



Exploring Lived Experiences of Parents of Youth and Youth with a Foreign Background in Sweden

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Abstract

Background Sweden is in transition when it comes to the immigrant experience. More research is needed to document the life circumstances and adjustment of those with foreign background living in Sweden.

Objective This study investigated the lived experiences of parents of youths and young people themselves who have an Iraqi or Syrian background and are living in Sweden.

Method This cross-sectional qualitative interview study focused on a sample of parents of youth and youth (N=26) with a foreign background. Participants were either born in Syria or Iraq or had one or both parents born in these countries and had migrated to Sweden. Participant interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results In relation to the study aim, the analysis indicated three main themes in participants' responses which concerned life in Sweden, feeling at home, and coping.

Conclusions Overall, these themes reflected how the perception of everyday experiences relates to adjustment within a multi-cultural urban Swedish context. This study showed how participants with a foreign background are rich in their own diversity of experiences and viewpoints. Results also pointed towards the promise of social policy and services aimed at benefiting those with a foreign background if such efforts are situated in the microsystems that provide life daily structure, as well as in contexts that offer socialization and networking opportunities (e.g., training, education, work, and school). Further, such action should consider the importance of the extended family as part of family-focused initiatives.

Keywords Immigration · Sweden · Iraq · Syria · Youth · Parents · Lived experience · Coping · Qualitative · Interview

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Background and Research Priorities

This study concerns aspects of the Swedish immigrant experience. Countries differ in how individuals with an immigrant background are defined in population statistics. Statistics Sweden (2020) considers individuals as having a foreign background if they were either born outside of Sweden or if they were born in Sweden but both parents were born abroad. Although there have been recent increases in immigration, the immigrant experience in Sweden is not a new phenomenon (Statistics Sweden 2019). There are many with a foreign background in Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2020). In 2019, 19.6% of the Swedish population was born abroad (Statistics Sweden 2020). Also, 25.5% of Swedish children have a foreign background (Statistics Sweden 2020). For those with a foreign background, common birth countries outside Europe are Syria, Afghanistan, India, and Iraq (Statistics Sweden, 2020). Since the immigration context in Sweden varies greatly by ethnicity, population size, and immigration history, this study focused on understanding the everyday situation of only two prominent, in terms of share of the local population, immigrant groups living in a large urban city in Sweden. One group has a longer history within Sweden (e.g., Iraqi) relative to the other, which has a more recent arrival in Sweden (e.g., Syrian).

Sweden is in transition concerning public discourse and immigrant policies, practices, and services (Hodes et al. 2017). Sweden is characterized as having "...generally multicultural approaches and attitudes and most favorable integration policies, also has the child population with above-average markers of well-being" (Marks et al. 2018, p. 16). Even with a positive international standing, findings suggest that relative to children with a non-foreign background, those with a foreign background tend to live with a single parent, in a large metropolitan urban setting, and in rental housing (Statistics Sweden 2017a, b), have lower educational achievement, and are at risk of dropping out of upper secondary education (10.5% vs. 5.4%; OECD, 2014). However, many children with a foreign background also have strengths (e.g., Carlerby et al. 2012; Taguma et al. 2010). A study of 685 Swedish youth showed that those with a foreign background were more likely to plan university studies directly after high school relative to those with a non-foreign background, who were more likely to plan to work or travel before pursuing university studies (Kaya and Barmark 2018). Such educational values are consistent with the immigrant optimism hypothesis (Kaya and Barmark 2018), in which high educational aspirations are valued as key pathways to success.

Further from a theoretical standpoint, the integrative risk and resilience model for immigrant populations holds that youth with an immigrant background contend with normative challenges that all youth face, along with unique opportunities for change related to adjusting to a new society (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2018). In such circumstances, the home and wider society are essential developmental contexts, not only for youth but also for parents of youth (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2018).

Given this background, more research is needed to document the life circumstances of youth and parents of youth with a foreign background in Sweden. Some information is available from Swedish registry data (e.g., Hjern 2012; Rostila and Fritzell 2014). However, wide ranging and more detailed survey- and/or interview-based studies with parents of young people, as well as youth themselves who have a foreign background living in Sweden are few in number. Thus, it is essential to develop new knowledge about how these groups are faring in Sweden and to gain insight into participants' perspectives, in their own words.

Empirical Studies About Iraqi and Syrian Immigration Experiences

Past qualitative studies about the immigrant experience in Sweden and elsewhere focusing on the relatively large and diverse migration groups from Syria or Iraq do exist, but have mainly explored how adults encounter medical and/or psychiatric care (e.g., Karlberg and Ringsberg 2006). However, a study of 154 Iraqi refugees who had resettled to the United States (U.S.) also included in-depth interviews with a subset of five participants (Yako and Biswas 2014). Qualitative analyses revealed that practical supports were important for transitioning to a new life in the U.S., particularly the availability of a secure and comfortable place to live, and short term financial and language support (Yako and Biswas 2014).

