gothenburg, all of them were informed of the research project and were invited to participate. Nine out of the twenty did.

In this study I have protected the informants by changing or leaving out their names. In some instances I have gone one step further and also changed other data in order to secure their anonymity in the study. Although it would be difficult for an outsider to recognize the identity of one of the informants, one also has to consider the possibility of being identified by other participants and employees of the DPs. At the end of the report there are a handful of photos. These were selected to secure the anonymity of the asylum-seekers that had reservations regarding being displayed. Explicit agreements were made with the informants concerning the use of the pictures (see appendix 1).

The interviews were designed to be flexible and open. That meant that the informants were asked a series of pre-prepared questions, but that the interview-guide at the same could be adapted to the situation. For example the order of the questions could be changed around. New questions could also be inserted, topics that appeared especially interesting could be elaborated, and questions that seemed too direct for individual respondents could be dropped.

The interviews included several questions that were potentially sensitive. It was my task to judge the state of the individual informant and then decide which questions should be included in the particular interview. This was mainly done from the ethical principle that participating in this type of research project should never leave the informants feeling worse than they did before. Another reason was that strong emotions could sidetrack and abruptly end the interview altogether. Earlier interviews with refugees had however taught me that it can be difficult to predict which questions that will elicit crying (Brekke 2001:43). This was confirmed in the two rounds of interviews for this study. Seemingly minor details could make the informants start crying, while the normally sensitive questions could be answered with great ease by the same person.

The use of flexible guides is a well-established form of qualitative interviewing within the social sciences. In addition to this method, I chose to ask the asylum-seekers to use single-use cameras. A couple of weeks before the interviews, they were asked to document their situation using the cameras. Although this method has been used before, it has so only to a limited degree.⁵ As a consequence of this, I partially had to develop the method as I went along.⁶

Using cameras had several positive effects. In short it made preparing for the interviews easier for both parties, it increased the quality of the actual face-to-face meeting, and it also made it easier to analyze and pass on the content of the interviews.

No matter how one looks at it, my asylum-seekers were in a precarious situation. The uncertainty surrounding their cases made them highly aware of persons and factors that could influence the outcome. Because of this I had to be extremely cautious when I presented the study and conducted the interviews. I had to establish the distance between me and the authorities that were involved in their everyday life and the handling of their cases. I stressed the fact that the initiative to the Equal program came from outside Sweden, and that their stories could contribute in shaping the future European asylum regime.

Before meeting the informants I was in doubt whether my Norwegian nationality would affect the interviews. As it turned out, this only helped my efforts to put a distance between myself and the Swedish authorities. I was a stranger too.

Language and communication have played major roles in this study. All the interviews were done with an interpreter present. These spoke the native language of the informant and Swedish. With my Norwegian background and English as the written language of this report, there were constantly four languages involved. I have been conscious of the challenges connected to this multi-lingual situation and have been particularly attentive when handling the quotes from the asylum-seekers.

The design of this study – conducting qualitative interviews in two out of the four DPs – was largely a result of the context of the project. It was important to me and for the quality of the study that the participation was made absolutely voluntary. Anything else would have been both methodologically and ethically problematic. The asylum-seekers were invited. The ones that wanted to participate were welcome. If they wanted to use the cameras, that was great. If they only wanted to do the interview, that was fine as well. Even if

5. See Clausen, Anders (2003), Staunes, Dorte (1998) For a more elaborate description and discussion, see appendix 1.

6. My experience from this experiment may be of use to others, and is therefore given in detail in appendix 1.

they changed their minds during the process, I made it clear during the information meeting that was no problem. In other words I wanted to make the threshold for joining the study as low as possible, at the same time as not participating should not make these already vulnerable individuals feel uneasy. As a result of this strategy, I ended up with motivated informants that for the most part followed the intended process of taking pictures and showing up for the later interviews. From the feed-back I got during the interviews as well as later from other sources close to the asylum-seekers, it seemed that the study succeeded in what was the most important ethical precondition for doing the study – that those that participated saw it as a positive experience.

The participants

Among the informants were people that lived in self-organized housing (Swedish: Eget boende) and in reception centers. Most of the participants had come to Sweden on their own. Three were daughters that lived with their families. The asylum-seekers had limited educational background. Only a few came from families where the parents had some sort of higher education. Five of the fifteen were girls/women.

How representative are the individuals, the stories, the interpretations, discussions and conclusions that are presented in this report? This type of research does not strive for being representative in a traditional way used in quantitative studies. It will for example not aim at establishing how many percent of the asylum-seekers in Sweden that experience their waiting this way or the other. By doing in-depth interviews, however, this study can describe and analyze some of the ways of managing the asylum-period that are definitely represented in the asylum-seeker population in Sweden. Achieving variation and saturation were the main concepts concerning the selection of informants (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The study aims at understanding the situations of my informants. By describing and analyzing their characteristics, common traits can be distinguished from the individual idiosyncrasies. These will be pieces in the puzzle of asylum waiting.

One of my preconceptions of the nature of asylum-waiting was that I expected there to be several ways of handling the waiting situation. For example it is reasonable to assume that the asylum-period would depend upon how the individual asylum-seeker saw her or his chances for a positive result. If one instead of dividing the asylum-seekers in two simplified groups of *real refugees* and *unfounded applicants* introduces a continuum of subjective estimation of legitimacy of their claim and probability of success, it should affect how the waiting period is experienced.

This is relevant when we consider which voices that are presented in this study. Because an important question is which voices that are not present. There are two answers to this, and both are based on limited information and speculation.

The first one is that one would expect that from the total of participants in the activities of the two DPs, the people that were doing well chose to take pictures and be interviewed. If reality was that simple, and the interviews that were made showed that the waiting period was one of distress, one possible conclusion would be that the rest of the group were experiencing the same and possibly were even worse off. Most probably, however, the reasons for not participating were manifold. The interviews with the staff that were working close to the two groups did however say that they could see no systematic difference between the participants in this study and those that chose not to participate.

The next and more complex answer takes into account the wider population of asylum-seekers waiting in Sweden. In Arrival Gothenburg the asylum-seekers went through a screening process to get a spot in the activity. In the Uppsala project, all newly arrived automatically qualified. If we stay with the continuum, one should maybe expect the respondents from the first DP to be more assured of the chances for a positive result. In the *Breaking the code* project, there was nothing suggesting a systematic difference. Covering the two groups should therefore make it possible to encounter central questions facing the waiting asylum-seekers. By making the participation voluntary, one important type of waiting would most probably be excluded from the study. That is the asylum-period of people who have low or no expectation of obtaining asylum, but instead use the period for legitimate purposes. A different methodological strategy would have to be chosen in order to capture and describe their situation.

Several of the dominant nationalities among the total of asylum-seekers that were waiting in Sweden in 2003, were also present in the study. Among them were people from Iraq, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Belarus, Eritrea and the Ukraine. Judging from what the people surrounding the informants told me, there were no signs of the informants being significantly different from other asylum-seekers waiting at the time.

Research on asylum and waiting

In this chapter I will bring up and discuss a few pieces of research that can supply concepts and help us understand the situation for waiting asylum-seekers in Sweden.

Some works concentrate on the situation for subgroups, like families with children. Sara Blüchers study from 1984 for example, gave an account of the living conditions for 80 families with children living in Stockholm. One of her conclusions was that they had a range of needs that were not reported to the city's authorities. The study also lends support to the statement that the strain of waiting increases with time (1984:65). Other studies have municipalities as their entity.

Within the field of psychology there are a series of studies done on the effects of pre-flight conditions compared to the post-flight experiences for the wellbeing of asylum-seekers (Ekblad, Abazari and Eriksson 1999, Sundqvist et al. 2000, Hermansson and Timpka 1999, Ekblad. et al 1994). Sundqvist et al. found support for earlier studies that saw greater negative effects from stress during the asylum period than events that happened before the asylum-seekers came into exile (2000).

A group of Danish social psychologists summed up their experiences from working with refugees in a book called 'The Psychological Crisis of Refugees' (Arenas et. al 1987). Here they use the term *trauma of return* to describe one such crisis. For the persons suffering from this state, the hope and expectation of one day returning home overshadows the wish and ability to integrate. This trauma paralyzes the refugee and keeps him from doing things that in his opinion are contradictory to returning. He lives with his suitcases packed and with his mind closed off to the outside world (1987:49). This book does not explicitly deal with asylum-seekers. In their precarious situation one could perhaps extrapolate and state that they are forced to live in a trauma of return.

In connection with the mass outflow from the former Yugoslavia in 1991-1993, a series of studies were conducted in the Nordic countries (Berg 1998, Schwartz 1998, Ålund 1998). Studying Bosnian refugees with temporary protection in Norway, I found that living the uncertainty of return was stressful as

time passed (Brekke 2001). One solution was to choose a line of activity that *either* pointed towards a continued life in Norway, *or* a return to their home country. The study questioned whether the Norwegian authorities' argument that there was no conflict between the parallel goals of integration and return was possible to defend. I also discussed the complicated relationship between the three elements of temporality for refugees: time, integration and return.⁷

One more topic from that study will be mentioned here, and that is the combination of sociology of time and concept of identity. The thesis is that in order to do identity-work, the individual needs some sense of a future self (Johansen 1984). The limited time-horizon offered to for example asylum-seekers make the (re)formation of identity difficult. The answers to the questions 'who am I?', 'who are we?' and 'who are they?', are hard to find given the uncertain situation of the informants of this study. Some may seek continuity with their former status, while other may have fled their country in order to avoid the answers that were given to these questions.

Zoran Slavnic was part of a parallel study in Sweden. He followed the situation for the so-called Bosnian-Croats that received an ad hoc version of the now established temporary protection institute. Living under these conditions presented the individuals with tough challenges. The constant threat of forced return that marked the first years for this group in Sweden put great strain on the individual refugees (Slavnic 2000).

Another contributor to the Swedish study of Bosnian refugees was Nihad Bunar (1998). Himself a refugee from Bosnia, Bunar examined the experience of liminality. This concept imported from social anthropology point to the position in-between two statuses. Bunar distinguishes between a structural and cultural dimension (1998:38), and argues that while one can become a part of the new society in a structural sense, the process of being fully accepted by one self and others as a non-deviator, is more complicated. According to Bunar, the asylum-seekers position is one of both cultural and structural liminality. 'He or she waits to either be given full access to the institutions of the welfare state (PUT), or being physically removed from the 'waiting room'' (Bunar 1998:38).

One recent contribution in the field of asylum policy in Sweden is the SOU no. 75 (2003) called 'Establishing in Sweden'. Here there are implicitly discussed two different theses about the relationship between the duration of waiting and later integration. According to the authors, the picture distributed from the media is that waiting is stressful and with time is likely to disqualify the asylum seekers from integrating in Sweden. Stressing the scarcity of re-

7. There is variation in the concepts used to describe the movement of asylum-seekers or refugees from an exile-country and back to the country or area they came from. I will use return in this report as a broad unspecified term including both voluntary and forced repatriation, and the grey zone in-between the two (Brekke 2001).

search done on this topic, they refer to two studies that support an opposite thesis – namely that the passing of time opens up for later integration. The contact with arenas of integration will increase with time, thus leaving long-time waiters in a better position than those that have waited for a shorter period. Studies done by Rooth (1999), and Larsson (SOU 75:176) both seem to support this opposite hypothesis. In the SOU, the authors go on to describe the difficult situation the asylum-seekers are to suggest a renewed focus on a shortening of the handling of asylum cases. In this report the two theses are discussed and taken a step further.

The Swedish authorities want the asylum period to be one of qualification for both integration in Sweden *and* for a possible return. But will not the qualification for one of the two lead to a des-qualification for the other? In the next chapter we will among others meet a girl whose parents in their handling of the asylum-situation gradually became less capable of both integration and return. Meanwhile their children adapted to the local community, forgot their native language and thereby disqualified themselves for return.

In the 1970s the sociologist Aaron Antonovsky developed the concept of *sense of coherence* (SOC). This was the outcome of studies that wanted to find factors that made some people handle stressful situations better than others (1987:16). Antonovsky found three elements that together gave the overarching sense of coherence.

The first component is the need for the individual to see the environment as well ordered and understandable instead of as chaotic and random. In other words it is a question of *comprehensibility*. Knowing how your surroundings work will give a sense of predictability (1987:17). The next element is *manageability*. This indicates the extent to which one feels one can handle the challenges the environment poses. It is a question of having sufficient resources in oneself or in one's network to be able to act upon them and find solutions. With a high score on this dimension, an individual will not feel victimized or unfairly treated. The third component is *meaningfulness*. Are the challenges you meet in life worthy of engagement and investing energy in to surmount? The people that score high on this indicator of coherence would answer affirmatively to this question. To them their situation and the surrounding world 'makes sense' (1987:18). The Swedish psychologist Solvig Ekblad cites her colleague Per Borgå (1993), and argues that employment and network have to be included as elements together with the SOC factors if one is to understand the health of waiting refugees (Ekblad 1995).

