“I’m surprised that I survived all these years”
- An Exploratory Study of the Experiences of LGBT Asylum Seekers.

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“JAG ÄR FÖRVÅNAD ATT JAG ÖVERLEVT ALLA DESSA ÅR”
- EN UTFORSKANDE STUDIE AV ASYLSÖKANDE HBT-PERSONERS ERFARENHETER.

Markus Byström and Ina Wood

Research on forced migration has largely ignored asylum seekers from sexual and gender minorities. This exploratory study aimed to examine both positive and negative experiences of LGBT asylum seekers who had migrated to Sweden. Within the study, experiences prior to migration, during transit, and after arrival in Sweden were conceptualized as a process. Guided by the research question “How do LGBT asylum seekers describe positive and negative experiences of their asylum journeys?”, semi-structured interviews with eleven LGBT asylum seekers were conducted and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The analysis resulted in five themes; 1. Living Under Threat, 2. Into the Abyss, 3. Living in Suspension, 4. External Sources of Support and 5. Strength from Within. Considerable stressors were reported, spanning form pre- to post migration. LGBT asylum seekers are found to be an especially vulnerable group that demonstrates considerable internal resources.

The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that 65.6 million people are displaced worldwide by war, political collapse, environmental disasters, and human rights violations (UNHCR, 2017a). Of these displaced people, 22.5 million are refugees, meaning that their asylum claims have been recognized by a host country. This is the highest number ever seen (USA for UNHCR, 2017). Currently, western nations that were once instrumental in establishing the international human right to seek refuge are pursuing more restrictive asylum policies (CONCORD, 2017), which has created additional challenges for the 16% of the world’s refugees who seek safety outside of developing countries (UNHCR, 2017b). The crisis of forced migration and the struggle to find refuge is a lived reality for people all across the world, including here in our communities. It is therefore important to understand the nature of these experiences, and their personal impacts.

Asylums Seekers from Sexual and Gender Minorities

Theory and research on forced migration have largely ignored the topic of asylum seekers and refugees from sexual and gender minorities. Globally, those belonging to sexual and gender minorities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people face widespread persecution (O’Flaherty and Fisher, 2008). Bodies within the United Nations have been involved in documenting human rights violations against LGBT people since the 1990s, with findings that show violence and discrimination against LGBT people in all regions of the world (UNHCR, 2011). Broadly, documented forms of abuse include arbitrary arrest, torture and death penalty from state officials, physical and psychological violence perpetrated by family, community, and organized groups, as well as discrimination in education, housing, employment, and health care (UNHCR, 2011). The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has described physical and psychological violence against LGBT people as a type of gender-based violence “driven by a desire to punish those seen as defying gender
norms,” and reports that violence against LGBT people tends to be “especially vicious” compared to other types of hate crime, often involving a higher degree of brutality (UNHCR, 2011, p. 8). In spite of this awareness, the first United Nations (UN) resolution addressing sexual orientation and gender identity was not passed until fairly recently, in 2011 (UNHCR, 2012). In the report that resulted from this resolution, the aim was not to propose new rights or protections specific to LGBT people, but rather to clarify and emphasize that LGBT people are in fact eligible to the same principles of equality and non-discrimination as all other human beings, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other core treaties, as well as in existing international human rights law (UNHCR, 2011).

It was estimated in 2012 that 42 countries globally had granted asylum to individuals fearing persecution based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (abbreviated as SOGI) (UNHCR, 2012). However, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has found that the management of these cases is often substandard in a number of ways (UNHCR, 2012). SOGI-related asylum claims have been subject to arbitrary review practices and inconsistent decision-making, a problem that has also been documented across EU member states (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; UNHCR, 2012). During and after the asylum process, LGBT people have been housed in facilities where they are subjected to threats and violence (UNHCR, 2012). Repeatedly, asylum claimants have been deported to life-threatening circumstances with the advice that they should “go home and be discreet” about their sexuality or gender identity (UNHCR, 2012, p. 21).

In Sweden, fear of persecution based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression has been specified as a ground for refugee status since 2005 (Aliens Act, 2005:716). In a SOGI asylum claim, the Swedish Migration Board is meant to assess the claimant’s belonging or perceived belonging to a sexual or gender minority group, the current status of LGBT people in the claimant’s home country and the availability of state protection, previous experiences of persecution, and the risk of future persecution (Migrationsverket, 2015a). In its official judicial position, the Swedish Migration Board emphasizes that assessing an asylum claim does not involve proving or disproving a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity; such a task would be impossible in many cases, as there are no definitive criteria for proving a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity (Migrationsverket, 2015a). Case managers are instructed to ask questions about the claimant’s childhood, family life, and relationships in relation to their LGBT identity, with specific questions about sexual acts being forbidden in accordance with rulings from the European Court of Justice (Migrationsverket, 2015a). The burden of proof in the asylum case rests upon the claimant, who is required to present a convincing account of both their affiliation to a sexual or gender minority group as well as the danger and persecution they have faced or would face upon deportation, in a way that is deemed credible by the Migration Board (Lukac, 2017). It may also be useful to consider some brief contextual information about asylum issues more broadly in Sweden. In 2015, the number of asylum claims in Sweden doubled from the previous year (Migrationsverket, 2015b). This situation was described by media and politicians as a refugee crisis (Dagens Nyheter, 2017); in the year following, Swedish asylum law was changed, rendering it more restrictive (Lag 2016:752). The Migration Board has encountered difficulties both in connection to the period of increased claims as well as the administrative demands created by the law change (Kudo, 2016). These issues have resulted in increased processing times, making the asylum process longer for applicants (Kudo, 2016).
Theoretical Background

In research on the experiences of refugees more broadly, trauma has been found to be a defining feature (Betancourt et al., 2015). When trauma is discussed in a western context it is commonly viewed through the lens of trauma-related disorders, the most prominent of which is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD can be diagnosed when someone has experienced exposure to death, threat of death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, and shows the following symptoms for more than a month following the event: persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event, avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, negative thoughts or feelings connected to the trauma, and trauma-related arousal and reactivity that began or worsened after the trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, this way of conceptualizing traumatic experiences may not adequately capture the experiences of people whose contexts differ from Western, middle-class men, which is the group that the PTSD diagnosis is based upon (Burstow, 2003). In reducing traumatic experience to a psychiatric diagnosis, other aspects of the complex experiences of refugees may be lost (Harms, 2015). In a clinical context, the concept of complex PTSD is used in an attempt to include the wider range of symptomatology connected to experiences of repeated and prolonged trauma; however, there is currently a lack of agreement between international diagnostic systems about how this diagnosis should be conceptualized (Cloitre, 2015). A broader conceptualization of traumatic experiences would involve stressful life events, potentially traumatic events or adverse events, and would consider how individuals have navigated through these hardships. Adversity and resistance to it can be thought of as stressors and resilience factors, neither of which can be firmly defined outside of a specific context (Hobfoll, 1989; Pickren, 2014).

There are several different theoretical frameworks that describe stressors. Some conceptualizations emphasize the role of the stimulus, and events are considered stressful if a normal response to the stimuli is a stress reaction, such as emotional upset, psychological distress, physical impairment or deterioration (Hobfoll, 1989). However, what comprises a normal reaction might depend on how events are perceived, which is why other theorists focus on the appraisal of events to understand stressors (Hobfoll, 1989). Another widely used stress model is the Homeostatic Model of Stress, which stipulates that it is the imbalance between demands and resources that causes stress. Following this definition, stressors and resilience factors are closely connected; however, conceptual problems arise from the impossibilities of universally defining demands and resources across subjects and contexts, and empirically measuring the concept of balance (Hobfoll, 1989). To combat this, Hobfoll (1989) presents a different model of stressors called Conservation of Resources (COR). The COR model has been used to understand stressful experiences in refugee families, where material losses and loss of social status are often described by refugee families as prevalent stress factors (Betancourt et al., 2015). Within this model, people are thought to strive to retain, protect, and build resources; stressors are then thought to be the potential or actual loss of these resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Hobfoll conceptualized resources in four different ways: as objects (e.g. a house), personal characteristics (one’s personal orientation toward the world), conditions (social roles, such as career or relationship status), and energies (time, money, and knowledge) that are valued by the individual (Hobfoll, 1989). The four types of resources don’t operate individually, rather Hobfoll (2012) stipulates that they influence each other and often increase or decrease together in an interconnected movement, which are described as resource caravans. It follows that people with little resources often experience further depletion of their resources in what Hobfoll (2012) describes as a loss spiral. For example, losing one’s position at work (conditional resource) would directly affect their economy (energy resource) which in turn might affect their ability to keep their home (object...
resource). Within the model, an actual or potential loss of any of these resources is considered a stressor if the resource is valued by the individual (Hobfoll, 1989).

Studies have linked mental health problems in refugees to adverse experiences before, during, and after resettlement, and to policies and practices that determine admittance to host countries (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Examples of pre-migration stressors are economic status in country of origin, disruption of social support, and traumatic experiences. Migration-related stressors are exemplified by trajectory (including route and duration), exposure to violence, and uncertainty about the outcome of migration. Post-migration stressors are described as further uncertainty about immigration or refugee status, unemployment, loss of social status, and loss of family and other relationships (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Acculturation, the psychological process of adapting in a post-migration context, can entail other potential stressors, such as limited language proficiency, lack of social connections, and discrimination (Berry, 1997; Betancourt et al., 2015). Another theoretical concept related to discrimination is minority stress. Broadly, minority stress refers to the particular stress experienced by individuals belonging to a marginalized social category, such as a racialized or sexual minority (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress arises from a wide range of social processes, such as being negatively evaluated due to stereotypes or prejudices. This places additional adaptive demands on marginalized people, who encounter these specific stressors in addition to stressors experienced by everyone (Meyer, 2003). Other underlying theoretical assumptions posit that minority stress is socially based, meaning that it stems from social processes, and chronic in the sense that it is related to stable, underlying social and cultural structures (Meyer, 2003). In spite of the bleak picture painted by this range of stressors, research on stressors has also shown that resources and strengths within co-cultural, diaspora communities mitigate material and social losses to some extent (Betancourt et al., 2015).

This last finding turns the focus to resilience factors. Resilience is only thought to be definable within a given context (Pickren, 2014), but an attempt at a common definition is “patterns of desirable behavior in situations where adaptive functioning or development has been significantly threatened by adverse experience” (Masten et al., 1995, p. 283, referenced in Pickren, 2014). Resilience can be understood both as an internal process, for example personality traits that help in psychological adaption during adverse events, and as external factors such as social networks and peers that are understood to be important in facilitating individual resilience (Pickren, 2014). Since resilience is contextual, there is no exhaustive list of resilience factors or strategies. Some adaptive systems that are often considered helpful in the context of migration are emotional and social support from family and co-cultural community members (Pickren, 2014). Ungar (2008) emphasizes the importance of culture in what constitutes resilience, and argues that communities or cultural groups should have a final say in what counts as resilience factors. Resilience at its core is about adaptive processes that facilitate survival and thriving within a specific time, place, and context, and may therefore vary across time and space (Pickren, 2014).

Inherent in the experience of being a refugee is, at least to some extent, geographical displacement, since a country of origin had to be left for a new country. A person who has experienced being a refugee has often been faced with severe or potentially traumatic stressors across the scope of their journey: in pre-migration, during the process of leaving a country, and in post-migration (Betancourt et al., 2015). Psychological research on refugees tends to focus on trauma as a singular, short-term event in the pre-migration context, neglecting the risk of continued trauma during flight and after arrival in a host country (Alexander, Arnett & Jena, 2017) There is a scarcity of research that pays attention to
psychological trauma as the totality of all traumatic experiences, from pre- to post-migration (Alexander, Arnett & Jena, 2017). When discussing trauma as a singular event, there is a risk of reproducing the following simplistic refugee narrative: people experience traumatic events in their country of origin leading them to flee and subsequently develop PTSD, which in turn is treated in a host country that represents stability and distance from these traumatic events. Research on forced migration has contradicted this view, showing that stressors carry over from a country of origin, through the process of leaving and into a host country where reception and treatment of refugees may be further traumatizing (Betancourt et al., 2015; George, 2010; Harms, 2015). Some studies have found that post-migration stressors are more strongly linked to psychological distress than pre-migration experiences (George, 2010; Harms, 2015). Varvin (2017) points to the burden that negative post-migration experiences add to a history of accumulated trauma. He posits that the dehumanizing rhetoric and living conditions currently faced by asylum seekers and refugees in Europe “confirms the experience of helpless abandonment during traumatization,” which can have profoundly negative impacts on psychological well-being (Varvin, 2017, p. 360). Herman (2015) describes the impacts of living under prolonged abuse and fear as a “corrosion of personality,” leading to profound and complex after-effects (p. 131).