In the wider international literature, it is clear that work is important to adaptation and well-being among many immigrant groups in general. A Canadian study conducted by Zikic and Richardson (2016), for example, found that skilled migrants with established professions faced difficulties in understanding and overcoming institutional requirements in the labor market. Self-initiated international careers due to migration have also been found to be challenging for many across different societies in the West (e.g., Canada, Spain, France, see Zikic et al. 2010). Similar observations have been made in Sweden, highlighting the difficulties to validate ones' competence, and thus, find qualified jobs (Diedrich and Styhre 2013). How migrants and their children experience these transitions in parents' work has not been focused upon, in Sweden, although it can be expected that both adults and youth are affected and have their own experiences of their parent's or child's adaptation to a new host society.

Generally, studies about immigrants' experiences in Sweden have often focused on ethnic identity, across diverse immigrant groups or have a focus on a particular ethnic group in Sweden, such as Swedes with an Iranian heritage. Results from such studies highlight how these groups experience and negotiate different cultural and social worlds (e.g., Ferrer-Wreder, Trost et al. 2012). In a relatively recent study, 16–29-year-olds with and without foreign backgrounds wrote narratives about their own ethnic-related experiences (Gyberg et al. 2018). Several themes, including a sense of feeling different and experiences of prejudice and racism, emerged. For foreign born participants, there was an emphasis on redefining what it means to be Swedish.

Study Aim

This study investigated the lived experiences of parents of young people (i.e., 15–16 year olds) and youth themselves who have an Iraqi or Syrian family background and are living in a large Swedish city.

Method

Participants

Participants were 15–16-year-olds and parents of 15 to 16 year olds ($N=26$). Of those interviewed, 20 participants had completed a questionnaire and provided detailed demographic information. The others provided no questionnaire data and only had basic demographics recorded (See Tables 1 and 2). One interview with an adult participant (recruited

Table 1 Participant demographics (N = 26)

	Recruitment		Heritage Nationality	
	Registry	Community	Iraqi	Syrian
Parents	13	2	9	5
Youth	8	3	8	3
Total	21	5	17	9

Table 2 Participant demographics: interview participants who completed a survey

	Born in Sweden*		Gender		Languages spoken*	
	Yes	No	Woman	Man	Swedish + one or more languages	No Swedish
Parents		12 (92%)	6 (46%)	7 (54%)	10 (77%)	2 (15%)
Youth	2 (29%)	5 (71%)	4 (57%)	3 (43%)	6 (86%)	

Note In this table, demographics for participants (13 parents and seven youth) in the interview study that also completed a study questionnaire are described

*indicates that percentages do not sum to 100% because one or more participants left this question blank/missing. Other demographic information for parents only in this table was that 31% (n=4) had a high school education or less, 62% (n=8) had education after completion of high school from less than two years to five years, and 8% (n=1) of the parents had a research education (e.g., PhD.). Further, 77% (n=10) of the parents in this table answered no to the question: "Would your family be able to get 20,000 SEK in 3 days if you needed it?"

via registry/mail home approach; see procedure for details about recruitment) was excluded due to transcription problems. The final sample consisted of 25 participants (15 parents of youth and 11 youth) who provided interview material that are analyzed in the present study.

Data Collection

The interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview guide developed by researchers within this project. In order to examine the lived experiences, participants were asked to describe what an ordinary day looked like, what they would like to change in their life, where they felt at home, and who they met with socially. Other questions were part of the interview guide and focused on the topic of research participation. Responses to the questions about research participation are not included in the present analyses. On average, an interview lasted 38 min (20–88 min). Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English.

Procedure

This is a cross-sectional interview study that is part of a wider project. Participants that met study inclusion criteria (criteria are explained in the next paragraph) were approached through either registry-based recruitment via Statistics Sweden or community-based recruitment via research assistants who visited a range of community organizations, placed

study advertisements, and used snowballing techniques. For the registry arm, the family study response rate was 11% (45 out of 400 families contacted participated in some aspect of the project). Community-based recruitment was conducted by in-person and written communications. In the community arm, the organizational response rate was 27%. The wider project, in which this interview study is embedded, was designed to test the relative utility of these two recruitment approaches (registry in comparison to community-based recruitment). Results of the wider project as it regards research participation will be reported elsewhere. The wider study procedure was to ask all participants that met the study inclusion criteria, to complete a questionnaire on health, well-being, and related topics and/or to participate in a one-on-one interview. Participants could decide to only answer the questionnaire and/or participate in the interview or both. Participants contacted through the registry received a mailed letter with information about the project from Statistics Sweden. This letter also contained the questionnaire and pre-paid envelopes to return the completed questionnaire to the research team. Participants who had indicated in the questionnaire that they were interested in being interviewed were contacted. Interviews were held in participants' homes or community locations. Participants could choose to conduct their interview in Arabic or Swedish.

