Liminal Belonging:
West African male asylum seekers’ narratives of the asylum experience whilst in Finland

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Methodologically, oral interviews, self-written autobiographical narratives, and ethnographic field work are qualitatively combined as data in this thesis for an empirical study of West African male asylum seekers in Finland. Narrative analysis is employed to analyze the data for this thesis. The ethnographic research data for the study began in May 2009 and ended in August of 2010. Altogether, ten interviews and four self-written narratives were collected as data. In total seven hours of audio recording were made, along eleven pages of hand-written autobiographical narratives. Field observation notes are employed in the study to provide contexts to the active interactional processes of interpretation throughout the analysis.

Findings from the study suggest that within the experience of liminality, which surrounds the entire asylum process, participations within informal social networks are found to be important to the process of re-making place and the sense of belonging. My study shows that this is necessary to countering the experience of boredom, stress and social isolation, which permeate all aspects of life for West African asylum seekers, whilst they wait for asylum decisions in Finland.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
Asylum Seekers
West Africa
Narrative Analysis
Belonging
Liminality
Place
Informal Social Networks
Social Capital
Ethnographic Field Work
Oral And Self-Written Autobiographical Narratives
Refugees
Irregular Migration
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................. 1
   1.1 OVERVIEW OF MIGRATION TREND WITHIN AND FROM WEST AFRICA ......................... 3
   1.2 THE STUDY OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS ................................................................. 6
   1.3 THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE IN FINLAND ......................................................... 9
   1.4 DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS IN THE THESIS .............................................. 12

2. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT IN FINLAND AND REVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDIES .................... 14
   2.1 PREVIOUS STUDIES OF IMMIGRANTS IN FINLAND ....................................... 16
   2.2 STUDIES FOCUSED ON ASYLUM SEEKERS ................................................... 20
   2.3 AIMS OF THE THESIS AND THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS .................................. 26

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE THESIS ............................................................................ 29
   3.1 INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND THE ROLE OF THEORY ......................................... 29
   3.2 UNDERSTANDING BELONGING WITHIN A LIMINAL CONTEXT ...................... 30
       3.2.1 INFORMAL SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL .......................... 36

4. RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA ....................................................................................................... 41
   4.1 THE DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS ..................................... 41
   4.2 DOING ETHNOGRAPHY: ACCESSING THE FIELD ............................................. 42
       4.2.1 PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS: MY ENGAGEMENTS IN THE SOCIAL LIVES OF WEST AFRICAN ASYLUM SEEKERS ...... 45
       4.2.2 CONVERSATIONS WITH WEST AFRICAN ASYLUM SEEKERS: ORAL INTERVIEWS AND SELF-WRITTEN NARRATIVES .... 49
       4.2.2.1 THE CONDUCT OF ORAL INTERVIEWS ........................................ 49
       4.2.2.2 SELF-WRITTEN NARRATIVES: .................................................. 54
       4.2.3 TRANSCRIPTION, AND CODING ............................................................ 55
   4.3 RESEARCH ETHICS ................................................................................................. 57
   4.4 NARRATIVE ANALYSIS ......................................................................................... 58

5. ANALYSIS: WHY ARE WE HERE? NARRATIVES OF PRE-FLIGHTS AND FLIGHTS ............ 62
   5.1 NARRATIVES OF EVENTS PRE-FLIGHT ....................................................... 63
   5.2 NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCES DURING FLIGHTS ........................................ 68
   5.3 NARRATIVES OF LIFE IN EXILE: FINLAND AS A PLACE OF REFUGE ............... 72
5.3.1 The Locations of Asylum Reception Centres ................................................................. 74
5.3.2 Narratives of Countering Isolation and Liminality ................................................... 77

5.4 Informal Social Networks and Belonging in a Temporal Context ............................. 82
5.4.1 Being Involved through Religious Activities ................................................................ 83
5.4.2 Socio-Cultural Familiarity within African-Owned Grocery Shops .......................... 87
5.4.3 Participations through Sports ..................................................................................... 88
5.4.4 Male Gender and Transnational Family Roles ............................................................ 91

6. Conclusions: The Multiple Narratives of Belonging within a Liminal Context .......... 95
6.1 Narrative of Powerlessness and Loss ............................................................................. 97
6.1.1 Meta-Narrative of Liminal Belonging ........................................................................ 98
6.2 A Sense of Belonging through Participations ............................................................... 100

7 Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 107

8 Appendices ..................................................................................................................... 118

List Of Tables:

Table 1: Top Asylum Sending Countries from West Africa to Finland: 2006-2011 .......... 6

Table 2: Number of Asylum Applications by Country of Origin 2009 & 2010
(Top 10 countries) .......................................................................................................... 10

Table 3: Average Processing Times in days for Decisions on Asylum ............................ 12
1. Introduction

“Not knowing anyone here makes the whole thing even worse... Sometimes I just sit on my bed for hours and not come out of my room for days because there is nobody... there’s nobody I know in this town...I feel like I don’t belong anywhere.”
- (RP8)

This thesis analyzes the personal narratives of West African male asylum seekers in Finland. The dominant discourses on the issue of asylum have placed it on a uniquely higher level of scrutiny as a politically very sensitive area for social research. My thesis contributes to the discussion by examining West African male asylum seekers’ narratives of the asylum process whilst waiting for asylum decisions in Finland. Whilst taking insights from the literature, my focus is on how West African asylum seekers express, within their narratives, the experiences of liminality as they wait for asylum in Finland. I emphasize here that the asylum seekers in this thesis, are in the midst of the narratives they are telling and that the process of storytelling, itself, is a highly symbolic way of making sense of the present. Hence, uncertainty and liminality is core to the understanding of the narratives examined in this thesis, rather than progression and conclusion to stories (Eastmond 2007; Riessman 2004, 2008; Huttunen 2005).

My thesis starts with the quote above from an oral interview with a West African asylum seeker. The use of the quote is important, as it captures the core process of the empirical study. The process also fulfills the broader aim of the thesis, which is to highlight the voices of asylum seekers in the production of the discourses about them. In the above quote, the interviewee expresses personal frustration and uncertainty about the long asylum waiting process in Finland. The quote also shows the experiences of boredom, the loss of own support networks, and the general inability to interact with people within one’s area of limited social life. However, it is in the last sentence, where he says, ‘...there’s nobody I know in this town...I feel like I don’t belong anywhere’, that reinforced my study’s goal, which is to investigate others, who, like him, have the experience of liminality throughout the entire asylum process.

Placed within current academic debates on the study of irregular migrants, this thesis
examines aspects of social participation for asylum seekers as they wait to be granted asylum or permanent residency through humanitarian or other grounds (Koser 1997, Hynes 2006). Thus, the notion of belonging within the context of experiencing liminality constitutes the broad theoretical framework for the thesis. Due to the situational circumstances and the social positions of refugees and asylum seekers, the literature of forced migration has described them as living in a ‘state of limbo’ (Malkki 1995; Hynes 2006; Corfield 2008). The concept of belonging is considered loosely in this thesis in order to avoid any consideration to the notions of assimilation or formal integration for asylum seekers (see Hynes 2006: 60).

Belonging is examined in this thesis within particular narratives of social positional associations, within specific places of social participation, and in the specific practices of membership within informal social networks (Koser and Pinkerton 2002, Valtonen 2004, Warner 1994). The main assumption suggested for the thesis is that displacement and exile, added to the bureaucratic structures that position these individuals as ‘asylum seekers’, means that they exist within a period of time, in social isolation and liminality (Malkki 1995, Corfield 2008). Therefore, I endeavour to examine through the activities and participations within informal social networks, individuals’ relationships with their spatial environments within specific places (Altman & Low 1992, Jorgensen & Stedman 2001, Proshansky 1978, Proshansky et al 1983, and Stokols & Shumaker 1981) and their sense of place as a social positional status (Valtonen 2008).

In order to advance a sociological understanding of the entire asylum experience, my current research pays significant attention to the living conditions in the countries of origin of the asylum seekers. I do this by first analyzing the events in the lives of the asylum seekers pre-flight, the experiences of flights from country of origin, and then the experiences of exile, as they wait in Finland for asylum decisions (Koser 1997; Koser & Pinkerton 2002; Hynes 2006).

To begin the process of presenting this thesis, I shall first introduce and discuss the migration trend in the sub-region of West Africa.
1.1 Overview of Migration Trend within and from West Africa

The countries within the sub-region of West Africa, notes Aderanti Adepoju (2005) share common characteristics. Apart from Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire, the size of the populations and the scale of the economy of countries from the sub-region are small (Adepoju 2005). Economically, Adepoju (2005) notes that the increasingly limited capacity of the governments in the sub-region to maintain a viable public sector, which provides employment, means a large number of the populations consist of unemployed youths. The private sector in the sub-region is the largest creator of economic activities but this is also weak as most of the economic activities are small-scale subsistent businesses. Another common characteristic within the sub-region is that a majority of the population live in rural areas, are considered illiterate, and earn their livelihood through subsistent agriculture (ibid: 1). Furthermore, amongst the countries in the sub-region, common socio-economic, political and historical-cultural factors are at the roots of migration trend. For example, historically, and prior to the advent of colonialism, migration within the sub-region was largely motivated by the search for security, new areas for settlements and the search for fertile lands for subsistent farming (ibid).

The Colonial regime, says Adepoju, transformed the motivation and composition of migration in the sub-region through the introduction and enforcements of various political and economic structures, and through the establishment of territorial boundaries. The shared colonial legacy between the various countries within the region is also an important common factor to the pattern of internal and external migration within the sub-region. For example, Adepoju notes that West African countries, as we know them today, are ‘agglomerations of peoples arbitrarily merged by colonial map drawers that traversed ethnic lines, as are the Yoruba in Nigeria and Benin; Ewes in Togo and Ghana; Vais and Kroos in Liberia and Sierra Leone; Hausa-Fulani in Niger and Nigeria, and so on’ (ibid: 3). The persistent border disputes and rampant ethnic-based conflicts, which are the major cause of internal displacements within the region today, take roots from the historical colonial legacy of forced-territorialization and the arbitrary constructions and mapping of national borders.

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1 This introduction to the study of West African asylum seekers in Finland does not attempt to cover the histories of the individual countries in the sub-region, but aim to present an overview of West Africa as regards internal and external migration trend.
boundaries.

Within West Africa, the main migration receiving countries today are Nigeria, Ghana, and Cote d’Ivoire. However, political and economic crises have, in recent years, motivated the migration of a large part of the skilled and unskilled populations from the region to destinations elsewhere in the world. For example, Adepoju writes that Since the 1970s, ‘highly skilled migrants, including doctors, paramedical personnel, nurses, teachers, lecturers, engineers, scientists and technologists moved from Ghana first to Nigeria and later to other African countries. Europe and North America attracted many more by virtue of their relatively higher salaries and better prospects of living conditions’ (2005: 2).

The volatility and unpredictable political landscape of each country within the sub-region is today responsible for the current phenomenon of migration within and from West Africa. These common factors, as Adepoju stresses, make the sub-region of West Africa, irrespective of its recent socio-economic development, still largely unstable (2002: 384). For example, the current trend of migration from the region to North Africa and the EU can be attributed to the worsening state of poverty and human deprivation. The weak socio-political and economic conditions that poverty and political instability creates, together, contribute to the poor perceptions of people from the region about their futures (Adepoju 2002: 385).

Nonetheless, and in spite of the admitted links between migration, poverty, and development, which are often considered in researches on immigrants, West Africa, notes Richard Black and Russell King (2004), remain a highly under researched region in forced migration studies (2004: 75). Quoting a report by the International Organization for Migration (2000), Black and King (2004) state that within the region of West Africa ‘many types of migration can be observed: unskilled and semi-skilled labour migrants, highly-educated professionals and students, as well as nomads, ‘undocumented’ migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons (International Organization for Migration, 2000: 133 in Black and King 2004: 75). The summation in Black and King (2004) is that there is a high rate of net population loss in the region even though actual data is not available. Migration trends within and from the region is described by Black and King as not only diverse, but volatile as it depends on the socio-political instability of the region and the particular circumstances of each country (2004: 76).
The phenomenon of West Africans migrating to the European Union countries (EU for short) is today common in dominant political and media discourses (de Haas 2008). As Hein de Haas notes, immigration from the sub-region to the EU countries is still fairly modest when compared to migration from North Africa and Eastern Europe (2008: 9). The majority of West Africans, says de Haas, enter the EU legally, even though an increasing number of them make irregular border crossings to North African countries, with an even smaller number crossing to the EU (ibid). However, unlike the dominant media discourses on migration to the EU from West Africa, de Haas suggests that the ‘current flow’ of irregular migrants is today a trend that follows a worldwide global phenomenon that cannot be definitively linked to one region of the world or the other (ibid).

Generally, Josephine Adjekughele (2003) describes Africans in Finland as those who had migrated from the African continent to Finland. They are not a unified group but consist of individuals with different cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds (2003: 35-36). African immigrants in Finland are a highly heterogeneous group from the entire continent of Africa and come to Finland either as refugees, asylum seekers, students, workers, spouses, and expatriates (ibid). Adjekughele (2003: 35) also indicates that the largest numbers of Africans living in Finland reside in the Helsinki metropolitan area (including Vantaa and Espoo), whilst a smaller number live in the cities of Turku and Tampere. Few Africans, suggests Adjekughele, live in central and eastern Finland and an even smaller number live in the northern parts of the country. According to the reports compiled by the city of Helsinki, some 80% of immigrants in Finland live south of the Tampere-Turku axis with approximately half of them living in the capital region. Helsinki, according to the report, appeals to a large proportion of immigrants moving both from abroad and from other areas in Finland. The largest non official language groups in the Helsinki metropolitan area are Russian, Estonian, and Somali. Somali is therefore the largest African language group in Finland today.

In this context it is important that I provide a table showing some of the top countries of

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origin of asylum applicants from the sub-region of West Africa to Finland since the year 2006 to 2011. The countries listed below are also the countries of origin for the participants in this research.

Table 1: Top Asylum Sending Countries from West Africa to Finland: 2006-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five West African Countries</th>
<th>Number of Asylum Applicants from 2006 to August 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambia</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cote d'Ivoire</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Finnish Immigration Service* (2011)

It is against this background that my thesis examines the experiences of eleven lone male irregular migrants from five West African countries who have arrived in Finland to seek international protection. The cases of people from the sub-region of West Africa seeking international protection in Finland is relatively new and their numbers in Finland remain comparatively modest.

**1.2 The Study of Irregular Migrants**

Castles and Miller (2009) describe broadly that migration is hardly only a simple individual action in which a person decides to move in search of better life-chances. Instead, they suggest that migration is a global phenomenon, and that the understanding of the process should combine the perspective of the effects of social change on the experiences of individuals in both sending and receiving societies.

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3 Statistical and informational data from the Finnish Immigration service is used in this thesis. Online: [http://www.migri.fi/netcomm/default.asp](http://www.migri.fi/netcomm/default.asp)
The definition of irregular migrants for this thesis narrows the common description given to all forced migrants, down to the examination of individuals who cross international borders to arrive at a destination country where they apply for asylum. Irregular migration involves the crossing of international borders without proper travel authority (see Koser 2007, de Haas 2008). De Haas (2008:13) broadly defines irregular migration as international movement that is in conflict with international migration laws. Irregular migration in Khalid Koser’s (2007) analysis is itself a highly complex concept that demands careful clarification. Irregular migration can include those who enter a country without legal authority, as well as those who enter with proper authorization but who have overstayed in contravention of their authority (Koser 2007: 55-56). The term, as Koser (2007:56) reiterates, is also used to describe those moved by migrant smugglers or human traffickers.

In the process of presenting data for this thesis, I show through the stories told by my participants that some asylum seekers find their way to Finland through being smuggled, mostly by choice, as a means to flee their home countries, or sometimes fall victims to migrant traffickers. According to the Finnish Refugee Centre, asylum seekers in Finland are not considered as illegal, once they have submitted asylum applications. In other words, the irregular means of the migration journeys does not affect the decisions on asylum nor does it affect the chances of getting international protection in Finland.

Broadly speaking, the term ‘refugee’, says Patricia Hynes (2006: 48), ‘conveys powerful and complex meanings’. The sociological definitions of refugees and asylum seekers are important because as Hynes (2006) notes, theory surrounding forced migration can be found in the differences between both terms. For example, the ‘push-pull’ model was preferred as a favourable theory of migration studies prior to the 1970s (ibid: 48-49). However, when applied, the ‘push-pull’ model has been found to solely situate theories of forced migration along purposive and proactive motivations of migrants (Thielemann 2010:78).

Those who criticize the application of the ‘push-pull’ model to the study of irregular migration have also pointed out how the model ignores the heterogeneity and internal stratification of the sending and receiving societies, as well as the circumstances of the individuals who are themselves involved (de Haas 2008). For example, de Haas critics the theory around the ‘push-pull’ model because it merely reduces the study of migration into
the understanding of purposive and economic-interest maximizing social actors, without adequate consideration of internal processes that can fully explain the phenomenon (de Haas 2008: 9-10).

In the sociological literature, the application of the ‘push-pull’ model is at the roots of the current debate on the nominalist approaches versus the realist approaches to the study of forced migration (Koser 1997, Hynes 2006). Nominalist analysis views the irregular migrant as a category, which is a mere social construct, which can structurally occupy the same position with other immigrants such as labour migrants (Koser 1997: 591). On the other hand, the realist analytical perspective aims to understand, at the individual level, the motivations and decisions of people who are forced to migrate from their countries of origin across international borders as refugees. The realist approach to the study of irregular migration thus emphasizes the prior events that lead to exile and the experiences of trauma and victimhood during flights from the original country. These are the key factors, which distinguish refugees and other immigrants (Hynes 2006: 49). Viewed this way, the realist approach to the study of forced migration highlights the specificity of individual circumstances because as Hynes reiterates, it ‘attempts sensitivity to particular refugee situations’ (Hynes 2006: 49).

Koser (1997:592) is of the view that the debates in the nominalist versus realist approaches are at the extremes of a single conceptual and political discussion. This is because an analytical separation of both perspectives can only serve to justify political assumptions about so-called spontaneous asylum seekers. Hynes (2006) similarly suggests that the debate is one of many tensions in forced migration studies, which are brought about by the need to distinguish asylum seekers from other immigrants.

In this thesis, I suggest that both the nominalist and realist approaches to the study of forced migration are important because when combined, clarity is given between the individual’s subjective experiences or the reasons of forced migration and the structures that classify them into the category of refuge or asylum seeker. The suggestion taken in this thesis also views the process of asylum as one that starts prior to the actual movement

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4 Also see Hynes (2006: 49-50)
from country of origin, and also before the need arose for the individual to make the decision to apply for asylum in another country. The ‘asylum cycle’, as Koser describes this process, only comes to an end upon a decision about a claim for asylum (Koser 1997: 594). Therefore, whilst the asylum processes persist, the affected individual occupies a social liminal state, not least caused by the asylum procedural juridical-limbo of existing within a temporary immigration status. Hence, the asylum seeker is neither able to go back to his original country of exile nor does he legally belong to the new country of reception. In light of this, and before proceeding further, a discussion of the asylum procedure in Finland is in order.

1.3 The Asylum Procedure in Finland

The processing time for decisions on asylum varies according to individual applications and the process may be under a normal or an accelerated procedure. According to the Finnish Immigration Service, under a normal procedure, asylum applications are submitted to the police or other relevant authorities after which asylum seekers are then transferred to reception centres located in different parts of Finland.

An asylum application can be processed under the accelerated procedure if: the applicant has arrived from a safe country of origin; the application can be considered manifestly unfounded\(^5\); or the applicant has made a new application that does not contain new grounds for staying in the country.

The type of decision given to asylum applicants depends on the nature of their claims for international protection and the information available to the Finnish Immigration Service. As I show in the table below, the grounds for issuing asylum decisions are based on the individual need for protection. These decisions, however, take prolonged time to make. The table below also shows the estimated average processing time under the normal procedure for asylum decision released by the Finnish immigration service in 2009 and

\(^5\) An application can be rejected as manifestly unfounded if the grounds presented in the application are not persecution or such violation of human rights as would entitle the applicant to international protection, or if the arguments presented for the need for international protection are clearly unconvincing.
Kris Clarke (2003) suggests that as a receiving country, Finland only began to seriously engage with the social changes that followed the presence of refugees and asylum immigrants in the 1990s. The country’s engagement was primarily through the introduction of wide ranging legislations to manage the new phenomenon (see Clarke 2003: 16-17, Ralf Kauranen & Salla Tuori 2002: 14-15). One of such immigration legislation was the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers (No. 493) of 9 April 1999 as amended by the law 118/2002. This was an important piece of legislation, which defined the goals of the Finnish state’s involvements with refugees, asylum seekers, and other categories of immigrants. The Act is also considered in this thesis as a social legislation in the way it has defined the reception as well as the social conditions for asylum seekers living in asylum reception centres in Finland.