The scope of potential stressors and the complexity of their impacts warrant a broader conceptualization of trauma, which can be done in several different ways. One proposal is to consider how the experience of multiple traumas can impact individual functioning, as this is more common in clinical and refugee populations than having only experienced a single traumatic event (Kira et al., 2008). Kira (2001) posits that experiencing multiple traumas can have additive effects, where the accumulation of trauma over time can lead to severe impacts on mental health. In the cumulative trauma model, core traumas sensitize a person’s responses to new future traumatic events, and subsequent traumas trigger responses influenced by earlier sensitization, potentially leading to complex impacts on psychological and physiological functioning (Kira, et al., 2008). Kira proposes a model for classifying trauma that identifies the areas of functioning that are impacted (e.g. attachment, identity, social interdependence) as well the different types of trauma experienced (Kira et al., 2008). Trauma types here extend beyond physical traumas and include collective identity trauma (e.g. discrimination, racism), family trauma (e.g. familial violence, divorce), interpersonal trauma (e.g. witnessing traumatic events), personal identity trauma (e.g. sexual abuse) and survival trauma (i.e. exposure to life-threatening events). While this model adds to the conceptualization of trauma, it remains focused on specifying varieties of trauma and delineating related symptomology. Other ways of thinking challenge the practice of classifying trauma as a psychiatric disorder. Burstow (2003, p. 1302) states that “trauma is not a disorder but a reaction to a kind of wound. It is a reaction to profoundly injurious events and situations in the real world and, indeed, to a world in which people are routinely wounded.” In this sense, trauma would not be primarily conceptualized as a disorder, but as an experience carried by an individual, caused by injurious events in their lived experience. When trauma is re-conceptualized, so too are the responses to it (Harms, 2015).

Anti-oppressive approaches try to widen the understanding of trauma responses (Harms, 2015). As previously described, within the DSM-5 trauma responses are divided into four different categories: re-experience, avoidance, negative thoughts or feelings, and hyper-arousal (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This, however, is a fairly limited repertoire of potential responses. In an anti-oppression framework, potential responses include broader concepts and more long-term effects, such as changed identities, dehumanization, silencing, and loss (Harms, 2015). Identity is viewed here as a process and product of interactions with
the physical and social world, and is therefore impacted by traumatic experiences. Subsequently, new personal and social identities may be formed. Survivors of trauma often experience being labeled with a victim identity that is imposed upon them by others, which might not fit with the self-identification of the trauma survivor, further complicating identity work following traumatic events (Harms, 2015). Within this framework, the experience of human rights violations might result in a number of difficult psychological losses, including the loss of control, coherence, agency, autonomy, identity, memory, and place (Harms, 2015). As these losses continue to occur, trauma reverberates (Harms, 2015).

Another wide theoretical framework connected to processing stressful life events is meaning making. In short, this theoretical concept builds on the idea that people have global, overarching ideas and beliefs about themselves and the world, including a subjective sense of meaning (Park, 2010). When potentially stressful events occur, individuals try to understand what happened and why, searching for meaning in the situation. A stressful event has the potential to be traumatic, and meaning making theory posits that the appraisal of events is important in how trauma is processed. When traumatic experiences seem to be at odds with a person’s global beliefs, the subsequent discrepancy can be a source of distress (Steger & Park, 2012). How individuals deal with this discrepancy is described in several different meaning making processes, and there are many potential ways to successfully incorporate ideas about events that transpired into a global set of beliefs (Park, 2010). Examples of such processes are perceptions of growth or positive life changes; integration of the stressful experience into identity (e.g. shifts in one’s biographical narratives as a result of stressful experiences); and changed global beliefs (e.g. seeing life as more fragile, having a changed relationship to God). If the discrepancy is successfully resolved, the psychological distress following a stressful life event is thought to be reduced (Park, 2010). Meaning making theory can thus enhance our understanding of trauma by offering a conceptual framework that highlights the importance of complex internal processes.

**Previous Research**

Psychological research on LGBT asylum seekers and refugees is currently scarce. In order to better survey what is known about the group, this study additionally examines research from other academic fields that have relevance for the current study, including queer migration scholarship, legal studies, and social work studies.

**Queer Migration Studies.**

A recently developed field, queer migration studies attempts to re-examine scholarship, policy, and experiences of migration through the critical lens of queer theory. Illuminating heteronormativity (i.e. the assumption and expectation that heterosexuality is a normal, default state of being) is central to the field, as migrants are predominantly presumed to be cisgendered (i.e. non-trans) and heterosexual (Luibheid, 2008). Another important framework used in this field is the concept of intersectionality; this is the idea that power structures in society create different types of exclusion and marginalization, and that these interact with each other, generating dynamic forms privilege and oppression that can shift and change across contexts (Larson et al., 2016). Within queer migration studies, intersectionality can be used to show how sexual orientation and gender identity interact with other constructed sources of stratification like race, class, ethnicity, and physical ability, and how the effects of these interactions shed light on norms and power structures (Luibheid, 2008). Another field of inquiry is to question traditional narratives about global migration by examining how processes like colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, and capitalism have shaped these patterns. For example, in highlighting the fact that the majority of the globally existing laws
against consensual same-sex relations in fact stem from British colonial rule, notions of western benevolence are reframed (Human Dignity Trust, 2016). Similarly, predominant ideas about western nations as safe havens and beacons of liberty for LGBT asylum seekers can be challenged by lifting post-migration experiences of homophobia, racism, and xenophobia out of the hegemonic narrative of the happy, grateful migrant (Murray, 2014). A related study in the context of Sweden examined how Swedish daily newspapers depicted anti-homosexuality legislation across Africa, creating a narrative that by way of contrast promoted Sweden as culturally superior place of gay friendliness, civilization, and democracy (Jungar & Peltonen, 2017).

Law and Legal Studies.

Research within the field of law and legal studies has focused upon issues of assessment and decision-making within the asylum processes of LGBT claimants. In a study of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LBG) asylum cases in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, Berg and Millbank (2007) combined legal scholarship with psychological perspectives, describing how the procedures and practices of the asylum process clash with psychological issues faced by LGB asylum seekers. These authors found that prior experiences of state-sanctioned persecution, cultural and gender norms about discussing sexuality, internalized stigma and shame, and lack of previous experience in talking about their sexual orientation caused LGB asylum seekers to be reluctant to reveal their minority status to immigration officials. Subsequently, their accounts were often deemed implausible when introduced at a later stage in the asylum process. The study also described how trauma and shame could have impacts on memory processes, which was also interpreted by decision-makers as a lack of credibility in the trauma narrative. Many claimants had developed deeply rooted strategies for concealing their sexuality and passing as heterosexual over their lifetimes, which in turn caused decision makers to doubt the credibility of their sexual orientation (Berg & Millibank, 2007). The authors further described how being asked highly sexualized questions about personal feelings and experiences was for some claimants a difficult, embarrassing, and even discriminatory experience, rendering them unable to produce stories of same-sex attraction that conformed to decision makers’ expectations. Decision makers could be heavily influenced by their own cultural norms about sexuality and assumptions about homosexual identity development; failure to conform to western trajectories such as going through a ‘coming out’ process could lead to the rejection of an asylum claim (Berg & Millibank, 2007).

Two recent law-related studies have examined the asylum process for LGBT claimants in the Swedish context. Malmquist’s 2016 master’s thesis examined how asylum law is applied by the Swedish Migration Courts by reviewing nearly 100 cases where claimants sought protection on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The study found that the Swedish Migration Courts frequently based their judgments of the claimant’s credibility on stereotypical ideas of how a homosexual person should think, feel, and act, most prominently requiring that a person express feelings of shame in order to be considered credible as a homosexual (Malmquist, 2016). Lukac’s 2017 report on LGBT asylum seekers in Sweden found examples of stereotyping and discriminatory questioning by case workers, where claimants were questioned about which gay websites and apps they used in spite of these being largely unfeasible in the country of origin; claimants were also asked to provide explicit descriptions of their sexual practices (Lukac, 2017). Lukac’s study also raises the issue of LGBT asylum seekers in Sweden being housed in facilities where they are exposed to threats and violence (Lukac, 2017).
Research from the field of social work has tended to focus on the interaction between LBGT asylum seekers and the institutions, services, and societal structures they encounter post-migration. It’s worth noting that all of the studies included from this field were conducted in Canadian or American contexts. Heller (2009) examined the demands placed on this group by the immigration system to demonstrate the credibility of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Heller’s study builds upon two concepts developed by Kenji Yoshino, namely covering and reverse-covering; whereas covering describes the practice of hiding or downplaying characteristics that signal membership to an oppressed group, reverse-covering entails enacting stereotypical aspects of a marginalized identity, often under external pressure (Heller, 2009). The research described how LBGT asylum seekers simultaneously found themselves required to demonstrate traits that conform to western stereotypes about LBGT people in the context of asylum procedures, while they have otherwise been required to conceal their LBGT identity in their daily lives to avoid discrimination and persecution, both pre- and post-migration. Other negative experiences related to asylum procedures included difficulties accessing legal services, retraumatization stemming from recounting traumatic events at asylum hearings, and pressure to express rejection and disapproval of their culture of origin (Lee & Brotman, 2011). A study conducted primarily with service providers to LGBT refugees found that the pressure to demonstrate, perform, and prove LBGT identity sometimes provoked acute emotional distress in claimants (Kahn & Alessi, 2017).

A few existing social work studies have considered obstacles outside of the asylum process that permeate the daily lives of LBGT asylum seekers. The group has been found to experience vulnerability, lack of services, and discrimination with regards to housing, employment, and health care (Chávez, 2011). Experiences of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in refugee detention centers and state-run housing, combined with limited access to safe and stable housing options are reported as significant difficulties (Lee & Brotman, 2011). Access to employment was limited due to protracted procedures for issuing work permits, as well as negative attitudes toward asylum seekers and racialized minorities (Lee & Brotman, 2011). Transgender asylum seekers reported additional discrimination stemming from being issued identification documents that did not reflect their gender identity, sparking transphobic reactions from potential employers, government officials, and landlords (Lee & Brotman, 2011). With regards to health care, difficulties faced by LBGT asylum seekers included experiences of cultural insensitivity from health care providers, fear of discrimination, language barriers, fear of being reported to the deportation police, and formalized denial of health care services based on asylum status or lack thereof (Chávez, 2011).

Issues of post-migration social isolation and community have also been touched upon in social work research. Kahn (2015) emphasized that although support from family and co-cultural communities has been described as an important resilience factor in research pertaining to refugees in general, these resources may be lacking for those who have broken cultural norms of gender and sexuality. This lack of familial and cultural connection and support proved to be a source of persistent grief for those affected (Kahn, 2015). Lee and Brotman’s (2011) research highlighted some of the complexity inherent in seeking connectedness within the LBGT community. Hoping to gain access to safe and supportive spaces, LGBT asylum seekers were instead met by racism and xenophobia in the mainstream LBGT community (Lee & Brotman, 2011). At the same time, LBGT community organizations that focused specifically on refugees and asylum seekers were described as vital
resources that “broke social isolation, fostered self-affirmation, and built community” (Lee & Brotman, 2011, p. 261).

Only one study was found from the field of social work that focused on the pre-migratory experiences of LGBT asylum seekers. As non-migrant sexual minority youth in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have previously been found to be at high risk for childhood abuse, Alessi, Kahn and Chatterji (2016) sought to investigate the childhood experiences of LGBT refugees in a retrospective interview study. The results showed that participants had experienced an early onset of psychological and physical abuse from parents and family members, in response to perceived gender transgressions (Alessi, Kahn & Chatterji, 2016). A wide range of abuse was also experienced at the hands of peers, teachers and school officials, and homophobia and transphobia was reinforced in religious and community contexts. Participants in the study described experiencing the feeling that they had nowhere to turn, as well as negative mental health impacts that had persisted since childhood (Alessi, Kahn & Chatterji, 2016).

**Psychological Research.**
As previously noted, psychological research on LGBT refugees is currently scarce. Unless stated otherwise the following studies have all been conducted in North America. In an article summarizing the mental health challenges faced by LGBT asylum seekers, Shidlo and Ahola (2013) reported that this group has been found to bear “significant and sometimes incapacitating psychological scars” (p. 9). These scars stemmed from broad and repeated experiences of psychological, sexual, and physical abuse, discrimination, and persecution, instances of which may have begun in childhood; these cumulative traumas led to negative mental health impacts such as depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, traumatic brain injury, dissociative disorders, PTSD, and complex PTSD (Shidlo & Ahola, 2013). One study found that sexual minority women were more likely to have experienced sexual assault and rape, while sexual minority men were more likely to have experienced violence from the general public (Piwowarczyk, Fernandez & Sharma, 2016). Both women and men reported experiences of forced heterosexual marriage and torture, and many reported losing a partner under violent circumstances (Piwowarczyk, Fernandez & Sharma, 2016). In terms of how LGBT refugees described living through these pre-migration experiences, a qualitative study revealed accounts of living in a state of constant vigilance and fear, developing and using concealment strategies to pass as heterosexual or cisgender, and frequent victimization in daily life (Alessi, Kahn & Van Der Horn, 2017).