The project inclusion criteria were family-focused and involved inviting participation by youths and/or at least one parent and/or another family member (e.g., the other parent, an adult sibling, aunt, uncle, or grandparent). Study inclusion criteria for youth participants were that youth were between 15 and 16 years old and lived in a specific geographic urban region of Sweden with a large population of inhabitants born in Iraq or Syria. In Sweden, 15–16-year olds are transitioning into high school and encountering an important social and educational transition. Thus, this age range was selected for the youth participants. Other study inclusion criteria were that within the family that at least one parent was born in Iraq or Syria. Only two families had two adult informants in which fathers and mothers participated. The family-based focus of this study was not pursued in the analysis of the interviews due to the existence of only a limited number of parent–child dyads who took part in the interview. In some cases, youths would participate in the interview and not their parents and vice versa. As the overall project aimed to better understand reasons for research participation of families in social science and health studies, families were instructed that youths and/or other adult family members could participate in any part of the research project (i.e., interviews or self-report surveys). Therefore, in the present study, we analyzed the parents of youth and youth interviews in their own right and not as parent–child dyads. For the sake of brevity, from this point forward, we refer to parents of youth (i.e., parents living with their child, specifically a 15–16 year-old) as parents, noting that parent–child dyads are in the minority in the present study sample, not allowing for an analysis by parent–child dyads.

All participants provided active informed consent and this study was approved by a Regional Ethical Review Board. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. Procedures and materials were informed by culturally sensitive research methods widely used in the international research literature dedicated to engaging underrepresented ethnocultural and/or immigrant groups in research (e.g., Aroian et al. 2006; Lee and Cheng 2006; Lopez-Class et al. 2016). This included the production of study materials in relevant languages (Arabic and Swedish) for the participants and field research assistants who were fluent in Swedish and/or Arabic. The entire research team is living in Sweden and have a foreign background but did not have the same national or ethnic heritages as study participants. However, the field research assistants had group specific cultural knowledge and sensitivity. Participants were offered culturally appropriate participant incentives (e.g., non-monetary incentives of minor

but some moderate value to youths and parents, gift card for a department store or movie tickets).

Data Analysis

It is important to note that qualitative approaches look at patterns observed rather than reporting frequencies or sample sizes where acceptance can be quantified (Fugard and Potts 2015). Indeed, subjective judgement guided by the data and the research questions play an important role which can function to seek patterns. Following guidelines by Fugard and Potts (2015) looking at instances of themes in regard to questions and cohort as well as cohesive judgement and agreement between three coders, the data analyses was conducted using a thematic approach.

A thematic analysis, following the Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) approach, was conducted by three coders who are also study authors. All study authors take responsibility for data integrity. The authors who coded the interview data take responsibility for the accuracy of the data analysis. Regarding the coding process, first, coders read all interview material to familiarize themselves with the data. The initial coding was conducted separately using an inductive bottom-up approach. Thus, all relevant data regarding lived experiences of (im) migration and participation in research studies regarding (im)migration were coded. However, the coders also worked deductively and used their disciplinary knowledge by coding patterns of agency referring to society, family, and the individual, and by coding content that revealed participants' psychological approaches to making sense of and creating meaning for lived experiences of (im)migration. Then, the analyses, including codes and generated emerging patterns, were discussed. Differences in coding were resolved by consensus and decisions were made on preliminary themes. Following this, each coder worked through the material again, to make sure that these emerging themes fitted the essence of the coded data units and patterns in the data. In the final analytic step, results were written and reviewed to ensure that each theme of the emerging theme structure was coherent and had a clear scope, and that all themes provided a rich and meaningful picture of participants' accounts. Illustrative quotations were given for each theme.

Results

In relation to the study aim, results yielded three main themes with various sub-themes (See Table 3).

Life in Sweden

Participants' life routines in Sweden that became evident in their day-to-day life and daily structures included six sub-themes. They were present in all interviews, but emphasized differently.