The procedure on asylum, as set out in the provisions of the Act, can only start with the

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The Integration Act is simply referred to in this thesis as the Act.
physical presence of the potential asylum applicant within Finland’s borders. The process thereto formerly begins when a person submits him or herself to the police or the border guards for asylum or other humanitarian protections. In Finland, there are two primary grounds for granting asylum. First, owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, an individual can be granted a convention refugees status. The convention status follows the general provisions of the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees 1951, which as a signatory state, Finland adheres to.

Secondly, and most importantly, much of the granting of international protection to asylum applicants in Finland is decided on humanitarian grounds. Asylum seekers who have been rejected refugee status get legal residencies when it is deemed clearly unreasonable to repatriate the affected persons. The decision may be due to reasons of ill-health or other humanitarian reasons that may include personal injuries to the rights of the individual if returned. It is therefore possible to apply for this permit following a final rejection of the initial application for asylum.

Under the provision of the Act, the reception of asylum seekers means that they are allocated temporary accommodations primarily in asylum reception centres and they receive assistance and essential social and health care services. They also get language interpretation services, where required, and such other basic needs, since vocational and work related activities are encouraged. The work related activities are often organized by each reception center and are directly linked to how basic allowances are received. For example, those who refuse to participate in routine daily activities may have their allowances reduced.

According to the Finnish Refugee Advice Centre⁷, asylum seekers are entitled to work without permit three months after the submission of asylum applications. As I show in the discussion on the social context in Finland in chapter 2, asylum seekers, due to the temporary condition of their immigration status, are however not entitled to social benefits

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⁷ The Finnish Refugee Advice Centre is a non-governmental organization founded in 1988. The Refugee Advice Centre provides legal aid and advice to asylum seekers, refugees and other foreigners in Finland.
or any other benefits such as child benefits.

Today, statistics on the numbers of asylum seekers in Finland are readily available. According to the Finnish Immigration Service, in 2009, a total of 5,988 persons applied for asylum in Finland. In the following year, in 2010, there was a reduction in asylum applications as a total of 4,018 persons applied. In the next table, I present the top ten counties of origin of asylum applicants in Finland in 2009 and 2010. As the table shows, Iraq, Somalia, Bulgaria, Russia, and Afghanistan, were for two consecutive years, the reported countries of origin for most asylum seekers in Finland. Apart from Somalia, Nigeria remains the second largest country of origin of asylum applicants from the African continent in Finland.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>1195</td>
<td>575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>1180</td>
<td>571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>739</td>
<td>485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosovo</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,988</td>
<td>4,018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Finnish Immigration Service (2010)

1.4 Definitions of key terms in the thesis

In this section, I clarify the definitions of the key terms used in this thesis. Under the Finnish Aliens Act (301/2004)\(^8\) \textit{asylum seeker} means a person seeking international protection. An asylum can be granted to an asylum seeker only when they have applied for asylum in a country other than their country of origin. Asylum seekers are granted a refugee status or granted resident permits on humanitarian or other grounds only after asylum decisions have been made on their individual cases. A positive decision acknowledges them as refugees. Asylum is therefore granted on the basis of an application for international protection for reasons that include:

- A well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality,

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\(^8\) The version of the Aliens Act sourced for this thesis contains amendments up to 2010.
membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

➢ In addition, owing to such fear, the asylum applicant is unwilling to seek the protection of his own country of origin.

Refugee according to ECRE⁹ is a common notion used to describe people forced to flee for their lives to escape a natural disaster or civil conflicts. According to Finland’s Aliens Act (ibid), a refugee is a person who has received asylum in Finland. Refugees are also individuals brought to Finland and whose status as refugees is recognized by the 1951 Convention on the status of refugees. This, for example, can be refugees who have fled their own countries and who are now in refugee camps outside Finland. In Finland, such people are called quota refugees. In the last 10 years, the annual number of such quota refugees admitted to Finland has been 750 refugees.

From the above definitions, it is clear that refugee and asylum seeker refers to persons who have been forced to flee from their home countries and who then seek international protection in another country. It is common to simply describe them as forced migrants because they have been forcefully removed from their countries of origin. However, to further present the individual contexts to the processes of fleeing home countries, and to highlight subsequent migration journeys before arriving in Finland, I describe the participants in my study as irregular migrants. The clarification that I present in this section is important because it explains how my study’s participants, who had fled from countries in West Africa, came to seek asylum in Finland.

The following chapter introduces the social context in Finland and then reviews relevant literature on the experiences of immigrants and particularly the studies of asylum seekers in Finland.

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⁹ ECRE is the acronym for The European Council on Refugees and Exiles. It is a pan-European alliance of around 70 organizations in 30 countries that works to protect and promote respect for all individuals seeking asylum in Europe (online: http://www.ecre.org/).
2. The Social Context in Finland and Review of Previous Studies

Historically Finland was a country of emigration. In his paper, Arno Tanner (2004) traced the historical wave of voluntary emigration that started from the 17th century, when hundreds of Finns, along with Swedes, established colonies in what later became the American state of Delaware. The first waves of migration of people across Europe to Finland started from the late 19th century onwards. The early immigrants settled in Helsinki and other major southern towns. They included Swiss cheese makers, Bavarian brewers, Norwegian sawmill proprietors, British textile industrialists, Italian ice cream makers, Jewish merchants, and Tatar fur and carpet traders. They all made considerable contributions to the young Finnish economy. Finland, however, remained largely culturally homogeneous and there were no form of formal integration for the early migrants.

According to Mika Salo (2004), Russian immigrants in the early 20th century, bore the first brunt of anti-immigrant sentiments, since they constituted the first group of large numbers of immigrants in Finland. However, contemporary Finland’s engagements with the phenomenon of refugees and asylum seekers did not start until the 1970s (Salo 2004: 7, also see Marja Pentikäinen 2005: 19-24). Kris Clarke (2003: 18-19) similarly notes that the situation was heightened in the late 1970s when Vietnamese boat-refugees, made it into Finland’s shores.

Valtonen (2004: 72) explains that contemporary Finland has been drawn into the periphery of immigrant and refugee flows to become a receiving country since the 1980s. Even though Finland remains, amongst the EU-member states, the country with comparatively fewer levels of immigrants, the numbers of immigrants grew steadily in the 1990s (see Valtonen 2004: 73-74). The introduction of the concept of refugees and asylum seeking to the Finnish public has also initiated some discussions on how to deal with the new social diversities in contemporary Finland. The arrival of refugees to contemporary Finland,

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10 This is referenced from an online publication: Finland’s Balancing Act: The Labour Market, Humanitarian Relief, and Immigrant Integration http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?ID=267.
according to Salo (2004), has triggered debates about the hitherto unquestioned notion of belonging in Finland, which has traditionally rooted the concept of Finnish citizenship within the notion of Finnishness. Ethno-cultural diversity, maintains Valtonen, was adopted at the legal level, as the banner of a modern Finnish society (2004: 72-73). This was accordingly exemplified by the Integration Act (1999) with goals that embodies the principle of equality and full participation in the society for immigrants, whilst allowing space to preserve the values which they hold dear. Valtonen interpreted this principle of integration goal as an acceptance by Finnish legal authority of the use of culture as a resource for integration.

However, as Valtonen makes clear, the issue of full social membership and, in a sense, the notion of social belonging for the new arrivals remain elusive. However, understanding the social context of belonging for immigrants in Finland, requires a presentation that draws on the discussion of Finland’s advanced welfare state ideology. The welfare state ideology also structures the social conditions for the reception of asylum seekers in Finland.

Annika Forsander (2004) describes welfare models to include the liberal welfare state, the corporatist, and the social democratic models. In an analysis of the different models, Forsander shows that the one most affected and challenged by issues of immigration is the social democratic model, which is also the Finnish welfare model (2004: 208). This model, unlike the liberal or corporatist models, recognizes as the primary goal residence-based access to social integration and social security. In other words, individuals who are Finnish citizens or who have gained permanent residencies in Finland, primarily have access to social welfare and social services.

The question thus raised is, what does this mean for those persons with a temporary immigration status? The existential living condition for such individuals, most of whom are asylum seekers waiting for asylum-decisions, is that they fall outside the legal definition of those with access to social benefits. The long asylum process also means that for a considerable period of time, they exist in legal-residence limbos, which also excludes them from the welfare state's residence-based access to social security.

Asylum seekers in Finland therefore exist as an exclusive social category whose lives are conditioned by the limited accesses to social security and social benefits because of their temporary legal status. For the individual, existing within this exclusive temporal social
category, the existential feeling of liminality impacts on the sense of belonging and their social position whilst waiting for asylum. The situation of the asylum seeker, viewed this way, presents challenges to the welfare principle of equality, which also ironically, gives legitimacy to the advanced Nordic welfare state model in Finland. In recent years, through an extensive number of studies, the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in Finland have received academic focus.

2.1 Previous Studies of Immigrants in Finland

Relevant studies that have in their designs highlighted and provided insights into the existence and experiences of settling refugees and other immigrants in Finland, are reviewed in this section. Together, the review provides important insights on the social context within which immigrants exist in Finland.

One of the foremost academic studies that examine the social lives of immigrant refugees in Finland is Östen Wahlbeck’s (1996) study on the sub-group of Kurdish refugees in Finland. Wahlbeck used the concept of diaspora to examine the social lives of Kurdish refugees. He argues in the article that refugees’ access to diasporic network can be an important resource for resettlement in their new country of settlement (1996:2). Wahlbeck’s analysis stresses that refugees’ diasporic social network became more important due to the unrealistic policies governing the integration and assimilation programme for refugees in Finland. Whilst critiquing the practice that disperses refugees in small groups around different parts of the country, Wahlbeck echoes Karmela Liebkind’s (1993) argument that the lack of cultural communities amongst refugees affects their abilities to create own social networks. This is given as adversely affecting the process of coping with the realities of the new environment for refugees in Finland.

To analyze the experiences and settling processes of refugees in Finland, Marja Tiilikainen (2003a) suggests that Somalis deserve a special historical mention. Tiilikainen described two reasons for this. Firstly, Somalis were the first large refugee group that arrived in Finland in the late 1980s and early 1990s as spontaneous asylum seekers. Secondly, and more importantly, Somalis constitute the largest group of immigrants of African origins in Finland and who are also Muslims (2003a: 60). Somali-Finns have become an important
point of reference when reviewing the critical turning point in Finland's engagements with immigrants. Their arrivals in Finland, as Tiilikainen (2003a) notes, also began at a period when Finland was in the middle of a deep recession, which contributed to the propagation of a dominant negative stereotype about settling Somalis.

In a study that examined the narratives of lived experiences of Vietnamese refugees and Somali asylum seekers in Finland, Marja Pentikäinen stresses the meanings of refugees' own cultures in the experiences and processes of settling (Pentikäinen 2005). The study presents, through personal narratives, a case for the relevance of pre-migratory experiences of refugees, whilst examining the circumstances of resettlement in the new environment. Pentikäinen (2005) found that refugees in Finland have a weak social network and subsequently rely on the limited nuclear family for social support. To manage and collectively cope with the individualism of the new society, Pentikäinen stresses that refugees continue to engage in the process of remaking and maintaining the collective culture of their home countries. For the sub-group of Vietnamese and Somalis in Pentikäinen's study, religion (Buddhism and Islam respectively), home-cultures, and ethnicity, were presented as important to the collective engagements with the new realities they encountered in Finland.

Pentikäinen (2005: 31) also suggests that being a refugee affects the life of an individual, since they are facing great personal changes and life disruptions. Through narratives of personal experiences of life before migration to Finland, and through the experiences of life as lived in Finland, Pentikäinen shows how refugees and asylum seekers endeavour to make sense of the new society where they now live. Through her, Pentikäinen (2005) had reflected on the narrative inquiry that emphasizes the stories of experiencing individuals going through disruptive changes to their lives.

Tiilikainen, in Arjen Islam11 (2003b), shows how experiences of everyday life by Somali women in Finland are constantly negotiated through memories of religion and tradition. Tiilikainen’s study provides historically valuable insights on the experiences of trauma and how this continues to influence the daily lives of Somali women. Experiences of trauma, as

11 My translation from Finnish to English: Everyday Islam.
the study showed, affect the processes of remembering past events, which also impact on
the efforts to reproduce continuity in the present.

In her analysis, Tiilikainen (2003a) concentrated on the specific issues of how Somali
women follow Islam in their daily life in Finland. These women accordingly have
encountered pre-migration experiences of loss of family through war, the trauma of being
uprooted from their homes, leading to the loss of social networks. Tiilikainen then employs
the central theme of religion to examine the daily lives of these women. She argues that the
manifestation of religion amongst Somali women in Finland can be examined as action that
becomes embedded within the webs of social relationships and social interaction, which are
found in daily routines. Tiilikainen observes that Islam plays the role of temporal continuity
between “life at home” and life in the diaspora (2003: 61) Tiilikainen’s study was able to
discover that for Somali women in Finland, Islam becomes a “practical and moral guideline
which helps them to manage in a new religious and cultural environment” (2003: 67). The
relevance of this study, especially for my thesis, is the presentation by Tiilikainen, which
shows that the reproduction and maintaining of religion by Somalis has become an
important resource for belonging, for social security, and for moral stability in the new
environment.

Apart from the uses of religion as a resource for creating the sense of security and social
stability, other studies that examined the settling processes of immigrant sub-groups have
shown how refugees in Finland recreate a social status and a social place through local
entrepreneurship. These are mostly in activities within ethnic-economies. In Wahlbeck’s
(2008) discussion, self-employment amongst immigrants from Turkey creates freedom and
the sense of social status. This is accrued from being an entrepreneur; an economic status
that Wahlbeck observes is also highly socially valued. Wahlbeck believes that immigrants in
Finland are forced into the area of self-employment due to the structural difficulties they
face in accessing the labour market. The value of self-employment by immigrants, as the
paper reiterates, is not only a means to economic independence and social security but that
‘it provides a social position and an identity’ (Wahlbeck 2008: 54). The importance of this
observation comes with the finding that self-employment occurs as a reaction to the
hostility of the surrounding environment. It also becomes beneficial when it provides
immigrants with a new social status – as entrepreneurs.
Indeed as Valtonen (1994) had earlier observed, ‘self-help mechanisms’, echoed in Wahlbeck’s (2008) paper as ‘self-employment’, is what become part of a resettlement strategy by immigrants, which also empowers and provides opportunities for refugees. Individuals who identify with such a sub-group are, in essence, able to use the social value of their entrepreneurship as a reference point and as a resource for maintaining and constructing positive self-appraisal. This becomes important, as Valtonen (1994) suggests, when the sub-group becomes a social network that creates resources for coping for the individual. For the group of Turkish immigrants in Finland, Wahlbeck’s finding shows, that self-employment *inter alia*, helps to construct “a positive self-understanding and social status, which the immigrants find difficult to achieve by any other means in Finnish society” (2008: 60). The paper thus takes into account mechanisms for coping with the marginalized social position of an established immigrant sub-group in Finland.

The themes of structural marginality, the hostile labour market, and the self-help mechanisms for managing and coping with the new social realities in Finland, are also central to Akhlaq Ahmad’s (2005) study. Whilst assessing the mechanisms for coping, Akhlaq Ahmad examines the social networks of immigrants from the Indian sub-continent in the Helsinki area. The study evaluates the uses and the roles of social networks in gaining access to the labour market. His study’s aim was to explore the various avenues, in which immigrants of his study’s sub-group used their personal networks, as he put it, “to locate and obtain employment opportunities in Finland” (Akhlaq 2005: iv). Akhlaq emphasizes in his study the significance of social networks for immigrants who have no other choice but to resort to transmitting job information through informal channels. This, Akhlaq summates, is as a result of the structural constraints and the social mobility restrictions that affect the lives of immigrants in Finland.

The studies presented above have all examined the social lives and the social conditions for settling immigrant sub-groups in Finland. Together, they provide a picture of the ways immigrants in Finland have had to negotiate various means of settling down and possibly moving ahead with their lives. Whilst some immigrants from the studies have found safety in the reification of religion in daily routines as a way to ensure continuity in the Finland, others, through self-help mechanisms and self-employment, have engaged in the remaking of a social status and a valued social identity. The importance and value attached to having own social network is shown in the studies as vital to the process of resettling. The review
has covered studies on the sub-groups of immigrants of Vietnamese, Somali, Turkish, Kurdish, and others from the Indian sub-continent.

2.2 Studies Focused On Asylum Seekers

The central focus in the studies discussed below highlights asylum seekers’ experiences of seeking asylum in Finland. The studies highlight the sense of existential uncertainties surrounding the asylum process, as well as the experiences of social isolation and exclusion. Other issues highlighted are experiences of stress, psychosocial difficulties amongst young refugees, and everyday challenges that asylum seekers encounter in their new social environments. The central themes of the studies together, highlight asylum seekers’ daily encounters with the social environment and the suggested ways of dealing with the process. They also reflect on the daily anxieties caused by the lingering awareness of a positive or a negative outcome to the asylum process.

Sainiola-Rodriguez & Koehn (2006) in an article, show that asylum seekers were much more likely to report experiencing a mental-health challenge, both from their previous experiences and from living and waiting in uncertainty for asylum decisions in reception centres. The study included political asylum seekers in five different reception centres in Finland, resident foreign nationals (RFNs) living in Helsinki and Joensuu, and a third group consisting of what the authors described as, “their ethno-culturally discordant primary health-care providers” (2006: 56). The attending physicians, as the study shows, were typically unaware of the causes of depression experienced by patient asylum seekers. Similarly, RFNs reported that their experiences of social exclusion in Finland contributed to their mental-health needs. Most physicians, according to Sainiola-Rodriguez and Koehn, did not recognize the role that experiences in Finland played in migrant depression. The study found that asylum seekers experienced problems with finding social and psychological resources to alleviate their anxieties. The health providers were culturally ill-equipped and under-resourced to attend to these needs.

Ilkka Pirinen, in a 2008 PhD dissertation, similarly assessed the health and experiences of asylum seekers who were dispersed to the city of Tampere. Pirinen’s study included 170 asylum seekers. The study’s focus was to examine the uses of health services by those who had experienced previous torture. 57% of adults examined in the study were found to have
experienced torture. Pirinen’s analysis shows that depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances were the most commonly reported mental health problems. He also found examples of unmet care and reports of health units in reception centres lacking the necessary resources to arrange all required services to the asylum seekers.

Asko Rauta (2005) writes in a study commissioned for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in Finland\(^\text{12}\) that refugee\(^\text{13}\) problems are often linked with arrivals in the country, even though the trauma they may have experienced is a process that extends over the actual arrival in Finland (2005:3). The experiences of trauma, according to Asko Rauta, are triggered as a problem in the context of any major changes in life situation and being a refugee is, in itself, a trauma. The suggestion is that the pre-migration trauma for refugees continues even after they have attained legal membership in the society (2005: 17). The study’s finding highlights the problem of anxieties, resulting from lack of knowledge about one’s state or situation, and the inability to connect with the immediate reception environment. Other problems faced by refugees include communication difficulties with officials and the lack of an organized system of accessing social resources to meet the immediate needs of refugees. The report also recommended the need for further studies that would provide insight into immigrants’ populations’ accesses to social and cultural resources to re-making belonging in Finland.