Other psychological studies have examined the post-migration stressors faced by LGBT asylum seekers. In navigating their new physical and interpersonal landscapes, LGBT migrant youth in Toronto reported experiences of racism, xenophobia, and homophobia across various spheres which blocked them from accessing social services, finding employment, and participating in community life (Munro et al., 2013). Gowin et al. (2017) highlighted the particular vulnerability of Mexican transgender women seeking asylum in the U.S., where experiences of violence, unstable environments, lack of safety, and economic insecurity often continued from pre- to post-migration; though stressors connected to being transgender were sometimes lessened upon migration, they were often replaced by problems stemming from asylum status (Gowin et al., 2017). Extreme distrust of authorities was also presented as a barrier preventing this group from accessing health care and social services (Gowin et al., 2017). Asylum seekers in some places are formally excluded from accessing many health care services, but even when access is permitted, a number of factors may hinder them from seeking mental health services, such as differing cultural attitudes toward psychotherapy,
language difficulties, and fear of exposure and stigmatization (Reading & Rubin, 2011). Alessi and Kahn (2017) proposed a framework for clinical practice with LGBT asylum seekers that considered how complex trauma, minority stress, and acculturation issues impact this group. The histories and symptoms of complex trauma borne by many LGBT asylum seekers interact with features of minority stress, which include experiences of homophobia and transphobia, vigilance connected to the expectation of future incidents, internalized homophobia and transphobia, and the concealment of sexual orientation and gender identity (Alessi & Kahn, 2017). On top of this, acculturation processes can be negatively impacted by the lack of housing, employment, health care, and social resources that have been shown to affect this group (Alessi & Kahn, 2017). Given the multitude and complexity of the issues faced by this vulnerable population, Kahn et al. (2017) recommend that clinicians working with LGBT asylum seekers should be equipped with knowledge and competence specific to this group.

The topic of resilience in LGBT asylum seekers is largely unexplored; this is unfortunate, as a better understanding of sources of strength and support for this group could guide interventions. Demonstrating the courage to leave one’s home country to seek life in an unknown place can be seen as an act that in itself shows the capacity for resilience (Alessi & Kahn, 2017). A single study has been located that focuses specifically on the resilience of LGBT asylum seekers, with participants residing in Canada and the United States (Alessi, 2016). Here, the strategies of maintaining a positive attitude in the face of uncertainty and hardship, using every means possible to access money and housing, and giving back to the community through volunteerism, activism, and social support were shown to be important for the group (Alessi, 2016). External sources of support in the form of community services (such as mental health care, legal services, LGBT organizations and LGBT-affirmative churches), as well as help from friends and partners, also contributed to resilience (Alessi, 2016).

Three studies have been located that considered the experiences of LGBT asylum seekers across the span of time from pre- to post-migration, examining how past experiences connect to present trajectories. Jordan (2009) looked at how pre-migration experiences, the migration journey, and the asylum process “shape and curtail possibilities for safety and belonging.” (p. 166). In their home countries, threats and experiences of danger and violence caused respondents to live with fear which, combined with a lack of knowledge about sexual and gender minorities, shaped the way they lived their lives (Jordan, 2009). Propelled by the need to escape danger and the hope of finding a better place, many of the respondents in this study first moved abroad before learning of the possibility of seeking asylum in Canada; as this pattern does not match the assumed refugee trajectory of sudden flight, the immigration system would later doubt their need for asylum (Jordan, 2009). Once in the asylum process, the claimants’ lifelong experiences of hiding their identities further jeopardized their chances of receiving asylum (Jordan, 2009). In two studies that link the pre- and post-migration experiences of transgender Latina women in the US, findings unsurprisingly showed that repeated experiences of discrimination and violence were connected to lasting negative mental health impacts (Cerezo, Morales, Quintero & Rothman, 2014; Cheney et al., 2017). With the combined effects of mental health symptoms, language difficulties, and lack of legal residence status, transgender Latina women encountered a lack of social inclusion, education, and employment options, which further perpetuated their vulnerability (Cheney et al., 2017).

In Sweden, a handbook for psychologists working with LGBTQ+ (with Q+ denoting queer and other identities) patients was recently published, including a chapter addressing issues
specific to LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees in psychotherapy. Examples of such included taking time initially to discuss attitudes about therapy, exploring internalized homophobia and transphobia, and finding alternatives to having an interpreter present in the therapy room, as clients may be hindered from discussing sexuality in front of members of their co-cultural community (Brunell, 2017). The author of this chapter noted that to the best of his knowledge, psychological research with LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in the Swedish context was almost non-existent at the time of publication (Brunell, 2017).

Taken collectively, the body of previous research on LGBT asylum seekers and refugees indicates a group faced with an enormous burden of stressors and potential traumas. These begin in exposure to severe pre-migration dangers and abuses from childhood onward, and extend into reception and resettlement in the post-migration context. The processing of SOGI asylum claims has been shown to be problematic, both with regards to how claims are investigated and evaluated, and how this process negatively impacts LGBT asylum seekers. Another factor that distinguishes this group from refugees more generally is that LGBT asylum seekers bear stigmas that have often led to rejection and harsh abuse by family and community; this stigmatization and its consequences are sources of trauma and vulnerability that carry over across contexts. As family and community support are considered to be important sources of resilience in other refugee populations, LGBT asylum seekers and refugees who lack these resources may be particularly vulnerable. Though research related to resilience in this group is scarce, some findings indicate LGBT community organizations and LGBT-affirmative environments are important sources of support. The complexity and severity of the social and psychological issues faced by this group warrant increased awareness and sensitivity on the part of migration personnel, social workers, and clinicians working with LGBT asylum seekers.

Aim and Research Question
Given the scarcity of previous psychological research, the purpose of this study was to explore both the positive and negative experiences of LGBT asylum seekers who had migrated to Sweden. In examining both positive and negative experiences, the study aimed to add to the dearth of knowledge about both the hardships and the helpful factors experienced by this group. An inductive approach was used to ensure that respondents could shape the interview with their knowledge, rather than being asked specific questions built upon preconceived notions that may not reflect the experiences of this group. Within this study, experiences prior to migration, during transit, and after arriving in Sweden were conceptualized as an interconnected process, which taken together formed what was described as the asylum journey. The current study also utilized a broad definition of 'experience', encompassing both descriptions of events as well as responses to them. The research question that guided the study was thus:

How do LGBT asylum seekers describe positive and negative experiences of their asylum journeys?

Method
Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven LGBT asylum seekers. Semi-structured interviews were considered suitable in this relatively unexplored field as the semi-structured format allows for flexibility in following participants’ stories with follow-up questions about topics of interest (Wengraf, 2001). Prior to the commencement of interviews
one author conducted an initial literature search in order to identify the available English language literature related to LGBT asylum seekers. In conducting this search the author read the abstracts while refraining from reading studies in full, while the other author was excluded from reading any of the material. The purpose of this approach was to gain an overview of the available previous research without letting the material overly influence the subsequent interviews and analysis. Data from the interviews were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Participants were also asked to answer questions on a questionnaire about anxiety and depression symptoms, to evaluate to what extent participants showed clinically significant distress. The instrument has been purported to be well received by refugee patients and offers an effective screening method for the psychiatric symptoms of anxiety and depression, and is considered helpful in evaluating trauma victims (Mollica, Wyshak, de Marneffe, Khuon & Lavelle, 1987).

Participants
The inclusion criteria for the present study were that participants had to be at least 18 years old, have experiences of seeking asylum in Sweden, and self-identify as an LGBT person. All participants were questioned about these criteria prior to the interviews. The authors recruited eleven participants through an LGBT community organization, out of which eight were men and three were women. In the group of men one was a trans man and in the group of women one was a trans woman. Ages ranged between 27 to 48 years (M=36.2 years, SD=6.5 years). Seven of the participants were gay, one was lesbian, two were bisexual and one was straight. All participants stated that sexual orientation or gender identity was a ground for their asylum claim, although three participants also had additional grounds.

The participants reported the following countries as their respective countries of origin: Afghanistan, Algeria, Cameroon, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Participants had been in Sweden between 0 and 16 years (M=3.9 years, SD=4.9), however 70% of participants had been in Sweden for two years or less. Two participants had received permanent residency in Sweden; the remaining nine were waiting for a decision or in the process of appealing.

Data Collection
To find suitable participants, a community organization working with LGBT asylum seekers and refugees was contacted. Recruitment then took place at member meetings where the authors explained the study in person and additionally distributed fliers. Twelve people showed interest in participating in the study and were offered interview times; one person declined to participate due to time constraints. All interviews were carried out by a single interviewer and both authors completed five interviews each. Most interviews were carried out individually and in English, but in three cases participants chose, on their own initiative, to bring a trusted person to assist or translate. Two respondents were interviewed together at their own request. The interviews were audio recorded and averaged at 78 minutes. However, with time given to an introduction, the completion of the questionnaire, and a concluding discussion, complete interview sessions generally took between 90 and 120 minutes. In total the transcribed interviews resulted in 375 pages of transcription, with the shortest being 20 pages and the longest being 76 pages. For the interviews an interview guide with broader questions and suggestions for follow-up questions was constructed, which can be seen in full in Appendix 1: Interview guide. The interview started with shorter background questions and progressed to open-ended questions about positive and negative experiences prior to, during, and after migration. The construction of the interview guide, specifically in regards to how the demographic information was collected, was guided by a supplementary module of the
Cultural Formulation Interview released by the American Psychological Association as a companion to the DSM-5 (Lewis-Fernández, Aggarwal, Hinton, Hinton & Kirmayer, 2016). This supplementary module specifically addresses interviewing immigrants and refugees.

Data were further collected with a questionnaire on mental health. Participants were asked to fill out an English version of Hopkins Symptom Checklist-25 (HSCL-25) together with the interviewer at the end of the interview. HSCL-25 is a questionnaire that has been used in general populations but has also been adapted for use with refugees. Respondents were asked to rate 10 anxiety symptoms and 15 depression symptoms on a 4-point severity scale; reviews consider this instrument to be a valid measure of symptoms (Mollica et al., 1987). An average-item score >1.75 indicates clinically significant distress, and is used as a diagnostic proxy in American studies (Mollica et al., 1987). The questionnaire has also been validated in refugee studies and translated to several languages (Mollica et al., 1987).

**Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed in accordance with guidelines by Braun & Clarke (2013), resulting in an orthogonal transcription of the interviews. Each researcher transcribed the interviews they had themselves conducted. After transcription was completed, the analysis commenced, aided by the computer software Nvivo. The analysis was done in five steps as described by Braun & Clarke (2006). The first phase is familiarization, wherein both authors read through the whole data set before commencing with the initial coding. Thoughts about initial codes and possible patterns were discussed before the initial coding began. To begin the second phase of the analysis, initial coding, both authors coded the same passage of an interview and discussed discrepancies until a shared understanding of the level of initial codes was agreed on. On this initial level, codes were intended to summarize the statements made by respondents into descriptive categories, examples of which included “being arrested,” “near death experience,” and “problems with legal representation.” The authors proceeded by coding the interviews that they had not conducted. Upon completion of this round of coding, the interviewers had separately generated two code sets.