The concept of SOC seems relevant for the understanding of asylum-seekers situation. Although there is an element of time built into the term, one could add Anthony Giddens concept of *ontological security* to put emphasis on the importance of predictability (Giddens 1984, Slavnic 1998). To Giddens this is one important component of a very basic existentialist experience of

feeling safe in the everyday situation. Having some idea of what and where one will be in the near future is essential to the experience of the present.

If we pull the SOC concept out from the border with psychology and into the open air of sociology, we can state an opposite concept. If SOC indicates that the individual is in control of his or her life situation (and future) the lack of control would be the opposite. With the concept of control, an element of power is inherent. The lack of control could be seen as a lack of power. In the mandate for this report, the concept of empowerment was indeed connected to Antonovsky's SOC. This study was asked to comment on the possibilities for empowerment for asylum-seekers waiting in Sweden. This wish has perhaps a picture of the applicants as disempowered as a starting point. The powerlessness will here be taken to mean a situation in which the individual cannot control elements in the surrounding that influence his or her life, or the effects they have on his or her person. In other words, it would be a situation that is the opposite of one characterized by a high sense of coherence.

The term powerlessness points to the individual. It is confronted with a perception and an imperative that one's time should be put to use. What has been called the powerlessness of freedom appears when one is expected to fill one's time with something meaningful, but lack the means and preconditions to do so. Instead one is left with option of getting rid of the surplus time – wasting it (Bringedal and Osland 2003: 345). Sociologists studying teenagers 'waiting to grow up' have discussed a connection between powerlessness and *boredom* (Bringedal and Osland 2003).

The concept of *awareness contexts* was introduced by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Their study was on how the signs of a positive or negative development were given and experienced by seriously ill patients. They described the patients and their families heightened sensitivity of signs from doctors, nurses, the allocation of treatment etc. The more uncertain the situation, the more sensitive the actors involved. The asylum-seekers presented in this material could be said to be in a similar situation of *heightened awareness*.

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The experience of waiting

Even in a prison they operate with a time limit! “This is when you are going to be free”, they’ll tell you. But here they only tell you to wait, just wait... (Un-accompanied Afghan, 17 years old, after 10 months in Sweden).

In this chapter the voices of the asylum-seekers themselves are going to be heard. As mentioned in chapter 2, I hold three elements to be central to the phenomenon of waiting – time, return and integration. I will use these concepts as organizing principles here, starting with a few remarks on the experience of time, followed by return and integration, before the three are seen in relation to each other. By describing the interrelation between the three, I mean to cover the most important aspects of the sociology of waiting. Remember, the asylum-seekers have a single goal: Obtaining a permanent permit to stay in Sweden (here subsumed under integration). While the authorities has the dual goal of either providing for a swift integration into the Swedish society, or the return of the asylum-seekers to their home country. From the day the application papers are handed in until one of these goals are met, time itself is at work making some of these goals more likely and easier to obtain than others.

Lost in Time

The quote at the top of this chapter can be seen as an entrance to the highly complicated field of how time influenced the asylum-seekers’ experience of waiting. Trying for a while to hold time separate from integration and the possibility of return, I will describe a couple of sides to the phenomenon here and then discuss them further in the next chapter.

In the quote, the boy pointed to an element of their situation that the asylum-seekers found stressful, namely that the waiting was open-ended.

For how long can a person wait for the residence permit (PUT)?⁸ We have no life apart from thinking about this residence permit. Whoever you ask, you get nowhere. They just tell you to wait. But for one more day? One more month? One more year? How much longer must I wait to know what my destiny is? (Boy 18, unaccompanied Afghan)

The uncertainty about how long they were going to have to wait before a result of their cases were ready, came in addition to the lack of certainty about the actual outcome of their cases. Living with an unclear time horizon had serious consequences for the individual as I will come back to.

There are several sides to the handling of individual asylum-cases that makes it difficult for the Migration Board to predict how long it will need to reach a decision (Norström 2004, SOU 2003:75). There is therefore good reason for the employees of the Migration Board to abstain from estimating duration of the case to individual applicants.

Among my respondents, however, there were people that believed they had been promised, with a varying degree of certainty, that their cases would be decided within 4, 6 or 10 months. Some said that the information had come directly from the persons in charge of their cases in the Migration Board, some had the information from brochures with perhaps outdated duration estimations, while others again based their beliefs and hopes on information from people they met in exile.

The point here is however not the authenticity of these promises, it is instead to point to the intensity in clinging to these points in time and to show how important certainty about the length of the waiting period is. One indication of this is the reactions that the asylum-seekers experienced when these points in time fail to materialize.

The first day we got here, they gave us a booklet in Dari and English. It said that it would take maximum six months before an answer would be given in a case involving an under aged applicant. I thought it would take around three to four months, but now eleven months have passed (Afghan 16 years old).

A girl from the Ukraine said that she had been promised a deadline when she first contacted the Migration Board. Their failure to live up to this point in time had become a sort of a mantra of deceit for this asylum-seeker.

They (the Migration Board) said that we would receive an answer within six months! (...) First they said it would take six months. They said it would take six months! Every day when I go to get the mail I think – maybe today. You

8. The Swedish word the asylum-seekers used for residence permit was permanent upphållstillstånd. The much used abbreviation for this is PUT.

just wait for something, something that is empty, which does not exist. God-dammit! It must come! They are making people disappointed! (18 years old. 40 months of waiting).

This girl and her family were in a different stage of waiting than the Afghan boy referred to above. Their situation illustrates an important point that I have come across in earlier research when it comes to the refugees' experience of the application process. And that is the impression that they do not count negative decisions as valid (Berg 1998, Brekke 2001). In contrast to the Afghan boy who was still waiting for the authorities' first say in his case, the case of the girl and her family had a longer story to it. After having appealed an initial negative decision to the Aliens Appeals Board without succeeding, the case had been readmitted to the Migration Board.⁹

Seen from the perspective of the authorities, there are two way of handling the uncertainty surrounding the duration of the case handling that both are experienced as problematic by the asylum-seekers. Not being told when one can expect an answer is tough. This open-endedness gives a draining feeling that increases as the waiting period is prolonged. On the other hand the seekers that felt they had been led to expect an answer after a certain period, that turned out not to be right, were left in a perhaps even more desperate state of being lost in time.

In an ideal world the obvious solution for the authorities would be to give the asylum-seekers dates for their particular case, and then follow this schedule. As mentioned earlier, however, this may not be easy to achieve. It would for example mean that one would have to solve the problems of establishing the seekers identity and secure enough manpower to be able to handle fluctuations in the number of arrivals from one year to the next.

Jumping the queue

One side to the time aspect of the waiting period that my informants reacted strongly to was that the timing of the decisions seemed to be random. This contributed to the feeling of not being in control of their situation. It also made the system appear as unjust. The decisions were not taken in succession in a way that the asylum-seekers could understand. Most importantly – it meant that someone that arrived to Sweden after you would in many cases get their decision before you got yours.

9. According to the girl, employees at the Migration Board had admitted to making a procedural mistake in the earlier handling of the case. The phenomenon of not counting the negative decisions as 'decisions' has an interesting connection to the wish to neglect the possibility of a negative outcome that will be discussed below.

The worst thing is when someone jumps the queue and is given their residence permit ahead of my family (17 year old girl from Africa).

In some cases this treatment was experienced as particularly unjust. This was when the persons that jumped the queue had comparable background, came from the same country, had similar stories to tell etc.

This is a difficult period marked by uncertainty and lack of fairness. People that arrived after me are allowed to stay. I thought that I was the first one that was going to be granted a residence permit of our small group. I was the first to start the course and the first to be given a part time position at a trainee at a workplace. Now there are only two more in addition to myself that have not received permanent residency (Man, 39, Arab).

Seen from the perspective of the asylum-seekers, the lack of transparency in the Migration Board's handling of the cases added to the process' character of being guided by randomness. This in turn reinforced the asylum-seekers uncertainty and feeling of being lost in time.

Even in school I suffer. I have been here for 10 months now, but when someone new arrives, he is put in the same class as me! There is no progression! They should separate us. When I tell them this, they tell me to wait until I get my residency. 'Then you will attend a bigger school' (Boy, 18, Afghan)

They were not given specific dates of when they could expect an answer and they could not compare themselves to others in the same situation. In total there were few cues to be taken from the surroundings that could help them to orient themselves in time. This may have contributed to a feeling that their future was out of their control (Brekke 2001). They did not feel they could influence the important decision in any way. In my study of Bosnian refugees on temporary protection in Norway, I found that some meant that a strong integration effort in exile would make their case for staying more solid. This resulted in an adaptation that to the uncertain future that I called *hyper-integration* (Brekke 2001).

The strong sense of injustice stemming from the non-sequential response on the applications also points to a wider phenomenon that can contribute to understand the situation of the waiting asylum-seekers. The concept that I am aiming at is *relative waiting*. This concept is inspired by the descriptions of relative deprivation in studies social inequality (SSB 2003). It simply points out that individual experience of waiting is dependent on others. "The length of my waiting is mirrored by the waiting of others." The thesis is that it is ok to wait for a longer period if the people that one compares oneself to share one's destiny. It is one's period of waiting *relative* to others that matter in the

judgment of whether one has waited *too* long. At the same time it is most likely that this thesis has its limitations. Certain complicating processes that are related to the passing of time and that are described here will make the prolonged waiting period a strenuous affair regardless of the waiting of others.

Subjective time

So far I have described the asylum-seeker's experience of time directly linked to deadlines and the passing of weeks and months. But, as I mentioned in chapter 2, time can also be seen from a stricter subjective side (Bergson 1990, Brekke 2001). From this perspective the focus is not the chronological sequential time, but rather how the individuals experience and relate to their own past, present and future. Not knowing what the outcome of their cases would be or when the final decision would be taken, several descriptions of being in limbo were given by the asylum-seekers.

One Arab-speaking man at one stage of our interview pointed to my coffee mug that was standing on the table between us. He told me to reach out for it. When I did, he quickly pulled it away, but immediately asked me to do it again.

This mug is like my future. My situation is as if someone moves the cup each time I reach for it. The permanent residency is not what I am actually dreaming of, but only the key to my future. (Man, 38, Africa)

This man was spinning in his tracks. He could not get started with his future. He had left his past behind, his future was blocked by the pending decision, and his present was in-between the two. He was in-between the life he had lived and the one he hoped to live in Sweden. But every time he tried to take control of his present and future, he was reminded that it was not in his power to do so.

Many of the questions I asked were difficult to answer for the respondents without using illustrations and metaphors. Talking about time, for example, was made easier by relating the experience to something more concrete. The feeling of being outside time was one of these topics.

The waiting is like being in the middle of an ocean and not knowing whether you will survive or not. You don't know what your destiny will be. Maybe you can't get out and drown. (Boy, 18, Afghan)

This particular informant had a tough time waiting. One could add to his illustration that he was treading water while he waited to be saved – i.e. receive a positive answer, and after 12 months he was getting tired doing so. Others

looked for relief from their uncertain situation from sources outside this world.

I live as if I was in the darkness. What gives me hope is Gods will. Often I feel down, but the word of God gives me power. At the same time I feel divided between hope and fear (Man, 28, Africa).

A bit further down in this report I will discuss the consequences for integration of this experience of being set aside from ordinary life. First, however, it is important to explore the more immediate consequences for coping with the day-to-day situation.

The physical manifestations of disintegrated time

In the interviews I asked the asylum-seekers what they did during a normal day and on weekends. The stories they told naturally included the organized courses¹⁰ that were the focal point of this study. These were central elements of activity in day-to-day lives dominated by reflection, passivity and waiting.

During the day I am at school. I live only 100 meters from it. After school I go back to my room. Then the thoughts come back. I stand in front of the window and look out. Then I remember where I am. You can really feel the pressure on your nerves (Boy, 17, Afghan)

Several of my informants told me about near catatonic ways of spending their time. One boy told me that he used to spend time in front of the mirror in his room. He also took a picture that shows him standing in that position, thinking:

Now I am here – what happened? What will happen to me in the future? Three years have passed since I last saw my family. No one knows where they are. When I look in the mirror I think – what will it be like? What will happen? The days are extremely long. They never end! (Boy, 17, Afghan).

As we will see in the discussion of integration, there is a connection between their uncertain future, pre-flight experiences and a lack of concentration. It was difficult to read study or concentrate on other activities when the mind was preoccupied.

10. In this report I use both courses, activities and projects as words to describe what the development partnerships organized for the asylum-seekers. The three terms are used interchangeably.