Andre Sourander (2003), in an important study, was able to show how families seeking asylum in Finland deal with the experiences of asylum waiting in asylum reception centres. Sourander presents that the adult members of the families in asylum reception centres lived constantly in distressing situations. This was noticed for those who had experienced a particularly difficult and cruel past. Sourander observes that asylum seeker families experience sudden disruptions to their lives and through becoming asylum seekers, encounter daily challenges. For example, parents are suddenly faced with questions of reconciling their present situations with their roles and identities as parents (2003: 205). Using Vignettes to present the analysis, Sourander showed that the major sources of distress and anxiety were the long asylum process, uncertainty of the future, and the fear of

\(^\text{12}\) Sosiaali-ja terveysministeriön selvityksiä, 2005:3.
\(^\text{13}\) Some of these studies do not clarify whether refugees arrive as asylum seekers or as quota refugees.
deportation. The study’s group consisted of 10 refugee families, of 16 parents and 25 children under 18 years who were residing at a reception centre in Finland. They were of Iraqi, Kurdish, Kosovan, and Afghan origins. Amongst all the parents, anxiety about their children’s future and current situation was also of particular concern. Apart from these, says Sourander, “the availability of social networks, economic position, engagement in a political movement, and spiritual and religious realm constitute the needs of families during their asylum seeking period” (2003: 206).

The suggestion from the above is that asylum seekers in Finland are socially isolated from the surrounding environment. In terms of physical isolation, the isolating locations of asylum reception centres were also symbolic of social marginalization. The centres, according to Sourander, had been originally planned for other purposes, such as old mental institutions. Sourander concludes by recommending that a more effective way to supporting asylum seekers would be to integrate them into the local environment and introduce them to their own refugee communities. This is thought of as a way of giving them full responsibility for their own lives. Sourander’s recommendations are crucial to shaping the research areas, which I examined for my thesis. In a final summation, Sourander criticized the asylum practices, which seem to institutionalize asylum seeker families, which can result in loss of self worth, isolation, and control over their own lives.

Arman Haghseresht (2003) used his personal biography as a refugee who came to Finland through the UNHCR’s programme to reflect on the experiences of Iranian asylum seeker families in asylum reception centres. His research aimed to investigate Iranian asylum seekers’ ways of thinking, feelings, and expectations about their positions in society. The study also investigated their uses of social and health care services available in the reception centres. Iranian asylum seekers were in Finland mostly on claims of religious freedoms, and protections from political and ethnic persecutions.

The participants, as Haghseresht found, had different cultural expectations to how their health problems would be met. They disliked what they saw as the doctors’ indifference in attitudes towards them whilst others lamented health care givers’ apparent unfamiliarity with their ailments and individual complaints. Cultural differences were also identified as a key hindrance to the uses of mental health services. Here, Manizh, an asylum-seeker mother, talked about her meeting with a family counsellor,
“My daughter and husband became sensitive to each other and argued frequently. I asked help from a family counsellor... we were not told what to do in order to improve things. There was someone who just listened to us. Maybe it works for Finns who don't have anyone to listen to them but not for us. We talk with each other regularly every day.” (Manizh, from Haghseresht 2003: 92).

As Sourander (2003) also observed, there was a considerable level of friction amongst family members in receptions centres, especially between parents and children. What Haghseresht demonstrated through Manizh’s narration, was the sense of cultural sense detachment that asylum seekers feel towards their places of reception and the people therein. There was also an observed deficiency in the socio-cultural capital of health care deliverers and mental health doctors who offer care or are in the position to offer help, “to improve things”, as Manizh expected from the visit to the family counsellor.

Andre Sourander (2007), in a review that analyzed a series of studies on the lives of asylum seeker families and their children, considered the experiences and situations of unaccompanied minors in asylum reception centres. Sourander referred to them as lone refugees waiting for decisions on their rights to international protection in Finland. He compared common themes from other studies on asylum seekers and refugees in reception facilities in Finland, from which he found that the experiences of trauma from previous experiences for unaccompanied minors as well as asylum-seeker families, also continued in the reception environment. The feeling of insecurity about their futures and socio-cultural deficiencies in the primary health delivery system at the centres was a major problem.

The feeling of social isolation and marginalization, as Sourander notes, was a common factor that negatively caused psychological and psychosocial traumas and anti-social behavioural problems, especially amongst unaccompanied minors (2007: 482). Sourander makes the observation that the kinds of support currently offered to asylum-seekers in reception centres were clinically, socially, and culturally inadequate to meet the needs of continually traumatized and stressed individuals and groups.

Sourander recommends that support services for asylum-seekers should include creating an environment that fostered a sense of continuity and security through leisure and free-time, possibilities for studies and work, and access to practice religion (2007: 483). Sourander concluded that access to cultural resources is a vital asset that can help asylum-seeker
families and unaccompanied minors in coping with stress and the new socio-cultural realities of being in new places, in a new country, and dealing with the apparent marginalization that may affect later integration into Finnish society. I have found this study to be particularly relevant to the issues in my study.

In other researches from the UK, Sofia Corfield (2008) conducted ethnographic field work amongst asylum seekers and amongst support workers working for various NGOs supporting services for asylum seekers. Corfield (2008: 5-6) describes the process of seeking asylum in the UK as a complex one that can mean for asylum seekers a very frustrating wait for long periods of up to seven years for asylum decisions. She used the study’s title ‘Negotiating Existence’ to highlight what she called the liminoid sense of self in the day-to-day struggle for belonging that is inherent in asylum seeking. Her study had a total of thirty-seven asylum seekers with ages between eighteen and thirty-five. Fifteen of the thirty-seven participants were asylum seekers who had arrived in the UK alone. All the participants in the study were at various stages of the asylum process, including those waiting for a first asylum decision, to others appealing against a negative decision. A majority of participating asylum seekers in Corfield’s study had been smuggled into the UK and did not possess valid documents. Corfield used her data to describe the lived and shared experiences of these individuals who, she found, struggled to identify themselves with their dispersal communities.

Discussing on the themes of social exclusion and isolation from possible social networks for asylum seekers, Alice Bloch & Liza Schuster (2005) argue from an asylum policy perspective against asylum dispersal practices. The issue they raised considered the no-choice basis of dispersal policies for asylum seekers to locations where they have no existing social network to rely on for social support (2005: 503-508). The practice of dispersal, as most of the Finnish studies presented also show, can cause the feeling of alienation and social isolation for asylum seekers in the new localities of reception.

To further highlight the sense of alienation created by the dispersal practices, Boswell (2001) stresses that an important point to consider is the receiving community’s experience of receiving and integrating other sub-groups of refugees. Boswell believes that this is important for evaluating the quality of interaction between the incoming groups and the local populations (2001: 26). The argument here is that where communities are relatively
ethnically homogeneous, a sudden and visible increase in numbers of asylum seekers can provide a trigger for resentment and aggression.

Jan-Paul Brekke (2004), in a study of asylum seekers in Sweden, examined the impact that the asylum waiting-period has on individuals within the asylum process. For Brekke (2004: 7-10) asylum processes are characterized by ambivalences that are primarily concerned with handling the arrival, screening, initial introduction into the reception environment, and possible deportation. This causes uncertainty as individuals cannot tell whether they will be granted permission to stay or will eventually have to go back.

Brekke’s (2004) study focused on the situation of the individual asylum seeker during the waiting period, who is stranded between legitimization of their existence in the society and possible deportation. Brekke further stresses the importance of understanding the individual's situation during asylum waiting, suggesting that the process can be both a negative and positive mixture of experiences depending on the final outcome. Brekke therefore emphasized the need for studies that highlight understanding of the sociology and psychology of waiting (ibid: 8-9). This is particularly important because as Brekke noted, a sociological study of asylum waiting-period will help identify the possibilities and limitations of empowerment to the vulnerable group.

In her study, Hynes (2006) discusses how aspects of belonging for asylum seekers and refugees begin before their arrival in the UK. She finds that similar stories of circumstances in the country of origin incorporate asylum seekers into membership of a particular group, since they are either described as victims or survivors. The shared circumstances, says Hynes, is in a way ‘an inclusive term’. The study had examined the impact of a specific asylum procedural practice of compulsory dispersal on any sense of belonging for asylum seekers. Hynes found that even though aspects of belonging occurred through social networks, the main policy of dispersal has a longer term impact on the process of resettlement, which can possibly affect later integration strategies (Hynes 2006: 289).
2.3 Aims of the Thesis and the Research Questions

From the above discussions, the goal of my current study is to highlight the voices of eleven irregular migrants from the sub-region of West Africa, who live in Finland as asylum seekers. The entire encounters with the participants occur whilst they wait for decision on their asylum applications. By analyzing accounts of personal narratives, which favour the individuals’ own viewpoints, the study is focused on dealing with the experiences of the entire asylum process, which starts from the country of origin and ends when final decisions are made.

A careful look at the issues covered in the review of the literature shows that asylum seekers, as a consequence of existing in juridical-limbo in Finland, are structurally placed outside the frame of formal integration into the mainstream of Finnish society. I thereto focus my study on how participation in the private spaces of informal social networks, within specific places and social settings, can allow a sense of belonging, where access to the mainstream is structurally impossible.

A summary of the studies also shows that settling immigrants in Finland, in various efforts to cope, often resort to their primary sources of community found within religious practices, social networks within and outside Finland, and other forms of group memberships through ethnic or national associations. As for the individuals whose claims for asylum are still under procedural considerations, the studies have shown that their situational circumstances whilst they wait for asylum decisions, often lead to the experiences of social marginalization, stress, and other psycho-social problems.

Some of the studies in the literature focused on the conditions within asylum reception centres and reveal that asylum seekers continue to face difficulties in their day to day routines as they are unable to do much about their current situations whilst their applications for asylum persist for months and years. For example, in Andre Sourander’s (2007: 280) analysis, the suggestion was made that however good the health care services and the social services available to asylum seekers in the reception centres are, the quality of social help falls far short of what the diverse groups of individuals in these centres need. Sourander also made the observation that accesses to one’s own ethnic communities and socio-cultural resources for asylum seekers are necessary if they are to cope and socially function whilst waiting for asylum decisions (2007: 483). Whilst referring to forms of social
support as being vital to alleviating anxieties, Sourander considered the possibilities for broader social connection and participation by asylum seekers and refugees in Finland to their surrounding environments.

My study takes insights from Sourander’s recommendations and combines asylum seekers’ narratives of experiences within asylum reception centres with the various areas of limited social access gained from informal social networks outside the asylum reception centres. To do this, ethnographic field work is employed to the research. The research participants that I contacted whilst doing field work, were lone males from five West African countries, without families in Finland, who were waiting for asylum. I choose to study persons from the region for two reasons.

First, to my knowledge, a study on the experiences of West African males has never before been conducted in Finland. However, a quick glance at the statistics on asylum seekers in Finland, reveal that a consistent number of people who originate from the region, have in recent years applied for asylum in Finland\textsuperscript{14}.

The second reason lends itself to both personal and pragmatic considerations. All the participants in the research were either ‘housed’ in the Helsinki metropolitan area or made frequent journeys to Helsinki from reception centres in cities and municipalities in central and southern Finland\textsuperscript{15}. Other pragmatic considerations came from how well and how effectively I could approach other males from West Africa, who where in Finland waiting for asylum. However, the final decision to investigate male asylum seekers is supported by Finland’s statistics on asylum, which show that more males than females seek asylum in Finland.

Core to the analysis in this thesis is to examine the reasons for seeking asylum in Finland. To do this, I analyze the narratives by West African asylum seekers of events that happened in their lives in their home countries and during the flights to Finland. By doing ethnographic research, I hope to gain first-hand knowledge of how the experiences during

\textsuperscript{14} See table 1 for the numbers of asylum applicants to Finland from the five West African countries in the thesis.

\textsuperscript{15} See appendix 1 for a picture of the distribution of asylum reception centres all over Finland.
irregular migration impact the experience of asylum-waiting whilst in Finland and the processes of coping therein. With the focus on possible areas of social participation, the thesis endeavours to examine how a sense of belonging is negotiated by individuals who exist in a state of liminality.

The research questions for the thesis are:

1. What are West African asylum seekers’ reasons for exile and how do these reasons affect their experiences during flights?

2. How do West African asylum seekers narrate their experiences of Finland as a place of refuge?

3. What are the informal social networks for West African asylum seekers in Finland and how do engagements within these networks enable a sense of belonging?
3. Theoretical Framework For The Thesis

In this chapter, I shall first articulate the definition of the theoretical framework employed for this study. Not only is it important to discuss the literature on the notions of liminality and belonging, which are the concepts examined for this study, I am also placing heavy emphasis on the role and the function of theory to this thesis. Like Pertti Alasuutari (1997), I believe that the qualitative research, itself, is a theorizing process for developing new perspectives to hitherto commonplace reality.

3.1 Intersubjectivity and the Role of Theory

The review of the literature presented for the thesis, whilst drawn from a broad social scientific body of works, lends itself to the research viewpoint articulated by Berger & Luckmann (1966: 33), that ‘social reality in everyday life is a reality interpreted by men as subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world’. Central to Berger and Luckmann’s views on scientific discourses is that in the presentation of theory, emphasis should be on the intersubjective production of knowledge, which is found in the common-sense practices of everyday life. Berger and Luckmann believe that all symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products, and that ‘their existence has its base in the lives of concrete individuals, and has no empirical status apart from these lives’ (Berger and Luckmann 1966:128). The implication of this is that the concept of ‘knowledge’ is a socially constructed phenomenon. The basic ideas in Berger and Luckmann’s articulation, is the inevitability of the intersubjective nature to all forms of knowledge production.

In his review discussion, Robert Prus (1996:88-89) suggests that knowledge production is not only a socially and historically grounded product, but that it is also an ongoing process. The ‘versions of reality’ produced in a research, suggests Prus, ‘reflect the collective interpretations of the world by the people who constitute the community’ (1996:88). The important point Prus stresses is that in Berger and Luckmann’s analysis, any discourses on the reality of knowledge is basically a product of a social interchange. Indeed as Prus (Prus 1996: 89) reiterates, it is in the aspects of the life-worlds within which particular sets of people interact with one another and, in the daily routines, they act upon, that become entrenched as ‘objective reality’. Thus, ‘objectivity’, as Prus (ibid: 88) articulates, ‘is not
innate to any state or condition of the world, but reflects the intersubjective consensus attained within particular contexts'.

Pertti Alasuutari (1996) maintains that theory is not the object of the study, rather, it is a general perspective within which the data collected can be examined. In Alasuutari’s (1996: 372) views, the underlying epistemological premise of the social constructionist researcher is to produce a study that particularizes understandings of social reality. Once this has been understood, the function of the theoretical frame is basically to present a perspective within which the details of the issues under research can be examined (ibid: 376-377). Important to Alasuutari’s viewpoint is the essential nature of context, which holds that irrespective of the entrenched knowledge about the social phenomenon studied, the work of the constructionist researcher is to provide different viewpoints to social reality. Such an understanding, according to Alasuutari, easily lends itself to the qualitative consideration of the specific structures of ‘meanings’, as socially and historically constructed (ibid: 1996:372). What this means is that in the process of examining the everyday life of individuals, the function of the conceptual framework that I present for this thesis, is to help locate and interpret social thoughts of the situations examined (see Alasuutari 1996: 380). To further clarify, the epistemological underpinning for my thesis, which is the constructionist approach, takes insights from Pertti Alasuutari’s (1996) informed analysis on the function of a conceptual framework.

3.2 Understanding Belonging Within a Liminal Context

‘Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise’ (Victor Turner 1967: 97).

Liisa Malkki’s study of Hutu refugees in Tanzania, considers how refugees, by virtue of their ‘displacements and deteriorialization’ and by the nature of their ‘refugeeness’, ‘occupy a problematic, liminal position’ (1995:1). Using insights from Turner’s (1967:97) essay, Malkki refers to the category ‘refugees’ as ‘classified/unclassifiable’. The suggestion by Malkki is that they are transitional beings,

‘since they are neither one thing nor the other; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of topographical geography), and are at the very least, betwixt and between’ all the

The status of occupying a liminal state, as Malkki notes, places the individual in ‘structural invisibility’ (Malkki 1995: 7). Malkki uses Turner’s (1967: 528) essay, ‘Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage’ to conceptualize structural liminality, by suggesting that in the liminal period, refugees are systematically invisible. This is because the discursive externalization of the refugee places them outside the banners of national belonging. As Malkki stresses, the situational circumstances of refugees mean that ‘they are no longer unproblematic citizens’ (ibid: 7). Refugees are thereto displaced in time and in place by nationalizing discourses, which roots national belonging into histories, place, and political loyalties.

In order words, by virtue of their ‘refugeeness’, individuals who occupy the liminal space are stripped of the specificity of a sense of place and culture (see Malkki 1995: 9-17; Turner 1967: 95). The suggestion taken for the West African asylum seekers in this thesis is that due to their state of exile, and by their situational positioning during the period of asylum processing, they exist outside the political descriptions of belonging to a nation, as citizens.

In such a scenario, individuals occupying the position of the ‘liminal stage’, which follows the initial separation from their prior status and before their incorporation into another status, are considered to be ‘neither here nor there’ (Hynes 2006: 56). For example, the exclusionary practices during the period of asylum, as Hynes (2006: 57) suggests, affect asylum seekers’ ability to restore normalcy to their lives as they have left their country of origin but are not yet accepted in the new country of asylum. Within this context, studies have shown that asylum seekers experience the feeling of ‘in-betweenness’ and the longing for the day when their asylum will be finally resolved (Corfield 2008). Indeed as Sofia Corfield (2008) stresses, the notion of liminality is core to the understanding of how asylum seekers endeavour to remake belonging and a sense of place in the absence of their own diasporic ethnic community, whilst waiting for asylum decisions (Corfield 2008: 12-13).

The long asylum-waiting time is described in this thesis as the period of temporary immigration. I suggest that asylum seekers occupy a liminal space during this period and remain invisible to the dominant public spaces of mainstream structural integration. The ability for West African asylum seekers in Finland to engage with informal social networks
is considered in this thesis as an important way of exploring the remaking of a sense of belonging from the position of liminality during the asylum-waiting period.

Asylum seekers, on the account of their situational circumstances, are made structurally recognizable by the asylum procedure, which also differentiates them from other migrants by exclusively placing them outside official integration. I suggest that for asylum seekers, being structurally invisible to the public spaces where formal structural integration occur, often leads to the reliance on activities within the private spaces of informal social networks where they can exercise some control. The notion of structural invisibility, which places them in a state of liminality, is thus applied to the individuals in this thesis to focus analysis on the subjective narratives of remaking a sense of belonging. My interest is precisely aimed at examining the sense of belonging through the power of stories, as a mechanism for reproducing continuity, whilst dealing with dislocations to life.

Now, more generally, in studies of forced migration, belonging for refugees and other immigrants has been measured by how groups and individuals are structurally integrated into the host society (Ager & Strang 2008). This understanding of belonging only looks at the structural dimensions to integration through a variety of public indicators. These indicators are found in the public outcomes to integration, such as available housing, access to labour-market participation, language proficiencies, and the possession of a permanent immigration status. Other structural approaches to belonging have also shown that the institutional indicators of belonging for immigrants can be realized through the kinds of rights they enjoy, such as political rights, socio-economic rights, civil equality, and social emancipation (see Valtonen 2004: 75, 83-86; 2008: 46-49; Huttunen 2005: 179).

Laura Huttunen’s (2005) discussion on such structural analyses of the notion of belonging, examines belonging through the politicized discourses on immigration. The suggestion by Huttunen (2005) is that public spaces of belonging are discussed using both the institutional control of entrance and resident permits. Huttunen explains that the institutional control of entrance and permits creates the structural divisions of individual in the public spaces between those who belong (us), and those who belong to a lesser degree (them) (ibid). These discourses on belonging, once institutionalized, become the ‘classificatory power’, which organizes everyday routines for immigrants. (2005: 179). Hence, for new immigrants, the sense of belonging is a continuous negotiation between the
institutional enablers of belonging in the public spaces, and their subjective understandings of belonging, which occur within private informal spaces.

Furthermore, literature references on belonging in Finland have considered the notion of Finnishness as a historical-cultural construction, which is used to describe the sense of belonging to the Finnish society (Anttonen 1998, Clark 2003). Anneli Anttonen (1998: 257) describes the historical process of Finnish citizenship as one that developed from rural communitarian basis. Finnishness is based on a strong communal-based membership of the Finnish society, which was historically constructed on the notions of membership in one community, one church, and one nation (Anttonen 1998). Kris Clarke (2003) similarly gives an important account on the historical formation of belonging within the frame of the notion of Finnishness. The notion of Finnishness, in Clarke’s analysis, has had fundamental impacts on the development of the concept of Finnish citizenship (2003: 16). Thus, in addition to the historical norms that constructed Finnishness, Clarke also suggests that the boundaries of belonging are tied to constructions of ethnicity, religion, and language. These accordingly have constituted the historical markers of belonging and membership in the Finnish society.