The third phase of analysis involved comparing and revising the initial codes, as well as grouping the codes into clusters (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In comparing the code sets generated by the two authors, some codes were found to be identical, and a number of codes had identical meanings but had slightly differing names (e.g. “abuse by family” and “abused by family”). Other codes had names that differed completely, but were found on review to identify similar concepts (e.g. “health issues” and “effects of physical abuse”). Such codes were combined and renamed. Some codes were found to be unique between the two code sets (e.g. one researcher had generated the code “being surveilled”, a concept that had been grouped into other codes by the other researcher). During the comparison and revision process, some new codes were also created (e.g. “avoiding detection”). All the revised codes, including newly created codes, were then applied to the entire data set by both authors working together. In grouping the codes into clusters, the authors collected codes that were perceived to be related to each other (e.g. the codes “abused by authorities”, “abused by family”, and “abused by public” were grouped together in the cluster “abuse”). When grouping was completed, the codes had been sorted into 50 clusters. During the grouping process, the authors discussed potential relationships between clusters and how they could be combined into themes (e.g. the clusters “difficulties in transit”, “fear of dying”, and “loss of material resources” were combined into a candidate theme describing the transit period). At the end of this phase, six candidate themes had been conceptualized.
During the fourth step of analysis, candidate themes were reviewed, compared, and tested against each other. This involved re-reading themes in full to check for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, meaning that the content within each theme told an internally coherent story that qualitatively differed from any other theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this point, one theme was re-conceptualized as belonging to two of the other five themes. In reviewing themes, approximately 10 codes (which had been categorized as “miscellaneous”) were found to be extraneous to the themes and to the research question, and were therefore discarded from the analysis. These codes (e.g. “explanation of cultural differences” or “explanation of asylum procedure”) often contained statements that conveyed factual information to the interviewers but contributed little understanding to the research question (“I was expecting the kind of food that I eat, but here I eat mainly Swedish food”; “In the morning I went to Migration and started the process. They transferred me to a hotel.”). The discarded material comprised approximately 7% of the coded data. The fifth and last step was to then refine the five themes that had withstood review in the previous step. This involved clearly defining what aspect of the data each theme captured (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During refinement, sub-themes were also defined and names were then given to each theme and sub-themes, as presented in the results section.

In the results section quotes from the interviews are used throughout, both in the body of the text (in quotation marks) or as longer excerpts in a separate paragraph. Quotes have been edited slightly in order to enhance their readability. In particular, repetitions or cut-off speech (e.g. “the whole, the whole body”, “my wor- my world”) and non-verbal utterances (e.g. “mm”, “uh”) have been removed. When the excerpts include statements from multiple speakers, the interviewer is denoted with I and the respondent with R. To enhance anonymity they is used as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun for all respondents.

Ethics
An important part of the recruitment process was to ensure informed consent of all participants. During recruitment, potential participants were informed verbally and through written fliers about the aim of the present study, its affiliation with Stockholm University, that participation would be voluntary and confidential, and that personal details would be excluded from the finalized study. Prior to the commencement of the interview, participants were given further verbal and written information (in the form of a consent form) about the following: the collection and storage of recorded interview material and personal information; anonymization of results; confidentiality; and voluntary participation; that recorded material would be erased upon completion of the study; possible benefits and risks of participating. The written flier was handed out to participants in both Swedish and English and the English version as well as the consent form can be seen in full in Appendix 2: Information about the study and Appendix 3: Consent form. All participants gave their signed consent and were re-informed that they had the right to withdraw this at any time before the conclusion of the study, with contact information detailing how to do so. A plan was also developed for how to aid participants that were identified to be in need of acute psychological help. Prior to the interview phase of the research, contact was made with two psychologists working with the target group on a voluntary basis that were available to the participants, regardless of asylum status. The HSCL-25 questionnaire was used as a tool to systematically highlight and facilitate a discussion with each participant about their current mental health status. Participants who expressed an interest or need for psychological treatment were offered contact with one of the aforementioned professionals.
When designing the study, possible benefits and risks for participants were considered. A possible personal benefit for participants was having the opportunity to share and reflect upon their experiences in a situation where they were in control of what they considered important to share. In a wider sense, possible benefits would be the accumulation of research material that could increase academic awareness about LGBT asylum seekers in Sweden. A possible personal risk was participants experiencing distress at recounting a narrative of traumatic experiences. In order to address this risk the interview situation was designed to conclude with a structured discussion about the participant’s current mental health status, which opened up for the opportunity to guide respondents to clinicians who could offer professional help. Given the neglected status of this group in academic research and migration praxis, the potential benefits of gaining valuable knowledge were considered to outweigh potential risks.

**Reflexivity**

One of the authors had previous experience with the LGBT community organization that was the basis for recruitment, though not with any of the current study’s participants. This was considered helpful in understanding the organization and gaining access. Both authors identify as LGBTQ people and this was made clear to the organization in the beginning of the recruitment process. This was considered a key to gaining access to the study’s target group, as the organization sought to ensure the safety of its members, who had extensive experiences of ill treatment from heterosexuals. This shared identification could also be potentially helpful in understanding nuances in the stories told. However, it could also lead to an over-identification with aspects of the respondents’ stories. Another potential risk of “shared knowledge” between interviewers and respondents was the possibility of eliciting and overly emphasizing mutual experiences, at the cost of other experiences that were not shared by the interviewers, such as being racialized as a minority (as both authors are white) or fleeing a country. As a method of monitoring the influence of subjective bias and emotional responses on the interview situation and the analysis, the authors created a shared notebook used to keep memos. These memos could pertain to assumptions about the research topic, personal reflections, and emotions tied to the process. The notebook was also used to document the recurrent discussions between the authors throughout the interview and analysis phase of the research.

None of the participants reported English being their first language, which is also true for one of the authors. Some of the interviews were also assisted or interpreted at the participants’ behest. As such, a challenge in the present study was the fact that a second, third, or fourth language was often used to describe experiences, which presumably had a negative impact on the nuance of participants’ reports. Despite these possible limitations, the importance of generating knowledge about the experiences of this group was considered to outweigh potential difficulties.

**Results**

**Results of the Questionnaire**

On HSCL-25, the questionnaire answered by the respondents, eight out of the eleven showed clinically significant distress as their individual summarized scores were above the cut-off of 1.75. On a group level the mean total score was 2.28 (SD=0.87), the mean depression score was 2.27 (SD=0.84) and the mean anxiety score was 2.25 (SD=0.93). A qualitative observation was that all but one participant reported various sleep problems. This was further
illustrated in interviews, where respondents described negative psychological impacts related to the asylum journey.

“And until now we are still waiting for the decision and this waiting period is the most difficult period. We have nightmares, we are not sleeping, we sleep around 3 AM.”

**Results of the Thematic Analysis**

The thematic analysis of the interviews resulted in five themes, with six sub-themes altogether. The first three themes and their sub-themes are chronological, and describe experiences prior to, during, and after migration respectively. The last two themes and their sub-themes are not time-specific, as they were not confined to a single period of the asylum journey. Figure 1 below further illustrates the themes, sub-themes and how they are related and situated in time.

![Thematic map](image)

**Figure 1. Thematic map of how themes are related and situated in time**

**Theme 1. Living Under Threat**

This theme encompasses pre-migration experiences and consists of two sub-themes, *Pervasive Oppression* and *Concealing Identity*. In describing their lives prior to migration, participants reported pervasive oppression against suspected or expressed non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming behavior, which is described in the first sub-theme. As a result of this persecution, respondents reported the need to minimize, control, or hide such behavior, along with their feelings and experiences, in order to be perceived as adhering to restrictive norms about gender and sexuality. This is described in the second sub-theme.

*Pervasive Oppression.*

Oppression against participants prior to migration occurred on multiple, interlocking levels: on a societal level in the form of norms and laws; on a community level in the form of discrimination and abuse in school, workplace, places of worship, and by the general public; and on a private level in the form of threats and abuse by family. The severity of the oppression varied, ranging from surveillance, harassment, and threats to violent attacks, rape, imprisonment, and murder attempts.
A majority of participants came from countries with laws against same-sex sexual activity. They described witnessing public executions of suspected homosexuals, and the fear they experienced as a result: “Oh I feel so bad, kind of cold, the cold was on me so I couldn’t ((pause)) I cried for days.” Participants who were arrested and imprisoned reported being beaten and raped, both by authorities and by other prisoners. At times, punishment by death was not carried out as a function of the legal system, but was rather committed at the hands of other authorities or the public, as sanctioned by cultural norms.

“I see many places that they are arrested and they are killed immediately in the house and nobody understands what happened. Or if they coming out a little bit they are put in some place and killed by stone and if you’re arrested by IS or Talibans or some AI Qaeda group, they push you from the top of buildings or they put you on fire, put you on the cage and make you fire on the cage, you don’t have any rights at all.”

In their daily lives, participants experienced discrimination and harassment at school and in the workplace when they were suspected of deviating from gender or sexuality norms. A feeling of being constantly surveilled by neighbors and members of the public was experienced as an unrelenting pressure.

“Even your way of sitting, your way of moving your hand, way of your dressing, everything. Everything make difference especially in our society, we have too much relatives and friends and you know some neighbors and people they like too much ‘blah blah blah’, talk talk talk. So whatever you will do someone will see, they will talk to others so there it will be announcement for everyone.”

The consequences of this scrutiny could be severe. In some instances, rumors themselves were enough to justify shunning or physical attacks by the public. Participants described a double sense of powerlessness stemming from being attacked by people in the street, and simultaneously being forced to conceal these incidents, as they were unable to report such abuse to authorities. Some respondents reported public attacks so severe that they resulted in both near-death experiences and the murder of a partner. Within their families, participants experienced threats and beatings, sometimes from an early age.

“I beat from my father many times they say ‘you are a boy now when you grow up you are not allowed to talk with the girls or something else.’ And one time I have bad experience, I wear my mom’s clothes and make up myself in front of the mirror, she’s coming and seeing that I’m dancing and I’m using her clothes an she takes her shoes and started beating me until she gets tired and I cannot go to school for 10 days.”

Participants also described other coercive measures used by their families to attempt to convert them to heterosexuality. Pressure to enter into heterosexual marriage, increasing with age, was a source of anxiety for many respondents. Their fear was not only related to being forced to do something against their will, but also connected to the risk of having their sexuality exposed after entering into marriage, when not being able to perform convincingly as heterosexuals. Another coercive measure described by participants was being sent by their families to traditional or religious officiates, where they endured ritualized beatings and torture to expel the “evil” source of their non-heterosexuality.

R: It’s crazy, ask some men to dig a hole about six feet deep and then asked to bury me in it, cover it with palms and then I was forced to lie in a grave all night.
I: You were forced to lie in a grave all night?
R: Yes, I spent the whole night there, before morning the evil spirit must have gone, you know. They were singing the whole night, dancing, beating drums and then later on my parents were present, they were seeing everything that was happening to me.
Concealing identity.

Faced with widespread persecution and in constant fear of repercussions, respondents described processes and difficulties connected to concealing their sexual or gender identity. The need to hide an important part of the self was most often described as an all-encompassing process that dominated their way of living. These efforts were described as beginning in childhood: “since we were children everything should be secret and hidden,” and were maintained constantly: “you never be yourself.” Respondents described how concealment was a necessity as “double life is mandatory,” and compared it to being disguised in some way: “I always had to wear a mask.” One participant described how these lifelong efforts resulted in “the mask” becoming a part of them:

“In the very simple way you can’t make a phone call, you can’t, they will hear you, you can’t speak openly about anything to your friends who know that you are gay and you can’t feel like to wearing some make up or dress. I can’t invite anyone to my home it’s totally out of the question, so the mask. I came to Sweden just to remove it but it’s still a part of me.”

Other specific examples of how participants concealed their identities included developing a “straight-acting” appearance and behaviors, entering into opposite-sex relationships to deflect suspicion, creating excuses to avoid heterosexual marriage, avoiding contact with family, avoiding medical inspections to hide HIV status, and hiding serious injuries after homophobic attacks. A state of constant vigilance and suspicion, driven by fear, was a part of concealment.

“I cannot talk about myself freely, I am always scared of who’s close to me, who is around me, who is in front of me, who is standing at my back. I don’t know who is after me, so everybody around me is a suspect, the fear is always there.”

The inability to share the hidden part of the self with loved ones, combined with a lack of knowledge about sexual and gender minorities, were connected to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

“You don’t have nobody you can trust, even your parents to talk with them or trust to any friends or trust to your sister or your brothers, no you cannot trust anybody.”

In spite of the dangers, descriptions of secret relationships and sexual encounters were common. Often these involved risky concealment measures such as lying to coworkers and family members about movements and meeting in secret locations such as hotel rooms, in the forest, or in cars. These relationships were often rewarding experiences for participants, but were also marred by the pressure of maintaining secrecy within a climate of constant suspicion and threat. For several respondents, the sudden exposure of a secret same-sex relationship precipitated the chain of events that led to fleeing a country.

Theme 2: Into the Abyss

This theme describes experiences that occurred in the process of fleeing a country or countries and during transit to Sweden. For respondents, this time period was characterized by being plunged into unknown situations, which generated fear and profound uncertainty. Feelings of desperation were exacerbated by the loss of material resources.

For some participants, the days, weeks, and sometimes months prior to escape were spent under pursuit, on the run or in hiding. Respondents described the pressure of not knowing if any given moment was one of temporary safety or potential danger. Participants who fled by air gave emotionally loaded descriptions of their experiences at the airport, where the closeness of freedom was juxtaposed with the acute fear of being captured at the last moment.
Even a participant who was able to obtain a visa and travel under relatively safe circumstances described a combination of relief and apprehension as their departure approached:

I: What was going on inside of you when you got the visa?  
R: I was very happy, but was very afraid because I came here alone, totally alone. I don’t know anyone, I don’t know what will happen with me, I was very, very afraid. I’m gonna lose my work and I’m gonna lose everything, family, everything, I’m leaving everything in [home city].