The Meaning of Work

Work was important both for parents and youth in providing structure to the weekday, or, in cases of seasonal work, the year. Work was also referred to in relation to professions and

Table 3 Main themes, sub-themes, and quotes

Main theme	Sub-themes	Quote	
1	Life in Sweden	The meaning of work	Q1.1.1 <i>My wife has an internship. For a year or so, she has been going from internship to internship and I wish that I, she, or both of us could find a job so we could have better control over our lives</i> Q1.1.2 <i>I want them to work for their sakes and for us as a family, economically, and psychologically, for them as people who want to live their life</i>
		1.2 School has a central role	Q1.2.3 My FOREMOST THOUGHTS <i>right now here in Sweden are focused on my son getting an education and work in the future</i> Q1.2.4 <i>It is study, one has a degree [...] the one who has a certificate and a job and everything, ... then the money will come, health will come, friends [...], without education, life is not a life</i>
	1.3 Accommodation		Q1.3.5 ... <i>to change the home, to live in a new house, because we and my uncle's family are eight people living in the same home, it is too small for us</i>
			Q1.3.6 <i>Until now, we haven't gotten a rental contract, although I was working legally, and registered with several housing companies. Until now, I haven't gotten a first-hand contract so there are worries that make me still [feel like] my life isn't settled</i>
	1.4 Social relations		Q1.4.7 <i>I meet people at school, my friends I meet yeah just my friends at school. My father meets his customers he meets his friends, after work. My mother meets her sisters</i>
			Q1.4.8 <i>I have a good relationship with my neighbors [...] and they are like family, I mean</i>
			Q1.4.9 <i>We have friends from church</i>
			Q1.4.10 <i>Family is here, my aunts are here, my grandfather is here</i>
			Q1.4.11 <i>My dad, my mother, my uncle, his wife, my cousin. We live in the same house [Pause, 2 s] we spend time together</i>
	1.5 Health		Q1.5.12 <i>But for the one who doesn't have health, it is difficult to buy health</i>
			Q1.5.13 <i>My dad is depressed, he is sick of Sweden. He says he doesn't have work here. He says he has too little work, he doesn't get much. He says he toils a lot so we can live</i>
	1.6 Free time		Q1.6.14 <i>I go the "gym" and after the "gym" I meet friends for a bit</i>
			Q1.6.15 <i>I have training before school, I go to training, football training</i>
			Q1.6.16 <i>I eat breakfast and go for training... then I start to work</i> Q1.6.17 <i>Because I have different activities, I go to music, to the scouts... eh, normal scouts, eh, I have an own band also. Eh and sometimes I go to church, vi learn Syrtian written language there</i>

Table 3 (continued)

Main theme	Sub-themes	Quote
2. Feeling at home	2.1 Accommodation gives feeling at home	<p>Q2.1.1.1 <i>My house is the most important thing to me, it is my place, it makes me feel this place is right... This I mean, its security, most importantly safety, I mean feeling that no one can enter my house who-ever can come and affect my life [pause] I mean that is more important than anything and that is my place</i></p> <p>Q2.1.2 ... <i>accommodation makes me at ease, comfortable</i></p>
	2.2 School and work gives feeling at home	<p>Q2.2.3 <i>The only thing that remains to make me feel this is my place is a job (Pause). For me finding a job is important... Finding work gives stability [pause]. Stability and income makes you think of having free time, of having (pause) once a person has employment, then he can have social connections and a wider social circle."</i></p> <p>Q2.2.4 <i>I mean, I feel at home with my family...and at school, I mean if [I had to choose] one, it would mainly be school...It's school, yes education yes...that is the most important thing [...]. Without education, you can't do anything here in Sweden. Yes it makes life better, to live comfortably</i></p>
2.3 Family gives feeling at home		<p>Q2.3.5 <i>Iraq is my place. I feel it is my home. [Pause] My extended family are there [pause] my house, my grandfather is there. And there is nothing better than to be with family and my grandfather and in my house as long as I am with my family. I mean there in Iraq [pause] um with my grandfather... Here we are just my family, and my cousins and [pause] uncle and aunt</i></p> <p>Q2.3.6 ... <i>I feel that I'm at home here eh when we are all together, not just my family, but eh even nieces, nephews, cousins...</i></p>
		<p>Q2.3.7 <i>My family is my place. If my family is well [pause] I mean now even if I don't have any friends, if my family is well then I'm happy here. Because they are like my escape. From all this with friends and stuff...my mother is my number one friend always and...my relationship with my dad. As for my brother [pause] It's like I'm one person but in two bodies. Like that, that's why... my family are my best in life and everything else comes after them. They are my place</i></p> <p>Q2.3.8 <i>Um the family plays a big role. If they are comfortable. I think my family is my feeling of home. Yes, they play an important role for me where I am</i></p>

Table 3 (continued)