Whilst discussing the broader sociological literature on belonging, Warner (1994) suggests that the notion of belonging is something we may construct to gain identity and the sense of belonging to a group. In Warner’s view, the need for people to belong,

‘is more than one for protection or for the means of individual development: it is also a need to be among one’s own. Although this latter need varies in strength according to individual circumstances... it is normally a strong human need, the satisfaction of which is conducive to individual and social well-being and the denial of which is conducive to suffering and to social disorder’ (Warner 1994:163).

The notion, to ‘be among one’s own’ is, however, contested along social identification cleavages, for example, through the discourses on race, gender, ethnicity, class, and nationality. Belonging, going by Warner’s viewpoint, relies on the mechanisms of cultural identification, which can occur in the practice of social membership that often excludes others.

In Ming-Bao Yue’s (2000) study, references to the cultural analysis of belonging and the discussions on the structure of visible recognition are used to evaluate the practices and ways of belonging. Yue (2000: 174) maintains that some discursive parameters of belonging
'rely on the existing categories of race, gender and class', to erroneously define the particularity of non-Western immigrant cultures. For example, the existing notions of race, which is inscribed in/by social practice of visible recognition, are used to discursively reconstruct and frame the racialization of ethnic identity, and hence, cultural belonging for immigrants (2000: ibid). In the process of distinguishing between those who belong, and those who belong to a lesser degree, the ‘practices of everyday life’, stresses Yue, is often used to discursively redefine the social activities of the visible others as a different way of acting (ibid).

Anja Jørgensen (2010), in her discussion, makes references to even more subjective and cultural analyses, in which she discusses the ways individuals, themselves, experience belonging. In her analysis, Jørgensen (2010: 7-10) stresses that the notion of belonging on the individual experiential level, may be a ‘reflexive’ and a ‘non-reflexive’ way of seeking community, membership, and connections to place. The suggestion is that a study on the sense of belonging should also examine those social relationships that guide and motivate people to specific places, where they feel a sense of belonging (2010: 20).

Anne-Marie Fortier (2000) similarly makes the suggestion that belonging is present in practices of producing ‘cultural’ and territorial ‘commonality’ (2000: 2). The terrains of commonality for those seeking community can allow, within physical and social spaces, the appropriation of cultural and social affiliation to enable a sense of belonging. Indeed, the physical and social spaces for developing a sense of belonging for migrants can also occupy transnational spaces. Many literature references have referred to the practices of migrants’ identification with several places, transnational associations or groups, communities, and entire societies, at the same time, as transnational belonging (Brah 1996, Vertovec 1999). Vertovec (1999: 4-5), describes the process of being at the same time, ‘home away from home’, or ‘here and there’, as an example of a migrant’s transnational sense of belonging. According to De Bree, Davids, and de Haas (2010: 491), migrants can also experience transnational belonging without having to travel to the country, in which they feel they belong. In the analysis for this thesis, I shall also consider the importance of transnational practices, as a process of remaking continuity and a sense of belonging for some asylum seekers.
Furthermore, I take the suggestion by Vertovec that we should consider disciplinary annexation if it extends the construction of our conceptual frameworks (Vertovec, 2003). To this end, I refer to the field of environmental psychology, where the sense of place has been used to describe how people form a sense of attachment to their surrounding environment (Jorgensen & Stedman 2001, Altman & Low 1992, Proshansky 1978, Proshansky et al 1983, Stokols & Shumaker 1981). Altman and Low (1992) describe place attachments as forms of social bond-making that are generated between groups and between individuals, to their local environments. Place identity refers to personal identity in relation to the physical environment that derives from feelings, values, and goals (Proshansky, 1978: 155). The understanding of place identity here focuses on the ability of the individual to construct the perceptions of place into the larger understanding of the self within those settings (see Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983: 60, Cuba and Hummon, 1993: 113). The concept of place has also been used to describe meaning of feelings towards specific physical locations called place dependence. Place dependence, as Stokols and Shumaker (1981: 457) note, occurs where the individual perceives strength of association between them to specific places.

With a heavy influence from Jorgensen and Stedman (2001: 233), my research expands on the notion of place by examining place as products of social activities and practices, which allow people, who experience spatial liminality (in terms of physical places), to feel a sense of belonging. I examine whether and how a sense of belonging can be acquired from social activities and practices of social relationships within very specific places. This immediately enables the possibility of examining the symbolic links between people and places, which I suggest, can help awaken the feeling of security in spaces where uncertainty and liminality exist. The understanding is vital to examining the narratives of volatile individuals facing juridical and spatial temporality to the current places in which they occupy as they wait for asylum in Finland.

Kathleen Valtonen’s (2008) discussion on the importance of individuals’ social position and social status in the context of settlement and integration is employed in this thesis to further expand on the notion of place. Important to the consideration is Valtonen’s (2008) suggestion that individuals’ sense of their social position and social status are important to examining their ability to generate feelings of progresses in establishing and engaging ‘relations with the surrounding society’ (2008: 40; also see Wahlbeck 2008).
As I shall explain further, activities within informal social networks and the social linkages to places are considered important to a person’s feeling of belonging and social position in the society. Viewed this way, the broad understanding of belonging used for this thesis allows the possibility of studying the sources of existential stability for individuals who experience volatility and liminality.

The notions of belonging and place are therefore examined in this thesis from the perspective that they are interrelated subjective processes. Analytically, place and belonging are considered for this thesis in such a way, that both concepts are combined at various points within the analysis, to reflect on the individual experiences of liminality. It is specifically within the micro levels of individual relationships found in informal social networks that this thesis focuses analysis on. From this, the areas of social belonging through participation for asylum seekers are examined. Informal social networks and the gaining of social capital are further discussed below.

### 3.2.1 Informal Social Networks and Social Capital

The understandings of social networks for this thesis draw from the contribution of various literature sources, which I then expand on to define the perspective that examines informal social networks for asylum seekers. Koser and Pinkerton (2002), in a study, offer a broad definition to social networks. The focused definition stresses the importance of weak social ties to the activities of asylum seekers. For Koser and Pinkerton,

‘Social networks comprise personal contacts with friends and family as well as commercial contacts with migration agents including labour recruiters, travel agents, smugglers and traffickers. Relations with networks can be voluntary and involuntary. Networks can facilitate migration in a range of ways, including by disseminating information. However, migration can take place in their absence. Networks exist and function across a range of countries, including origin, destination and also transit countries.’ (2002: 36)

Koser and Pinkerton’s broad definition describes the term for those potential asylum seekers who have had social networks prior and during irregular migration journeys, and for others who may or may not have social networks in the country of subsequent asylum. When defined this way, social networks are understood in a ‘metaphorical sense’, which does not rely on the technical and mathematical approaches of network analysis, but describes an individual’s set of relations with others (see Hynes 2006: 23).
Social networks allow the possibility to interpret the ‘social worlds’ of refugees and asylum seekers by focusing on social linkages between individuals who have experienced total or partial collapse of prior social connections (Marx 1990: 197-198; Hynes 2006: 54). Immigrants in a new country who have experienced the collapse of original sources of social networks, says Emanuel Marx, tend to seek relationships and membership with primary groups (e.g. church parishes), to bolster their sense of security (Marx 1990: 200). As Hynes similarly suggests, ‘reformulating or maintaining social networks is one way in which individuals resist the imposition of exclusionary practices’ (2006: 54-55).

Social networks have been described as a resource for remaking social linkages and for gaining social bridging capital (Portes 2000). In Alejandro Portes’ (2000) analysis, recently arrived foreign individuals are heavily dependent on social networks in order to construct the sense of belonging and the feeling of continuity to get by (2000: 5). Social networks have also been described as a way to facilitate the process of getting on with daily routines of life (see Robert Putnam 2000:23). A further understanding of social networks is proposed by James Coleman (1998), who views the social networks as vital for acquiring human capital. In Coleman’s (1998) analysis of the concept, the suggestion is that certain actions of actors within the same structures can help facilitate a variety of different functional capital resources (1998:98). Functional resources gained in the process, suggests Coleman (ibid), can develop into a sense of agency as well as emotional and social support. For example, for individuals who are in the long waiting period for final asylum decisions, social networks can be an important resource for information about basic survivor needs.

Furthermore, in J. Clyde Mitchell’s (1969:2) analysis, social network is defined as ‘a specific set of linkages among a defined set of persons, with the additional property that the characteristics of these linkages, as a whole, may be used to interpret the social behaviour of the persons involved’. This definition emphasizes relations and outcomes as crucial to the construction of social networks. Hynes makes similar remarks by saying that ‘social worlds allowed for understanding of the reasons why people behave in a particular way whilst at the same time incorporating the social forces impinging upon them’ (Hynes 2006: 54). The implication of this is that asylum seekers’ decision making and the motivation to make them can be examined whilst keeping in mind the wider contexts that structures their relation and composition.
The importance of relations to the composition of social networks is also stressed by David Knoke and Song Yang (2008) who, in their discussions, describe social networks as ‘a structure composed of a set of actors, some of whose members are connected by a set of one or more relations’ (2008:8). The description of a relation here, lends itself to the specific types of contacts, connections, and social linkages between individuals (Knoke & Yang 2008: 7).

The type of relations that constitutes a social network depends on the kinds of social linkages that exist between those individuals who seek social support networks and others or entities who may be the position to provide those supports. For example, in a study that evaluated the uses of social networks, Zetter et al (2005) examined the role and impact of RCOs (Refugee Community Organizations). RCOs, as an entity that offers social support network, suggests Zetter et al, were important as places of respite and existential stability for refugees and asylum seekers who previously lacked sources for such support. The activities of the RCOs, as Zetter et al (2005) found, provided the needed source of establishing social connection for refugees and asylum seekers, thereby aiding experiences of coping with both the asylum process and later possible integration practices. Studies on the availability of such social support network for refugees and asylum seekers in Finland are scarce.

Studies, especially those from the UK, have revealed that asylum seekers’ inability to generate social networks is influenced by the highly geographical processes of asylum dispersal. This can lead to the loss of social capital necessary for developing social and individual networks of relationships.

The disruptions to lives and the feeling of loss of own network can lead to experiences of marginality and social exclusion (see Schuster 2004: 3, Bloch & Schuster 2005: 493). Similarly, accesses to social networks have been identified as an important source for generating social capital and socio-cultural resources for coping and remaking continuity for asylum seekers and refugees living in asylum reception centres in Finland (Sourander 2007). Ahmad (2005) similarly argues in his study, that social networks were the most important source of job information and employment opportunities for immigrants in the Finnish labour market (2005: IV).

Putnam (1995a, 1995b) argues that social capital can be generated through participation in
activities (1995a, 1995b). For example, these can be activities embedded in the networks of social interactions, which can perform the function of broadening individual productivity and, in some cases, help to develop the individuals’ sense of self (1995b: 66). For Putnam (1995a), social capital can also be found in ‘networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives’ (1995a: 664–65). Putnam thus describes norms and networks as generated through forms of participation and in activities that involve face-to-face interaction. Within these processes, mutual trust can then be generated.

Insights from Putnam’s analyses indicate that social capital can be a major resource from activities embedded in social networks. The emphasis on mutual trust is considered for this thesis as uniquely important for restoring the sense of security against the existential vulnerability and the sense of insecurity for asylum seekers. For example, in her analysis, Hynes (2006) argues that the loss of social networks for some asylum seekers occur whilst in waiting to become refugees in the asylum country. This is mostly caused by the prevailing asylum procedure (e.g. dispersal). The asylum seeker, says Hynes, who lacked resources to accessing social networks expressed feelings of ‘extreme social isolation and social exclusion’ and therefore for them, ‘the ability to create social networks took on an added importance (2006: 9).

Pierre Bourdieu is generally considered to be the first to provide a systematic analysis to the concept of social capital (Portes 1998: 3; Coleman 19998:98). Bourdieu (1997) describes social capital from social networks as ‘the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition – or to membership in a group’ (1997:51).

Putnam’s (2000) analysis of the concept of social capital provides a more comprehensive articulation to Portes’ (1998) definition of the structure of social relationships. Putnam approaches the concept by distinguishing between two types of social capital: bonding and bridging capital. Bonding capital, according to Putnam (2000:23), derives from relationships based on strong social ties of familiarity, kin, and closeness. Bridging capital derives from ties of weaker links and other social acquaintances. Putnam further describes the bonding social ties as ‘sociological superglue’, which helps people to ‘get by’.

In Putnam’s analysis, it is, however, the bridging social capital or weaker social links that
facilitate the process of ‘getting ahead’ (ibid). Weaker ties or social bridging links are actively generated by individuals themselves in daily efforts to ensure getting ahead and remaking continuity to their lives. Resources from this process can be achieved, for example, through spreading of information for daily uses and active survival strategies within different social contexts. Viewed this way, the two forms of social capital are employed here as resources or assets, and deployed for the purposes of examining the processes of either getting by or getting ahead. The definitions are appropriate to examining the everyday lives of irregular migrants in my study, who engage in various coping mechanism to get by or move on with their lives whilst, waiting for asylum decisions.

In the discussion above, certain characteristics of social networks have been pointed out. This includes the importance of the wider structures that constitute social networks and the context in which informal social networks are constructed. Social networks have also been understood as being formed along weak social linkages and bridging social ties, especially for those asylum seekers who have experienced the collapse of their own social networks as a result of forced exile.

The purpose of examining informal social networks for this thesis is to analyze the behaviours that influence the structure of relations that constitute informal social networks for West African asylum seekers in Finland. Particular attention is thus given to the sets of relationships that are socially constructed as sources of social and emotional support. As Ager & Strang (2008:177-178) suggest, it is at the informal levels of individual contacts, that social networks can allow the construction of social linkages and social bridging ties necessary for individual and collective social capacity building.
4. Research Method and Data

In this chapter, I shall discuss the methodologies and the research practice employed during the entire process of data collection and the analysis of this thesis. In the following subchapters, I shall discuss the ethnographic field work employed to elicit data, the field ethics for the study, and the narrative analysis employed to analyze the data collected. But first, I shall describe the participants in the research.

4.1. The Description of the Research Participants

Altogether, eleven persons participated in the research. All the participants in the study are male and are originally from countries in West Africa. They include individuals from Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, and Gambia. The oldest was 36 and the youngest 24 years old at the time of our meetings. They were at the time in the process of waiting, either to have their asylum interviews or for final asylum decisions.

The average waiting time for asylum interviews in Finland amongst my participants was ten months. On the average, and for those who had had asylum interviews, they had been altogether waiting for asylum decisions, at the time of our first meetings, from between sixteen to eighteen months. Some studies done on asylum seekers in Finland have described the asylum process as lasting for a multiple number of years (see Ilkka Pirinen 2008; Andre Sourander 3003, 2007). Others have similarly shown that the socio-backgrounds of asylum seekers and refugees (i.e., their age, gender, marital status, and educational backgrounds), at the time of moving to Finland, influence the progress and levels of experiential difficulties in the processes of acculturation and integration (Mustonen 2008:2).

In my study, three of the research participants were married and had left families at home. Two mentioned that they had cohabited with their partners and kids before leaving their homes and countries behind. Four of them had been in prison for political and religious reasons and had experienced torture in prison in their home countries. One participant described himself as a homosexual, and this was also given as the reason for seeking asylum.
The individuals in the study had on the average completed secondary education. Two had completed primary school level education, four had graduated from secondary school or its equivalent, and five told of completed university or polytechnic degrees and diplomas. Their educational backgrounds also placed my research in a unique position, as it very likely influenced the ways they reflected on their experiences and tried to make sense of them. Similarly, high levels of formal education were also a useful resource for those who had attained levels of formal education because some of them later made efforts to apply for vocational and other study places whilst their asylum processes continued. Yet, whilst most did not tell of having meaningful employments in their home countries, two participants said they were professional journalists. The background working experience of the participants also varied according to their levels of education.

4.2 Doing Ethnography: Accessing the Field
To effectively examine how the individuals in this study reflect on context and experience, I employed the ethnographic qualitative research approach for the thesis. This is because of the qualitative research’s emphasis on understanding human actions and experiences, which I believe is appropriate to my study.

Following Bryman (2004: 207-284), the epistemological underpinning for my use of qualitative methods in this thesis comes from three research principles, which are:

- The research values, which view the social world and events from the perspective of the studied.
- The significance of the context, within which people’s behaviours take place.
- Qualitative research’s views of social life as a process.

The field work for this thesis began in May of 2009, and ended in August of 2010, in Helsinki. My initial research practice was to explore the possible field sites for data collection. I clarify here, that the definition of site for this thesis, does not suggests a conceptual site. Rather the ethnographic sites that I visited refer to the actual multiple physical locations and different places from where ethnographic field work was conducted (Falzon 2009).
In late spring and throughout the summer of 2009, I was able to make visits to some of the asylum reception centres in the Helsinki metropolitan area. During the same period, I visited one asylum reception centre and two temporary asylum housing accommodations in Helsinki. I had also begun to make field notes of the experience from those visits. The experiences from those early visits did not give much encouragement to my research intentions.

On one such visit, I walked into the general area of a reception centre and approached two reception workers that were present at the receptionist desk. I introduced myself to one of the workers in the Finnish language. I told him about my study and the thesis I was currently researching for, which was also the reason for my visit. Whilst replying me in English, he asked if I had come to formally submit myself as an asylum seeker and so wanted to know where I was from and how long I had been living in Finland. I reintroduced myself and again repeated the reasons for my visit, this time in English. It is fair to imagine that I was stunned. Later, I was told by the same receptionist that I was basically free to approach anyone in the centre and talk to them. I left soon after because I was unable to secure an interview or the promise of a future interview from people I met at the centre that day. On the way home, I got on the tram and after a while, approached a man whom I had noticed also came out of the reception centre building with me. I introduced myself to him and asked if he lived in the reception centre. He confirmed this and told me he was from Gambia. We began to talk.

The experiences of the first six months of trying to gain access to the research participants were very discouraging. There were times when I was almost convinced that the research would never happen. These experiences, from my initial forays in the field, have remained long-lasting as they also shaped the research methods and practices employed for data collection. Initial failures to get the kinds of access and support that I hoped for from the reception centres, were not the only problems that I had come to realize. I also discovered that I had placed too much emphasis on gaining interviews.

The awkward experiences from the reception centres had also illuminated in me an acute sense of self awareness; this was in terms of my physical appearance. The projection of that image had seemingly influenced others’ perception of me, being a student in the field. This was evident in kinds of responses I got from initial contacts with reception centre workers.
and asylum seeker residents alike. I took lessons from these experiences and decided to reevaluate how I presented myself to possible participants and where, in terms of physical locations, I would arrange my research sites. I therefore embarked on the process of building rapport and trust, through frequent repetition of my aims and by making regular visits to prospective participants.

To fully apply myself in the field, and after identifying the preferred group that could theoretically guide my research aims, I employed purposive snowball sampling. As Bryman (2001: 100) suggest, purposive snowball sampling is a form of convenience sampling. With this sampling practice, I was able to make contacts with most of the participants through word of mouth passed by a previous contact to other contacts, who indicated their interests and were willing to participate in the research. My study is particularly common with this form of sampling because the opportunities and accessibility to potential participants and respondents in the field was not always guaranteed. For example, some of the individuals with whom I had made prior interview arrangements, in the weeks that followed, were either deported based on accelerated asylum procedures or had simply disappeared. However, following Silverman (2005: 48), I consider these experiences, to be an important part of the research process.

Generally, sociology’s use of ethnography, as Delamont (2004) points out, was pioneered at Chicago sociology, which was robustly empirical in developing research. Robert Prus (1996: 116) identified George Hebert Mead as one of the earliest Chicago sociologists, whose much coveted work, *Mind, Self, and Society*, was theoretically framed in the ethnographic tradition. Mead’s work in sociology has provided much of the conceptual foundation for studying human lived experience. The ethnographic tradition in Mead’s work was essentially and fundamentally intersubjective that insisted on recognizing the human capacities for self-reflexivity, agency, and linguistic (interactive) exchange (Prus 1996: 117). Insights from this literature influenced the ethnographic approach employed for my thesis. This follows the constructionist epistemology which, like Mead, sees research in society as not an abstracted objective structure, but one that exists and is constructed within intersubjective, collaborative, and meaningful interactive contexts.