My informants also reported other physical problems that they related to their strenuous situation. Having difficulties sleeping was the most prominent of these and was reported mainly by the ones living in the reception centre. In my material I found different degrees of this problem. They reported everything from having problems falling asleep at night to a disturbed sleep-pattern and dependence on medication.

When I think about the decision, then thoughts come to my head that say that I risk being sent back to Afghanistan. Those thoughts are horrible and when I think too much about this I get a headache. Then I say – now I have to sleep ... but I cannot sleep. It's 4 AM and I want to sleep, but I can't (Boy Afghan, 16.).

The word 'tired' was used and its double meaning was commented upon. They were mentally tired of waiting and physically tired from the lack of sleep. It could be hard for them and for me to distinguish between the two. They appeared to be part of the same problem. For some the disturbed sleep was accompanied by physical symptoms.

I have waited for twelve months. I am tired and very nervous. I didn't use to tremble, but now my hands shake. And I can't sleep (Boy, Russian, 17).

Sleeping disturbance is commonly accepted as a symptom of the psychopathological diagnosis Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – but I believe the phenomenon in this context can bring us to a further understanding of the asylum-seekers situation (Johansson 1998). A recent psychological study on refugees in Sweden found that factors in exile were more important than pre-flight factors for their mental well being (Sundqvist et.al 2000). It was at least quite clear that the sleeping problems experienced among my respondents were related in some way to their temporal situation.

And when you have that type of thoughts, you cannot read – my head gets tired and I have to sleep. I sleep two to three hours during the day. Then I stay awake the whole night. Often during the night my fingertips go numb and my teeth ache, so I talk to the employees. I need to take a sleeping pill every night. Then the next day I am tired and cannot study. (Boy, Afghan 18).

It is easy to envision the possibility for self-reinforcing negative circles here. Worries results in lack of sleep – which gives less activity and energy during the day – lack of meaning – worries – lack of sleep. To distinguish cause and effect here is not a simple task. The lack of sleep will quickly become part of the problem.

Time without direction

One way of describing the situation for the waiting asylum-seekers is to say that they experienced *directionless time*. The concept is a combination of time and space and characterizes the unclear future for the asylum-seekers (Brekke 2001:70). Situated between past and a future, their present does not point in a specific direction. Although they hope that they will be allowed to stay in Sweden, they do not know. Without a future to steer towards, the person is not given any clues on how to act in the present. They do not know what comes after the waiting.

Their surroundings supply them with constant reminders that their situation is temporary. Classmates, teachers, personnel and neighbors leave, move or return to their home country. They move or are requested to move themselves. The only stable thing in their everyday life is their waiting for the result of their case. In the pictures they took for this study, one can see that the walls in their rooms are empty. The ones in self-residence could put their things together and move on quickly. They were in a temporary situation and surrounded themselves with temporality.

Phases of waiting?

Several attempts have been made to describe the situation for refugees from pre-flight to integration in exile in the terms of phases (Eitinger 1981, Brekke 2001). The splitting up of the continuous experience has also been criticized for focusing too much on conflict and discontinuity (Berg 1999). I have not been able to find any phase-theory developed specifically for the experience of waiting for asylum. According to Eitinger the migration act will be followed by a period of 'over compensating' – satisfying immediate needs, then came a period of decomposition – marked by confrontation, and finally a phase of reorientation. The theory was developed and used in studies of migrants. Although their situation in many regards resemble that of the asylum-seekers, the differences are important. For the discussion here, I will only point to the findings among my informants that they were stuck in the phase of decomposition, to use Eitinger's term.

If we return to the discussion of whether the use of phases will increase our understanding of the waiting of asylum-seekers, it is wise to confront the interview material. I posed this question indirectly to the respondents. I wanted to know whether it felt different to wait now – that is from 6 to 40 months after they arrived – than in the first period after they had arrived. Was it more difficult now or did it feel easier? I will come back to this central later when discussing the relationship between waiting and integration. Let me just present how one of the asylum-seekers from Afghanistan experienced the phases after arriving to Sweden.

The first phase lasts for maybe two to three months. In the beginning you think about your home country, the war and the distress. Plus the travel here, it was miserable, especially the warmth, the cold, the toilet facilities ... Here we have got a warm bed and didn't have to sleep outdoors and so on.

The second phase came after this when you open your eyes – and ask yourself – who are you? And who are the others in this country. You see how they live. See that they can travel, work, while your own life consists of rules and restrictions! In my old home country I suffered, but here I suffer in a different way.

The third phase is now. For every day that passes the degree of suffering increases. Even the personnel says that time is passing and that I have to learn the language, but I cannot learn anything now. I open the book and think about how my life will be. What will I do? (Boy Afghan, 17)

If we follow the description of Eitinger's phases it would initially seem to fit the boy's experience. A couple of months with focus on the immediate needs and relief from distress were followed by a gradual awakening to the realities of exile. However, the third phase my informant described did not fit in with Eitinger's theory. One could perhaps state that this was simply a continuation of the decomposition phase, but I think that would risk missing an important element of the waiting for asylum. And that is the question of what direction the asylum-period in total has in regard to qualification in a broad sense. Does it point towards passivity and thereby disqualification, or towards increased activity and qualification for what comes next, be it integration in the Swedish society or return. The answer is perhaps not as obvious as it may seem. A hint about the discussion in the next chapter can be given here.

Other informants did not agree when I confronted them with the claim that the suffering under the temporary conditions increases with time. Some said that the first phase after arrival to Sweden had been tough as well. Others said that it was easier to participate in the Swedish society as time went by and their knowledge and skills increased. For the time being we can conclude that it would be a simplification to state that there is a linear relationship between time and increased burden of waiting. At least one cannot hold this to be a priori true. Integration needs to be included in the discussion.

Returning – just not an option

In one citation above an Afghan boy told of how the thoughts of being sent back haunted him at night. In general it was hard to get the informants to

speak about the possibility of receiving a negative decision and having to go back to the country of origin. Even though I took great care in making the questions as indirect and harmless as possible, it was not something they wanted to talk about. Even though I did not encourage them to tell the stories of why they were forced to leave their country, these questions and emotions came to the surface when the possibility of return was mentioned.

I often think about my asylum-application. I think about whether I will be allowed to stay or not. It is sad for me if I have to go back. It is dangerous for me to return (girl 17, Russian).

Yet return was present in their lives, in their thoughts and as a constant factor in their answers. One part of them did not want to accept that the negative outcome was a possibility, and they struggled to appear *as if* it was not a part of their lives and thoughts. They had a double attitude towards this issue. One respondent put it this way:

I think that I will get a positive answer, but (pointing to his heart) I feel something different. Even if I don't get permission, I cannot lose anything more. I have already lost everything. (Man, Arab, 38)

It did not exist at the same time as it overshadowed every aspect of their daily lives. In some interviews I could apply some pressure in order to get their thoughts on this issue.

My brothers and sisters and me, we cannot go back to our home country. There the war is continuing. And we cannot wear hijab etc. When someone calls, we say that we are Muslims, but we don't want it that strict. Here we can choose for ourselves?(girl, 17, Africa).

This girl had been attempted recruited to the conflict with the neighboring country. Her father and mother had both been in the army for several periods. They felt that a return was not an option. They had no plan B.

There is of course the possibility that they did not want to reveal their thoughts on repatriation or return to me. I mentioned this earlier. However, I did not get the impression that I was the only one they wanted keep this part of them hidden from. They seemed to suppress the possibility of failure to themselves as well.

Since the explicit goal of the Swedish handling of the asylum-phase is to keep both possibilities – residence permit and a negative decision – open, this tendency to look away from the latter is interesting. The questions regarding return elicited strong emotional reactions that in several cases made me shy away from them. When repatriation and the chance of a negative decision is to be held forth as being *as* likely as the opposite by the authorities, then this

finding shows that it will be a serious challenge. One could argue that the reactions my informants came because they had not been seriously confronted with this possibility during their stay in Sweden. Maybe there is a *hope for the best* attitude among the native people the asylum-seekers come into contact with. I will return to the possible consequences of such an avoidance of the sensitive topic of return.

Integration

The third component of the triangle of waiting is integration. In close relationship with time and return, integration plays a pivotal role in the management of, as well as the experience of the asylum-period. As I mentioned in chapter 2, there is no consensus on the exact meaning of the concept. One source of confusion is the double reference to both a process and an outcome. On the individual level, both *adaptation* and *participation* are important elements. In the study of Bosnian refugees, I introduced the distinction of subjective and objective integration (Brekke 2001:213). The latter referred to easily observable participation in society, e.g. on the arenas of housing, education and labor. Subjective integration, on the other hand, was less obvious and referred to the mental orientation of the individual. Could one for example notice an increasing orientation towards Sweden during the asylum-seekers stay? Did their sense of belonging start to change?

Over time one would under normal circumstances suppose that there would be movement in both forms of integration. For an accepted refugee or immigrant integration would increase as months and years passed. As we have seen, however, the relation between time and integration is not that straight forward for asylum-seekers waiting for a decision. There are two opposite hypotheses at work. One predicts there is an increase in integration over time for this group, the other a decrease.

Since most of my informants were quite newly arrived, one would perhaps not expect the description and discussion of integration to yield anything interesting. If one keeps a broad perspective, however, and include both subjective and objective elements, several interesting points can be made. In addition to that, one goal of this study is to comment on the effects of waiting on future integration, as well as return.

The day to day life

So how did the asylum-seekers in my material spend their days? What does integration mean in this context? The main impression I am left with after having read through the interviews once more is that their formal status was

matched by what they did – they operated largely on the outside of the Swedish society.

After the course I go home, sleep a little, study a little, make some food (starts crying) ... but there is no concentration. It feels like one has left the good life behind. A new country, the language ... and I did not plan to leave my country (Man, Arab, 39).

The daily routines were different depending on the situation the individual asylum-seekers were in. The boys living in the reception center in the small sized town could see their school from their own window. Spreading their time between the two buildings for four days a week gave life a repetitious character.

The days are all the same. It's just going to school, and then ... nothing. Some food, a bit of television, but we have nothing to do. The strange thing is that the teachers ask me 'why are you sad?' That should be obvious for all to see – that this situation makes you sad (Boy, Afghan, 17).

The trip to town and a day of 'Breaking the code' and lessons held in their own language were the highlights of the week.

For the informants that lived on their own or with their families it was the same. The weeks seemed to follow a strict pattern. The organized activities – the course or the school – were the core of their daily life. Around those hours, for the most part there was waiting. In a few cases the personnel of the Equal sponsored activities or the asylum-seekers themselves initiated extra curricular activities. One man was put in contact with a handball team as a coach, and a Asian boy joined a basketball team as a player. In addition to those cases, one girl had been in the country for more than three years and had worked weekends for part of her stay. All three spoke positively of these experiences.

I asked my informants whether they went to the cinema, for shorter trips or did other leisure time activities. The Equal course in the city included regular field trips. Apart from those, they spend a lot of time where they lived, be it in self-organized housing (Swedish: Eget boende) or the reception center.

The evenings and nights could, as I mentioned, be a challenge to my informants. For those who lived in the reception centre and had severe sleeping disturbances, it was particularly problematic.

In the evenings I do homework. At ten o'clock I try to get some sleep. If I can't manage to fall asleep, I get up again. Usually I fall asleep late – it is almost daylight when I finally manage to get some sleep. Because of the others in the building, I cannot listen to the radio or watch TV during the night. Instead I read a book or just sit there alone (Boy, Afghan, 17).

As we have seen, several of my informants spent significant amount of time by themselves. Still they all had sources of social contact. One would expect the importance of well-being should be the same whether the contact was with native Swedes or others. I mentioned in chapter 2 that it makes sense to talk about social integration in both cases. Interacting with others in a meaningful and giving way is the important factor on this level. One could maybe use the term *vertical integration* here to describe contact with peers and others in the same situation. The activity does not necessarily point in direction of a future life in Sweden, but still serves an important role as preserver.

The Afghan boys living in a reception center met each other and enjoyed each other's company. The negative sides of their stay were implicit and explicit topics of their interaction, and were therefore potentially reinforced. Still, sharing the precarious status made them important sources of support for each other. They were friends. For the people living at the center, the personnel were significant actors in their life. And for the unaccompanied minors, they were particularly important. They had little or no contact with people in the country they had left behind.

Others were still able to stay in touch with family members that had stayed.

I have some family left in Azerbaijan. We sometimes talk on the phone ... with grandfather and grandmother, for example when there is a birthday. But we do not have a lot of contact with those who are left. And I have no contact at all with my friends (Girl, 19).

The teachers and the people administering the two courses were described as central characters in the day-to-day lives of the asylum-seekers. They were important points of contact between my informants and the Swedish society. In addition to the formal transmission of information, several asylum-seekers described them as important sources of informal information.