Most respondents described protracted periods of moving between places that lasted weeks, months, and in one case years. Some experienced exhausting sequences of travelling by foot, alone or in groups, often unaware of where they were or where they were going. Some paid smugglers to transport them across land and sea into Europe; these participants described feelings of agony at being denied any information about the route, the duration of the journey, when the next phase would begin or what would be asked of them.

“So the smuggler will just try to make us blind, he put us in the trunk and totally close from all areas. And in the middle of the night we’re gonna go through the woods to a place we really don’t know and then we will find a boat and we will just go. We don’t know anything.”

Descriptions of experiences during escape and transit were dominated by fear. Those travelling illegally did so under constant fear of being captured by authorities. Even while travelling legally, one respondent reported being threatened by other asylum seekers, attacked by citizens, and arrested and beaten by police. Other respondents described acute moments of terror, such as being trapped at sea on a boat filled with crying and panicked civilians for hours, surrounded by potentially hostile naval ships. One participant described the moment a rubber boat they had been traveling in capsized into the sea:

“I get on the boat, but the boat sank and my bags and everything sank. Maybe with water for ((pause)) it’s hard for me to remember that night, but it was only darkness.”

A common hardship for participants who experienced protracted periods of travel was a lack of material resources. Large sums of money were paid to smugglers, remaining funds were depleted along the way, and possessions were lost, destroyed, and sometimes stolen. With all of their possessions in a small backpack, one respondent described the difficulty of having to change and wash their clothes every day for months. Another participant described living in a state of homelessness and desperation in countries foreign to them, where they were forced to things that they found shameful in order to survive.

Theme 3: Living in Suspension

This theme contains participants’ descriptions of post-migration experiences. The theme consists of the two sub-themes, An Unfair Trial and Crippling Restrictions. The sub-themes are closely related, as the experiences described in An Unfair Trial often led to effects that are described in Crippling Restrictions. Together, they paint a picture of a time in suspension during which respondents have little control over their circumstances while having to wait for a decision before they can start working, studying, or building lasting relationships, all the while fearing being unjustly sent back to a more or less certain death.

An Unfair Trial.

Respondents’ initial relief upon arriving in Sweden to seek asylum was soon complicated by confounding experiences in the asylum process. Some difficulties were connected to obtaining adequate assistance or representation from people working within the asylum
process. Respondents sometimes felt uneasy with translators who shared a similar cultural background, which limited their ability to discuss topics that concerned their sexual experiences. Another problem was securing legal council with competence in SOGI asylum claims. Respondents described not knowing how their cases were supposed to be processed and felt that they lacked knowledge of their rights. Here, a respondent described feeling a lack of support from their lawyer prior to a critical hearing at Migration Court:

“He didn’t even tell me what to focus on, what to say, what to speak. I was like completely lost, I don’t know what they gonna ask me, I know they gonna ask me about homosexuality and maybe a proof, maybe they will not believe me, I don't know what to say. The lawyer said to me that he was going to see me, but he didn't see me before.”

During the asylum process, participants often felt treated unfairly, disbelieved and suspected of lying; to them it seemed as though the case workers were trying to poke holes in their stories or employing strategies to make respondents “slip up.” Examples of such included asking questions that focused on irrelevant biographical details, failing to give claimants adequate time to answer questions, asking questions that jumped back and forth in time without following a chronology, and interviewing claimants for an extended period of time.

“On the interview they keep you for four hours, asking you questions for you to make a mistake so they will use it against you.”

Often, the respondents felt as though their sexuality was being disbelieved, and they found it difficult to understand what case workers were asking of them in order to prove their sexual orientations. This was felt to be exacerbated by a lack of understanding about cultural differences in expression of sexuality. One respondent felt that they were expected by the Migration Board to signal their sexuality according to norms that may be applicable in Sweden, but were foreign to them.

R: They expect us to paint ourselves, you know. Here if you see a gay you know, if you see somebody who’s a gay you would know.
I: It’s a different expression, right?
R: You understand that expression you cannot do it in Africa. Immigration wants Africans to behave like — it’s not like that, a gay is a gay whether you paint yourself or not.

This was also a grounds for rejection for one respondent, who according to the Migration Board’s rejection of their asylum claim had not “expressed their inner feelings” convincingly. When trying to get a further explanation of what constituted “inner feelings,” the respondent was unable to obtain a clear answer. This was experienced as an injustice. Another respondent struggled with the feeling that different groups of asylum seekers were being treated unequally to each other, and was concerned that racism was involved.

Although one participant, who had additional grounds for asylum, expressed relief with the efficiency of the asylum process, all others described the process as lengthy. For respondents, this was an extended period of being forced to wait helplessly for a life-altering decision: “Our lives are in the Migration Board’s hands now.” For some respondents, getting an initial interview took up to one-and-a-half years, others experienced long waits between interviews, and some had an extended wait for a decision to be made after the interview process was completed. This time period was often described as psychologically strenuous and dominated by anxiety over an uncertain future. However, this protracted period of waiting often led up to a sudden decision. Respondents never knew when to expect the decision to come, resulting in a perceived time frame that could suddenly end tomorrow, but felt like it could go on forever.
Some participants expressed feelings of disillusionment with the nature of the asylum process, and their personal journey. As one participant stated:

“I moved to seeking safety, just seeking safety. I realized actually it’s too much to ask in this life to be different and need to be safe.”

**Crippling Restrictions.**
Respondents described how practical constraints had negative impacts on their material, interpersonal, and emotional well-being. While going through the asylum process, most respondents lived in migration housing in various locations across Sweden. Respondents described several problems concerning housing, often stemming from other asylum seekers perceiving them as LGBT. Problems included harassment as well as sexual, psychological, and physical abuse. This often led to respondents isolating themselves or being segregated by staff in attempts to stop the abuse. One respondent described their experiences of being moved from camp to camp because of homophobic abuse, and how being isolated for their own protection felt like being imprisoned.

“It’s a big problem because my friends is hurt there, other friends is all the time hurt by other people, by other straight people and family people. You know they came to me and slap me and say ‘you are shame of us’ and so I never feel relax to go outside of camp because I know they are beating me until I move from that camp after long time. In another camp I cannot come out what I am, I hide myself, I have a room that inside have toilet and shower and I just go for dinner and it’s like prison for me.”

Another aspect of isolation was geographical, where respondents described small cities as isolating since they offered limited possibilities to find an LGBT community. A further form of isolation was described by a respondent who, living at a remote migration camp, had no one to talk to as no one spoke their language. They described how this caused them to experience “a kind of psychological trauma.” Isolation also ran through respondents’ descriptions of being unable to engage in daily life activities due to restrictions inherent to the asylum process. Participants described not being allowed to work without a permit, continue or finish previous studies, or take Swedish classes.

R: I cannot right to study, to go to SFI [Swedish for Immigrants]. I really want to go to SFI and study as soon as possible and continue my study if possible.
I: The studies you did in [home country]?
R: In [home country], yes because I cannot finish my study unfortunately. Yeah, do a normal life.

Respondents often used metaphors of being chained, tied, psychologically bound, imprisoned, or stuck to illustrate their feelings of being restricted. As asylum seekers, participants had restricted access to health care as they only had access to emergency services, which for transgender asylum seekers entailed being denied gender-affirming treatment. Even when participants were allowed access to areas of public life such as employment or social venues, negative attitudes and discrimination against asylum seekers made it hard for participants to engage. Participants described problems with the ID card issued by the Migration Board, as it identified them as asylum seekers and was often considered invalid as a form of identification. Participants described their ID cards being used against them to deny them access to work, education, and social venues.

“Yeah, education, find a job, everything. When you are an asylum seeker it's not easy, if you have this kind of ID that means they don't trust you, they are afraid, you know. Because they see you like a criminal.”
Beyond these practical restrictions, respondents felt limited in their possibilities of building or maintaining long-term relationships. Respondents described the process of seeking asylum as a prolonged “problem” during which time others might feel hesitant to try and build a strong relationship with them, seeing as the outcome was still uncertain. Participants described additional relationship difficulties connected to their asylum status, such as not wanting to be perceived as using others to improve their situation. Practical restrictions were also experienced as having a negative impact on relationships.

“I do remember also I lost a nice relationship in the beginning when I came to Stockholm, but because I was in the process it was long distance relationship. And I don't have papers, I couldn't travel, but it was real love story I guess and it was like real special for me, it was nice memories but it makes me sad.”

While living in this state of limbo, respondents also described dealing with the psychological distress caused by significant losses experienced throughout the asylum journey. Respondents felt sorrow at losing connections with family, friends, and all of the people they had known in their home countries. Some respondents also reported having been disowned by their families as a result of their sexual identity being exposed. Respondents spoke about losing their educations, jobs, and careers. Others reflected upon the magnitude of what was lost, with the feeling that they had left their entire lives behind. While waiting in the asylum process with an uncertain future ahead, respondents described feeling like they were unable to take the time to resolve the grief they carried, which further hindered them from moving forward.

“She was killed in the police station out of torture and I said ‘I have to move, I cannot stay in this country anymore’ and this is actually why I left because losing her ((crying)). After she passed away I had to move and leave the country and I am moving from country to country. I didn't even have time to feel sad for her or grieve, until now I ((crying)) didn't have this moment like she passed away and I have to give respect for years now and I don't feel I – ((pause)). She passed away in 2015, I don't have time for me during all of this journey.”

**Theme 4: Sources of External Support**

This theme contains descriptions of the sources of material, interpersonal, and environmental support that helped participants throughout the span of the asylum journey. Monetary resources were often essential in order to undertake and prevail through the asylum journey; these were needed to acquire visas and plane tickets, pay smugglers, and sustain participants over long periods of travel. Material resources were often obtained through the help of a key figure, a trusted person who helped to initiate the asylum journey. One respondent described being completely dependent on a key figure for help to escape imprisonment, obtain a passport, and flee the country. Respondents’ stories tended to emphasize the importance of help from a key figure in the pre-migration period of the asylum journey. However, key figures also emerged further along in the journey, for example in the form of relatives in Sweden who were able to offer support. In the face of depleting resources, respondents described that friends had been another important source of help.

A source of support that tended to emerge to a higher degree in the post-migration period was help from institutions and organizations. One respondent had positive experiences of receiving support from Swedish authorities, and some described receiving practical and emotional help from religious institutions. Repeatedly, respondents mentioned the importance of LGBT community organizations. For some respondents, being forcibly rejected by their families was described as a loss of connectedness and important bonds; this heightened the importance of finding and creating an LGBT community. The LGBT community was described as filling the void of the “family we lost before, because of our sexual orientation.”
Respondents also described feelings of inclusion and connectedness that stemmed from a perceived cultural openness to sexual and gender minorities in the post-migration context. This perceived cultural openness was described as reducing the loneliness caused by previous experiences of social exclusion.

“Any place that I am coming out as a gay Swedish people is very nice very kind to me and I feel more kind, more happy from them and more support from them when they understand that I'm gay. That's very, very, very good things, that I feel happy and never feel alone, I feel that they are supporting me.”

Beyond describing specific instances of receiving help or support, participants also reflected on the psychological importance of interpersonal support. Often, partners were described as very important and the love felt for them was a motivating factor that kept participants going through difficult times. One respondent described how their boyfriend was the only thing that gave them hope and filled their life with meaning after all the losses endured because of the asylum journey.

“The only hope that I have now, I have life just with my boyfriend. I live with him now, he is my life now and he is my hope and he makes me a little hope in this life, otherwise my life with no meaning for me.”

**Theme 5: Strength from Within**

This theme also runs throughout the span of the asylum journey and contains descriptions of how participants have dealt with adverse experiences and persevered using internal resources. The theme is divided into two sub-themes. The first, *Ways of Coping*, describes strategies participants employed to deal with hardships and psychological distress. The second sub-theme, *Creating Meaning*, describes overarching processes connected to understanding the self in relation to past experiences, current situations, and future outlooks, constructing a life story that is manageable.

**Ways of Coping.**

Participants often described the importance of mindset in dealing with the hardships and psychological distress they experienced. One such mode of thinking was staying positive. Participants talked about visualizing positive outcomes: “I cannot fail, I can never fail, I believe everything is possible if you believe.” They also encouraged themselves to remain positive by imagining that others had it worse. Many respondents described strategies of trying to direct their focus to the present or the future while trying to forget the past: “Now is new life, way better situation. So it’s fool to think about the past, the past has past”; “I just try to forget everything though it is impossible.” Another recurring strategy was for respondents to envision themselves as having gained strength from adversity, describing themselves as fighters. Others described fighting as something that was demanded of them in order to prevail.