As Silverman (2005) suggests, ethnography is useful to fully understand a group of people and their social worlds (2005: 49). This is important because the issues and people I
investigate continued to move within very fluid sets of circumstances that are usually characteristics of the asylum-waiting period. It is for this reason that I made the decision to employ participant observations and qualitative research interview methods, in order to immerse myself in understanding the social reality that was constructed for my research subjects. As I see it, doing ethnography is itself participation in the construction of the narrative of research and not merely an exercise in understanding a group.

In this way, the ethnographic methods, which I employed for this thesis, are more about gaining relevant contexts to the phenomenon and people in my study, and less as a method for gaining access to the field. In light of this, I present here, the ethnographic methodology employed for the entire process of this research. This includes doing participant observations and elicitation of oral interviews and self-written autobiographical narratives.

4.2.1 Participant Observations: My Engagements in the Social Lives of West African Asylum Seekers

The process of doing participant observations meant that I was physically present to observe and participate in the social occasions where I could. For the most part, I took the role of a researcher-participant in the process of attending church services with some participants; playing sports; going on walks in parks and in other places; grocery shopping in certain parts of Helsinki; and having coffee on separate occasions with two participants. These engagements during participant observations immediately raised for me the issue of my role in the process. I contemplated whether as a researcher-participant, my role was active or passive, during the period of field work (see Prus 1996: 19, Bryman 2004: 301).

For Prus (1996), the participant-observer role during field work, allows the researcher to get closer to having first-hand knowledge of lived experiences of the participants. For the researcher, Prus stresses that it is important to thoroughly develop an appreciation of where and in what ways one’s own experiences may reflect on, approximate, and differ from those of others in the setting (1996: 20). Prus’ emphasis on roles is based on the assumption that the space for participation is socially constructed and that doing participant observation is itself, an ongoing intersubjective process with the researched.
As I see it, my role during participant observations involved a more active (and interactive) role for me as a researcher. Knowing my role also required that I fully understood the degree of my involvement and detachment during the entire process of my field research in order to grasp the possible expectations that my research participants had towards me. Here, I follow Bryman’s (2004: 302-303) discussions, in which he cites Gan’s (1968) classification of participant-observer roles which may be:

- **Total participation**: this involves complete involvement. The researcher role of taking notes is assumed only after the process of participant observation.

- **Researcher-participant**: the researcher is partly involved, enough to fully function as a researcher in the cause of the situation.

- **Total-researcher**: the researcher observes without involvement in the situation. The researcher attends and watches events going on, without participation in the flow of events.

To help illuminate the extent to which I engaged myself in the field as a researcher-participant, I have employed Delamont’s (2004) explanations of the degrees of immersion in the field for sociological researchers. Here, the field is usually visited on regular bases with researchers returning home at night after each day’s work. Perhaps redefining Gan’s classifications, Delamont writes that researchers can operate within participant observation either by totally immersing themselves in the field or through partial immersion.

Total immersion, according to Delamont (2004), takes its roots in anthropological practices, where the researchers move to and live in the communities or settings where societal patterns, social activities, occupations, and social systems are studied. In such cases, researchers are totally immersed in the culture under study, twenty-four hours a day (2004: 218). Researchers from both disciplines of sociology and anthropology variously engage in both total immersion and partial immersion in the field. As Delamont suggested, at the end, when the research is done, the result is ethnography: ‘a theorized account of the culture studied with ethnographic method’ (ibid: 219).

I have engaged in conversations with my supervisor on similar issues, especially when it
came to drawing the boundaries between research and friendship, and maintaining them. This proved to be particularly difficult because, as I later found out, some of the participants expressed feeling very lonely, and had experiences of boredom with little or no social interactions or contacts with people outside the reception centres.

I cannot definitively state here, that as a researcher, I was totally or partially immersed in the field during the period of participant observations. However, from an experiential standpoint, I reflect on how my own biographical positioning has influenced my degree of immersion in the field of asylum research. I moved to Finland in 2004 under the family reunification program. The process of seeking asylum is something I do not have a first-hand experience of. Yet, the occasion of my presence in Finland was a result of reunification with a family member who had sought international protection many years ago in Finland. The process of reunification was itself, a profoundly troubling experience for me. Even at that experiential level, I have often wondered what it must have been like for those who came to Finland as irregular migrants. Again, as someone who also has roots from the region, I have always been concerned by news reports of West African irregular migrants crossing borders over lands and seas to get to ‘Europe’.

Before embarking on this research, I had met and introduced myself to some individuals, who had gone through the process of seeking and receiving asylum in Finland. I was primarily intrigued by their experiences of separations and displacements, irregular migration journeys, and how these stories were employed to make sense of their current reality in Finland. Yet, whilst I have had some knowledge of West African asylum seekers in Finland, I have not spent the entire period of participant observations by being totally immersed in everyday lives of the research participants.

Nonetheless, being partially immersed in the field meant that on those occasions where I was physically present to conduct observations and participate, I wrote down field notes for my research after getting home. The field notes constitute a major part of the data analyzed in the following chapter. I started making field notes of my thoughts and recollections of the experiences and events in the field from the spring of 2009. For this thesis, field notes act as records of ‘observed’ activities with participants, as well as my recollections of events during conversation-style interview situations where I could not use a voice recorder.
The process of making field notes did not however go without some trials and difficulties. Particularly frustrating was my inability to take notes during participant observation sessions. Taking notes at those times always seemed to interrupt the natural flow of things and, in practice made some of my participants seem quite nervous. I countered both difficulties, overtime, by increasing the number of times I met with some of them, and by agreeing to participate in social activities such as sports, walks in parks, and grocery shopping with others. Other events where I participated included attending church services with two participants. The frequency of doing, what amounted to drop-in(s), to the field for my research observations, aided my recall of what I had observed and as I have mentioned, on getting home, I quickly wrote down in my research diary. Activities that I had thought would not help in generating data at first, later became not only sources for some of the most revealing data materials, but also helped in generating a positive relationship; the trust that my research was serious and meant no harm to them.

I stopped writing field observation notes in August 2010, which was also the time of my exit from the field. The process of ‘exiting the field’, was gradual. This was because even though I had stopped collecting data for the research, I still entertained some audiences with my old participants and ‘hung out’ with a couple of them in the weeks after exiting the field. I did not make notes or record any of these reencounters and with the passing months since doing field work; I have not been in contact with the participants.

My engagements in participant observation with West African asylum seekers, even though it had its initial trials and errors, as well as advantages and disadvantages, has provided me with valuable data material that could not have been accessed or collected with any other methods. This eventually created the rapport that helped facilitate other aspects of data collection process, such as agreements to conduct interviews later on. Overall, the gathering of the research data for the thesis had taken me sixteen months to complete.

The process of participant observations did not only allow me to engage in long interactive observations, but also, I have been able to gain first-hand experience of the context and

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16 By drop-in(s), I refer to the actual act of going to meet my participants for data collection, and returning to my own home later.
settings from which the data I collected were generated. It also gave me a practical leeway as I was able to elicit some participants for subsequent voice-recorded interviews and gain self-written narratives from others. As a result of the long period of time spent doing participant observations, those who later agreed to sit down for interviews and/or who wrote and handed me their own-stories, did so with the full knowledge of my intentions and knew of the uses of the materials as data for a research.

4.2.2 Conversations with West African Asylum Seekers: Oral Interviews and Self-Written Narratives

The researcher needs to discover what ‘their’ people believe; what they do at work and in leisure time; what makes them laugh, cry and rage; who they love, hate and fear; and how they choose their friends and endure their relationships (Delamont 2004: 218).

Oral and self-written narratives are the two types of narrative data analyzed in this thesis. The oral narratives were elicited from most participants through the conduct of interviews, whereas the self-written narratives are hand-written autobiographical stories, which were presented to me by some participants. Altogether, I conducted ten voice recorded interviews (including three follow-up interviews), and collected four self-written autobiographical stories. The oral interviews conducted for this thesis contained between 37 minutes to 130 minutes of recordings, with the average recording time been 45 minutes in length. Altogether, I collected over seven hours of recordings.

4.2.2.1 The conduct of Oral Interviews

The ways I conducted interviews, demanded a lot of patience. The usual format was to meet with potential interviewees, after weeks and at times even months of participant observations. Delamont’s suggestion that participant observations are often employed with the mixture of observation and interviewing, guided my approach in conducting these interviews (2004: 218). Tim Rapley (2004), whilst discussing Atkinson and Silverman (1997), refers to interviewing as currently the major resource through which contemporary social sciences engage with issues that concern it. Rapley (2004) argues that the literatures
on how-to-do-interview are concerned with massive amounts of technical and moral instructions, which are the outcome of specific theoretical values about the analytic status of interview data produced (see Rapley 2004: 16; Gubrium & Holstein 2002: 3). Silverman (2005) similarly suggests that whether interview responses are to be employed as direct access to respondents’ ‘experience’ or as actively constructed oral narratives involving activities which themselves demands analysis, both positions are legitimate and only requires methodological justification and explanation. (Silverman 2005: 48; see also Andrea Fontana 2002: 166).

Conducting pre-arranged interviews was also met with other unforeseen practical challenges. For example, even though I made separate contacts with three participants in June of 2009, I was only able to arrange interviews with all of them later that year in the autumn and winter. In another example, after arranging some interviews in late spring of 2010, I was dismayed to find later that my potential interviewees (the two of them), had all been dispersed to reception centres as far away to central Finland. I contemplated travelling there but cost of travels, time constraints, and my unfamiliarity with those places, made me re-evaluate my choices. I decided to keep in touch with those individuals via telephone. Also, during my initial forays in the field, I was unsure of the practice of ethnographic interviews and how to balance the role of a researcher, whilst maintaining a relationship with the individuals involved. There were occasions when some solicited help for various reasons, most of which I declined because I wanted to maintain my role as a researcher in those cases. Others simply wanted company, most asked questions about accessing services. Some others asked for directions to places like the names of addresses and locations of specific places they were unsure of. Indeed, one of the most frustrating instances was the loss of some potential interviewees, which happened after I had respectfully declined to help when the requests seemed to me to have crossed the boundaries I was ethically obliged to entertain.

In other practices, I possessed an interview guide, which I carried to every interview situation (see appendix 2). Prus (1996) has stressed that researchers, especially those who employ qualitative interviewing as ethnographic practice, ‘develop fairly extensive interview formats or guides but which however take different shapes in the field as researchers learn more about the situations and the participants involved’ (1996: 20). The structure of the interview guide that I employed was not specific, but acted as a list of memory prompts of
areas to be covered or issues to be addressed during conversation-style interviewing. Bryman (2001) also reiterates that what is paramount in an interview situation is that ‘the questioning allows interviewers to glean the ways research participants view their social world and that there is flexibility in the conduct of the interview’ (2001: 324). I find this approach to ethnographic qualitative interviewing particularly appealing because it emphasizes the importance of not entrenching one’s approach with too many preconceptions but allowing the space for finding and following events over the course of a particular period and time. I believe that data collected from interviews are products of collaborative and locally constructed narratives.

The conversation-style interviews enabled me and my prospective interviewees to interact more informally than in a structured interview. The process of doing conversation-style oral interviews also helped to put my interviewees at ease. The flow of conversations was never hurried in a question-answer format. The interview situations were often long, in most part due to my interviewees’ long conversational talks. I had tried on some occasions to limit our conversations, but I found this to be a challenge because as I shall show in the analysis, most participants expressed experiences of boredom and lack of frequent interactions with people around them. So, most of the participants were very eager to talk and, in some cases, these talks were off-topic. In these situations I did not discourage them from talking, but stopped recording altogether, listened to what they had to say, and then I would remind them of the actual topic of our current interview. This usually helped to re-focus the conversation and bring us back on track to do more recordings. In the process, I therein elicited oral narratives following my relevant interview topics that needed to be examined. I formulated these topics on the research issues, but the actual conversations in the interviews were as noted, descriptive, repetitive, and full of detail.

As a researcher who extensively follows Catherine Riesman’s (2008: 23-27) argument that interviews are narrative occasions, I encouraged the practice of allowing the particular circumstances in an interview situation to develop into its own form of storytelling. Indeed, the stories generated from my interviews are a non-neutral intersubjective reflection of the life circumstances of asylum seekers whom I studied. What this means is that the oral narratives from the interviews followed the ethnographic practice, in which, as Riessman (2008: 23) argued, the interview is a discursive accomplishment. The interview, according to this argument, develops a narrative account where the speaker and the researcher render
events and experience meaningful collaboratively. In this way, detailed accounts on how my participants narrated their experiences and the day-to-day process of dealing with asylum-waiting were recorded.

In Johnson’s (2002) analysis, doing qualitative interviews that involve an exploration of lived experiences, means that the interviewer must build trust and offer reciprocity. He recommended employing strict or complementary reciprocity (2002: 109). Offering strict reciprocity involves the interviewer’s disclosure of personal biographical (emotional) experiences or otherwise. Complementary reciprocity, on the other hand, entails exchanges of assistance, favours or other forms of complementary gestures. On some occasions, due to the normal flow of conversations during interviews, I shared some of my experiences with participants. On two other occasions, I purposefully gave my voice-recorder to my interviewees after they expressed desire to see how it worked. I continued the interview by allowing them to hold the recorder and talk directly into it themselves. This form of reciprocity changed the dynamics of the interview relationship as I maintained the role of a researcher asking questions, whereas they had the power to control the information that was recorded. The practice also encouraged greater equality in the interview process. They were able to stop the recorder to collect their thoughts, and sometimes, under my instructions, replayed recorded conversations, listened to them, and at times, made corrections or pointed out areas they had forgotten to mention or add. This made the atmosphere in those interview situations, friendly, cordial, productive, reciprocal, and collaboratively reduced the relations of power to some extent. Most of the interviews were conducted in places where participants themselves chose to feel relaxed like in open parks and in quiet coffee shops.

The oral interviews for this thesis are thus specific to the trajectory of interaction between the researcher and the researched. In other words, the oral narratives produced in this thesis are historically grounded in the particular contexts of each interview with the research participants. Hence, the directions each narrative took were dependent on the person(s) being interviewed. Of equal importance were the issues we covered, the situations in which the interviews happened, and the collaborative culturally nuanced language of conversations, which altogether, shaped the interview process.

Whilst the language of talk is not analyzed in the following chapter, most of the interviews
were generally conducted in the Standard English language. However, the conversational patterns of the oral interviews with some research participants were conducted using ‘Pidgin English’. Pidgin English, because of its heavy use in some of the oral interviews in this thesis, deserves some further clarification here.

Pidgin English is an informal conversational spoken version of the Standard English that structures words from the socio-historical dialects mixes in Western Africa into the English language. Similar variations of Pidgin English are spoken across the coastal belt of West Africa, even though the pronunciations and accents differ greatly as a result of the heavily heterogeneous mixture of African languages. Nigerian Pidgin English (see Faracas 1996: 2-3), Ghanaian Pidgin English (see Huber 1999: 75-134), and Cameroonian Pidgin English (see Ayafor: 2004: 210-213), were variously used during the conduct of oral interviews with some participants in this thesis.

There were similarities in the spoken Pidgin English, of some of the participants from Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon. As Huber (1999) suggests, these similarities can be traced historically back to the early Creole Afro-European communicative contacts, first with the Portuguese traders in the 15th century, which were later re-lexified when the English presence and influence in the sub-region overtook the Portuguese (also see Faracas 1996). Today, remnants of words from the early Portuguese contact influences are now thought to have been integrated into the English-based Pidgin English (Barber 1993).

In doing ethnographic research interviews, the collective language of talk, which has been described as West African Pidgin English (WAPE for short, see Huber 1999), were employed and encouraged in the conversations with some of the participants. For example, interviewees would utter words like, “I no sabi this place!” meaning, “I don’t ‘know’ this place!” or “I sabi my situation” meaning “I ‘know’ my situation”. Sabi is a commonly used WAPE word, which is originally derived from the Portuguese word Saber, meaning ‘to know’. In other examples, participants would say, “I miss mi pikin” meaning “I miss my ‘small child’. Pikin denotes ‘small child’, and was another commonly used Pidgin English word by some participants. Historically, the word Pikin is also said to have been derived from the Portuguese word Pequeno, meaning ‘little or small’ (see Barber 2000: 260-261).

So, in the oral interviews for this thesis, varieties of WAPE were used by some participants from Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Though the uses of the language were nationally
distinctive, they were however structurally similar. The similarities in the structure of WAPE have been attributed to the close people to people socio-interactions and the sociolinguistic continuity around the Anglo-speaking countries in the sub-region of West Africa (see Lothar & Hans-Georg 2007: 3-5). In the course of developing familiarity, which I see as core to the ethnographic research process, the language of talk during conversation-style interviews was important to approximate the elementary understandings of narrated life-worlds. In other words, by encouraging the use of Pidgin English as a language of conversations with some of my participants, the process has provided me more precise intersubjective understandings of the intricate constructions of narratives by the West African asylum seekers in this thesis.

4.2.2.2 Self-written Narratives:
Autobiographical stories, described here as self-written narratives, are an important part of data collected for this thesis. They are self-written narratives, which some participants themselves volunteered to write instead of participating in oral interviews. The stories were all hand-written in the Standard English language and on topics we had agreed on. The topics covered the general areas of life prior to the events that led to exist from their countries, stories of experiences during the journey to Finland, and experiences since applying for asylum. On the average, most of the hand-written stories retuned to me by all the participants were however only focused on the events prior the flights from their countries. Only a small percentage of the stories covered experiences in Finland. The stories of the journeys to Finland received very little mention. In the autobiographical stories, participants recounted their experiences of events back home that led to their exile. The longest of the self-written autobiographical stories was 3 pages, whereas the shortest was about 2 pages long. Altogether, about eleven hand-written pages of autobiographical stories were compiled for the study.

Self written life-stories, as Laura Huttunen (2005) stresses, can perform two functions. First, self-written stories can perform the primary roles of communication to other people, and secondly, it is also a space for self-reflection (2005: 178). In Eastmond’s (2007) discussion on the representation of life stories, the suggestion is also made that people facing disruptions to their lives and who occupy volatile social positions, reproduce
narrative accounts of themselves which are then ‘storied’, to produce coherence (2007: 250-251). The suggestion similarly echoes Riessman’s (2004: 705) views that stories represented in ‘personal narrative’ selects, organizes, connects, and evaluates meaning for a particular audience. These self-written narratives were often very topically, politically charged. They reflected on how unstable local politics, governmental corruptions, and environmental degradations have in one way or the other, personally affected them. The parts of the self-written narratives that overall described experiences in Finland, focused on personal reflections of being in Finland as self-described political exiles, which were also the told justifications in applying for political asylum.

As I will show in the following chapter, the process of active self-reflection, in the act of telling, was more common in the narratives of participants who had written their own stories. Indeed as Huttunen similarly suggests, the contexts in which the texts in life-stories are produced are also an important part of the overall consideration of the contents of the written stories (ibid).

4.2.3 Transcription, and Coding

The first thing I did after collecting interviews was to start listening to them. Altogether, the longest interview I conducted lasted 130 minutes from which I produced 25 pages of transcribed text. The work of transcription required listening and re-listening for long hours to the recorded conversations mostly because of the language in some of the oral recordings. The ease of telling a narrative in the preferred language of some of the participants reduced the language tension in the interviews but made the process of transcription more challenging. The Finnish language was not used to gather oral narratives because none of the participants could understand the language.

In using narrative analytical techniques and bearing in mind the limited resources available to me for a master’s level thesis, I decided to apply a ‘first pass’ transcription to the oral narratives (see Riessman 2008). Through hours of listening, and by constantly referring to the aforementioned relevant literature references on each national varieties of WAPE, I have translated all the conversations recorded in Pidgin English into the Standard English language. This means that I completely omitted the Pidgin English-based and Standard English talk phonetics, intonations, emphasis, breathing, and interruptions in the
transcriptions. I used my collected field notes to compensate for these omissions and to provide recall to the contexts of each interview. I have found this style to be immensely useful to the presentation of analysis. This way, I have combined observations, ongoing relationships, and conversations overtime with participants, and incorporated these as sources of knowledge.

After transcription, I began the process of coding my data. The use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis or CAQDA, suggests Udo Kelle (2004), now represents a well established part of qualitative methodology (2004: 473-474). I shall not engage here in the debates on CAQDA in academic social research but suffice to say that I found it useful as a tool for building the analysis of my data. The quotes from Riessman below guided how I approached the process of transcribing and coding my data. This also reflects on the form of analysis that I construct throughout the research process.