Some of the informants lived, as I mentioned earlier, with their families. For them this was their major network. For the ones that had arrived without anyone from their family, contacts had to be made elsewhere. Some, like the girl from Azerbaijan, had the possibility to continue the contact with people in their country of origin. Other had family elsewhere in Sweden or in other exile countries. Although the possibility to travel was limited, this in some cases gave some support. Others yet again had friends of their larger families that lived in Sweden. These weak ties could serve as a support financially and in other ways, but could also be a troubling source of control.

Housing – receptions centers and self-organized housing ¹¹

There are distinct advantages and disadvantages with both housing options that face the asylum-seekers in Sweden. As mentioned earlier the total group spreads itself out half and half. The negative sides of the self-arranged housing have been discussed most recently in the SOU (2003:75) on integration. The possibility of exploitation by the house-lords, of isolation and of reduced control from the authorities, were among the elements that were mentioned. I will comment on the first factor, the relationship between the asylum-seeker and the owner of the apartment or house, as well as add one more element on the negative side. A young woman from Iraq lived with a couple that was friends of an older brother.

Those I live with say that ‘you are a girl, you are our responsibility, you cannot hang outdoors on your own. If you get your permanent residency and your own place, then maybe ok, but now it is not’ (Girl, Asia, 20).

The owners of the apartment used her lack of a permit in arguing that she should spend her time at home and under their control. The first part of the quote could have been picked from a standard discussion between teen-age children and their parents. The same does not go for the last section. Again:

They say: ‘How can you go out? You do not have any money!’ I answer: ‘Yes, but sometimes I spend time with people that help me learn the language’. Then they tell me that I am not part of this society and that I have no business out there.

The second element my informants described as a problematic was the lack of stability in the self-arranged housing option. There were several factors that made the asylum-seekers had to move frequently from one apartment to the next. For the most part they were living on the grace of the owners. The 500 Swedish kronor that they got as compensation from the Migration Board did not cover much of the expenses connected to owning and running an apartment in today’s Sweden.

Housing is a problem. I have lived with different friends. They take care of me. At the moment I live with someone that is distant family. I have lived in five different houses and have traveled back and forth between some of them. There are many of the asylum-seekers that are having problems with their housing (Man, 38, 1 year in Sweden, Africa)

11. The Swedish terms are ‘anläggningsboende’ (ABO) and ‘eget boende’ (EBO).

Constantly moving houses added to the lack of stability for some. For the single men living in self arranged housing it was the rule.

Currently a couple has taken me in. They are good friends of mine that I have met through an organization with connection to my home country that I am a member of. The first months I lived with someone else ... with different people. I have lived in four different apartments before this one (Man, Africa, 10 months in Sweden)

This man had lived five different places in 10 months. He came through in the interviews as a humble and easy-to-live-with type. If it was not individual characteristics that were the reasons for this tendency to move, one has to look elsewhere. It is not room here for a broad discussion of the causes for this possible pattern. The asylum-seekers themselves put it across as a feeling that 'it was time to move on after a while'. Among the reasons that they gave for this was the problem with 'maintaining the balance' between the people that owned the housing and the 'guests'. They expressed this in exchange-terms and pointed to the uneven character of the relationship.

The couple I used to live with was having a baby. So now I live with a friend of theirs. He is handicapped. He is from the same country as me. I don't pay a rent to him. Instead I try to compensate by buying food. He knows I get only a small amount of money here. My father sends me some money from home. It is difficult. If a friend buys something for 50 kronor, then I have to return it. If I have no money, I have to give something else back (Man, 38, Africa).

Some tried to compensate by contributing by taking care of children, cleaning and doing general housework. The man that I just cited on the topic of moving continued his description in this way:

Now I live permanently at the couple's house. Still I do from time to time live with others as well. The 500 Swedish kronor go directly from the Migration Board to them. Apart from that I do as much at home as they do. I don't have specific chores, but I do some shopping and help out (Man, 28, Africa).

Temporary integration

The marginal position as both inside and outside the Swedish Society meant that the asylum-seekers had to relate to their surroundings whether they liked to or not. Being in contact with people and institutions outside their house or centre meant that they had to adapt to Swedish rules and norms or in some minor respect – initiate integration. This was particularly true for the families with children. And as I will show here, the necessity of interacting with the environment also brought into play the problematic sides of integration that

we usually discuss when refugees with permanent residency or immigrants are the topic.

Some of the dilemmas facing the newly arrived¹² even seemed to be reinforced by the temporary conditions of the asylum period.

One example is the change of status within the family as a result of the move to exile. It is not uncommon that the children in a family are the first ones to adapt to the new environment and for example learn the language (Brekke 2001). This phenomenon has a series of effects that can pose continuing challenges to the cohesion of the family. It can also put the children in a precarious situation as interpreters, mediators or buffers between the parents and the host society. Some of my informants had ended up playing such a role. The problems seemed more hopeless because of their uncertain status.

I already knew about our situation when I was fifteen. Our lawyer talks to me because I am the only one in our family that understands. When I talk to him I get depressed and cannot concentrate. Often I do not want to talk to him, but I have to (Girl 17, Africa, two years in Sweden).

When the children take over the roles of the grownups, it leaves little room for the adults in the family. This then adds to the burden of their asylum-situation.

For my father there is a dark train coming at him. He says he has to think about our future. Think about that he wants us to become doctors and the likes. Now it is me who is daddy at home. I have to help out. My father is in despair (Girl 17, Africa, two years in Sweden).

One interpretation of the parents' actions in this family could be that they feared the integration of their children. They saw that their children's qualification for a life in Sweden was simultaneously a disqualification for a life in their home country. They saw that they risked losing their children as they forgot their native language and relate more strongly to their Swedish friends and their families.

My little sister is five years old. She wants my parents to read her stories before she goes to sleep at night. She wants to hear the same stories as her Swedish best friend does. But they don't know how to do it. We have to help them and translate. My sister complains, she says: 'they never read me stories at bedtime!' (Girl 17, Africa, two years in Sweden).

12. Newly arrived was a concept used by the administration of the Equal Program. It has a matching word in Swedish: 'nyanlända'. The group includes both asylum-seekers waiting for their decision and people that have recently received their residence permits.

One could also expect that they would sense that they themselves disqualified by not making an effort to adapt or integrate in case Sweden indeed became their new home country. When this young girl told me about her situation, it was tempting to blame the parents for not taking good care of their children. But it immediately struck me that it would be to simplify the situation. The parents had to take the possibility of a negative outcome of their case seriously. The family had already been through one round of threats of forced return and was in their second round of appeals. And even if they wanted to adapt to the possibility of being allowed to stay, the conditions made learning difficult.

There is no room in their heads to learn Swedish. They think a lot about what will happen, and what will happen to the children etc. They say we have to know how to speak our native tongue. They say: 'What if we have to go back? What then?' But the children don't know how to speak the language any longer. How will they cope if they have to go back now? (Girl 17, Africa, two years in Sweden).

These problems are reinforced and a solution does not present itself during the temporary period. I will make further comments on this particular form of the possible return having an effect on integration in the next chapter.

The attitude of this girl's parents can be used as a starting point for a discussion of a complicated area of adaptation to the asylum period, namely the distinction between being excluded from integration and actively holding back. The asylum-system sends signals of temporariness to the persons in it. They are not meant to go full speed ahead with integration. In addition to that, however, they themselves hold back.

One has to find ones own solution – my solution – to the double character of our stay and all the problems. It is important that you don't get too attached, because you never know what will happen. (...)I have so many dreams that I do not dear to dream (Girl 19, Belarus, 3 years in Sweden).

One direct consequence of the asylum-status is that money is scarce. This makes it difficult for the young boys and girls to participate in the normal activities of Swedish youth or even of people with similar backgrounds, but with a residence permit.

When my friends go to a cafe, to have something to eat or to the movies, I say I can't go because I can't afford it. We don't have enough money for my family. I have to say no to my friends. They say: 'We'll pay', but I can't say yes. I say no, that won't be possible (Girl 17, Africa, two years in Sweden).

On the social scene, the element of my informants holding back was in the open. At the same time their status as asylum-seekers made others avoid forming lasting relationships with them. It worked both ways. My informants risked having to leave Sweden, something that made them weary of bonding to closely. At the same time others – e.g. newly arrived asylum-seekers - might also be sent back after a while.

I don't want to have contact with the new people that arrive because you quickly start to like them. They become friends and boyfriends and ... then they leave! My heart feels so heavy when I am told that someone has gone back. I am the one that react the strongest to that kind of news in my family (Girl 19, Asia, 3 years in Sweden).

Others avoided them because of their status, while they avoided others with the same status. This created what could be called a *temporary social system*.

I am now afraid of getting new friends that do not have a residence permit. Because I don't want to become friends with someone that is going back or who will be moved to another part of the country (Girl 17, Africa, two years in Sweden).

Finding a boyfriend or girlfriend was also made difficult by the circumstances. Also in this area my informants held back.

The worst thing is that if you don't have residence permit, you do not have the right to love someone! They say: 'You don't have the permit', and gradually pull away. They say: ' ... It will be difficult'. We have other dreams. If I fall in love with a guy with a permit, they say it is difficult. Because they want to travel and do other things you need a permanent residency to do (Girl, 19, Asia, 2 years in Sweden)

My informants were all conscious of the negative effects of their status as asylum-seekers. The phenomenon played itself out differently in the various ethnic groups already established in the local community. Some told me it was widely known who had the permit and who were still in the waiting. These were exposed to different types of pressures depending on their other characteristics, e.g. gender and age, and the characteristics of the ethnic community. Within one community, for example, young girls experienced a pressure to marry someone with a permit in order to secure their stay, while the boys were expected to work under dismal conditions. The point here is to see that the status as asylum-seeker is not shaped nor experienced independently of the environment and that for some nationalities the ethnic or exile community can be an important part of this.

In other more traditional areas of integration, such as employment and economy, we know that the possibilities for asylum-seekers are limited (Brekke 2001). For some, the temporary situation made them hold back in these areas as well.

I would like to become a journalist. The family I am staying with says that when you get your permanent residence permit, you can do all that. But now you cannot study or make contact with others, because it may serve no purpose. You don't know what will happen. Maybe you will be sent back (Girl, 19, Iraq, 2 years in Sweden).

Traveling is another area that is restricted for this group. For the youngest of my informants that had qualified for ordinary Swedish school, this meant that they could not sign up for the yearly trip abroad with their class. Although one would not think that traveling should be an important part of the asylum-period, the point is that it became a symbol of not being on the inside.

One could add permanent residency to this list of prerequisites. My informants perceived it as a sign that they were not fully a part of the ordinary student group. Being in possession of documents and the possibility to travel was yet another signal that you had the all-important residence permit. It was just another reminder of their marginal position.

From time to time female friends of the family I live with come to visit in the apartment. They have permanent residency. They talk about travel etc. They let me sit with them, but they tell me that I don't know anything about this. 'We have been here for a long time', they say. 'We go for holidays to Spain and other places'. I have nothing to say to that. If I say something, they answer that this is something I don't have the possibility to do. It takes money and time (Girl, 19, Asia, 2 years in Sweden).

At the same time as my informants reported that they were kept on the outside and they themselves reduced their contact with the Swedish society, they were a part of it. They all wanted to stay. One line running parallel to the mainly negative effects of their uncertain position was learning and adapting to the Swedish system. As I will argue more thoroughly later, I think it may be a mistake to see the asylum-period as one of either qualification *or* disqualification. It is obvious that different individuals and groups will react differently to the same situation, but I also think that it can be both at the same time for the same individual.

One indicator of this *sneaking integration* is the opinions my informants had of getting a negative decision early in the process or after years of waiting. The consensus was that after a certain number of months it would be much worse to be turned down and have to return.

If we get the message within maximum one year, then it is ok, but there should not be given any negative decisions after that. By then one has gotten used to the community and society, one has learned the language etc. But then we still don't hear anything (Girl 19, Asia, 3 years in Sweden).

Other informants gave other limits within which they held it to be justifiable to end up with a negative result.

If we had gotten a rejection after three or four months, then it would have been ok. But not after three or four years, and then 'Out!' There are people that wait for six or seven years (Girl 17, Africa, two years in Sweden).

How should we interpret these opinions? It seems as if the longer time is spent waiting, the more reason should they have to end up with a positive result. If the authorities wait too long before rejecting an application, the asylum-seekers in some way feel cheated. This despite the fact that the informants that had waited for more than 2 years were all in the second or third stage of their application process. There seemed to be some underlying notion of attachment to the Swedish society and an increasing separation from their home country. At the same time the waiting was taking its toll.