“One thing I learned from these days and these years, you should fight for your value, you should fight all the time. If you stop your fighting you lose yourself, that's it the time has learned me.”

Engaging in social activities, for example by meeting up with friends or going to events organized by LGBT community organizations, was described by participants as a way to minimize the psychological distress caused by memories of past traumatic experiences. Many also described taking on responsibility in LGBT community organizations and referred to themselves as activists, which was described as having a positive psychological impact.
Others described feeling compelled to engage in activism by strong inner beliefs about equality. One respondent described the feelings aroused in them by viewing media coverage of human rights violations in their home country:

“I live here in Sweden, but I see all these pictures and I get angry. I feel like I want to – we have to do something. I try to gather my friends here too, we can’t just sit by and watch.”

However, even when employing these strategies to cope with their experiences, participants described the inherent strain in maintaining a positive, active, fighting spirit. One participant, who strove to remain socially active in order to avoid being overwhelmed by distress, explained that they only “pretended to be ok,” and was unsure of their capacity to overcome their trauma. Another respondent described feeling exhausted by their own efforts: “I cannot keep on fighting like this, I cannot keep on moving like this.”

Creating Meaning.
Participants’ stories also contained broader reflections about how they have come to understand themselves and their life stories. Beyond the idea of having gained strength through adversity, respondents described the feeling of having changed in more far-reaching ways as a result of their experiences. For some, this was a feeling of having been changed on a cultural level; this could entail the feeling that one had become different from other members of their home culture, or a strong identification with the cultural values and practices in their new context. Some respondents felt that they had attained a stronger sense of personal agency as a result of their experiences. One respondent characterized this as a deeper control of their thoughts, feelings, and reactions, making them “a better person.” For another respondent, the feeling of personal agency was connected to moving from a position of extreme victimization and helplessness to one where she could see herself as a strong person with the capacity to take care of themselves and others.

Although some respondents did not describe problems with self-acceptance due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, those participants who had previously struggled reported positive changes to their self-perception. These changes were connected to having positive same-sex sexual experiences and relationships and being in environments that were explicitly accepting of LGBT people, where participants had the opportunity to “be open” with others.

“So you shift your thinking, you don’t think your God is your enemy about your identity. You think God is accept you, love you with the way you are. It makes you more peaceful in the mind and in the heart by accepting yourself more. Actually you feel more protected, yourself first and then around you in the society and then the organization and the authorities.”

In reflecting upon their asylum journeys, some respondents made sense of their stories by finding meaning in their experiences. Participants spoke about believing in “karma” or the idea that “things happen for a reason.” In these interpretations, the pain and hardships endured throughout the asylum journey were seen as worthwhile. In spite of impending deportation, one respondent found meaning in their asylum journey in that it had transformed them into a person who could be loved by themselves and others:

“This journey changed a lot of things during the years. Though I suffered a lot in this journey by physical and sexual and psychological abuse, if the time goes back again I will do it again and again and again because it framed me as I like, in a way even others like, so I am so glad of this journey and what it did to me and how it did it to me. Yes, I would do it over and over again.”
Discussion

The current study aimed to explore experiences of LGBT asylum seekers who had migrated to Sweden. Three of the themes described negative experiences from different periods of the asylum journey (Living Under Threat, Into the Abyss, and Living in Suspension), and two themes described more positive aspects that were not specific to a given period (Sources of External Support and Strength from Within).

Discussion of Results in Relation to Previous Research

The first theme, Living Under Threat, described pre-migration experiences of persecution and the efforts made by respondents to conceal their sexual orientations or gender identities. In accordance with previous research (Alessi, Kahn & Chatterji, 2016; Alessi, Kahn & Van Der Horn, 2017; Piwowarczyk, Fernandez & Sharma, 2016; O’Flaherty and Fisher, 2008; UNHCR, 2011), respondents experienced abuse, oppression and the fear thereof that extended across private and public spheres of living. Several participants reported incidents of abuse from their childhood; these descriptions are in line with Alessi, Kahn & Chatterji’s (2016) study, in which LGBT refugees reported repeated experiences of verbal and physical abuse from their families, caregivers, and community members throughout childhood and adolescence. In order to survive in these circumstances, respondents in the current study described needing to take comprehensive measures to vigilantly conceal a major aspect of their identity. Previous research has found similar descriptions by LGBT refugees about the need to hide parts of themselves in order to survive prior to migration (Alessi, Kahn & Van Der Horn, 2017; Berg & Millbank, 2007; Heller 2009; Jordan, 2009). Participants described that these efforts extended far beyond merely concealing specific sexual or gender non-conforming behaviors. The struggle to hide all of the thoughts, feelings, reactions, expressions, and behaviors connected to this part of the self, and instead be perceived as convincingly heterosexual and cisgendered, permeated their interpersonal realities.

The second theme, Into the Abyss, highlighted the experience of profound uncertainty that was connected to the transit period of the asylum journey. In the previous research on LGBT asylum seekers reviewed here, there is no study that focuses on experiences during transit. Although Jordan’s (2009) study considers the transit period, the focus is on analyzing the trajectories of escape rather than experiences themselves; furthermore, Jordan describes the findings related to migration trajectories as tentative. In the current study, some respondents were required to make sudden and dramatic escapes, without the time to make plans, gather information, or obtain resources. Even respondents who had the possibility of planning their escapes in advance described having felt anxiety stemming from leaving what was known and moving into the unknown. Participants travelled to Sweden in different ways and the length of their journeys varied greatly. A majority of respondents reported experiences of travelling illegally, and these stories were especially connected to feelings of danger, desperation, and terror. The depletion and ensuing lack of resources was another source of major concern, especially for those respondents who experienced lengthy periods of transit. In travelling illegally for extended periods of time, respondents found themselves living in societal exclusion, outside of the basic stability and protection of belonging to a place. The challenges and dangers of travelling illegally are compounded for LGBT asylum seekers by the risk of being exposed as a member of a sexual or gender minority.

The third theme, Living in Suspension, describes difficulties experienced during the post-migration period in Sweden. Participants reported negative experiences of being subject to a critical legal process that was felt to be unfair, living in hostile and sometimes dangerous
accommodation, and being required to wait indefinitely for an outcome while being unable to access work, education, and other sources of integration. With regards to the asylum process, it’s important to reiterate that the results of this study reflect the experiences of LGBT asylum seekers, and do not constitute an assessment of how cases have been processed. However, respondents’ experiences of being treated unfairly are aligned with both international (Berg & Millbank, 2007; Heller, 2009; Lee & Brotman, 2011; Jordan, 2009; Munro et al., 2013) and Swedish research examining SOGI asylum claims, where the use of stereotypes was found to be present in procedures and decision-making (Lukac, 2017; Malmquist, 2016). A difficulty that was expressed repeatedly in the current study and which is less focal in the international research is that of the lengthiness of the asylum process. A potential explanation for this difference is the increase in asylum applications received by the Swedish Migration Board in 2015 combined with the added administrative demands stemming from the change in asylum law (Kudo, 2016; Migrationsverket, 2015b), which resulted in longer processing times during the same period that the majority of the current study’s participants had active asylum claims. In concurrence with previous research, participants in the current study felt the asylum process to be a source of emotional distress (Lee & Brotman, 2011; Kahn & Alessi, 2017). Enduring the asylum process is likely emotionally distressing for any person seeking safety in a foreign country; however, the burden of being required to demonstrate membership in a stigmatized minority places an additional pressure on LGBT asylum seekers.

Respondents experienced homophobic and transphobic threats and violence while living at the facilities provided by the Migration Board, a problem that has been previously reported (Lee & Brotman, 2011; Lukac, 2017; UNHCR, 2012). Housing LGBT asylum seekers together with a heterosexual majority was experienced as a continuation of the persecutory conditions respondents were forced to flee. Previous research has found that LGBT refugees encounter homophobia and transphobia within co-cultural diaspora communities (Chávez, 2011; Kahn, 2015; Munro et al., 2013). In light of the previous and current findings, the practice of housing LGBT asylum seekers in hostile conditions is a questionable one. The combination of having to wait for an undetermined period of time without being able to use their time to study or work was felt to be a source of strain. Participants expressed a desire to improve their situations by learning Swedish, securing a source of income, and finding safe housing, but were hindered from doing so both by formal restrictions and negative cultural attitudes to asylum seekers; such limitations are aligned with international findings (Alessi & Kahn, 2017; Chávez, 2011; Gowin et al., 2017; Lee & Brotman, 2011; Munro et al., 2013).

Living in this liminal period, participants described experiencing a range of symptoms of psychological distress, as reported both in the interviews and through the HSCL-25 questionnaire. Previous psychological research has found LGBT asylum seekers to suffer from significant mental health consequences of their experiences (Alessi & Kahn, 2017; Cerezo, Morales, Quintero & Rothman, 2014; Cheney et al., 2017; Shidlo & Ahola, 2013). Although the participants in this study were not formally assessed for psychiatric syndromes, their descriptions of suffering indicated that the current group likely experienced mental health difficulties. As asylum seekers in Sweden do not have access to non-emergency health care, access to psychological treatment for these symptoms was largely unavailable.

The final two themes, Sources of External Support and Strength from Within, describe external and internal resilience factors respectively. External factors contributing to resilience were material, interpersonal, and environmental in nature. Certain types of external support were described more often in relation to a given period of the asylum journey, e.g. help from a key figure was often described in pre-migration reports, whereas help from an organization was often described in the post-migration period. In spite of shifts in emphasis, most of the
identified sources of external support were described to a lesser or greater extent during both pre- and post-migration. In contrast, the transit period stands out as a time when respondents reported a considerable lack of external support, which may have contributed to instability experienced during that period. Previous research on resilience in LGBT refugees is scant, and focuses exclusively on the post-migration period. In line with the findings of the present study, Alessi (2016) found that, alongside help from friends and partners, LGBT organizations were an important resource. Given the scope of the social isolation experienced by our participants, it is not surprising that a welcoming, supportive context of peers and allies is seen as a significant source of support.

The internal resilience factors described in Strength from Within consisted of both coping strategies that were employed by participants in specific situations as well as wider attempts to reflect upon and make sense of their life stories. The coping strategies identified were most often described in relation to negative internal processes; these were often ways in which participants attempted to mitigate feelings of anxiety, depression, or the impacts of traumatic memories. The descriptions of maintaining a positive attitude and participating in social events and activism are similar to the findings by Alessi (2016), where staying hopeful and positive, and engaging in formal activism or volunteering were reported as important sources of resilience. The descriptions included in the final subtheme, Creating Meaning, though arguably also related to coping, were not connected to specific situations or difficulties. These were broader reflections made by participants about how their experiences of the asylum journey have changed how they perceive themselves and their reality. In describing positive ways in which they have changed as people and attributing meaning to their experiences, respondents may be affirming belief in their human potential for positive development and belief in a world where living is worthwhile. Alessi’s (2016) study on resilience in LGBT refugees does not report any similar theme. One explanation could be that the act of creating a meaningful narrative may have been viewed in the previous study as an inherent part of the interview situation, and therefore not a finding in itself. Another interpretation could be that the structure of the interview in the current study, which covered a wide spectrum of participants’ life experiences, may have facilitated this type of reflection.

Discussion of Results in Relation to the Theoretical Background
As the first three themes, Living Under Threat, Into the Abyss and Living in Suspension all contain descriptions of negative experiences; these will be discussed together in relation to psychological theory. When respondents described their experiences across the asylum journey, monetary resources were often seen as necessary in order to be able to initiate the asylum journey. However, as the journey went on, participants experienced depletion of these scarce monetary resources during transit. In a post-migration context participants then had difficulties obtaining new resources. These descriptions could be understood as stressors when applying Hobfoll’s Conservation of Resources model (1989), within which the loss of resources is a cause of stress in itself. In describing negative experiences respondents often reported what Hobfoll (2012) describes as loss spirals. The decrease of one type of resource often led to the decrease of others, which subsequently made it harder to obtain new resources. Respondents described expending object resources (such as houses or other valuable possessions) in order to obtain the necessary energy resources (monetary resources) to prevail through the asylum journey. Respondents also reported losing conditional resources, such as social status or positions they held at work. Participants described having very limited conditional resources in a post-migration context, as they were now part of a new stigmatized social group as asylum seekers. Left with scarce resources, participants had few
ways of gaining new ones. This was experienced as a considerable stressor that cut across time.