By our interviewing and transcription practices, we play a major part in constituting the narrative data that we analyze. Through our presence, and in listening and questioning in particular ways, we critically shape the stories participants choose to tell. The process of infiltration continues with transcription, for language is not a “perfectly transparent medium of representation” Riessman (2008: 50).

In applying CAQDA to my study, I fed my transcribed material into the software package The Ethnograph 6.0 (Qualis Research)17. I used the software to build a coding framework and to write memos on topics and themes. The Ethnograph has a special feature for filing memo lists on themes and topics from a coded body of transcript. I constructed active topics from talks and highlighted them to a memo book that links themes together. The software also allowed me to cross reference and make links between topics from different data sources (transcribed interviews, field notes, and other documents). The ability to file and organize thematic materials from different sources was most useful to linking my various sources of data. However, much of the analysis of data was done manually, on notebooks and through the jotting down of notes as soon as the process of thinking formed links with particular parts of the data.

17 The Ethnograph 6.0 (Qualis Research) is qualitative data analysis software available online: http://www.qualisresearch.com/
4.3 Research Ethics

Anne Ryen (2004) makes the note that no matter how well the conditions of the academic work and textbooks were deployed in a research, there is always the need to integrate autobiographical experiences with analytical reflections. I have endeavoured in this thesis to employ a strict code of ethical conduct throughout the entire process of the research. Ethical considerations guided my levels of engagement and detachment whilst doing field work. As Ryen (2004: 231-233) makes clear, this is an issue of particular importance for social researchers. With this in mind, and in relation to the research ethics, I keep the confidentiality and trust of those who gave me permissions to conduct participant observations as well as collect their oral and/or self-written narratives, as most paramount. Therefore, as I shall show in the following chapter, the names and identity of the participants are not included in the text; instead they are simply identified as research participants and numbered therein (e.g. RP1, for short).

I gained the consent of all my interviewees before conducting interviews. No special permission from asylum reception centres was required since the asylum seekers in this thesis agreed to participate individually and on their own volition outside the authority of the reception centres. I am indeed reminded by the words of Steiner Kvale (1996: 10), who stressed on the relevance of ethics at all stages in the research process including field relations and the writing up of the work. Also, the ethical issue in the variations of roles in different settings and situations during data collection is similarly of immense importance to me. They have consequential implications for the relationships that were developed from the encounters in the field. At this stage of the research process, I am fully aware of my role in this study, just as I am aware that researchers do not work in a vacuum. Thus, my approach to the study recognizes the centrality of intersubjectivity to the methodological viewpoint that was developed for this thesis.

I have applied the ethical guidelines from both the British Sociological Association (2004) and the Social Research Association (2003). Together, they have provided guidance and support to the decisions I made in collecting my data, and the analytic techniques I employ in the presentation of analysis for the thesis. The key to the presentation of analysis is that for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality I have not attached any detail that may lead to the personal identification of the persons involved in the research.
This is in line with the statement of ethical practices by the British Sociological Association (BSA) (2004: 5 (34)), which holds that the anonymity and privacy of those who participate in the research should be respected. I also keep as central to this thesis, the ethical guideline that sociologists who are carrying out research, in the process of research, unless otherwise specified, do enter into personal and moral relationships with those they study, be they individuals, households, social groups, or corporate entities (BSA 2004: 2 [10]). My personal experiences during the period of doing fieldwork also enabled me to know and appreciate the kinds of uncertainties and the feelings of daily insecurity, which were present in the lives of my participants. I used the long period of my field engagements with my study’s participants to build a good understanding of the areas and issues which I study, as well as the people who exist within them.

Taking lessons learnt from reading Delamont (2004: 226), I position my research stance here, that through reflexivity, I strive for reliability and validity. In terms of the generalizability of findings, I am reminded by Giampietro Gobo’s (2004) approach, where he stressed that in qualitative research, ‘generalizability concerns structures rather than single social practices, which are only examples of structures’ (2004: 453). The result of a qualitative research process, as similarly articulated by Pertti Alasuutari (1996: 373), rather than generalizing claims, is to achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon investigated.

In the presentation of my analysis, I do not aim to generalize experiences for all cases of asylum seekers in Finland. Rather the analysis and the discussions that follow are historically specific to the social situations examined. The purpose of my study is therefore to contribute to the existing body of works on refugees and asylum seekers in Finland, as well as to provide new insights into the living conditions of those still waiting for asylum decisions.

4.4 Narrative Analysis

‘Stories are part of everyday life and constitute means for actors to express and negotiate experience. For researchers, they provide a site to examine the meanings people, individually or collectively, ascribe to lived experience’ (Marita Eastmond 2007:248).

In a discussion on the literature on narrative analysis, the ‘narrative turn’ according to
Catherine Riessman (2002) has been used across the boundaries of several scholarly approaches (2002: 696). Studies that have examined personal narratives, according to Riessman (2002: 697), take roots in the sociological tradition, which is present in the work of C.W. Mills’ The Sociological Imagination (1959). It was Mill’s sociological imagination that has influenced the view on social research, which intersects biography, history, and society (Mills 1959: 5-8). In this section I discuss some key approaches to narrative research, which includes the structural approach, the interactional approach, the performative approach, and the interpretive approach. I shall then present the understanding of narrative used for this thesis.

The structuralist approach to doing narrative research, according to Vladimir Propp, can be traced, historically, from the field of semiology (Propp 1968:21). The structural approach to narrative then gained more exposure and saw further development in the work of the socio-linguist William Labov (1972). Labov’s structural approach has been mostly applied in narrative discourses to analyze the function of sequences of clauses to the overall narrative (Labov 1997: 5, also see, Czarniawska 2004: 76-78, Riessman 2004: 706). By stressing that narrative accounts must have in them sequences of clauses, Labov (1997: 6-8) defines and describes a sequential clause as ‘a clause that can be an element of a temporal juncture’ (1997: 6). The focal point, therefore, for the structural approach is in the way accounts are told (Labov: 1997:7-8, Riessman 2004: 706-707). With emphasis on the way a narrative is delivered, the structuralist approach to narratives favours the narrative tools, used at different parts of the talk, as the object of study, over the content of the narrative itself.

A different way to do narrative research is the interactional approach. In Riessman’s (2004) analysis, the interactional approach focuses on the representation of speech in the overall presentation of the narrative. The interactional approach, as Riessman (2004) similarly indicates, has been employed in studies that highlight the relationships between speakers in a diverse field setting: in court situations, medical situations, or in psychotherapy offices, where actors engage in organized conversations (2004: 707). The emphasis in this approach, according to Riessman (ibid), is on the conversational flow of the dialogue between the teller and the listener.

The next approach, which is the performative approach to narrative in Riessman’s analysis,
goes beyond a reliance on the word alone (2004: 708). Instead, the approach highlights the following:

- The performance of narrators and their positioning in the story.
- The context and settings in which the narratives are told.
- The subsequent interpretations of those stories, which together constitutes a narrative.

A study that employs the performative approach, says Riessman (2002), works from a social constructionist perspective and therefore sees the reality constituted in the narrative as an active process of truth constructs. The emphasis, suggests Riessman (2002), is less on the verification of facts of lives and more on examining the meanings of events for those in the story. The performative approach shows how ‘meanings’ reflect the context in which the story is produced. Indeed, as Riessman suggests, the emphasis on personal narrative for this approach, is focused on how story tellers ‘interpret the past rather than reproduce the past as it was’ (2002: 705). This approach thus recognizes the fluidity of life events as not fixed in history, but constantly reproduced by subsequent experiences. To emphasize this point, Riessman (2002) reiterates that in personal narratives, which view stories from the performative approach, past events take on new significance in the context of constructing a new meaning to continuity of life in the present.

In the field of irregular migration research, the interpretive approach, which is the final approach to narrative research discussed here, is viewed as important in understanding ‘life in time and places’ (see Eastmond 2007: 249). The interpretive approach is also used in this thesis as useful in illuminating the ways individuals as, ‘experiencing subjects, make sense of violence and turbulent change’ (2007: ibid). The approach takes roots from the phenomenological assumption of Alfred Schutz (1967), which holds that experiences can only be better understood through the expressions individuals use to describe them (Alfred Schutz 1967: 99-100).

Schutz’s contribution (1967), informs the views of intersubjective understandings, in which people develop shared understandings of reality and the ways in which people attempt to make sense of day-to-day encounters. This thesis is thus focused on the understanding of multiple realities, which can be presented in the interpretation of a single life event. To
reiterate this, I follow Riessman’s (2002) analysis, in which she stresses that in the interpretive approach to narrative, there cannot be a singular canonical validation of perspectives (2002: 706). Instead, the suggestion is that this approach makes it possible to study active, self-shaping processes of human thoughts. Hence, for this thesis, the emphasis is on how people use the power of story to reshape their lives.

The use of narrative in qualitative social research, however, has some limitations in its ability to portray experience as Jerome Bruner (1986) points out. The suggestion by Bruner is that the expression individuals give to their stories can indeed be affected by the repertoires available to them in the telling. Hence, the expression given to narratives in accounts of personal experiences may not necessarily convey the story in its entirety as lived. As a result of this limitation, Eastmond (2007) stresses that the accounts of stories should not only be understood as life as lived. Instead, she makes the suggestion that stories should be understood as ‘creative constructions or interpretations of the past, generated in specific contexts of the present’ (2007: 250). Insights from the constructionist viewpoint have been employed in this thesis, which greatly influence the interpretive approach to the presentation of analysis.

I agree with Riessman (2002) that personal narratives, which are employed in this thesis, in the systematic study of experiences, offer a glimpse into lives of the individual studied and how they confront the constraints to their life circumstances. For this reason, my focus in the analysis is to show how the West African asylum seekers in the research give meaning to their life situations through the accounts of the stories they tell. I am primarily interested in personal narratives of experience as told by the asylum seekers. The focus on personal narratives is thus intended to direct the interest of research towards the individual who tells stories of and about their own life experiences (see Riessman 1993:3, 2002: 697, Pentikäinen 2005: 30-31).

By drawing from the literature, I develop for my study, the perspective that combines both the interpretive and the performative approaches to presenting accounts of experiences. The persons included in the research had all expressed experiences of personal hardship as asylum seekers. My presentation of analysis is therefore focused primarily on how the individuals construct meanings through the stories they tell (Riessman 2008: 53-54, 73-76).
5. Analysis: Why are we here? Narratives of Pre-flights and Flights

‘We start out with some sort of canonical expectancies of what the world is like, how things are going to be, and then all of a sudden things happen differently. We try to cope with the peripeteia and to restore a new legitimacy and expectancy in life’ (Jerome Bruner 2002:4).

An effective way of analyzing the range of individual decisions that involves migrating from the country of origin and then seeking international protection from another country is first to apply a research question that specifically addresses the reasons for exile. The focus of this analysis is to show that the reasons for exile directly influence the irregular migration experiences and the stories told therein. To directly do this, I employ Koser’s (1997) description of the ‘asylum cycle’, to my analysis. The asylum cycle as Koser (1997:594) suggests, involves the analysis of the asylum experience, which begins from the country of origin and only ends when asylum decisions are made. My analysis follows the experiences of seeking asylum by presenting narratives of events pre-flight, experience during flights, and then various experiences whilst in Finland, leading to asylum decisions.

The narratives analyzed in this chapter are taken from two primary sources of data; they include oral narratives, collected through conversation-style interviews, and self-written narratives, collected through hand-written autobiographical stories. I then employ my field observation notes to interpret contexts to the narratives, as well as to provide descriptive recollections to the events surrounding some of the stories told. By applying narrative analysis to the thesis, the core process of the following analysis aimed to show how individuals facing volatilities and uncertainties, endeavour to produce continuity through the stories of the past to reflect on the present. The presentation of the following analysis does not represent a complete history or biography of the teller but an extraction of a single life-story or reflections of life as told in relation to particular life circumstances and in the particular context of the questions asked.

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18 With regard to the current debate of whether narratives are the same as stories; in this thesis, they perform the same work for my presentation. So I use ‘narratives’ or ‘stories’ interchangeably throughout this chapter on analysis.
19 For a reminder of my grounding for the use of this method of analysis, I encourage the reader to refer back...
The following analysis is therefore primarily based on recurrent stories by individuals or on reflected episodes of events across a selection of topics by different individuals that share common or similar themes. I then analyze them by constantly using and making references to concepts in the literature as well as referring back to similar findings from other studies. The analysis is therefore structured around topics centred on interwoven themes that sometimes collapse on each other throughout the analysis.

5.1 Narratives of Events Pre-flight

To begin, I shall first analyze the reasons for flights as told by the participants in their narratives. These narratives, generally describe their lives in the country of origin, as it were, prior to the final decisions to flee homes and countries. From the narratives of events pre-flight, I have located in my data that the key reasons expressed by the West African asylum seekers in this thesis for applying for asylum in Finland are namely: politically motivated reasons, reasons of sexual-orientation and persecution, socio-economic reasons, and finally, ethno-religious reasons.

Overall, within the narratives for seeking asylum, the theme of personal loss and victimhood were commonly constructed to describe each reason for seeking asylum. Another common extraction from the reasons for applying for asylum is that, altogether, they reflect on the experiences of social-economic volatilities and political instabilities within the countries of origin of all the asylum seekers in the thesis.20

A participant revealed to me that before fleeing his home country, he practiced political journalism (field notes, August 2009). The following is a section of a hand-written autobiographical narrative, which he presented to me.

“The problem came after the column in my small newspaper was published, in which I publicly shamed some powerful politicians for negligence and corruption. The piece

to my discussion in of narrative analysis in the previous subchapter.

20 Here, I urge the reader to refer back to the discussions in the introduction, in which literature references were used to describe the unstable socio-politically landscape of countries in the region of West Africa.
was about oil spillage in the river, and lakes which are the only source of water for my community. I also wrote on how there are no regulators to look at what the oil and gas companies are doing through oil exploration. The pipelines are old and they are vandalized by local discontent youths every now and then. Also the wastes from the oil and gas activities are not subject to any regulation because our politicians are in the pockets of these companies. The worst part is how they have totally destroyed our water supply, the river, and the surrounding wild life and fishes which is also our main source of livelihood. The oil companies give bribes and they let poorly built oil rigs flow out raw oil just like that. I report the news on the ground, how it affect my people, then they [government officials] go against us.”    (RP1)

Whilst attributing his current predicament to a published article in the column of a local newspaper, RP1’s narrative is focused on the causal issues of environmental degradation and government corruptions, which were also covered in his published column. Corruptions and unchecked regulatory practices are highlighted throughout his story, which went on for about three pages long. In order to underline his direct involvement in political and environmental activism, RP1 uses the narrative frame of “us” to include himself as a victim of the problems he describes, thereby setting himself apart from those he sees as the perpetrators of the ills in his community and country. This is clearly stated when he writes “I report the news on the ground; how it affect my people, then they [government officials] go against us”.

In the latter parts of his writing, RP1 concentrates more on how the issue of political repression has directly affected him.

“I had everything going for me. I had my job which I loved. I had a home which I built from my own sweat. But everything went away as if they never existed. First somehow, our newspaper offices caught fire, and the place burnt to the ground. Then the same fire out of nowhere destroyed my home in the same month. Nobody was arrested or prosecuted for arson. In one month I had lost my job and my home.”    (RP1)

He went on to describe how he had endured punishments and threats to his life from local officials and from people he described as ‘thugs’, as a result of his publications (field notes August 2009). In this self-written narrative, RP1 does not only recount what simply happened to him, but he successfully incorporates different events such as oil and gas explorations, oil spillages into local rivers and lakes, corruptions by both government
agencies and multinational corporations, and the violence done to him, to reflect on the themes of personal loss and victimhood. The way RP1 writes his narrative, overall, is to connect the significance of one event to the other. He presents himself as a target of political harassments and violence, and then shows how the events in his life prior exile, has been consequential to his decision to flee for his life. Within RP1’s story, the narrative theme of loss and victimhood, is expressed as one caused by political persecution.

In a conversational style interview with another participant, the narrative themes of personal loss and victimhood were employed to narrate events leading to the flight into exile. The individual had fled his home country to ‘seek better life elsewhere’ because of the sufferings he had endured due to his sexual orientation (interview, November 2009). He continues here,

“Things changed in my life after I confessed in church that I am a homosexual. The news spread around the whole area like so and I was afraid to go out of my home. I did this because they said they will cure me, but instead all I got was complete shame… nobody will even come near me… In my country they are even making laws to make my life illegal… Some people attack my mother because of this. So I... with my mother, then I plan that I should run away.” - (RP2)

RP2’s story is more personally directed, even though a wider societal intolerance of his fact of existence is narratively used to identify why his sexual orientation was a problem. The unacceptability of his being, by those around RP2 is clearly expressed with “I confessed in church as a homosexual.” By saying this, RP2 is acknowledging how his sexual orientation is a religious sin, which first needed to be openly declared through the religious ritual of church confession, and then cured. The role of religion in RP2’s life is thus narratively employed to show how his homosexuality is a social shame in his country, where there are also ongoing legislations to criminalize his existence. As he further revealed, people around him mocked and threatened him in the streets and once his mother was publicly humiliated at a market place. RP2’s final resolve to flee from this experience was clear as he continues,

“…I had to leave to some where far away from those experiences..., to a place in Europe where I can find those who would respect my rights.” - (RP2)

Central to RP2’s narrative is the issue of personal victimization endured through social
shame, as a homosexual. RP2 also endures the loss of a place to exist and call home in his own country, through the state's legal de-legitimization of his fact of existence. This is clear from RP2's expressed fear that his ability to live peacefully in his own country has been threatened at those two levels, in both the public and private spaces of existence. Through the rejection he experienced from his own community and church, and by the state-controlled legislation against homosexuality, which has threatened his rights to exist, both factors combined, has forced RP2 into exile.

The narrative of personal loss and victimhood is also expressed within the next example from another participant.

“What people don’t understand when they blindly call people like us economic migrants is that they don’t know what it’s like to live in total poverty... I know this thing because I'm myself a victim of poverty..., my younger sister... she died from common tuberculosis because we could not buy medicines or properly care for her... Poverty is a disease that eats you up so bad that you become a small thing... You cannot do anything...you cannot feed yourself... or help your family members who are sick! There were times when I ate only once a day... Sometimes I drink only water and go to bed on an empty stomach... The politicians make life really bad for us because they steal our money and put them in banks in Europe... So why can’t I come to Europe to look for that money!?" - (RP3)

In the above example, the speaker narratively frames the harsh socio-economic condition in his home country to depict his reasons for forced exile. References to abject poverty, hunger, diseases and poor health, the lack of political accountability, and hopelessness, are narratively employed within RP3's story. Together, they help to make sense of his loss, of a 'younger sister', who suffered from a curable disease and died. Thus, being poor and unable to escape the horrors of rampant poverty is expressed by RP3 as causing the ultimate repercussions to himself, and to those dear to him. Within the narrative, the power of intense emotive words is deployed to express a life situation pre-flight, which is rife with socio-economic deprivations and hardships. In this way, RP3 uses the process of telling his story, to justify his reasons for fleeing his country. Then, by saying, ‘they blindly call people like us economic migrants’, RP3 is expressing his sense of awareness of the dominant discourses on forced migration, which may impede on his claim for asylum, as a ‘refugee’. This is because his expressed reason for fleeing his country was to economically
emancipate himself. Indeed, by expressing himself as a victim of poverty and deprivation, RP3 has not positioned his narrative of the events in his life pre-flight to exile within the more discursively dominant, political asylum claim.

In another instance, a participant, in a hand-written autobiographical narrative, expresses politically motivated pre-flight events in his life, which forced his exile from his country.