Main theme	Sub-themes	Quote
	2.4 Religion/Belief gives feeling at home	<p>Q2.4.9 ...I always tell my children, thank God and praise him that you have a house, a home to live in, that you are healthy [pause], that we are together, you have mother and father...this feeling of security, all of it is from God, to know God, knowing God, I feel that I have security, security is feeling good here, it gives a feeling of being in our place</p> <p>Q2.4.10 ...to be honest, the religion. I mean I want my children especially the two youngest to have that feeling, I would like them to be closer to it [religion] to be honest, then they would have traditions and our customs, it is true ok they are here in this society but I really want them to be more committed to it [religion]...I come from a country ah which has an Islamic background, ... I have principles, it helps, I mean to have [pause] religious commitment. To feel ok here, for them, and like that</p>
3	3.1 Comparing the present to the past	<p>Q3.1.1 I cannot get even one percent of what I had reached</p> <p>Q3.1.2 Every day I think of my home country</p> <p>Q3.1.3 I can't forget what I had achieved in the country I have left</p>
	3.2 Escaping reality	<p>Q3.2.4 I dream of a normal day (when) I don't have to think of anything</p> <p>Q3.2.5 No one can enter the house and affect my life</p> <p>Q3.2.6 I feel as if I will stay a foreigner all my life. I will never be a daughter of this country</p>
	3.3 Loss of the pre-migration life	<p>Q3.3.7 In our country, our life had stopped</p>
	3.4 Positive future for the children	<p>Q3.4.8 Here, I see my children's future (is) better, the security for them is better</p> <p>Q3.4.9 I want to work and for my son to have a bright future</p>

professional identities. In many families both parents worked, e.g., youth talked about their mother's and father's jobs, or parents reported on daily routines that included employment of both adults in the family. Parents also referred to their own or their partner's internship as a work activity that was expected to be a step towards employment (Table 3, Q1.1.1). For those with no paid employment, work and the absence of it was a pressing theme; several obstacles, including learning the language, doing the qualifying course, getting a residence permit, or adequate help to find a suitable job, had to be overcome. Professional identities, for example being a teacher, a dentist, having certificates in mathematical science, having worked in different professions prior to immigration were emphasized. Finding employment was considered a key to a life in Sweden, and essential for not being forced to live from benefits anymore. Emphasis on professional identity was closely linked to emphasis on a work identity, to indicate that one is used to work and is not "lazy". In struggling families, youth were aware of, and concerned about their parents' situation (Table 3, Q1.1.2).

School has a Central Role

All youth were at school and it structured the day and was the place to be. There was frequent mentioning of siblings being in Swedish child care or at school. School had an important role during evenings and weekends as well: homework, studying, doing work for school, preparing for tests and exams were daily activities that mainly involved youth but often their parents as well. Parents hoped that the children would succeed in education and build a good life (Table 3, Q1.2.3). This is also apparent in the youth interviews. For some, education and a future job were essential to their future economic situation. For others, school and their education was the key to everything else in life (Table 3, Q1.2.4).

Accommodation

Many families had trouble finding a suitable place to live. Mainly parents worried about their housing situation, but youth were often aware of their parents' struggling and wished for a change (Table 3, Q1.3.5). Housing was also troublesome for those not fitting the typical average family requirements including mentioning of the difficulties to find larger accommodation and the high costs involved. Participants experienced greater vulnerability in a tight housing market with long waiting lists and requirements of having steady income (Table 3, Q1.3.6).

Social Relations

Parents and youth had social ties and daily contacts to colleagues and customers at work, friends, teachers, students at school, neighbors, and members of sport clubs, the church or mosque, or community. Particularly among youth, spending time with friends was an important part of their daily activity and life routine. A considerable amount of the study participants also had close contact to relatives in their extended families. For example, parents mentioned visiting their parents a lot, and some mentioned that their relatives and extended family were in Sweden. Youth talked about having aunts, uncles, cousins, or grandparents living close in Sweden, so that these social ties were an important part of the life routines in Sweden, with several visits during the week or at the weekend and on free days (Table 3, Q1.4.7., Q1.4.10., Q1.4.11).

Health

Health, and foremost health problems in adults, was a concern for parents and youth alike. For some, health was a prerequisite to a good life, something to appreciate because health cannot be bought (e.g., Table 3, Q1.5.12). Youth observed parent's health issues, which they saw affected the whole family. In one case, youth believed that the mother kept her job despite no longer having the physical capacity to continue working there, and thus never had energy left for the family, not on evenings nor weekends. Also, youth mentioned parents' mental health issues as related to problems finding work (Table 3, Q1.5.12–1.5.13). Themes of mental or physical ill-health associated with work, income, and housing, illustrate how vulnerability would accumulate for some.