For long periods during this phase of waiting everything collapses inside you... all of your dreams. So, if in the end they will let you stay, you won't have the ability to pick your life back up (Girl, 19, Iraq, 2 years in Sweden).

It seemed that the two tracks that the authorities wanted to dominate the period – the possibility of staying or returning – were matched by the asylum-seekers simultaneous qualification and de-qualification.

Relief

The study of the Bosnian refugees with temporary protection showed that there were different strategies that the individual could use to soften the effects of their uncertain situation (Brekke 2001). If we set integration or return as the two main directions the individual asylum-seeker can take, there are four options available. They are return, integration, both and neither. In the next chapter I will systemize and discuss these four possible orientations and see how my informants placed themselves across the four categories.

Here I will only my informants mentioned – where they would like to be – if they could choose for themselves. What they wanted was a *normal life*.¹³

Why shouldn't I get to live here? I don't have a normal life. At one point I must be told what is happening. Not only have to wait for that which never comes. To be able to live like normal people – go to work – and not only have to think: When will I get an answer?! (...) Then I could have lived a normal life. I could choose for myself – I could think more about my future (Girl 19, Belarus, 3 years in Sweden).

The key to a normal life in the sense this girl means would be to be allowed to stay. Earlier I cited an African informant that called it the key to his future. But is it then impossible to obtain normality during the asylum period? The question brings us straight into a discussion about what normality is, something that I will stay away from here only to make one point. For some of the Bosnian refugees the way out of the tension between staying and return was bridged by living *as if* they were going to be allowed to stay. This tactics was partly done to protect their children – by pretending that they, the parents, were in control – partly as an exercise to levitate the stress caused by temporality. The choice to live *as if* could also have the opposite direction. Some of the Bosnians lived *as if* they were certain that they would one day return to Bosnia.

This mild self-delusion gave a direction in life that made other choices easier. If for example one decided for oneself that one would be allowed stay – if they 'chose' Norway – then investment in language, education, vocational training etc. followed in the wake. Among my informants, this *as if* phenomenon was not as prominent. There are several probable reasons for this. They may have perceived their chances for getting to stay as lower. Also, they had a less educated background, something that may contribute to putting less value in the long-term 'investment' that qualification and education can be viewed as.

So, would getting the positive message mean that a normal life could start? This is of course not the case; although 'residence permit' (PUT) was the most recurrent word during the interviews. One can hypothesize that the lack of such a permit served as a *peg* onto which the asylum-seekers could hang their other problems. When that peg then was taken away, and they were al-

13. The concept of normal life is vague and the discussion of how it should be understood is interesting (Brekke 2001, Swartz 1998). A starting point is distinguishing between what normality was before the flight vs. after, and the different expectations various subgroups would have to normality. Here it will be used in a simple form, involving some sort of stability with regard to employment, economy and sense of certainty about what the future will bring.

lowed to stay in Sweden, one can only speculate about the consequences. The Bosnian refugees in Norway did not experience the relief one should expect when they got notice they could stay, according to the sociologist Berit Berg (1998). In fact, decisions, big and small, that had been 'put on hold', now presented themselves with increased force. They could no longer lean on the role of being victims of an unjust asylum system.

The courses

So how did my informants experience the courses that are pivotal point of this study? In case of the full day course in Gothenburg, they were very content. They had only positive comments about the 'breaking the code' project in Uppsala as well. In the latter case, though, the asylum-seekers had a hard time distinguishing these two hours of lessons a week from the rest of their native language and other school related activities. In fact, neither group of informants had heard about Equal or the name of the two local projects. I will discuss the importance of this finding in the next chapter.

The full day course offered close contact with the other participants, but also with the organizers, administrators and others connected to the house of the voluntary organization in charge. This contact and support was what came first to mind when I asked my informants about the value of this project. With a limited number of participants, the employees were highly accessible during the day. One informant pointed to a picture of him and two employees:

She is a good person. She has helped me with applications for jobs and takes care of me. I will never forget those two (pointing at a picture). They have helped me a lot and even gotten me a position in sports, which I wanted (Man, Arab, 38).

As this man indicated, the personnel helped the participants in every way they could. They were important points of contact to the Swedish society. Securing this contact was part of their goal, but the impression left by my informants was that they went out of their way to help. The *support function* of the course therefore became one with both practical and social value. The youngsters in the other project had to look outside their course to find someone they could talk to and find support from. In the locals of the voluntary organization it was ready at hand.

When I talk to the leader of the project and tell her that I am sad because I have spoken to my mother in my home country, then she understands. They listen to me (Girl, 19, Asia, 2 years in Sweden).

Another important function was that the courses, whether integrated in a school day or as a separate activity gave structure to the days of waiting. It was something to get up to, to study for, and even to be irritated over.

When I get up at eight o'clock I go straight here (to the full day course), start the pc and log onto the Internet. I see if there is any news about Kurdistan or Iraq. It has been quite turbulent there lately. After a while the people that are responsible for the course arrive. We discuss a bit, often about politics (Man, 39, Arab).

For some of the young boys in the reception centre, the alternative to going to school was staying indoors, waiting or sleeping.

During the day I go to school from 08.45 to 13.30. After that I have a cup of tea, and then I do my homework. I haven't been doing this for long, though, only for the last three months. Before that I slept all day here at the reception centre. I read my Swedish book and slept (Boy Afghan, age 17, 11 months in Sweden).

Even given these three important functions of structure, social support and contact to the host society, one could ask why the courses where such positive experiences for the participants. One common answer is that the activity if at all successful keeps the minds of the participants occupied while they're there. Thereby they potentially give relief from the worries and subdue the stress stemming from the basic uncertainty. This would have its parallel in doing a job.

For some periods I worked Saturdays and Sundays. It is good to work. I worked in a restaurant. Sometimes one actually forgot about one's problems (Girl 19, Asia, 3 years in Sweden).

If we try to look behind this most probable and intended function, two related suggestions come from reading the interview-material. The first is that the activity at the courses gave a direction for the asylum-seekers stay. The waiting period was a time void of direction, something that the courses provided by pointing towards completion, end of the term, next semester etc. Progression can also be made and documented for the individual. The setting of learning reinforced this function. Attaining knowledge is generally seen as meaningful.

The other and related function was being allowed to play the role of the student. It was a role that was an accepted part of the everyday life of society. It was role that for parts of their lives also the native population had experienced. There was a difference here between the regular scholars and the slightly older group that attended the full-day course. The latter was more set

apart from the surrounding community. Both however, gave the individuals a chance to get confirmation as individuals and not just as 'asylum-seekers'. The relatively small groups, and in case of the full-day course the ample access to employees, meant that the activities could serve as *backstage* to the larger Swedish and ethnic community.

Identity

Another concept related to the discussion of roles is identity. This has a long history in within psychology, social anthropology (Gullestad 2003), and sociology (Arenas et. al 1987). In chapter 2 I outlined a simplified version of how one can handle the discussion of identity by asking the questions: Who am I? Who are we? Who are they? (Bjurström 1997).¹⁴

The first question was one that all my informants struggled with. One could say that this is *the* basic question for all humans, and that the asylum-seekers struggling with it is no exception. However, for people living in their daily routines, the question is mostly in the background, only to come to the foreground at certain points in life (Heidegger 1962). For my informants the question of personal identity played a larger role. It was probably made more relevant for this group due to their precarious situation in exile, being bereft of their former position and status in their home country, many being isolated from friends and family etc. Several of the photographs my informants took made us talk about this point. After a few sessions I included the question: 'If you showed these pictures to someone, what do you think they would say about your situation?', in the interview guide. In addition to commenting on the concrete photographs that showed themselves in front of mirrors or windows, I thereby got them to see themselves from the outside. That gave them an easier way into the discussion of 'who am I'.

The next question is one of group identity. The sense of being part of a group was crippled for several of my informants. Some related to their ethnic community in Sweden, some kept the identity of the parties in their homeland, and others again talked of themselves as missing 'a we'.

The third question was more present in the minds of my informants. What group do others think that they are a part of? They knew people outside the

14. One alternative take on identity would be to see how the roles my informants were used to have were changed in exile. The roles of student, employee, father, mother, daughter, son etc. were all changed or not relevant all together. For asylum-seekers that are part of families that come together, the members used to reproductive roles (caring, housework etc.) will possibly have an easier task coping with the new environment that the ones used to productive roles. In my material they were all in situations calling for production.

asylum-community saw them as part of the stigmatized group *asylum seekers*. The discrepancy between this social identity and the asylum-seekers perception of themselves as unique individuals gave rise to what could be called an identity-conflict.

When I think of myself, I don't think of myself as an asylum-seeker. I think of myself as one that has always served my people. If my people are doing well, I am doing well (Man, 39, Arab).

The question of identity and the identity-work that is being done during the waiting period is complicated. One way to go one step further than the three questions above is to reintroduce the time element. One reason why the existence without production can be so troublesome is that it does not point to a future state. The present does not have a value unless it is seen from an imagined point in the future, writes the Norwegian social anthropologist Anders Johansen (1984:12). As a result of this, man lives his present as though it was already our past, he continues. It follows from this that in a way you are what you do. And, today we project ourselves into a tomorrow, when we can say that I am what I was yesterday. The point is that activity and 'production' in some sense, are imperative both for maintaining identity and for the sense of direction in life. I.e. without knowing who I will be, I do not know who I am. And for the asylum-seekers with the limited scope of their future, it was exactly this 'project(ed)' self that they were deprived of.

The organized activity eased the absence for the asylum-seekers to see themselves in the future. Inherent in the courses were a silent promise of meaning and direction.

The lack of being able to produce made some of my informants frustrated. In some of the comments they made one could hear the experience of breaking the moral obligation to be of use.

If I get my permission, I wish to learn the language and get a job. That way I can contribute to the Swedish society and through my work I can show my emotions for this country (Man, Asia, 38).

When talking about their wish to contribute, the asylum-seekers said they also wanted to show gratitude. They did not have a problem relating to the general obligation in the Swedish society to work and that they could be viewed as a strain on the national budget. This could also be turned around and seen from the perspective of the individual.

They don't take into consideration that we are loosing our lives, lives that therefore are wasted. If they give us permission to stay, we can serve Sweden (Girl, 19, Asia, 2 years in Sweden)

Discussion and findings

The asylum period should be filled with meaningful activities that qualify the individual for the outcome of the waiting, be it a return to the home country or integration in the Swedish society (SOU 2003:75). This is the aim of the Swedish asylum-policy. As we saw in chapter 2, there are two additional concerns seen from this perspective, and that is securing that the quality of what is offered do not become an attraction in itself. Furthermore the standard should not make the people already in the system too comfortable. The authorities need them to be on their toes to secure a swift return in case of a negative decision. In other words they want a two-tracked arrangement, where integration and return are parallel concerns that permeate every aspect of the asylum period.

The premise for such a policy is that there is no conflict between the two concerns – that there is no contradiction involved for the asylum-seekers in preparing for a life in Sweden at the same time as they stay ready to return to their home country. There are two ways to handle this for the authorities. One is to say that there is no problem connected to the two-tracked policy. This was put to the test in the Norwegian policy towards the Bosnian refugees in the 1990s (Ministry of Labor 1993, Brekke 2001). The other solution is to admit that the two are hard to combine or right out non-compatible. This last position would entail a view of the asylum period as problematic for everyone involved, no matter how it is packaged.

Before I develop this discussion any further, I would like to bring back into play the main questions in this study. In chapter 1, I asked how the asylum-seekers experienced the waiting and what the consequences were for the later integration or return. In the rest of this chapter I will discuss the first question in some depth. Towards the end I will also deal with the last part of the question – the consequences. One part of this is to look for ways to empower the individual. At the very end I will give a checklist of some of the findings of the study.

A typology of waiting

One way of starting the analysis of the asylum-seekers' experience is to take the double aim of the policy and see how they orientated themselves according to the two. I have already discussed the finding that 'for the time being', return was not an option for my informants. They behaved outwardly as if the possibility of a semi-voluntary or forced return did not exist. At the same time this restrictive outcome dominated their waiting and day-to-day life. If one says that the asylum-seekers could be orientated either towards returning to their home country or towards a life in Sweden, and cross these dimensions, four possible groups appear as shown in figure 1.

If we look at figure 1, and at the outset regard the possible outcomes independently of the informants in this study, it is obvious which category that is the ideal for the Swedish authorities. What I have called the ideal applicant is someone who is oriented towards both integration and return, and makes efforts to prepare for both outcomes.

These persons are on their toes. In a way they accept the underlying uncertainty regarding the outcome of the asylum-case. They maybe even see that it has to be this way. They take that into account when deciding what to do with their time. They seek activities that do not disqualify them for neither return nor integration. With a positive outcome of their case, this asylum-seeker would already be on his or her way into the Swedish society. If he or she receives a negative decision, the ideal applicant would accept it and not think of the time spent in the Swedish asylum-system as wasted. 'A language learned is always useful', would be the tone. Although in a less caricatured version, this applicant most probably exists. And as we have seen, this double mode of orientation was common in my material. Yet, my informants did not seem to act in accordance with this non-spoken orientation.