The stigmatized social positions respondents described in the post-migration context can also be viewed through the lenses of acculturation theory and minority stress. Acculturation theory posits that stressors in a post-migration context can include limited language proficiency, lack of social connections, and discrimination (Berry, 1997; Betancourt et al., 2015). Respondents describe all of these different stressors; their limited language proficiency was often thought of as having a negative psychological impact, which was exacerbated by not having the right to formally study Swedish, sometimes for several years. This was described as limiting social connections. Issues related to minority stress include stressors from both the pre- and post-migration contexts, particularly the abuse and harassment described by participants. Abuse was extensively reported during the pre-migration period, and this continued to some extent into post-migration, especially in migration housing or camps. Respondents related this abuse to their position as a sexual minority, which can be understood as a stressor rooted in a stigmatized social position (Meyer, 2003). Respondents also described other stigmatized minority positions in the post-migration context; here their status as asylum seekers was connected to stigma, which was seen as a source of discrimination. Some respondents also described being racialized in the post-migration context in ways that they were not in a pre-migration context. This racialized position was experienced as a disadvantaged one.

This can be further understood when applying more critical theories, such as queer theory and the concept of intersectionality, as described within queer migration studies (Larson et al., 2016; Luibhéid, 2008). Respondents gave descriptions of different power structures that created various types of exclusion and marginalization, which interacted and changed across contexts. Further, the criticism of the predominant idea about western nations as safe havens for LGBT asylum seekers, as discussed within queer migration studies (Murray, 2014), is resonant with how respondents described their post migration-experiences. Rather than simply decreasing when moving from a pre- to post-migration context, the type of stigma and discrimination respondents experienced was described as changing in a more complex manner over time and across contexts. Even though the severity of abuse and harassment respondents suffered as a result of belonging to a stigmatized sexual minority decreased, it did not necessarily cease. Respondents also described new stigmatized positions in a post-migration context, which had not been present pre-migration.

The fact that stressors were often described to be severe, cut across time periods, and build on one another supports the conceptualization of traumatic experiences as a continuing and accumulative process (Burston 2003; Harms, 2015). Over a vast span of time participants reported experiencing various types of trauma, extending beyond physical trauma to include family trauma, personal identity trauma, and interpersonal trauma, as described in Kira’s proposed model for classifying traumatic experiences (Kira et al., 2008). In line with this model respondents reflected upon how this has impacted different areas of their functioning, such as identity and social interdependence. Respondents described experiences of having a changed sense of self, which was positive at times, but not always. Many expressed experiencing a loss of control, agency, and autonomy in relation to the asylum journey; these feelings of loss can be seen as reactions to trauma (Harms, 2015). Respondents often described that their contemplations about loss became more focal in the post-migration context. By this point in their journey, respondents had long histories of accumulated trauma, and found themselves in new circumstances that were experienced as stressful and potentially leading to further losses. In particular, reception and treatment in Sweden, which was
perceived to be unfair, may be a source of re-traumatization (Betancourt et al., 2015; George, 2010; Harms, 2015).

In interviewing LGBT asylum seekers, we encountered survivors of grave persecution who successfully navigated through dangerous conditions toward the hope of safety. Their very survival and their presence in their current context indicate resilience. It is impossible to precisely extract and delineate the factors that contributed to resilience from a complex life narrative, and such a task remains outside of the scope of the current study. Additionally, what constitutes resilience has been found to vary across cultures, time, and contexts (Pickren, 2014). This further complicates efforts to generalize, both in theory and in the context of a research study conducted with a culturally diverse group of respondents reflecting upon journeys that spanned both years and nations. Among the aspects described in External Sources of Support, monetary resources can hardly be considered a supportive factor that was uniquely important to this respondent group; however, the fact that money can serve as an important adaptive tool appears to be neglected in theoretical conceptualizations of resilience (Hobfoll, 1989). When theorizing about external sources of resilience for migrant groups, family and co-cultural diaspora community are viewed as important supports to adaptation (Pickren, 2014). Among respondents in the current study (and in previous research on LGBT refugees), various degrees of disconnectedness from family and co-cultural communities were reported. Respondents described how interpersonal resilience factors were often found in key figures – either a partner or a single friend or family member who could be trusted to provide acceptance and assistance. For this group, community is found and forged among other LGBT people, in particular those with a shared experience of forced migration.

In discussing individual resilience factors, Ungar (2008) points to the risk of being blinded by western-based notions of what constitutes adaptive functioning, thereby ignoring other manifestations of resilience that fall outside of expected norms. In order to avoid this pitfall, it is necessary to reflect upon the experiences described in Concealing Identity as possible manifestations of resilience. In contrast to western ideals about striving to develop and display a unique, individual identity, our respondents developed in contexts where the concealment of identity was required for survival. Although this was described as a negative, constraining experience, their efforts to mask aspects of themselves constitute examples of adaptive functioning. The role of context in shaping what constitutes resilience becomes apparent here; while essential to successful functioning in pre-migration contexts, the same strategies used to conceal sexual and gender identity threaten to undermine the legitimacy of the asylum claim in the post-migration context. The coping strategies described in Strength from Within, such as maintaining positive attitudes and avoiding thoughts about the past, can be seen as attempts to mitigate psychological distress. However, these may also enable other efforts, such as engaging in social activities and activism, which in turn widen the individual’s network of resources. Respondents’ reflections about the ways they have personally developed as a result of the asylum journey are aligned with Park’s (2010) summary of meaning making theory. The distress caused by an appraisal of stressful events that clashes with one’s overarching beliefs instigates a process of meaning making, wherein a person seeks to restore their belief in their life being worthwhile. In reflecting on their extensive stressful and traumatic experiences, this study’s respondents described changes to their identities, changes to their global beliefs, and perceptions of personal growth.

Methodological Discussion
In the following section the current study will be discussed in relation to three criteria for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research as described by Shenton (2004), namely
Credibility, transferability, and dependability. These will be defined in the discussion that follows.

**Credibility.**
This criterion deals with the question “how congruent are the findings with reality?” and is described as of the most important factors in ensuring trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004, p. 64). As the research question of the current study examined participants’ descriptions of their experiences, evaluating credibility is not a matter of ensuring that the results reflect a factually accurate documentation of events. Rather, congruence in the context of the current study concerns the extent to which the collected data actually describes the positive and negative experiences of LGBT asylum seekers, and subsequently how well the interpretation of the data accurately reflect the descriptions given by the study’s participants. More succinctly, credibility can be evaluated in both the quality of the data, and the quality of the analysis.

There are several different strategies to ensure credibility in the data; these are often related to decisions regarding the research design. Shenton (2004, p. 65) posits that researchers should develop “an early familiarity with the culture of participating organizations” in order to establish the trust necessary to gain access to a relevant group of potential respondents. In the current study, initial meetings were made with the LGBT community organization prior to recruitment, where the organization was consulted on the suitability of the current study and the practical considerations that would facilitate recruitment. This cooperation allowed the authors to make use of the organizations expertise in order to develop a sensitive research plan. Shenton also describes the advantage of a random sampling of individuals as a way of improving credibility; however, this is a point of contention within the qualitative research tradition. Purposive sampling is often used within qualitative research in order to gain “insight and in-depth understanding” from groups that are hard to recruit (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 56). This method was deemed to be the best recruitment option for the current study, as we were exploring a sensitive research topic with a very specific population.

In order to credibly fulfill the aim of the study it is important to use well-established research methods. As the current study’s aim was to capture respondents’ descriptions of their experiences, semi-structured interviews and the use of thematic analysis can be considered constituting well-established research methods for the purpose of exploratory research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). One aspect to consider in the current study was that as respondents were asked to provide a recollection of prior events, their narratives were affected by how they remember their experiences. These recollections were in turn likely affected by the impacts of stress and trauma on memory processes. However, the current study sought to explore how respondents described their experiences, rather than attempting to present a factually accurate account of events that had transpired. In this sense, the potential impacts of trauma on memory do not jeopardize the value of the findings. The semi-structured interview format provided a fairly open yet supportive framework to facilitate participants in telling their stories, and also allowed for the interviewer to ask respondents to elaborate on topics of relevance during the course of the interview. However, it is necessary to consider how the interview situation in the current study could have potentially influenced respondents’ narratives. The structure of the interview guide was chronological, posing questions about experiencing prior to, during and after migration. Asking questions about these three periods might very well have influenced how respondents presented their stories, which in turn could have resulted in the chronological structure of the first three themes. With this in mind, the interviews consistently indicated qualitative differences in how respondents described their
experiences across these different periods. This could indicate that the interview guide influenced the structure of the thematization, but less so the content of the themes. Another way the interview might have influenced respondents’ narratives is in its similarities with other interview situations. Asking respondents to share their life stories with a professional in a closed room could be reminiscent of the interview component of the asylum process, which was a recent and stressful experience for many of our respondents. The similarities between these two interview situations could have potentially lead respondents to place an emphasis on recounting negative experiences, as proving the seriousness of their fear of persecution was essential in their asylum interviews. One alternative method would have been a series of separate interviews, where one interview would have an explicit focus on positive experiences. This option would not have been possible given the time constraints of the current study. A second possibility would be conducting group interviews, to avoid the potential similarities to the asylum interviews. However, given the language barriers between respondents and interviewers, a group interview format would have seriously complicated the existing communication challenges present in this study.

Shenton (2004) also describes the importance of tactics that would help ensure honesty in participants, in order to ensure credibility in the data. Examples of such tactics include explicitly giving participants the opportunity to refuse participation, explaining to participants that there are no right or wrong answers, and employing iterative questioning (Shenton, 2004). As voluntary participation was described to participants on several occasions (recruitment, beginning of the interview, after the interview concluded), participants were encouraged to withdraw their consent for any reason if they wanted to. As can be seen in Appendix 1: Interview Guide, an initial instruction in the interview explicitly stated that no answers were right or wrong, as questions aimed to investigate participants’ own descriptions of their experiences. The semi-structured interview format also allowed the use of iterative questioning, meaning that researchers could return to earlier statements using rephrased questions in order to obtain a better understanding. A challenge when interviewing the current group was that the authors were limited to conducting the interviews in English, which was not a first language for any of the respondents. In three cases interviews were assisted or interpreted and it is worth remembering that the subsequent data in these cases were filtered through another person. This likely affected the way stories were told, but was at the same time considered more beneficial than having the respondents struggle in a language that they were not comfortable with. In all of the interviews, the use of iterative questions for clarification was much needed at times. At the same time, this increased the risk of asking leading questions or giving leading interpretations. Given the challenges posed by language barriers, the use of iterative and clarifying questions was deemed a better option than striving to maintain a passive stance during the interviews. This use of iterative questions could also be viewed as a form of “on the spot” member-checking, meaning that respondents were given the opportunity to evaluate if the interviewers’ interpretations matched what they were trying to convey. However, no further member-checking beyond the interview situation was conducted, such as letting respondents read through transcripts, as doing this was deemed inappropriate without being able to offer respondents support in understanding and processing the material. This was due to the limited time frame of the current study.

Triangulation is described as another way in which to enhance credibility, both in regards to the data and how they are interpreted. Shenton (2004) posits that the use of several different data sources or methods of data analysis could be used to understand the same phenomenon through different lenses. An attempt was made in the current study to triangulate certain aspects of the respondents’ narratives through the use of a quantitative questionnaire that
explored mental health impacts. This quantitative data can be compared to some aspects of the interview material. However, a more thorough comparison of these two sources falls outside of the main objectives of the current study. Other practices suggested by Shenton (2004) include peer review and frequent debriefing sessions with supervisors. Initially, expert review was considered, but was later found to be impossible within the given time frame. Debriefing sessions with supervisors where discussions about perceptions, alternative interpretations, and potential flaws in the research process were conducted throughout the course of the study.

Transferability.
Transferability is a term used in qualitative research concerning the extent to which findings can be applied to other situations (Shenton, 2004). As Shenton (2004, p. 69) states, “Since the findings of a qualitative project are specific to a small number of particular environments and individuals, it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations.” Within qualitative research, especially in exploratory studies, transferability is inherently limited and results must be understood within a given context. Even if transferability is not a main aim, readers may try to make comparisons or relate findings to other contexts. In doing so, a number of factors should be taken into consideration. An LGBT community organization provided the setting for both recruitment and for the interviews. All of the participants in the current study had a relationship to this organization, which likely influenced how LGBT organizations were discussed in the interviews. With regards to the participants in the current study, respondents were predominantly gay cisgendered men; the limited number of lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered respondents could result in experiences specific to these minorities being concealed or underemphasized in the data. Currently, there is no official documentation of the number of SOGI asylum claims in Sweden, and it is therefore impossible to determine how the composition of the respondent group in the current study compares demographically to LGBT asylum seekers in Sweden as a whole. However, a number of the findings from this study are aligned with results from previous research, which suggests that some of the experiences reported here may be shared by other groups of LGBT asylum seekers in different contexts.