Free Time

Working out physically was a frequent activity of many youth during the week and weekends. This mainly included working out at a gym, but some were training specific sports, including soccer, boxing, or wrestling. To some extent, youth activities required family engagement because parents were responsible for transporting youth to and from activities. Some parents reported weekly workouts as part of their life routines. Occasionally, other leisure activities and engagements outside of work and school were mentioned, such as playing an instrument, being a scout, or attending religious school for Arabic lessons. Parental political activities or active participation in the local housing association were described as well. Going to church or mosque or meeting friends from the church or mosque were among the activities mentioned rarely as part of the life routines (Table 3, Q1.6.14–1.6.17).

Feeling at Home

The patterns identified from parents involved characteristics that reflected the feeling of being at home as stemming from accommodation, work/school, family, and religious/cultural beliefs.

Accommodation Gives Feeling at Home

Unarguably, one of the most predominant themes in frequency from both parents and youth was the idea of accommodation. Having a place to live and a place to call their own is what many reported as being important to feeling at home. Having such a place seemed to be associated with security, a subsequent sense of being at home, and was important to participant's perceived agency (Table 3, Q2.1.1, Q2.1.2).

School and Work Gives Feeling at Home

Both parents and youth, reflected on school and work as being important not only for themselves but for others. Youth and parents mentioned school/education as being important and as a conduit that can help youth feel comfortable in a new country. Parents described school and education as necessary for their children, because this will make them feel at home and have a future in Sweden. The youth mentioned school in some way as an important aspect of their lives in terms of feeling at home. Parents and youth appeared to be

keenly aware of each other's road to feeling at home. Both work and education were often seen as a way of not having to rely on the establishment, which in turn gave some a feeling of being at home (Table 3, Q2.2.3, Q2.2.4).

Family Gives Feeling at Home

The most predominant and well represented idea across the interviews was that of family, where participants, independent of age, noted that the context of social connectedness with family gave a sense of home. Social connectedness with not only close family members but even extended family clearly was a driving agent considered to help one's sense of being at home in another country. For instance, youth noted feeling at home is where the entire family is, including extended family. Due to having extended family abroad, Sweden was not always considered to be home (Table 3, Q2.3.5). Others had family, including extended family, in Sweden, which added to feelings of being at home (Table 3, Q2.3.6). The two perspectives exemplify the importance of extended family in the perception of feeling at home. It also questions a Westernized definition of family and extending it beyond the nuclear family when investigating the lives of immigrants. Yet, family in a more nuclear, traditionally westernized sense was mentioned as well. For some, it is indeed important to have the entire family together, while others did not mention the extended family but having everyone from the family in the same place, gives a feeling of being at home independent of place or country. Yet, other youth mentioned family as making them feel at home even when friends do not seem to exist. This is particularly interesting considering that friends play an important role in young people's lives with respect to feeling comfortable (Table 3, Q2.3.7). A sense of feeling at home stems from the family as a very strong agent to one's own feelings. Parents leaving to provide their children with a better, safer and more comfortable future describe how this, through the children, makes the parents feel at home (Table 3, Q2.3.8).

Religion/Belief Gives Feeling at Home

This key sub-theme refers to the individual expressing experiences of feeling at home through their relations to religion or God. Despite not being a predominant theme across the interviews, it seemed critical to those few who specifically mentioned religion as an aspect of feeling comfortable. This then, motivates its importance in the results. Religion or a commitment to religion is mentioned with regard to a feeling of security and a feeling of home (Table 3, Q2.4.9). A commitment to religion seems to function as giving and holding of traditions and practices which, in turn, give a feeling of being at home. Parents considered it important to transfer such a commitment to their children to share principles of life and involve them in traditions (Table 3, Q2.4.10).

Coping

Participants often described their current life-situation in comparison to their past, pre-migration, experiences in their home-countries or to possible future, post-migration scenarios. In these descriptions, the coping efforts with migration challenges, e.g., with the loss of any former structure and difficulties of building a new one, became visible. Youth did not evidence in their responses complex psychological structures for meaning-making about their pre-migration experience. Youth did not seem stuck in a pre-migration situation

but instead they focused on adapting to a new context. However, parents in this sample brought along more complex psychological structures, which allowed them to engage in different meaning-making processes. They reveal highly individualized and creative variations in their ways of coping with the migration situation. What becomes apparent are their difficulties in leaving behind a former life-situation and their lack of attempts to adapt to the culture, ideals, and norms of the new society.