The next frame contains what I have called the exile activist. This is someone who stays orientated towards his or her home country. Neither in mind nor action is this person seeking to integrate in Sweden. Over time the activist must relate and interact with different sides to the exile society, but the point is that integration is not a goal. The goal is to return when it becomes possible. There is a long line of studies that show the fragility of this position if a return is not possible within a few years (Berg 1998). The tendency is that the dream or myth of return remains but that the people end up living their life in the exile country (Ramirez 1990). In my material, I did not find anyone fitting this description. It is the archetype of refugee from the last fifty years (Zolberg 1989).

If we move our attention to the top box of the people that do not stay orientated towards return, we find the type I have called the bridgeburner. The ones that fall into this category do not consider return an option, but is both mentally and in action pursuing a future in Sweden. Although not necessarily

Figure 1. Types of adaptation to the waiting period

		Orientation Return/home country	
		Yes	No
Orientation: Integration /Sverige	Yes	Ideal applicant, 'On their toes'	Bridgeburner
	No	Exile activist	The waiter

part of their motivation to leave their home region, this group is motivated to go full out for the integration option. In the case of the Bosnian refugees waiting with a temporary protection in Norway, this adaptation to the situation led to what I called hyperintegration (Brekke 2001). They more than fulfilled the expectations from the Norwegian Government with regard to integration. If return became possible, this group would not be easy to persuade to go back. Although there were not many of the individuals I interviewed that would fully fit the description, this category nonetheless played an important role in my material. I will return to this a bit further down.

The last box is the most central to this study. I have called the type with this adaptation the waiter. This person is not strongly oriented towards a possible return, be it voluntary repatriation or in case of a rejection. At the same time he is not actively pursuing integration in Sweden either. The uncertainty left those of my informants that seemed to fit this category in a situation of passivity. Even though they did not even want to think about a possible return to their home country, they did not go strongly for the sets of action that would make them qualify more easily for a later life in Sweden. The possibility of not ending up in Sweden was pushed to the back of their minds without it giving a real belief in the opposite possibility. They were stuck in limbo.

At the same time, my informants were picked from courses that were innovative and with highly motivated teachers and organizers. Most of my informants seldom skipped a class and were enthusiastic about the content. Is it then not unfair to say that they did not put their money on a future in Sweden? Of course these four boxes represent a crude simplification of reality. As I mentioned earlier the mandate for this study was to develop thoughts around the 'psychology of waiting'. Not being a psychologist myself, I still want to risk saying that most of my informants were holding back their integration efforts. The brakes were on. In different manners they told me about the difficulty they concentrating and studying. Also in other ways the characteristics of the asylum-period both held them back and made them hold back by their own will. The possibility of being sent back influenced their integration. And,

as we have seen, the reverse was true as well. The integration influenced their thought about a negative outcome and a possible return. I will bring the three elements into play a bit further down. First, however I would like to let the passing of time enter into the figure 1. What kind of movement between the 4 types of adaptation to the asylum waiting should one expect?

The backward and forward hypotheses

Let us let time into the picture. There are two main hypotheses when it comes to the how the individual asylum-seeker adapts to the waiting environment. I mentioned these earlier, but now the basis for discussing them is a bit stronger. The first one is what one could call the backward hypothesis. This states that with time, the number of asylum-seeker that slide from being motivated for integration in Sweden or return to a position marked by passivity. In the terms introduced here one could talk of a movement from exile activist, ideal applicant and bridgeburner, to pure waiters. In other words it states that there will be a shift among the applicants from being active to passive. This hypothesis has strong support from research done on the experience and the consequences of living in reception centers (Solheim 1990, Sundqvist et.al.2000). Seen from a traditional integration perspective, the development is going in the wrong direction. It is going backwards and after a final decision, the individuals will have a hard time starting the process of integration or return. This hypothesis provides ammunition for those working to minimize the duration of the asylum-period.

It also brings into question how low one can allow the standards of the asylum period to be. The overt goal of the Swedish control policy of not wanting to attract people that exploit the asylum period, the standard can be adjusted downwards. At the same time no-one benefits from a situation where more or less vulnerable asylum-seekers get hurt. The authorities want a low standard also so that rejected asylum-seekers will not wish to stay on to enjoy the benefits. At the same time one does not want them to first get damaged and then either return or stay on in Sweden.

The forward hypothesis states the opposite – that with time the possibilities, knowledge and motivation for integration will increase. The defenders of this position find support for example in the Swedish researcher Rooth's study on labor participation for asylum-seekers with varying length of waiting. He found no relationship between the two. In other words; waiting for a long time did not make it less likely that the asylum-seekers would be successful in securing employment five years later. One of my informants meant that this was how the developments were for many of his friends. Given that they sent money to their home country, they were forced to work to be able to survive. As

time went by, more and more were forced out into the black, gray or white labor market, according to him.

If we once again return to figure 1, the forward hypothesis states that there will be a movement from the passive waiter to the bridgeburner, or that the latter category will not leak to the former. There will be a move from the passive to the active or the active will remain so as time passes, according to this way of thinking.

And even though you cannot find an effect of the waiting for labor participation several years later, the months spent waiting are an important part of life for the asylum-seekers and a building block for the trust and motivation for subjective as well as objective integration.

One of the informants, a girl aged 19, was cited in the previous chapter saying that her life was being wasted. During the waiting period, life is put on hold. But for how long is it possible to wait with fulfilling one's life? This girl had remained active and had made a conscious choice of going for integration.

So, which one of these two descriptions of reality is supported by my material? First it is important to remind ourselves that the study was not set up in order to test in any way the two opposing hypotheses. It would be a good idea to follow a broader selection of individuals with varying background, stories of flight etc. from before and after they had gotten their decision. Maybe that would help us understand the recovery or lack of such that follow a decision in favor of the applicant.

Let me return to the support from my informants for the two hypotheses. From the descriptions in chapter 3, it is clear that the main story is one of increasing stress as a result of the waiting. At the same time, there were individuals that had waited for a long time, had turned around and chosen to go for the integration-track. This can be an indication that after a certain amount of months of worrying about whether the future holds integration or return, one has to select one of the two, and behave as if the outcome was already certain. The alternative seems to be continued suffering. It can, however, also be an indication that my material did not include people that could cope with the double tracked situation over time – that could continue their adaptation as ideal applicants.

Yet, the typology in figure 1 is, like I mentioned, a simplification. The two courses that my informants attended did soften the impact of continued waiting.

Of course one would expect the full-day course to play a more important role in the lives of the asylum-seekers than the two hours a week of the other course. It gave them knowledge about the Swedish society and language capabilities. It also had a series of positive side effects, like supplying the participants with daytime structure and a time-direction. This it had in common with the ordinary courses offered by the Migration Board. In addition to that it offered frequent excursions, contacts with employers and more. What really

set it apart though was the direct personal link to the Swedish society. Working in a small group at the time, the asylum-seekers had ample access to teachers and other personnel. It was an outspoken aim of the Arrival Gothenburg course to handle the question of a possible return. This study has not gone into in what way and to what extent this topic made it out to the participants. From what they told me, it was however clear that they felt that they had the support of the staff. It seemed that anything else than a positive decision would be a disappointment clearly, but also a major surprise. Even though they are told to prepare for both outcomes, the signals are strong that they should expect to be allowed to stay. They should at least hope for the best. The environment of the course side communicated that they were heading for a future in Sweden. And this may very well be true, since the selection of participants may have been skewed in that direction. At the same time they heard of and saw others being asked to leave the country.

It would not be fair to the other development partnership to not see the activity as part of full time school. Seen in this way, the course was no less important in the lives of the participants. For the students aged 16-19, school was their way forward in life no matter the outcome of their cases. When judging the well being of this group, one has to remember that these asylum-seekers were at a stage in life that in it self can be a challenge. In addition they had varying experiences of war or other forms of suffering. Some had come by themselves. As with the other group, school, lessons in their mother tongue, and the DP's course offered them a structured everyday life. For the most part the school pointed in a direction – towards further education and a life in Sweden. Yet, they were parts of somewhat larger groups and the employees did not seem to connect as closely with the participants. The school environment did not inspire the same type of communication as did the locals of the voluntary organization in the larger city.

Holding on or letting go

To say that the double aim of the asylum policy is what one could call time fragile (Brekke 2001), would be in line with both the forward and the backward hypotheses. Whether the development goes towards an increase or decrease in motivation for integration, the dual goal of integration and return is challenged as time passed. In line with this thought I was confronted with the concept of holding on by one of my informants. She said that one had to hold on to the present and remain active – keep working. She shared this attitude with some of the informants. After her interview I noticed that some of the other informants were about to revert to the other side of the metaphor – they appeared to be letting go. Their reaction to not having control over their lives – their futures – was to stop caring.

Course identification

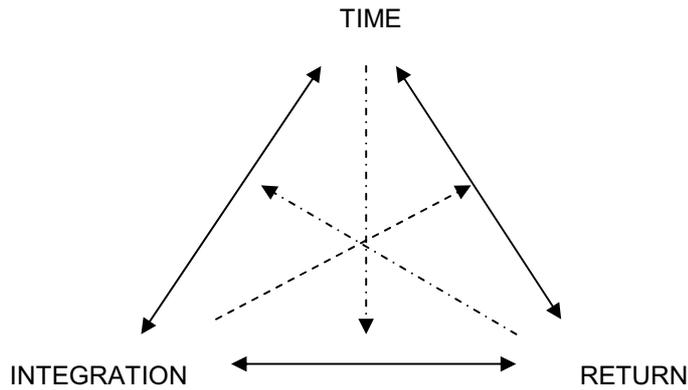
Many of the photos were taken in the classrooms or in the school environment. Several of them showed the participants with posters in the background containing the orange and blue Equal symbol. In the interviews with the persons that had taken the pictures, I asked why they had taken them and why they had included the posters. They answered: ‘Why I have included which poster?’ I put my finger on the photo. It turned out they hadn’t noticed that the poster was in the picture when they took it. In fact, they hadn’t noticed that it was even in the classroom. This made me repeat the question in the other interviews. It turned out that none of the asylum-seekers that participated in the study had a clue about the Equal project, or the specific names of the two courses. Every time I asked about this, the interpreter had a hard time understanding and translating the name of the projects into the informant’s native language. I was puzzled. The identification with the courses formal framework was minimal. When I reported this back to the National Thematic Group – Asylum, of the Swedish Equal Program, we ended up in a discussion over whether this was really important. As long as the content of the courses was of high quality, did it matter that the participants did not have the formal framework all worked out?

Time, integration and return

Let us now see if the triangle introduced in chapter 2 can help us to analyze the effect of waiting on integration and return. Set up as a triangle, like in figure 2 below, it is clear that the relationship between two of the elements can be seen isolated or as under the influence of the third factor. The word waiting used in the question can be substituted by the word time. I will comment on two of the relationships here.

If we start without letting time into the discussion, the first relationship is between integration and return. First we can look at the effect that the possibility of return or a negative decision had on the efforts to integrate during the waiting period. The informants in this study were already participating in their courses and in addition signed up for the interviews. They were active. Yet the premise of possible return played a central role in their everyday life. It was not that much an attitude of giving up, but the general uncertainty and the temporary living conditions made it hard for them to concentrate and direct their energy. If we let time into the equation, these problems seemed to increase with increased waiting. The difficulties I met with when I wanted to talk to them about the possibility of return were an indication of the semi-reflective way they handled the question for themselves. The premise of possible return was working partly behind their backs.

Figure 2. *The triangle of waiting*



If we turn the arrow around and ask how the integration influenced the motivation or understanding of return, other parts of the data become highlighted. Again excluding time, my informants gave the impression that increased integration gave less openness for accepting a negative decision in their case. Remember the daughter that from age 15 had to take care of the legal matters for the whole family. Her sisters and brothers adapted rapidly to the local community and lost their native language. Their integration into the Swedish society was a direct disqualification for return.

Yet I hold it to be too easy to say that integration automatically disqualifies for later return. In order to get a good grip of the relationship, however, we need to bring back in the distinction between subjective and objective integration. If we explicitly let time play a role, it would be right to say that although the integration during the asylum period would make the individual more capable of returning, it would not make him or her motivated to voluntarily go back. For the authorities the ideal combination would be that the asylum-seekers remained active and were objectively integrated, while staying mentally open to a possible return. The relationship between the two analytical parts of individual integration is interesting, but a discussion will have to wait (Brekke 2001:213).