Dependability.
The term dependability in qualitative research is comparable to what is described as reliability within quantitative research (Shenton, 2004). Dependability is mostly informed by how well the different parts of the research process are described, and if a future researcher wanting to conduct a similar study could follow them. The influence of the researchers’ subjective preferences and perceptions should be minimized as far as possible. In the current study, attempts have been made both in the method section and in this discussion to clarify the different steps of the research process and to reflect upon the authors’ subjective influences. Memos, recurrent discussions between the authors, and process-oriented supervision with the focus on emotional reactions to the material were used as tools to systematically monitor the influence of the authors’ subjective preferences and perceptions. Although the impact of subjectivity can never be eliminated, extensive steps were taken in the current study to address and minimize its influence as far as possible.

Further Recommendations
In comparison with previous research with LGBT asylum seekers, the current study investigated experiences over a broader period in participants’ lives, utilizing the concept of an asylum journey that spans from pre-migration, through transit, and into post-migration.
Most previous research focuses either on pre- or post-migration experiences, and in some instances these two periods are examined together. The period of transit is an especially neglected research topic; this is concerning, as the present study reveals that respondents encountered deeply distressing experiences during this time. To better understand experiences unique to the transit period, further studies are required. The current study also aimed to include both positive and negative experiences. However, positive experiences were reported to a lesser extent. Further studies could therefore focus explicitly on positive experiences and resilience factors in order to attain more comprehensive and saturated data on these topics.

During the research process, ideas arose about how identity formation could be affected by the asylum journey, as well as questions about the concepts of relatedness and connectedness in relation to LGBT asylum seekers. Further insight into the importance of connectedness and how factors hinder connectedness across the asylum journey could help to better understand the stressors and resilience factors specific to LGBT asylum seekers. As indicated in the methodological discussion, further studies with subgroups of the current respondent group could provide important information about differences in experiences between transgender women and men, lesbians, bisexuals, gay men, and other minorities not represented in this study’s respondent group. Further, LGBT asylum seekers may have differing experiences of prejudice and racism depending on how they are racialized across contexts. Respondents in the current studies described negative cultural attitudes directed toward them as a result of their asylum status, but few made explicit connections to racism. It is possible that the cultural position of the interviewer, being white, inhibited this type of reflection. Future studies conducted by researchers who are non-white could possibly help to elicit these narratives.

In this study, as well as many previous studies, participants were recruited through an LGBT community organization. This is a common approach, as it is difficult to conceive of alternative ways to safely and effectively recruit members of this vulnerable population. As a result, existing research completely neglects the experiences and well-being of LGBT refugees who are not connected to LGBT community organizations or services. This group could be especially vulnerable given that LGBT organizations have been described as vital sources of support. Alternatively, LGBT asylum seekers who are not connected to a community organization may have developed other types of resilience that could enhance our understanding.

**Implications**

The results of this study highlight the specific challenges faced by LGBT asylum seekers. Experiences of emotional distress continued into the post-migration period, which should be of particular relevance for officials and service providers here in Sweden. Case workers, interpreters, and legal representatives working in the asylum process are in need of knowledge and competence related to the issues affecting SOGI asylum claimants. Without this sensitivity, migration officials risk not only exacerbating the distress of these claimants, but also jeopardize the fairness of the asylum process. The ability to discuss sexuality or gender identity, especially in the context of related trauma, can be impacted by a number of factors that should be taken into consideration. Respondents reported experiences of threats and abuse from childhood onward, which resulted in lifelong efforts made to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity. These experiences can hinder a person from being able to openly and coherently discuss topics that have long been connected to taboo and danger, in front of strangers in authority positions. Interpreters and translators with co-cultural backgrounds were also described as inhibiting to the process. People working within the asylum process should further be aware about how gender and sexuality expression vary
across cultures, in order to avoid imposing their own cultural ideas or stereotypes about how sexuality should be expressed on LGBT asylum seekers. These issues heighten the importance of providing people that have SOGI asylum claims with a supportive environment to talk about these topics, as doing so is crucial to their cases. This also applies to clinicians working within the healthcare system, who are most likely to meet those claimants who attain refugee status and thereby gain access to treatment.

Many respondents reported homophobic or transphobic harassment and abuse at migration housing. Attempts to stop individual incidents of abuse often resulted in respondents being socially excluded or isolated. In light of these experiences, separate housing for LGBT asylum seekers should be established in order to protect LGBT asylum seekers from continued experiences of threats, violence, and social isolation. Finally, as participants described LGBT community organizations as serving an important role in providing social and practical support, as well as being a basis to build social connectedness, attempts should be made to ensure that all LGBT asylum seekers have both proximity and access to such organizations.

Concluding Remarks
In a time when an unprecedented number of people face the crisis of displacement, understanding the lived reality of asylum seekers and refugees becomes a critical task. The pursuit of safety from war, disaster, or persecution is a human right; this places legal and ethical responsibilities on host countries to ensure the humane treatment of people who are forced to exercise this right. A more nuanced understanding of stressors and resilience factors specific to different groups is needed to better guide responses in host countries, as asylum seekers are not a homogenous group. This study makes a contribution to the scarce psychological research on LGBT asylum seekers, especially in a Swedish context where, to the best of our knowledge, it may be the first of its kind. LGBT asylum seekers constitute an especially vulnerable group that is faced with particular hardships. Long histories of pervasive abuse, alienation from family and co-cultural communities, the demands of proving their stigmatized identities to authorities, and continued abuse during resettlement are some significant stressors described in this study. In spite of these adverse experiences, LGBT asylum seekers show evidence of employing considerable internal resources in order to navigate and survive. The often sparse or lacking external resources described by the group is a further testament to their adaptive functioning. This resilience is strained by placing LGBT asylum seekers in dangerous conditions, and exposing them to proceedings that are felt to be protracted, insensitive, and unfair. Instead, host countries should seek to facilitate the resources of this group by providing them with safe living places, informed asylum procedures, and access to affirmative community spaces that bolster connectedness and healing.
References


Appendix 1. Interview guide

Introduction
The Focus of this interview will be your experiences before, during and after your asylum journey, and how those experiences have affected you personally. The effects can be both positive, for example things that have given you strength and support, and negative, such as things that have been upsetting or even extremely painful. We are interested in your well-being and how your experiences have made you feel. There are no right or wrong answers, we want to hear your story.

Background information
I will start with some questions to learn a bit more about you and your background.
1. What country did you grow up in?
2. What country did you live in before coming to Sweden?
3. How would you define your ethnicity?
4. What is your main language? Which language are you using with the translator?
5. How old are you?
6. When did you arrive in Sweden? Do you live in Stockholm?
7. Where are you in the asylum process, right now?
8. Did you seek asylum based on your sexual orientation or gender identity?
9. How would you define your sexual orientation?
10. How would you define your gender identity? What are your pronouns?

Pre-migration experiences
I’m now going to ask you some questions about experiences you’ve had before leaving (COUNTRY OF DEPARTURE)

Could you tell me about things that were difficult for you in (COUNTRY OF DEPARTURE)?
Could you tell me about things that were helpful (positive) for you in (COUNTRY OF DEPARTURE)?

-How were you feeling during that time?
-How did that affect you?
-What was that like?
-Can you tell me more about how you struggled with that experience?
-What did you do to cope with those experiences?
-What gave you strength/support?
-How was that helpful to you?
-We have talked about difficult and helpful experiences you’ve had in COUNTRY OF DEPARTURE, is there anything you want to add to this?

Experiences between pre- and post-migration
Now I want to ask you about your experiences during the process of leaving (COUNTRY OF DEPARTURE) and coming to Sweden.

Could you tell me about things that were difficult for you during the process of coming to Sweden?
Could you tell me about things that were helpful (positive) for you during the process of coming to Sweden?

-How were you feeling during that time?
-How did that affect you?
-What was that like?
-Can you tell me more about how you struggled with that experience?
-What did you do to cope with those experiences?
-What gave you strength/support?
-How was that helpful to you?
-We have talked about difficult and helpful experiences you’ve had during the process of coming to Sweden, is there anything you want to add to this?
**Post-migration experiences**
For the last part of the interview I would like to hear about your experiences after arriving in Sweden

Could you tell me about things that have been difficult for you since you arrived in Sweden?

Could you tell me about things that have been helpful (positive) for you since you arrived in Sweden?

- How have you been feeling during this time?
- How does that affect you?
- What has that been like?
- Can you tell me more about how you struggle with that experience?
- How have you coped with these experiences?
- What gives you strength/support?
- How is that helpful to you?
- We have talked about difficult and helpful experiences since you came to Sweden, is there anything you want to add to this?

**Conclusion**
You have told me about your experiences before you left (COUNTRY OF DEPARTURE), in the process of coming to Sweden and since you came to Sweden. You told me about things that have been difficult for you as well as things that have been helpful/positive. Our interview is nearly finished. Before we conclude, I was wondering if you’ve had any new ideas or reflections about your experiences that you would like to share with me?

Thank you for sharing your story with me. I’m grateful that you were willing to share your experiences and participate in our research. I’m now going to stop the recording and we will finish up together.
Appendix 2. Information about the study

Do you identify as LGBT+ and have experience as a refugee or asylum seeker?

Are you interested in taking part in an interview study that aims to highlight the experiences of LGBT+ asylum seekers?

We are two psychology students from Stockholm University who are writing our master’s thesis during the fall of 2017. Our thesis focuses on the positive and negative experiences of LGBT+ refugees and asylum seekers during and after their asylum journey. We both identify as LGBT+ and our hope is to increase awareness about your experiences as LGBT+ refugees.

There’s currently a lack of research on the topic of LGBT+ refugees and asylum seekers and studies within Sweden are especially lacking. Our thesis is being written as part of a larger project on asylum seekers, which we hope to enrich by adding the voices of LGBT+ people.

The interviews will be held individually in Stockholm in September of 2017 and conducted in English or Swedish. All notes and recordings from the interview will be handled with confidentiality, your participation will be anonymous and personal details will be excluded before any results are presented.

The time and location for the interview will be agreed upon once you have signed up to participate. A more detailed description of the study will be given before the interview starts.

For further information or to sign up for the study, contact:

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**Ina Wood**
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**Supervisors:**
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Claudia Bernhard-Oettel, Associate Professor of Research Methodology
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Information for participants

Documenting the experiences of LGBTQ+ Refugees

Invitation to participate
You’re invited to participate in a research study about LGBTQ+ refugee’s experiences before, during and after an asylum journey and the effects these experiences have had.

What will happen?
You will participate in an interview about your past and present experiences in coming to Sweden and how these experiences have affected your well-being. The interview will be recorded and later transcribed. After the study has finished, the recordings will be erased. You will also be asked to answer some questions on a questionnaire about mental health called Hopkins Symptom Checklist 25. Anonymized information from the transcription and questionnaire may be used in future studies.

Participant’s rights
You have the right to ask any questions you might have about the procedure of the interviews or this consent form. The researcher is also available to you to provide further information after you have given your consent, if you have any further questions. You can withdraw your consent at any time before the study has finished without having to explain why you wish to do so.

Benefits and risks
There are no personal benefits or risks for you in the present study. However some people may experience stress when talking about past traumatic experiences, while others may find it relieving. If you have any worries about your participation you are encouraged to discuss them further with the researcher.

Confidentiality and anonymity
The information given as part of this study will contain personal information such as your name, sexual orientation, gender identity and place of origin. However, the results will be anonymized which means that no personal information that can be traced back to you will be presented in the final result. Your personal information will be handled with confidentiality, which means that only the two researchers and two supervisors in this project will have access to it. The person responsible for handling the personal information collected in this study is Markus Byström and he will answer any questions you might have about the handling of your personal information.

Further information
If you have further questions after the interview you can contact either Markus Byström by email, markus.bystrom.psychology@su.se or phone 073-036 46 84 or Ina Wood by email ina.wood.psychology@su.se or phone 073-393 99 46.
If you are interested in the final results you can use the same contact information and we will gladly share the results with you.

Consent form
Documenting the experiences of LGBTQ+ Refugees

By signing this document you confirm that you have: (1) Read and understood "Information for participants"; (2) had questions about the study answered to a satisfying degree; (3) understood possible benefits and risks of the study; (4) agreed that anonymized information from the interviews and questionnaires might be used in further studies with similar aims; and (5) agreed to participate in this study by your own free will (without being pressured to do so).

Name ___________________________  Signature and date _______________________

Researchers name ___________________________  Signature and date _______________________