“As a freelance journalist in [xxx], I worked with my colleagues in a climate of fear. The paper I write for is in opposition to the government so naturally we did not feel safe whenever our weekly publication came out. Being branded by the government as an opposition paper means that everything I and my colleagues wrote were scrutinized as political and every accusations of misappropriation of government funds is seen as personal attack on the people in government. After a while, the paper was banned from circulation, meaning that I and my colleagues had to work from underground. In [xxx] of last year, they closed down our news publication house. After that, I did not only lose my source of income, I knew that my life was similarly in danger… the choice to leave was clear to me when they arrested my news editor, I knew I was next.” - RP4

The story above appears written as an expression to indicate a wider political divide in RP4’s country. Through the assemblages of the various elements that represents the current working and political climate in the narrator’s country, the narrator presents himself as a victim of political repression. In the above example, the expressions of politically motivated victimization are interwoven with RP4’s working environment, which leads to the loss of personal income. Here, a strong political repression has lead to the loss of the ‘source of income’ for RP4, and further harassments and threats forced RP4 into exile. As he said, to describe the seriousness of the events, ‘I knew I was next’. Thus, within the above example, economic and political considerations are narratively constructed to frame the reasons for forced migration. As Adelson (2004) stressed in an analysis of the distinction between politically and economically motivated reasons to migrate, ‘legitimate asylum seekers may have economically motivated reasons for migrating, just as political circumstances might motivate what would otherwise be considered economic migration’ (2004: 2). If Adelson’s analysis is to be followed, then the connection can be made here, between the reasons for exile narrated in the above examples and the receiving states’ official reasons, for possibly denying them asylum or protection when they apply. My data indicates that the boundaries between socio-economic and political reasons for seeking asylum, as expressed by the West African asylum seekers in this study, remains blurred.
Overall, all the autobiographical narratives, were focused on the events and life circumstances pre-flights into exile. The self-written stories were mostly focused on describing political suppressions and violence perpetrated personally against the writers, their family members, and their entire communities. The specifics of these described experiences can altogether be grouped into narratives of ethno-religious violence, inter-communal clashes, and national political divides. Common to all the autobiographical stories are the uses of graphic depictions of loss of homes, the descriptions of trauma, and the accusations of others, mostly perpetrators of these alleged crimes. Some described in them, the loss of primary sources of social networks, which for most participants, is the family. Another factor common within all of the self-written narratives are the uses of terms such as ‘suffer’, ‘pain’, ‘injury’, ‘torture’, and ‘refugee’, to narratively express feelings, memories, and recollections of events prior the forced migrations from homes, communities, and countries.

The significance of all the self-written narratives is that in their representations, they pay more attention to the lives of the West African asylum seekers in this thesis, pre-flight, even though they differ in the expressions given to experiences by all the participants. The fact that they were overall more concentrated on describing the events prior to their decisions to seek asylum, is reflective of the use of the process of storytelling, through the act of writing, to directly address a specific audience. All the participants who wrote their stories felt that describing what happened to them prior any decisions to migrate, takes precedence over subsequent experiences of seeking asylum in Finland. As Huttunen (2005) also suggest, the process of writing one’s story is an embodied practice, and specific to the context of the narrative. The politicized meanings that are contained within all the autobiographical narratives were thus aimed at reiterating the political instabilities in the countries of origin, which pushed them into forced exile, and which, compels the present need to apply for international protections as political exiles.

5.2 Narratives of Experiences during Flights

The narratives of flights follow, because as I shall show in the following analysis, the experiences during irregular migration journeys were directly connected by some participants, to the events prior their forced exile.
From my data, most of the participants in the study did not disclose much about their irregular migration routes or the actual modes of their journeys. Indeed, even amongst those who narrated some of their experiences during flights, there was still a general unwillingness to disclose much detail. As I found, the general unwillingness to disclose actual irregular migration routes grew out of the fear expressed by most that this might affect the final decisions on their asylum. Others feared that they might be legally persecuted due to their irregular migration journeys to Finland. Overall, my data shows that a common theme from the various irregular migration experiences is the loss of migration power and the choices to decide on the desired destination country for asylum.

The following is how some of the participants, initially replied to how they came to be Finland.

“Finland was never where I imagined myself to be in. I know I wanted to get out of [xxx] but Finland is not where I imagined I would end up in…, so the whole process of coming here is something I was not in control of!”    - (RP5)

“I don’t know if I can tell you how the journey went… because I can’t now remember everything, so but I didn’t have any paper or visa, so it was very difficult for me to move and make my way...it was tough!”    - (RP6)

In the first of the two examples, RP5 is explicit about his lack of control over the way he got to Finland. Even though RP5 offers some particular examples of what he lacked during his flight, ‘visa’, he is more evasive or unsure whether to directly address how he came to Finland. In similar subtle ways, both RP5 and RP6 are open to expressing the narrative that they had experienced difficulties and hardships in the narratives of their flights. One interpretation of the unwillingness to disclose irregular migration detail comes from the various fears observed in my data, of the criminalization of the different irregular migration journeys and cross-border routes during flights. My data show that this fear of criminalization of migration journeys is indicative of particular concerns over the rejection of applications for international protection.

However, in a more descriptive narrative of experience during flights, the next narrators are the only two individuals, who disclosed some detail about their migration routes.
“I made my way to Morocco on foot, and sometimes with bus... or with lorry truck. In
that place I met someone who helped me cross. I gave him all the money I have, so he
put me on a plane and told me someone else will wait for me and pick me up there in
Sweden where my friend is. But my brother..., later, I found I was in Russia... I don’t
know how that happened! From there I made my way here, the border people
[Finnish Border Guards] took me and told me I was in Finland, so I apply for
asylum.” - (RP3)

“The thing is, why I wanted to go to Germany is because my only living brother is
there. We have the same story, we left together, but we became separated on the way.
He is the only family I have left so when I lost him I was alone... This happened in
Libya; I was in a camp there... alone for a year until this white-man ...he came and
offered to help us from the camp. My brother phoned me in Libya that he is in
Germany for asylum.... So I wanted to go there to be with him.” - (RP7)

In a follow-up interview with RP7, he expressed to me that he was satisfied with his life in
Libya. It was out of the need to be close to his brother that he decided to continue his
journey to Germany. In doing so, he had mentally prepared himself for some form of
social support from a family member, in his destination country of Germany (interview,
February 2010). However, it is in RP3’s narrative that a key method of migration during
flights, which is smuggling, comes to be mentioned. Indeed RP3 mentions that he made
financial payments to a middle man who promised to help him. Within the same narrative,
RP3 uses the expression of surprise to indicate his bewilderment when he found himself in
Russia, in a country where he absolutely did not intend to be.

In other instances, some participants disclosed to me that they had paid or made promises
to make cash payments to persons who would transport them. These persons were
variously referred to as “the agent”, or “the white-man”, “the man carrying us”, and “the
pastor” (field notes December 2009). These were the common names for migration
smugglers, who had promised to help them through various migration routes. Europe,
irrespective of the particular countries, was the idealized place for this group of West
African asylum seekers, and rarely was a specific country voluntarily mentioned except
when I insisted (field note, December 2009). Smuggling, as a common experience during
the various narratives of flights does not come as a surprise. Indeed as some of the
previous narratives of pre-flight experiences indicate, those who fled into exile, as a result
of threats and violence to their lives or who were victims of persecution and torture,
preferred not to go to the same authorities in their home countries to apply for legal travel authority. Smuggling was therefore the common practice, subtly expressed within the narratives of most participants as means to ensure the flights from their countries into exile (field notes, December 2009).

As can be seen from the above examples, my data shows that in the narratives of experiences during flights by West African asylum seekers, the themes of loss of control and power during irregular migration journeys were commonly expressed by most. This includes those who did not give detail about actual flight experiences.

Overall, I have located in my data that the narratives of the loss of migration power is broadly connected to the decisions of final destination countries and the modes therein, of irregular migration. The construction of the narratives concerning the control of irregular migration shares similarities to the discussions in the work of Koser (2001). The suggestion by Koser is that migration smugglers, who act at times as traffickers, do not always inform irregular migrants in advance where they will be taken. Haven Crawley (2010) makes similar suggestions that irregular migratory choices are made, as she put it, ‘within a narrow range of possibilities which can only be understood in the context of circumstances under which individuals leave their home countries’ (2010: 5). The context of circumstances as I have interpreted them to my data, are mainly the events and circumstances leading to flights from the home country, which directly affects the individual’s ability to control the mode of migration during flights, in a quest for international protection.

I have identified in my data that the pre-flight experiences of the West African asylum seekers in this thesis are expressed through the themes of personal loss and victimhood. My data has also shown that the themes of personal loss and victimhood impacts on the expressions given to the experiences of flights during irregular migration journeys. Within this narrative, the loss of control over migration choices and the power to influence the final destination country is shown to have been greatly diminished during the flights to exile.

The focus of the next subchapter is to analyze how West African asylum seekers in this thesis, narrate their experiences of Finland as a place of refuge, where they have arrived and applied for international protection.
5.3 Narratives of Life in Exile: Finland as a place of refuge

“When they finally give me asylum, I will find a place of my own and I will just quietly settle down there. Look all I want is a peace of mind... Somewhere I can do things and not be afraid that I cannot.” - (RP5)

“The fact is clear; Finland is a safe place for people like me who are running away from bad happenings in the past... I personally did not know anything about the place before I ended up here, but since they accept my application, I feel like... finally someone is listening to my story and thinking whether or not to help me. Even though the system is not good, being here alone is a sign that at least, because of my case, the torture that I suffered, I’m being considered for protection. It is us, who are experiencing the system that only know how we feel.” - (RP6)

A majority of my participants expressed to me the general willingness to settle in Finland. It is however not clear to me whether this was as a result of a progressive feeling of place attachment towards Finland, or mainly due to the primary goal of seeking international protection in the country. Nonetheless, when asked whether participants had feelings of attachments to the Finnish society, a clear majority of responses were negative (field notes, February 2010). In the first example above, RP5 expresses the resolve to settle in Finland when his asylum application is finally decided. Within RP5’s narrative, there is also an implicit construction of Finland as a place of relative peace and freedom, in sharp contrast to the construction of own experiences of life back home. By saying ‘all I want is a peace of mind’, RP5 presently connects past experiences, to his future hopes about Finland as a place ‘he can do things and not be afraid’. In the second example, RP6 is explicit in stating that ‘Finland is a safe place’, for a person in his situational position. RP6, in constructing his narrative, explicitly locates himself as a victim of persecution by connecting in his story, his experiences of torture, to his present need for international protection in Finland. Within both narratives, past events are contrasted with the present situation, whilst narratively constructing what could be achieved in the future. In other words, by connecting their past experiences to their current circumstances, RP5 and RP6, use their narratives to express their feelings towards Finland as a place where they could find relative peace and security, hence refuge.

The construction of Finland as a place of refuge, by most participants in the study, is an
expression towards Finland as a place to find lasting peace and security. My data indeed shows that most West African asylum seekers do not have any prior knowledge of Finland as a place to seek international protection. In the next example, RP5 links earlier events of losing control over his journey to Finland, to explain his first encounters within the Finnish border.

“The moment I knew I was in Finland is when the customs people told me after they started questioning me about where I’m from and things like that... I told them I’m applying for asylum.” - (RP5)

The narrative of losing migration power, which is implicit to RP5’s example above, does indeed correspond with my data that the intended final destination countries for asylum seekers are often those other than previously envisioned. From the total eleven participants in my study, only one individual disclosed to me that he intended to come to Finland because of an invitation by a relative, who already lived in the country (field notes, December 2009).

The loss of power to control irregular migration journeys is core to the understanding of the experience of liminality by most of the asylum seekers in the thesis. As I shall further show, during the process of waiting for asylum, asylum seekers in Finland are usually housed either in asylum holding facilities or in asylum reception centres. Most in my neither had prior knowledge about living and surviving in Finland, nor did they have access to social networks. Foe them, the process of waiting for asylum, and not knowing when final decisions will arrive, meant that they occupied a liminal state, within these reception centres.

The experience of liminality during the period of waiting for asylum is even more profound for some in my study who, after weeks of temporary housing in the Helsinki metropolitan area, were later relocated to remote and geographically isolated locations of asylum reception centres. To these individuals, as with all in my study, this asylum procedure of relocation symbolized a form of social exclusion, which is symbolic of the entire asylum process. The analysis in the next section examines the impacts of the practices of the relocation of asylum seekers on the experience of liminality.
5.3.1 The Locations of Asylum Reception Centres

“Not knowing anyone here makes the whole thing even worse. The people I meet in the centre are nice but they help with those kinds of things that they know. Sometime I just sit on my bed for hours and not come out of my room for days because there is nobody... there’s nobody I know in this town that I can talk to that will understand me. I feel like I don’t belong anywhere” - (RP8)

In my data, I have found that that the experiences of social isolation can heighten the feeling of liminality for individuals waiting for asylum. As indicated, upon the start of the asylum process, individuals are dispersed to reception centres in various municipalities and towns to wait for final decisions on their applications. Some of these reception centres are located in remote and sparsely populated areas with very few immigrant populations\(^21\). This was the common impression I got from participants who did not live in reception centres within the Helsinki metropolitan area (field notes June 2010)\(^22\).

The locations of the reception centres were interpreted by asylum seekers in terms specific to their own situations. For example, some participants who were moved to reception centres located in places they had expressed to me as geographically isolated described their inabilities to socially participate within their new reception towns (field notes may, 2010).

Some of the towns in Finland, where reception centres are located, also do not have a long history of receiving asylum seekers. Overall, five out of the eleven participants in the thesis, were housed in asylum reception centres located outside the Helsinki metropolitan area. From my data, I found that asylum seekers’ social connections to the new dispersal locations of their reception centres are not considered in the decisions to re-locate them, neither do they have a say in the official decisions to relocate them (field notes, May 2010).

The feeling this creates for some of the participants in my study is expressed above by RP8. In the example, the themes of ‘not knowing’, and ‘not belonging’, are present in how RP8 expresses his feelings of isolation and the experience of liminality. RP8 feels from his reception place, the sense of alienation towards the people in his immediate surrounding

\(^{21}\) See appendix 1 for a picture of the current locations of asylum reception centres in Finland.

\(^{22}\) In my analysis, I describe the Helsinki metropolitan area to include the cities of Vantaa and Espoo.
environment. RP8 is one of a few participants in the study whom I came in contact with in the Helsinki area before he was relocated to a different reception centre, somewhere in central Finland. Within his narrative, RP8 uses the narrative imagery of himself sitting on his bed for hours and days, to express the feeling themes of loneliness, passive time wasting, and the lack of role in determining his fate. Within the space of a room in the reception centre, RP8 feels himself temporarily displaced because, as he indicates, there is no one he knows he can talk to, and who will understand him. This resonates on how his experience of liminality as he states, ‘I feel like I don’t belong anywhere’, which also indicates a suspension of life activity until he feels a need to move on in his life.

Much like RP8, all the participants in the study, were unanimous in their stories of how significant knowing the activities in their surroundings was to them. Knowing about the places and the people, where one resides was unanimously expressed as vital to forming attachments to local places and the surrounding social settings. As one said, describing the frustration and loneliness they felt in the reception centres, “it is like living in the middle of a cold wilderness” (interview February 2010). The speaker used the symbolism of someone abandoned in a cold desert to capture his feelings and anxieties. The weather in Finland also seemed to have taken most of the participants by surprise as some used this as a euphemism to describe their current disillusionments with the slow nature of the process; “The darkness is so thick as if my future will never be bright again” (interview February 2010).

For some participants, like the next narrator, the relocation to a remote and largely unfamiliar town of asylum reception centre is employed to describe his feelings of isolation and loneliness. Within the narrative, RP7 connects his present feeling of social isolation to past experiences of loss of his primary source of support which is his family and friends.

“I was in Helsinki for sometime before they called me out and told me about the move... I was surprised but it is not something I even protested or showed any interest in... I’ve been there since nine months now doing nothing... For me this place resembles the same things I’ve lost..., my belongings, my friends..., no brother or sister... no father, no mother; just me and me alone.” (RP7)

RP7’s feeling of uncertainty towards the decision to relocate him is clear from the expression of surprise in the narrative. Indeed, I have found in my data that the uncertainty
surrounding the relocation and dispersal of asylum seekers to different reception centres heightens the experience of liminality. Hynes (2006: 184) in her analysis, makes similar suggestions that the relocation of asylum seekers from one reception centre to another in different dispersed locations means asylum seekers in exile occupy a liminal space both socially and geographically. For RP7, the period of liminality has continued from experiences prior his arrival in Finland. The past is effortlessly linked to the present as a way to connect similar experiences of loss of a sense of belonging and the experience of liminality.

Previous experiences of broken trust as a result of irregular migration experiences were also used by some in my study to narratively construct the sense of unfamiliarity with local cultures in the new reception towns (interview, February 2010). This meant that some harboured transferred suspicions of people around them. As I show in the next two examples, the narrative frames of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ were explicitly and implicitly employed by RP7 and RP8, to describe initial reactions to relocations to new towns of reception.

“Look I know why I’m here in this centre ...It is not because the people there like me, or like they put me there to live happily in a peaceful and quiet environment. The thing is because of asylum, so it is just part of the process, so that is why they put me somewhere, where I can’t even feel like I’m a part of anything.” - (RP7)

“There is this transfer of fear when you come from an unstable country to this very quiet and sleepy place ... It remains in you for a long time. Until that fear dies away, it will still be there, everyday to remind you where you belong... I know some Finns that are very nice, the people in the centre, they try their best... but when I’m alone in the street..., the way the people [locals] are looking at us bring me to fear, they just rush past us... as if we are not there, ... so I prefer to stay in the centre where I can relate to people around me.”

- (RP8)

Like RP7, some in my study expressed their feelings about their relocations and the reception centres themselves, as mere transitory places, where they would live, until their asylum claims were decided. In Malkki’s (1997) study, the suggestion is also made that the refugee camps were considered as liminal spaces where the fact of living in those camps, resonates with the status of being refugees. From RP7’s narrative, the asylum process, itself, can be thought of as creating the experience of liminality. As RP7 states, being
geographically placed ‘somewhere’ to wait for asylum, simply indicate to him a social categorical positioning, which only helps to remind him that he is yet, not ‘a part of anything’, hence occupying a liminal space in time and in place.

In the second example, even though the particular episode RP8 narrates was from his own personal experiences, he nevertheless employed the terms, “us” and “we”, to evoke a collective and shared sense of social positional solidarity, with all the asylum seekers in the same geographical and social positional location. His tone of narration, of a collective liminal association of solidarity, was a common and recurrent theme amongst the participants, who resided in places they had no feelings of attachments to. In both examples, the individuals themselves feel out of place, and alienated in their asylum centre reception towns, just as they narratively interpret the asylum period as an experience that places them within a classified social position. This experience has also heightened for them, the feeling of spatial isolation in terms of geographical dislocation, and the experience of liminality induced by the asylum process itself.

5.3.2 Narratives of Countering Isolation and Liminality

I have located in my data that daily frustrations with the long asylum process and the social isolation that limits social interactions, influence the common experience of liminality for the asylum seekers in the research. For example, the experiences of geographical isolation were variously connected by participants living in dispersal places that meant little to them other than for the purpose of waiting for asylum decisions (field notes, June 2010).

As RP8’s previous example suggests, the experience of social and geographical isolation is a major source of trepidation for most of the West African asylum seekers who feel no sense of community with locals in their asylum reception dispersal towns. In a bid to find solace in a perceived hostile community, RP8 expresses how he retreats into the premises of the reception centre where he feels he can relate with others sharing similar concerns as he. Corfield (2008:71) similarly suggests dispersing individuals to isolated places leads to a climate of solidarity amongst people who share the experience of place-making in communities where they have no social or cultural bonds. Some in my study, found it impossible to make useful social contacts within the new communities where their
reception centres were located (Interview, August 2010).

From my data, I have located two narratives that can be interpreted as counter to the expressed feelings of social isolation by the participants, and the observed asylum process influenced experience of liminality. These are contained in the narratives of gaining power to relocate or move to other places of choice within Finland, and in the narratives of participation in the asylum process itself. In the next two examples, the speakers use the power of their narratives to express where they hope to reside and why.