Sense of coherence

In Chapter 2 I introduced Antonovsky's concept of *sense of coherence* (SOC). When I read the quotations of my informants and the discussions in the previous chapter, it is obvious that the level of coherence was low.

The first component under the SOC umbrella was *comprehensibility*. We are now in a position to ask whether the surroundings and challenges that met the asylum-seekers appeared as random and chaotic or well ordered and understandable. In at least one important aspect the answer has to be the former. My informants experienced the lack of order in the handling of their cases to be negative. It contributed to the sense of randomness. It also seemed unfair and hard to understand. The same was the case for the related phenomenon of not knowing when they could expect a decision. The open-endedness of their waiting contributed to the sense of the process being guided by an element of randomness. Information about the process and the standing of the individual case was experienced as almost absent. And this absence contributed to reducing the already scarce understanding of the premises, policies and law-basis that were relevant in the decision making process.

In several cases the information that had been given – the false or optimistic deadlines – were faulty and lowered the comprehensibility. They were thrown back out into the timeless void. In one case I witnessed an official personal guide (Swedish: *Goda mannen*) supply a 17-year-old asylum-seeker with seriously wrong information about asylum policy, current practice and the handling of the particular case. The people providing the information must of course take into account the *heightened awareness* the asylum-seekers have for signs regarding the outcome of their cases (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Another challenge that I mentioned briefly earlier, is reports that information that does point in direction of the wanted outcome is ignored (Brekke 2001).

The next component of the SOC was *manageability*. Did the asylum-seekers feel that they could tackle the challenges in their lives? Did they feel they had the sufficient resources within themselves and their network to solve the difficulties they were confronted with? Finding a solution and moving on, was problematic for my informants. So many aspects of their lives depended on what the result would be of their application. This they could not *manage* or solve by themselves. Their network was, as we saw in the previous chapter, in most cases limited. They could not get anyone to help them with solving this challenge to their advantage.

The everyday life was also a source of low manageability. Faced with the extensive task of orientating themselves in a new language, in a new society with new cultural codes, it was difficult to get the feeling of success that handling challenges can give. The result was rather that they did not feel in control of their environment. The case was rather the reverse – they felt powerless in the meeting with the *Swedish system*. One could add – and rightfully so.

Pending the outcome of their case, their possibility to manipulate and manage their environment and future was limited. In order to seemingly retrieve the control of their lives, they would have to act *as if* they already knew the outcome.

The third component of Antonovsky's concept was *meaningfulness*. Are the challenges you meet in life worthy of your engagement and energy? In easier terms it is a question of motivation (Antonovsky 1987:18). Were my informants motivated to tackle their everyday life and the future that lay ahead? Were they positively emotionally involved in their efforts? Did their efforts make sense to them? Here the answer has to be divided into two.

On the one hand the basis of their situation, the flight and following existence in exile was highly meaningful. They presented their stories as if they had little or no choice but to flee. Getting away from their homeland and seeking protection and residency in Sweden was absolutely a meaningful project. This made the potential for a strong motivation to cope with their situation and integrate in Sweden. However, for many it seemed to remain a potential due to the prevailing uncertainty.

A negative decision would drain the meaningfulness of their project. This is the other side to the answer. They were left uncertain whether they had done the right thing or not. There was a lot at stake. Some felt their lives were threatened if they were forced to return. For all it would be an emotional but also economic disaster.

In their everyday lives my informants struggled to find a meaning. What I described as the experience of a time without direction. If their efforts are to make sense, they needed a direction.

So where does this leave the asylum-seekers in this study as far sense of coherence goes? As we have seen they would score low on all three of the elements. As I have argued, though, the basis may be sound. Antonovsky discussed different mixes between the three components of the SOC. He found that low scores on comprehensibility and manageability but high on meaningfulness would mean that there was an inherent *pressure to move up* (1987:20). In other words; when a solution to the question of residency is found, comprehension and manageability will follow. One could argue that this presupposes that the decision is positive. With a negative outcome, the meaningfulness may be harder to sustain.¹⁵

The problem for the asylum-seekers as well as for the authorities is then to secure that the experience keep presenting itself as meaningful. A failure in this work will risk taking away the basis of the applicant's existence and ren-

15. This is highly relevant for the ongoing discussion on whether Swedish authorities should organize a program of preparatory activities for rejected asylum-seekers waiting to return (Swedish: av, avisningsverksamhet) (SOU 2003:75:39). Motivational aspects and securing meaningfulness in Antonovsky's sense would be central elements in such considerations.

der them as fatalists. In the Norwegian study of the Bosnian refugees, I met young people with this fatalist attitude. They meant that it didn't matter what they did, their future was anyway out of their control (Brekke 2001). They had retreated from life.

At the same time the two other components must be optimized. Information can give understanding, understanding gives predictability, and predictability gives a sense of control. Maybe the key to empowerment can be found in this line of thought, given that the conditions for installing the applicants with power to control their lives are difficult.

Two comments are needed to put the low SOC score of my informants into perspective. Firstly it is important to note that the three indicators of health were not developed especially for refugees or migrants. My point is that any *stranger* to a social system would be at risk of getting a 'low' score. Asylum seekers are however in a special situation compared to immigrants or to other people that are new to a society. The element of forced exit and waiting at the grace of the host country are among the relevant differences here.

The other comment I wanted to make is that the SOC standard indicates a relationship between class and health. To make it easy for ourselves we can hold class here to mean the level of education, family background and other resources. Antonovsky himself point to this connection when he discusses what causes some people to have a high SOC, while others have low (1987:103). Together with gender, history, genes and idiosyncratic fortune, he holds social class to be of importance. Difference in resources and educational background has not traditionally been used as an explanatory variable in Scandinavian research on refugees and immigrants.¹⁶ In my material, the informants that had some education and perhaps even more important that had parents with education, seemed to handle their situation better. Although there is no necessity involved, this should not be a surprise (Sundquist 1995). Strong and resourceful individuals will always have the best starting point to tackle new and demanding situation (Brochmann 1995:58).

One obvious solution to the problems connected with the asylum period springs to mind. Looking through the Swedish literature on the asylum period, there is one suggestion that is repeated again and again – the call for shorter waiting time (Lindgren 1990:3). In 1987, the Swedish Government even asked for a deliberation to be made on the subject. In January 1988 the committee handed in a report with the title *A shorter wait* (Kortare väntan, SOU 1988:2). They suggested a maximum waiting period of two months in the first instance and two if an appeal was launched. Sixteen years have passed and the

16. The reason for this may be worth looking into. In the research on migration and integration in the UK for example, class plays an important role.

humanitarian, juridical and economic arguments (SOU 1988:2:10) have since been repeated (SOU 2003:75:176). The list containing the reasons that this has not been achieved includes variations in the number of arrivals (less than 10 000 in the mid 1990s and more than 30 000 in 2003), legal considerations and bureaucratic hindrances. My study indicates that certain dates or intervals for the various phases of the asylum-procedure could be as important as making the total period shorter. These *waypoints* would give predictability and a more comprehensive waiting period.

Having looked through the photographs from my informants one last time, it strikes me that these people were not prepared to return to their home countries. This part of the double tracked policy was just not an option. As time went by they chose or drifted either towards integration or resignation. Who of them that would have the personal characteristics to endure the strain of the asylum period and come out on the other side with their abilities intact was hard to predict. The DPs' activities supplied them with structure, a certain sense of direction and usable knowledge during this tough period.

Selected findings

- Returning was not an option

The informants had a double attitude towards the question of return. On the surface they acted as if the possibility of return did not exist. Yet return played the central role in their day-to-day lives. At the same time they only halfway believed that they would be allowed to stay. The result was that they prepared for neither of the two outcomes.

- They were not well informed about their case

The informants received random and often faulty information about their cases and the conditions of the asylum period. They could go for months without knowing what progress was being done. This made the waiting *open ended* and contributed to the feeling of randomness and being *lost in time*. Instances of faulty information further reduced the *predictability* and threatened the *ontological security* of the asylum-seekers.

- The introduction of *waypoints* is suggested

My study indicates that certain dates or intervals for the various phases of the asylum-procedure could be as important as making the total period shorter. *Waypoints* along the asylum process, ideally locked to time intervals, have been suggested in this study to secure existential elements like *ontological security* and *predictability*. These *waypoints* would give a more comprehensive waiting period.

- The double policy of promoting integration *and* return was problematic

This study shows that there are challenges both for the individual asylum-seeker and for the authorities in handling the simultaneous preparation for integration and return. The possibility of return influences the motivation and access to integration. Integration in turn has effect on the potential success of a return operation.

- The asylum seekers had low *sense of coherence*

This study shows that the asylum seekers scored low on standard indicators of health. The most central, the *sense of meaningfulness*, was however considered to be partly intact. Apparent randomness in the handling of individual cases and lack of information worked as direct challenges to the mental health of the asylum seekers.

Appendix 1

Photography as tool in social research

This is a note on one methodological aspect of the study called: "While we are waiting – uncertainty and empowerment among asylum-seekers in Sweden". The main focus of the larger project is to understand how various forms of activity and coping affect later integration and repatriation. The empirical base consists of qualitative interviews with asylum-seekers waiting for the outcome of their cases. In addition I have included photography. Here some methodological advantages and challenges from the use of photography are described and discussed.

The data-gathering for this study was designed as a two-step process. First, asylum-seekers were to be asked to document their everyday life by using single-use cameras. Later this was to be followed up by individual qualitative interviews. What could be called *auto-photography* has not been widespread as a method in the social sciences. There is a specialized field called *visual anthropology*, but there the people and practices are documented by others and not by the objects themselves (Becker 1981).

In the Nordic countries it has however proved useful in the documentation of asylum-seekers everyday life and the relationship between "us" and "them" (Claussen 2003, Staunes 1998). It has also been used to study the everyday life of children (Rasmusson 1998, Jørgensen m.fl 2001).

During April and May 2003 I used this method in a study of a group of asylum-seekers resident in Gothenburg. They were attending a special activity and educational course organized under the cap of the European Social Fund's so-called Equal Program. This is a program designed to develop methods for securing equal access to the labor market for various vulnerable groups, including asylum-seekers.

Photography as a communicative tool

Due to the lack of experience of using photography in this type of project, I was not sure what to expect when I handed out the cameras in Gothenburg. Would they bother to use them at all? If they did use them, what would they take pictures of? When developed, would the photos be useful at all in the later stages of the research process?

In addition to all these questions, I was uncertain how much I should inform the recipients about the project before I gave them the cameras. By telling them about the framework of the study, it would in a way make it easier for them to choose what to portray. At the same time that could make the task appear more like a chore – like something they were told to do. Since the participation was highly voluntary, this could hinder their participation. After having consulted the Danish photographer Anders Claussen, who has used a similar method, I chose to give them just a minimum of guidelines. I even played down the fact that the photos would be used if they allowed me to interview them at a later stage. This would maximize participation and secure that the individual story could be presented with minimum distortion.

The day I handed out the cameras, ten out of twelve from the group were present. They all wanted to participate. I told them very briefly who I was and what the project was about. I also demonstrated how the cameras work. They all got a camera. One of them had second thoughts and did not want to participate. He said it felt 'unsafe'. That left nine. I also had to answer several very good questions, for example what the effects of the study would be. How would it benefit them? Would it be like the couple of times journalists from the local newspaper had visited them? Then they had not been able to recognize their own stories. I assured them that this was a broader and more ambitious study and that their views would be taken seriously.

A week later six of the cameras were handed in and the photographs were developed. All 27 frames had been used on the cameras. I had promised that I was the only one who was going to see the pictures before they got them back. They were also promised a set of copies. I was anxious to see what my respondents had chosen to take pictures of. Had the guidelines I gave them been sufficiently clear? Had they used the camera like a tourist would, or had they used them to document their situation? Some months later I did a second round of fieldwork on the same project. This time eight cameras were handed in. Further down I will comment briefly on the content of the pictures.

Why photos?

The goal in qualitative interviews is to establish an atmosphere that allows for a maximum flow of information. The respondents should be comfortable with the situation. In earlier studies where I had interviewed refugees, I had strug-

gled to achieve what one could call the *balance of status* between the informant and me, the expert. Being interviewed in the exile country, they had a disadvantage. They often struggled with the language and needed an interpreter and their knowledge of the host society was limited. The unbalance was increased by the fact that I – the researcher – had experience from earlier interviews and knew what was likely to happen during the next two hours.¹⁷ The interview situation was structured to be unbalanced. This could be dealt with within the situation, as the respondent could be launched as the expert in the field of being a refugee. According to my experience it is possible to exclude the status-relationship outside the situation, but it is a difficult strategy. As responsible for the interview-situation, the researcher typically has to continually work to counter the structural setup of the respondent as the inferior part of the relationship. It was the wish to, at least in part, to counter this unbalance that motivated me to ask the asylum-seekers in Sweden to take pictures.