Comparing the Present to the Past

Some were living in the past, which relates to the migration having led to a severe loss with no possibility of compensation. For instance, those who had been successful in their home countries now had difficulties finding work. Thus, the current life situation was experienced as an “abnormal condition” characterized by helplessness. This unsuccessful situation was accompanied by other problems, including stress (Table 3, Q3.1.1, Q3.1.2, Q3.1.3). Helplessness was accompanied by requests for authorities or the government to “take away the hindrances for employers” in order to facilitate the possibility of employment. A strong longing for the past was also linked to a position characterized by not having psychologically arrived in Sweden. These parents seemed to focus on a (lost) situation in their pre-migration country. They were not “here”, but “there” and thus not fully present in their current life-situation.

“Escaping” Reality

The permanent concerns of every-day life about “clothes, work, children” were experienced as stressful. In contrast to a strategy where others (e.g., the country, the authorities) are made responsible for this, this stress instead involves a mental state characterized by a standstill in which nothing happens and there are no thoughts of actions. Such a tendency to escape the present reality is expressed in parents preferring not to having to think of any daily ordeals (Table 3, Q3.2.4). Such a state would then be experienced as a relief. Another strategy of escaping involves focusing on specific roles, for instance on being “a mother and ... a sister to [the] siblings”. Thus, home provides a possibility to be a mother, regardless of the society in which one lives. To ignore all biographical and historical aspects allows feelings of “security”. However, there is also an awareness of the consequences associated with such a focus (Table 3, Q3.2.5, Q3.2.6). Instead of being oriented towards any past or future point in time, the individual focus involves wishing for a safe place characterized by some sort of timelessness. Such a timelessness allows little room for adaptation or for establishing meaning around the migration process and related experiences.

Loss of the Pre-Migration Life

Another pattern involves losing the “old life” in the country of origin, i.e., before the actual migration to Sweden. In the new country, the typical challenges were described as: Besides mastering the language, new relationships are considered necessary in order “to enter society”. Home was lost “when the old life had stopped” in the old country. However, here, the main fear lies in experiencing a repetition of the old societal conditions in Sweden. This fear was described to include risking to form a “society within the society”, “with the same things: persecution of the other. Racism.” In the old country, “a majority was persecuting

the rest” and this may also happen in Sweden. Yet, a clear difference is emphasized: In Sweden “a law one can turn to” exists.

Positive Future for the Children

School is seen as important to ensure the future of the children. It is a clear description of a future-oriented situation where a home is a place for the children “in the future”. This place is linked to the new country and to accommodation, language, having a job, and with earning money. Although learning a new language is reported as a difficulty, the acquisition of a new language is seen as necessary. Another component needed to feel at home is feeling “comfortable”. This involves a “comfortable house, a job one feels comfortable with, and children who are comfortable”. The key to achieve this is described in terms of “strong personalities”. Instead of being afraid that the “children get lost in Sweden”, it is seen as necessary to rely on and trust the strengths of children.

Discussion

This study set out to explore the perspectives of immigrant parents and youths’ lived experience. Results indicated three main themes relevant to this study aim which concerned everyday experiences of life in Sweden, feeling at home, and coping. Considering the main themes of everyday experiences of participants—that is life in Sweden, feeling at home, and coping—these clearly revolved around issues that form part of daily life. Facing every day and normative challenges is also in line with the integrative risk and resilience model (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2018). Specifically, accommodation seemed as a prerequisite for stability. This finding is consistent with a past qualitative study of Iraqi refugees living in the U.S. (Yako and Biswas 2014), which also highlighted the importance of stable housing of appropriate size for a family as secure basis for adaptation and setting the stage for a stable and safe future.

In addition to accommodation, work and any income related to work, provides an important path into a new society for adults (e.g., Zikic and Richardson 2016). However, language and societal structures (e.g., labor market laws, rules, and regulations regarding employment and education) can constitute barriers for entering the Swedish labor market (Diedrich and Styhre 2013). In the present study, for those who worked, new jobs gave structure to daily life albeit the work may not exactly fit individuals’ education or expectations. For others, job searching activities and language courses helped to provide a structure for daily life. As is seen in international literature, work is an important lived everyday experience whether one is an adult or being the observer of the adults in their home as in the case of the youth in this study. Similar to participants in in Zikic and Richardsson’s study (2016), the parents in this study reported feeling that work and attending classes gave their everyday lives structure and meaning. Interestingly, youth in this study also reported such similar lived experiences from their parents being employed. This suggests that the type of work per se may not be the underlying factor but the embedded structure, value, and hope that it may give as attending language courses and searching for possible employment in a structured way also was quite meaningful. As a whole however, employment does seem to be perceived as important for well-being for youths and parents in this sample, which is consistent with ideas posited by Jahoda (1958).