So how did it work out? The presence of the pictures did have a series of positive effects both on the relationship and on the interview as a whole. I will give a brief description of a few of them:

Having to take pictures of their everyday life meant that the asylum-seekers began a *reflective process* even before they met me for the interview. For the most part there had been a conscious selection preceding the choice of objects, places, people and processes. They had thought about what I wanted and what they themselves wanted to express. Together, this meant that they had in a way prepared for the interview. To keep this effect alive, it may be a point to keep the time-interval between the hand-in and the interview as short as possible. They were also looking forward to seeing how their pictures had turned out. The same was true for me as the researcher. After the photos were developed I looked through them with great interest, and then again when preparing for the interviews. In doing so I had one could say that I had already met the informant through his or her pictures. I was prepared.

All interviews started with a session where we went through the stack of photographs together. I made certain that the photos were on the top of the table when they entered the room. After a short introduction we turned to the pictures. As mentioned we both had a set of copies, and I made sure that they were in the same sequence. This gave the informant an opportunity to start the interview with topics and choices that were her or his own. It also gave them

17. There are several ways the relationship between the interviewer and the informant has been described in the social sciences. Some state that the situation is the exact opposite than how I portray it here, in other words that the scientist is the pupil and the informant the teacher/expert. This does not hold when the informants are newly arrived asylum-seekers or refugees (Brekke 2001, Brekke 1997).

something to hold in their hands and to focus their attention on. This meant that they became less uncomfortable with the interview-situation. The presence of the photographs served as an *ice-breaker*.

The fact that it was *their* pictures, taken from their lives and by them, contributed to *improving the balance* of the researcher-informant relationship. They were the experts on the content of the photographs and I was ignorant. Throughout the interview the persons, places and objects in the pictures served as constant concrete references: 'No, that was not him, but that guy there', or 'Yes, that one there shows the park where I go for walks when I am feeling a bit down'.

I had planned that the initial session with the photographs should take fifteen, maybe twenty minutes. It was not unusual, however, that this session lasted for 45 minutes and even longer (out of the 90 – 120 I had at my disposal). The reason was that with a good picture material, most of the topics in my interview-guide were linked with the visualized objects. Living conditions, social network, family, activities, experiences with the organized course, could all be represented in the material. They pointed to different aspects of my topic – life while waiting for asylum.

When analyzing the notes from the interview some weeks later, the photographs again served as useful references. They *helped me remember* the individual interview-situation and the informants' comments to the pictures, some of which I had written down on the back of the paper-copies. The photographs stayed with me through a second fieldwork that also included photos. As the number of pictures grew to more than 300, it was still easy to keep track of the individual informant when her or his set of pictures was combined with the interview. They made it easier to *tune in* to the context for the particular interview.

Only a couple of weeks after the fieldwork, it was still unclear how much value the photos would have in the later presentation of the results of the study. It was however clear that they could serve as documentation of the methodological process. In addition they could be presented as illustrations of general living conditions of the asylum seekers and as starting points for discussions about the asylum-seeker's uncertain situation. These post-fieldwork functions of the photo-method came in addition to the increased access to the respondents and higher quality in the interview situation.

Now at the end of this study, there is one function of the photos that I was not prepared for. After the first occasion where I presented some the pictures, I was struck by their power. It took me some time to understand why they made

such a strong impression on the people that saw them, be it bureaucrats, practitioners or researchers. I believe their effect was due to them being displayed as subjects and not objects. It was their pictures, their stories that were being told. If I had taken pictures of them and then presented them, the effect would not have been the same. Later I discovered that I had to be very conscious about what words I said when the pictures were being displayed. People very easily got teary eyed if I did not soften their impact.

What kind of pictures did they take?

I stated earlier that I would give some account of what kind of pictures the asylum-seekers took. I will elaborate and analyze this further in a later publication, and the categories must be considered as under construction.

This is where I live

These pictures showed the apartments or the rooms in the institutions where the asylum-seekers lived. Members of the family they lived with, neighbors and details of the interior decorations were often included. Some of the pictures were taken outdoors and showed the buildings from the outside or the surroundings, such as playing grounds, garbage cans, parks, shops etc. In general these pictures gave a good starting point to talk about everyday life and routines.

My friends

The pictures of the friends were of course a good place to start talking about networks and social contact. Some portrayed friends living in the reception centre, others friends and fellow students from the courses. My informants pointed to the pictures and told the stories of their friends. 'He has waited for 12 months, that one for 8, and the one to the right got his residence permit (PUT) last month', they could start.

At the course

Most of my informants took pictures from the classroom or around the course facilities. This was the focal point of the study and it was where the cameras were handed out and handed back in. But in addition to these practical reasons for these pictures, the courses were also the focal point of the daily life for most of my informants. Photos of the employees, fellow students, pc-rooms

and the 'courses in action', made it easy to address several sides to the organized activity.

The landmarks

When I first saw these pictures, I thought of the cliché tourist pictures we all know. There was the big church, and there the City Hall, and on that one you could see the boat on the river etc. In itself this opens up an interesting discussion on the marginalized position the asylum-seekers have in the Swedish society. They are both on the inside and the outside of it at the same time. Yet it turned out that only some of the pictures in this category were actually taken with the tourist's disinterested distance. Rather they hid stories of special meaning for the individual asylum-seeker. They would tell me that 'that tower there was my landmark on my way to the course. It was my beacon'.

The special place

As we just heard, the landmark pictures could have been put under this heading. They were special places. Yet, this was a distinct category of pictures. They were of significant importance to me because they opened up the inner thoughts of the asylum-seekers. With the pictures in our hands, it was easier for them to talk about their longings, fears and dreams, and for me to ask. They included the corner of the apartment that was only theirs, all their belongings displayed on a table, their special necklace with inscription. It could also be a tree where they sit when depressed, the view from the window where they stand and think in the evenings, or a picture of themselves in front of a mirror.

Some concluding remarks

The list of positive effects of using photo in social science fieldwork makes it quite easy to conclude. Possible negative effects were hard to detect during this first round of interviews. Such a list could include that informants would shy away from participating because of the cameras, that the researcher can over-analyze the visual material, and of course that the extra loop of communication can be time consuming. I needed help from someone who was close to the informants in both fieldworks that could gather the cameras and send them to me. These persons would also serve as information buffers. Being dependant on an interpreter, the direct communication was complicated.

The second fieldwork took place among young asylum-seekers. When I presented the study to them, there were a series of questions about who would see the pictures, would they have to take pictures of themselves, and whether they could participate without taking the pictures. I believe that the photo-method was not the reason for the people that did not choose to participate. In one case a girl had been denied to use the camera by her father.

When it came to the discussion on how to publish the pictures, I had to consider a series of ethical questions and the question of copyright. With few exceptions my informants had given me the right to use their photos in the mediation of the study. They wanted their stories told and spread. They wanted people with power to see what it was like living as an asylum-seeker in Sweden. Still it lay on my shoulders to secure their anonymity and protect them against any negative consequences of showing their pictures.

It is however the positive sides of this scarcely used methodology that spring to mind when an evaluation is to be made. Letting the informants themselves take pictures made the respondents look forward to the interviews and increased the flow of information within the situation. The photos gave a balance between me as the researcher and the informants heightened the quality of the interviews. At a later stage the mediation of the individual story was made more interesting and more powerful through by the self-reporting photos.

The use of photography also had more subtle effects that only became evident during the interviews. Through the pictures, the asylum-seekers gave me entrance to their *backstage*. Like I described above they opened for questions on their inner thoughts by displaying their things or places that were special to them. This type of access presupposes a level of trust that is hard to achieve over the course of a regular interview. One informant took a picture of a mirror surrounded by his belongings on a bed. I asked her why she took the picture. She said:

I wanted to include this little place (Swedish: *stället*) around the mirror. This is my place. It is where I have my things in the house. It is my place. I like the mirror, and often I talk to the mirror instead of talking to others. The mirror doesn't answer and that is better. If I say something to the woman in the house, then maybe she will get angry. Better then to say it to the mirror.

Another positive effect was that by having taken the pictures, the informants had already told me a story. For the informants that were shy, had difficulties expressing themselves or other hindrances, this was a great advantage. The pictures lessened the tension for these people. One story was already told.

There are also advanced advantages with the method that came to the fore during the interviews. One example was the increased possibilities to have the informants reflect on their own life. Having the pictures at hand made it pos-

sible to create the necessary distance for the informants to see themselves from the outside. One question this opened for, and that I was particularly content with was; if someone else saw these pictures, how do you suppose he or she would describe your situation? With the pictures spread out in front of the informant, the answers were easy to come up with.

To sum up, one could say that the photographs worked as communicative tools in at least three different ways: Firstly they served as direct transmitters of information. Even without the presence and additional interpretation of the informant, the pictures gave me a basis for further gathering of material and a series of specific questions. Secondly, and more important, they worked as vehicles and anchors in the face-to-face interaction in the interview situation. Thirdly, they served as important illustrations when the findings of the study were presented to the informants, the public, the financiers of the study and the academic community.

Appendix 2

The asylum-seekers' pictures



This is where I live.



The special place. 'See that store in front? That was where I did my shopping when I arrived ten months ago. For a long period I only went there'.



At the course. 'On a normal day I do not sleep well – perhaps from five until eight. Then I go straight here and start up the computer. I check the news from my home region. It has been turbulent there lately'.



The landmarks. 'I wanted to go there. I like that type of places. It is quiet and you are able to think. I like calm places. Quiet. There is no calm in our lives – that's why I like those places'.

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Report 2004:10

<i>Forfatter/Author</i> Jan-Paul Brække
<i>Tittel/Title</i> While we are waiting Uncertainty and empowerment among asylum-seekers in Sweden
<i>Sammendrag</i> Det er to spørsmål som stilles i denne studien: Hvordan opplever asylsøkere ventetiden og hvilke konsekvenser har dette for senere integrasjon eller retur? Innenfor rammene av det Europeiske Sosialfondets (EU-fond) såkalte EQUAL-program settes søkelyset på konsekvensene av usikkerheten som preger denne perioden for asylsøkere. Studien er basert på fotografier som asylsøkere selv tok for å beskrive sin situasjon og kvalitative intervjuer. Rapporten har med et appendix der fremgangsmåten beskrives og diskuteres. Asylsøkere er valgt ut innenfor to såkalte <i>utviklingspartnerskap</i> . Dette var to forsøk på å utvikle nye metoder for å nytte ventetiden til å forberede asylsøkere på både integrasjon og retur, noe som er et uttalt mål i svensk flyktningpolitikk. I tillegg til å utvide forståelsen av venting som fenomen, søker studien å avdekke muligheter og hindringer for integrasjon og utvikling av asylsøkeres egenmakt. Studien viser hvordan politikkenes doble målsetting spilte seg ut innenfor konteksten av de to Equalprosjektene. Resultatene viste at asylsøkere ikke var forberedte på retur. De forholdt seg <i>som om</i> det ikke var et mulig utfall. Samtidig ble både deres og andres innsats for å sikre integrasjon dempet av deres status som asylsøkere. Konsekvensen var at de ikke forberedte seg fullt ut for noen av de to mulige resultatene av søkerprosessen. Studien viser også at søkerne ikke var godt informert om utviklingen i sakene sine og skåret lavt på standard mentale helseindikatorer.
<i>Emneord</i> Flyktning, asylsøker, venting, integrasjon, Sverige, repatriering, tilbakevending, tid, helse
<i>Summary</i> There are two main questions that are asked in this study: How do asylum-seekers experience waiting for a decision in their asylum case? What are the consequences of this period on later integration or return? Within the framework of the European Social Fund and its EQUAL program, this study sheds light on the consequences of the uncertainty that dominates this period. The study is based on a combination of pictures taken with single use cameras by the asylum-seekers and qualitative interviews. The report includes a thorough description and discussion of this innovative method. In addition to increasing the understanding of the phenomenon of waiting, the project seeks to identify the possibilities and limitations of empowerment and integration of this vulnerable group. The study is inspired by relevant theoretical work on the nature of waiting, but at the core of the discussions is the activity of two so-called development partnerships in Sweden. According to the Swedish authorities the asylum-seekers are supposed to prepare for both integration and return. This study shows how these seemingly contradictory ambitions played themselves out within the context of the two Equal courses. The study showed that the asylum-seekers were not preparing for a possible return. They behaved as if this was not a possible outcome. At the same time their status meant that integration efforts made by themselves and others were limited. It also showed that the asylum-seekers were not well informed about their cases and scored low on standard mental health indicators.
<i>Index terms</i> Refugee, asylum-seeker, waiting, integration, Sweden, repatriation, return, time, health