Consistent with the immigrant optimism hypothesis (Kaya and Barmark 2018), the participants in this study, independent of cohort, emphasized the importance of education as a way to enter and thrive in the Swedish society. Similar to work structuring the day for parents, school structured the day for youth. Also, both work and school include opportunities to contact people beyond the family, thus expanding participant's social network. This structure, socialization and networking that work and school provided in the daily life of participants also is in keeping with historically important factors linked to positive functioning and health (e.g., Jahoda 1958).

In line with previous research on adjustment, participants' ways of coping were associated with their views of their current and future situations (Heffer and Willoughby 2017). Parents with more straining life situations characterized for instance by low incomes, high insecurity, and poor working conditions, were more likely to have more difficulties in seeing a positive future for themselves and instead missed what they had before migrating. However, many of participants had hopes for the younger generation to be better off, while others, with reasonable incomes, security and better jobs, were more likely to adjust to their situation and focus on their current life in Sweden while also having hopes for the younger generation. Youth seemed well aware of adults' daily coping, mentioning the sacrifices older generations made in order to provide youth with better future prospects. Importantly, the issues of bringing conflicts between different immigrant groups to Sweden and fearing a society within the Swedish society were mentioned by some participants. While some may prefer to stay with cultural counterparts and, for instance, maintain traditional gender roles, others may want adapt to the mainstream Swedish context. This was reflected in the different ways of coping. These variations in coping make it clear that different individuals have varied support needs for adapting to Sweden. Thus, the situation of individuals has to be carefully explored in order to offer adequate support.

The extended family including aunts, uncles, and grandparents was important. Both parents and youth mentioned the extended family emphasized the need to have all family members around to feel at home. The extended family played an important role in for instance providing support. Perhaps traditions and religion, albeit not consistent yet included in the data-material, where parents expressed concern of youth not being in line with traditional values of the pre-migration culture and religion, could be understood as a means to link back to the extended family and keep shared values across generations. More consistent, however, was the conceptualization of "family" being more than just the immediate nuclear family.

There was no consistent mentioning of prejudice or racism found in some previous research (cf. Gyberg et al. 2018). This may relate to the present study focusing on everyday experiences. So, while not disputing the fact that prejudice and racism are part of daily life, the interviews may not have prompted this topic for these study participants. Most of the information did involve encountering and making the Swedish context one's own place at the individual level or concerned "micro-systems" (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2018) including schools, neighborhoods, or families. Thus, any micro level context action may improve the "immigration receiving contexts" (e.g., Marks et al. 2018). With everyday issues situated within microsystems, interventions based in key micro-systems and/or tailoring of resources in schools, neighborhoods, and homes may be effective. Yet, the importance of extended family was emphasized as a key factor, meaning that actions addressing the extended family may be valuable. However, the present findings should be viewed as tentative and awaiting further replication prior to action or policy based on the present study themes concerning migration within Sweden.

Regarding study limitations it is recognized that individuals are unique in their lived experiences and the present findings are relevant to this sample and may not generalize further to all with a foreign background; nor do we generalize the findings to immigrants from the two specific countries who live in Sweden. It was determined that 25 interviews were sufficient to understand the unique but everyday experiences of the participants. Yet, additional participants would improve representativeness. We analyzed parents and youth separately and not as parent–child dyads due to a lack of family dyads participating in the interview study. If dyads were available, linking parents with their children may have revealed dyadic themes regarding for instance coping within families but generalizing findings would still be cautioned. Similarly, any in-depth analysis concerning gender may have produced other themes than those presented here.

In relation to study strengths, these results begin to address empirical gaps in the research literature on the immigrant experience in Sweden among parents and youth at key social and cultural transition points (i.e., the transition to high school). These findings also provide directions for future research. Considering past and present life conditions of parents and youth, their current everyday routines, characteristics of feeling at home, and coping are important. Future research would benefit from considering the diversity of experiences of individuals with immigrant backgrounds, including their different coping strategies and how they encounter the mainstream/receiving and heritage cultures, and to focus on the microsystems that are important for everyday life. Since 25.5% of population in Sweden have a foreign background (Statistics Sweden 2020), it is important to understand that the population in Sweden is diverse, culturally and linguistically. Consistent with Suárez-Orozco and colleagues (2018) integrative risk and resilience model for immigrant populations, the present study results also illustrate that how those with a foreign background are rich in their own diversity of experiences and viewpoints. Yet, at the same time, study participants also shared several normative challenges and everyday life experiences that are also commonly encountered by Swedes without a foreign background (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2018). Research that simultaneously studies these complex processes is a needed next step to understanding diverse populations.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. The program of research that this study is embedded in was funded by Stockholm County Council and Stockholm University (#4930825, #1485108).

Informed Consent All participants provided active informed consent and this study was approved by a Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm (Ref 2016/483-31/5).

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