“Somewhere like Helsinki is the place I feel I can come to, to start how I will settle down…I strongly believe that I will feel better living there…when I came down to Helsinki sometime ago, I met a sister from ‘home’ who introduced me to this pastor so I try to come at least once in a month to attend his church service… You see, faith is the only thing that can keep you going in this place…, so I think if you ask me where I will like to live in Finland; Helsinki will be good places to start because I don’t even have any friends in [xxx]…the people around don’t make me feel like I’m welcomed to live there.”    - (RP5)

“I’ve been looking for a place where I can rent in Helsinki or in Vantaa... So far nothing available but someone I know is helping me search for a place...It feels good just thinking I can one day have my own place… That is what I need now..., he contacted someone he knows in Helsinki, but the money to pay is a big problem even if I find a place of my own... the person will let him know at the end of the month, so that I can move out of the centre because if I can find a room in Helsinki, it’ll be easier for me to move here.”    - (RP9)

Through their narratives, RP5 and RP9 express their hopes of relocating themselves from their current dispersal towns to a place of their choice. They also reflect on the possibility to rent apartments for themselves, even though the likelihood of this happening still appears to be farfetched. Within both narratives, the efforts to find own living accommodations, and the processes of soliciting help through social associations, were examples of countering liminality. Overall, feeling expressed within the narratives of RP5 and RP9 is the common desire to find areas of social inclusions either through housing or through being associated with other residents of similar national and cultural backgrounds.

All the five participants in my research, who were residing in geographically isolating asylum reception centres, disclosed similar desires of relocating themselves to areas where they could access familiar national and ethnic communities as a counter narrative to their
existential experiences of liminality and isolation. These participants also expressed their feelings of social detachment and loneliness within their asylum reception centres (field notes, August 2010). Again, in the example above, RP5 uses the occasion of encountering a ‘sister from home’, to express why he strongly feels the need to relocate to Helsinki. By all accounts, this was a good contact for him as he similarly expresses gaining further contacts in the process; a pastor, and a church. Within the narrative of making meaningful contacts, RP5 expresses rekindling his faith, which he describes as the ‘only thing’ that ‘keeps’ him going. By identifying in his narrative the significance of his social contacts to his faith, RP5 expresses the attainment of social and spiritual support, which he narratively employs to counter his feeling of liminality.

RP9 similarly describes how a contact from Helsinki is currently helping him to find a place in the metropolitan area where he hopes to rent an apartment for himself. In both instances, it is clearly the case that social contacts with others, is a much desired goal by both individuals. Form the expression given to how the contacts were made; it is also clear that they were not within the current locations of their asylum reception centres. Through the making of social contacts, RP5 and RP9, explicitly identify in their narratives a sense of attachment to the Helsinki metropolis, as a place they envision to someday ‘move ‘and ‘relocate to’.

In the next two examples, I shall show that the narratives of experiencing relationship and continuity can be a counter to the experience of liminality.

“In the centre [reception centre], it is not important who you are or which country you’re from… once you find yourself in this place, other people will determine your fate…I see it like we’re all in the same problem., I share things with my roommates in the centre, and I feel lucky because at least we can get along as good friends. One is from Iraq and the other is from Sri Lanka. We have very different backgrounds but still, I don’t have any problems connecting with their life history because at the end, the fact that we’re seeking asylum together is the mighty issue that is tying us down to this place.” - (RP7)

“I’ve a friend from Morocco in the centre. We go to the gym regularly together and just last month, we found this indoor place for swimming, so we come here to sometimes swim and just relax... we’ve been through a lot together, his story is even worse than mine, but no matter how bad, no single story can be the same. We both experienced hardships and suffered differently but we belong to that group of people who have always managed to survive through difficulties… This is something I’ve
learnt from him. It was here in Finland that we know each other, and personally... just knowing there's also someone here that I can hang out with and not feel like I'm alone with my problems is a big help.” - (RP8)

Interpersonal bonding through a shared sense of a common experience of the asylum process is common to the way of remaking and experiencing friendships. Both RP7 and RP8 express the continuity of a shared sense of history and experience to identify themselves with others, who occupy a similar social positional place. As the above examples also indicate, the associations with others in the same social position are expressed as vital to ensuring a sense of continuity, where individual who share common experiences in the past construct social bonds. Continuity of past life activities is expressed within the above narratives through the sharing of stories and through the restart of old activities like going to the gym and swimming. In this sense, the expression of forms of continuity, have assumed the space as a direct counter to the experience of liminality.

On many occasions, the breaches of their trusts, in their home countries, and also from others who took advantage of their vulnerability during their irregular migration journeys, were constructed to reflect on the opinions about those who will decide their asylum applications. This made the issue of trust, in the process of experiencing relationship; occupy an extra level of importance to all the West African asylum seekers in the study. Through the following examples, I shall show why and how the issue of trust is important.

“You know, I met a lot of people who have promised to help me get to safety... I did not know them personally but I trusted them and I tell you, it's God’s grace that I’m here today ... So for me it is important to know something about who the person is who will be representing me... If I know them and they know me, then there’s more confidence that I can relate to them and they won’t be impatient with me... I just think that because these lawyers that they give us have done this so many time before that they don’t even care to listen... if they are so good how come many people don’t get asylum in Finland?” - (RP2)

The feeling of mistrust of the asylum process itself is, for example expressed within RP2’s narrative. He employs previous experiences of mistrust and powerlessness over his irregular migration experience, to express his anxiety and scepticism towards the prospects of receiving a state assigned legal aid. The concern expressed in the example above by RP2, is one of many worries expressed by some of the individuals in my study, whose asylum
cases demanded that they needed legal aid. In the next example, RP2 expresses in his narrative, the feeling of uncertainty over the asylum process and the efforts to counter this feeling.

“I know people who have been here for years and don’t even know what will happen to them yet... One of my roommates in the centre is going to appeal his decision... I can’t say for sure when mine will come, but it is only through my lawyer that I get some information... or advice on what to do in the mean time. You can just be there for up to six months and you will hear nothing..., not even a single thing about your case... the officials from the centre will say they don’t know anything yet about your case…, So, sometimes I go to the office by myself to find out what is going on. But all I hear is that this thing will take some time so I should go and be patient and just wait!” - (RP2)

Through citing instances of others who are faced with similar situational circumstances, RP2 directly addresses in his worries over the inherent problem of uncertainty during his long wait for asylum. By saying, ‘I can’t say for sure when mine will come’, RP2 expresses how he identifies himself with others who, like him, are not aware of the current state of the asylum process. It is also clear within RP2’s narrative that other people’s situations are interpreted to construct the frustration he experiences in his own case, which he expresses by saying, ‘all I hear is that this thing will take some time so I should go and be patient and just wait!’

Overall, a clear majority of the participants in my study, like in the example above, expressed similar desires to acquire their own legal representations instead of the ones assigned to them through the asylum procedural process. Scepticism and the lack of trust were commonly expressed by most participants towards officially assigned legal representation.

From my data, I have located two interpretations for the desires to find own legal representations. The first interpretation is the need for volatile individuals who experience liminality, to feel a sense of participation through being involved in the asylum process whilst they wait for decisions. Secondly, the need to participate in the process is not unconnected to the apparent loss of power and their own-role during irregular migration journeys. Indeed, most of the participants in my study have expressly linked their experiences of sufferings and hardships prior and during irregular migration to exile, to
their experiences of liminality during the entire asylum process (field notes, August 2010). The various efforts to survive and cope whilst the asylum process persists, constitutes the following analysis.

5.4 Informal social networks and Belonging in a Temporal Context

I have identified in my data that through the expressed sense of participation in the asylum process itself, some participants have endeavoured to resist the experience of liminality. Sourander (2003, 2007) engages with similar discussion in his analysis, by suggesting that for most asylum seeker families living in culturally detached asylum reception places, the experience of social isolation and social marginality is made more prominent by the expressed feeling of powerlessness and boredom during the asylum process.

In my study, whilst some participants through the power of narratives, try to counter the experience of liminality, there were others who made efforts to survive and cope through involving themselves in activities within the limited social areas of informal social networks. The following analysis draws on data from my own ethnographic research, from which I show what constitutes informal social networks for West African asylum seekers in Finland, and how in the process of participation, a sense of belonging can be achieved for individuals facing volatilities and uncertainties about their lives.

Being involved as Prus (1996) suggests, ‘denotes the sequencing of people’s participation in settings’ (1996: 153). Following Prus’ outline of the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of involvements, the following narrative analysis focuses on the processes of participation within the specific social settings of informal social networks. The emphasis is to show how and why participants expressly internalized particular engagements of experiencing positive social bonds with others, to developing a sense of belonging as counteractions to the experience of liminality.
5.4.1 Being involved through religious activities

“My trust is in God... I could not have come this far without God’s help. I have since renewed my faith in God and that is why I believe he will not let me down.” - (RP11)

In the process of collecting ethnographic data for this research, I found that most of the participants in the study have at one point or the other, described themselves as Christians. Participants’ self descriptions as Christians and the practices of Christianity occurred in interviews and during the period of participant observations. Overall, participants from Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and Côte d'Ivoire described themselves as Christians. Only one participant from the Gambia said he was a Muslim (field notes, July 2009). Due to my limited access to Muslim organizations in Finland, the ethnographic research was focused on the majority of my participants who described themselves as Christians.

“I ’m not a Jehovah witness but I first met some of their members when they came to our centre. They came to me, to my room and spoke to me and we discussed my problems and how my steadfast faith in Jesus Christ will protect me through these dark days....since then, they've [members from Jehovah witnesses church] been coming to see me every now and then…the visits keep me busy…so I also ask like how I can find work or something like that to keep me busy. Sometimes they take me to show me places in town. They have been very helpful to renew my spiritual faith... from that I even met my current lawyer through the contact number that one of them gave to me to try.” - (RP5)

Within RP5’s narrative is the telling of a process of reinvolvement in religious devotion. To reengage himself in the practice of his faith, RP5 is recruited by members of a Christian religious group, which he explains he did not belong to prior Finland. RP5 expresses the importance of the visits by faith groups as not only important for the continuation of his spiritual faith whilst in Finland. The visitations are also important to developing social contacts as well as gaining social and emotional supports. When RP5 says ‘the visits keep me busy’, within the statement is the recognition of the profoundly important place of religious involvements to counter the experience of loneliness and boredom.

Just as in the example above, other individuals in my study have also disclosed that the regular visits to their reception centres from outside groups and other volunteer helpers are immensely important to developing social contacts. It is however the contacts with
members of religious organizations that most participants expressed as immensely vital, due to the role of religion in their lives. A participant disclosed to me that members of a faith group took him and others from the reception centre, on excursions to parks, museums, and other places of recreation and relaxation (field notes, April 2010). As he explained, this experience provided him the means to ‘venture out’ of the immediate vicinities of the reception centre into those specific places where as he said, ‘Finnish people go to relax’ (interview with RP11).

From the various stories of re-involvements within religious activities, my data shows that being involved denotes for asylum seekers, participation in social settings within specific places and locations where informal social networks help foster a sense of belonging. My data also shows that for most West African asylum seekers, who have expressed the loss of their own social networks due to the pre-flights and flights experiences, the re-involvement in religious devotions whilst in Finland, is a primary source of remaking social network. Data from the following analysis are mainly extracts from my ethnographic field observations in two churches.

In January and April of 2010, I followed two participants on separate occasions to church services in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The general atmospheres within both churches were of a social gathering, even as religious devotions were prominent amongst those attending the church services. The churches I attended with the two participants mostly consisted of a mixed congregation of people including those of African, native Finnish, and other backgrounds. For the participants that I followed, on both separate occasions, there were opportunities to meet with other African residents in Helsinki, or with persons with whom they shared similar ethnic, national or linguistic associations. These occasions were unanimously expressed as good situations and opportunities for positive social bonding (field notes, January and April 2010). In practice, the attendance of church services provided for some asylum seekers the opportunities to establish associations with others. Once informal associations were established, members of the church congregation, including my two participants, engage in the process of making personal contacts with individuals. Interactions and exchanges of all sorts also occurred during walks around the church premises in which the telling and sharing of experiences were predominantly the features of conversations (field notes, January 2010).
The participants that I followed, in later conversations, disclosed to me that they gained new contacts and even acquired some phone numbers of new associates, as a way of prolonging their associations (field notes, January 2010). The churches I visited with the two participants were of the same Christian church denomination that they had belonged to prior to their arrival in Finland. The identification with the physical spaces within and outside the church building, and the familiarity attached to this as a place of worship, were vital to remaking the sense of continuity for both participants.

The church premises had provided the social space, within which both participants, found a ready affiliation with a socio-religious community. As I observed on separate occasions, the remaking of continuity, which was attached to the church became even more concrete after both asylum seekers officially were registered as members of the church. This act, effectively, made them new members of the church’s congregation (field notes, April 2010).

To the participants, the making of membership, within the socio-religious settings, was not only useful an opportunity for establishing a sense of belonging, but also for the achievement of emotional security as counter to the experience of liminality. Through experiences and practices, within socio-religious places, I have identified from my data that a sense of belonging for West African asylum seekers in Finland is constructed. A key observation occurred when a participant, during the routine call for prayers for new church members, stepped forward into the midst of supportive others, who placed their hands on his body, and offered prayers for him (field notes, April 2010).

I could not interview the participants immediately after the church services, but in the weeks that followed, I conducted separate interviews with them. Individually, I asked both participants on how they felt about the experiences of the church services they participated in.

“It was the hand of God that led me there... It was so spiritually fulfilling after everyone placed their hands on me to offer prayers on my behalf... It was as if suddenly, the weight in my head was lifted... I did not know when I started to cry, but it was the Holy Spirit that was moving in me, because I felt so light in my head.”

- (RP3)

“I don’t have home or anything I can call my own now, but whenever I’m in church, I feel more relaxed... I feel okay with myself because the people I meet there are so
welcoming, and they have taken me in as one of them... just the simple thing of singing and worshiping God together makes me feel in my mind like everyone there is sharing their time with me.” - (RP6)

Through being involved in church activities, RP3 and RP6 express the internalization of their experiences within religious practices with profoundly personal terms. Implicit to their reflections is the expressions of remaking belonging within religious practices, as a way to survive the dilemmas of their own situational circumstances. Even more profound for them, was the sharing of their personal burdens with others who were willing to provide them the emotional support for achieving the feeling of personal security. In a discussion on the relevance of spiritual and cultural traditions for immigrants, Tiilikainen (2003a) makes the note that increased observance in religious practices and devotions are necessitated by the need to preserve one’s own cultural identity and religious traditions (2003a: 61-63). Valtonen (1997) in her analysis, similarly suggest that participation in religion has in it, the sense of continuity as the inclusive association helps to form cultural links with the past. From my data, the inclusive association found within religious practices and associations were important to all the participants who faced anxieties due to the uncertainties about their futures.

In other studies, the uses of religious meetings as resources for integration and structural adaptation for immigrants in Finland have been studied, and its effectiveness to breaking integration barriers, have been thoroughly appraised by Tuomas Martikainen (2004, 2009). Religious based activities, as similarly suggested by Valtonen (1997: 74) can be an important way of exercising collective participation and the remaking of identities in the new country of immigration.

I interpret these suggestions to my research observations, and expand on them here, that participation in religious activities, for West African asylum seekers existing within a temporary immigration context whilst waiting for asylum, enables a space for achieving the sense of belonging. From my research data, a sense of belonging is also located in those instances, where the particular social settings within specific places, allow for participants the expressions of meaningful social roles and emotional security. These instances are further analyzed in participations within other social locations and social settings such as ethnic grocery shops, performing sporting activities, and sustaining one’s own family roles.
5.4.2 Socio-Cultural Familiarity within African-Owned Grocery Shops

All the participants in the study, who did not reside in the Helsinki metropolitan area, made it a common but financially challenging practice to make long train journeys to Helsinki. The reason for this was to get more contacts or to have prearranged meetings with already known contacts.

The main draw to Helsinki, as I found, was through information sharing (field notes, March 2010). By travelling from other asylum reception centres to Helsinki, participants believed that they were more likely to make contacts with other foreign born residents of Helsinki, with whom they may share similar ethnic, linguistic, or national histories (field notes, March 2010). This feeling was also expressed here by the next narrator. Whilst in Helsinki, some participant showed me some grocery shops owned by other African residents in Helsinki. These participants told me that they did most of their shopping for food items that originate from their home countries. As I also observed in the shop, buying food from home was not the major reason we visited the shop (field notes, March 2010). I had an interview with one of the regular visitors to Helsinki, a day after following him into one of the grocery shops.

“I come to Helsinki, to the shop in [xxx] to buy food items... The things are expensive but mostly I come here to sit and talk to people. Nobody comes to drive you away or look at you like you are a thief... When you look around people treat you as equal. I can stay here and talk for as long as I want and nobody here has ever forced me out or asked me to leave...Even the smell of the food is enough to remind me that I can feel at home here [in xxx shop]...some of the things I see here is almost like I’m buying food at home” - (RP2)

As RP2 admits, from the actual buying, ‘the things are expensive’. The financial burden notwithstanding, being in a place where he hoped to develop the sense of home feeling through the process of buying familiar food items, was the social exchange he sought from that occasion. In a way, through being in the African-owned grocery shop, RP2 is able to express the connection he feels to the people within the place. A construction of ethnicity and cultural familiarity is achieved through the food items he purchases in the shop. The process of buying foods in a grocery shop in Helsinki is positively compared by RP2 to familiar practices of ‘buying food at home’. Within the narrative, RP2 is constructing the socio-cultural significance of achieving a home-culture as the benefit of being there.
For the individual who views his personal state as volatile, as a result of the temporary context of living as an asylum seeker in Finland, the kind of social capital found in having a personal relationship with specific social places is important. The process of achieving forms of ethnic and community identifications within the African-owned shops are examples of momentary social links, which constitute a profound form of social support for some in my study. Mustonen (2008: 33, 67) also attest to this in her study, that access to various forms of social support was the most important need for asylum seekers in the reception centres who could not make contacts outside the reception environments. Similarly, Ann Game (2001) also made the observation that the feeling of belonging is often realized from how specific places can perform the roles of the catalysts for individual feelings of home-coming.

Furthermore, the feeling of home, suggests Huttunen (2000: 179) is emotionally loaded and involves the bodily experience of place and space where feelings of familiarity are evoked. This was noticed with some other participants who made frequent visits to other ethnic grocery shops in the Helsinki area. The exchanges within these shops as I observed, went beyond mere business transactions. The exchanges of conversations with other shoppers were mostly in the languages that participant called ‘home tongue’, or expressions with ‘pidgin english’. This process was for some useful to the re-establishment of familiar routines through the uses of own languages, the sharing of stories surrounding different food items, the ways of preparing them back home, and the different kinds of local dishes available in Finland (field notes, June 2010).

### 5.4.3 Participations through sports

Asylum seekers in Finland housed in asylum reception centres, are generally free to engage in various forms of recreational activities if they choose to do so. They are encouraged to do so, as a way of relieving boredom and generating participation in their places of reception. Whilst most in my study variously expressed that they could only develop new acquaintances from relations formed within asylum reception centres, participation in sports was an avenue that ensured for some, the possibilities to form social links with people outside the reception centres. As noted, my study involved only male participants; whether or not gender influenced the observed high value given for sports is unclear to me.
What is clear is that the majority of participants in the study told me that they had either played football prior their arrivals in Finland or were ardent fans of the sport.

Also considered for this claim is the age distribution of the participants. The average age, as previously mentioned, was 32 years. In addition to these, the overall response in interviews, to the preference of watching sports as a mode of relaxation, were generally positive. The following analysis describes how the kind of social capital gained from participation in sport acted as an important resource for collective and individual capital for this group.

Those who were housed in the Helsinki metropolis, expressed having knowledge on where to either relax in parks, or to play or watch football (field notes June 2009). Four of my participants had played football more than once with local Finnish youths in their reception neighbourhoods in Helsinki. Three others had played in football teams organized for refugees, and others of immigrant and Finnish backgrounds (field notes June 2009). I went along on some occasions to watch and participate in organized football games in the summer of 2009. The football event was organized by a local group in the area. The organizers of the event openly promoted it as a ‘social festival,’ to celebrate the diversity of nationalities amongst all groups in the area. At the local level, the argument can be made that participation in sports can be an effective way of introducing asylum seekers to their local communities, as well as increasing social bridging through increased personal contacts between asylum seekers and their local neighbourhoods. This was perhaps a good reason why organizers of the football event made it more of a social occasion than strictly playing football. As I observed from the three who participated in the games, football did not only represent a way to create personal relationships with the surrounding environment, but it also created a way for the performance of social continuity through the expressions of own skills.

Some of the participants even went as far as narratively redefining themselves, in a bid to resisting the discourses associated with their socially placed positions, as asylum seekers. Here, a participant told me, “I’m not merely an asylum seeker person, I was already a professional player before this thing started” (interviews, August 2009). He achieved the development of his self image by identifying himself as a socially valuable actor, as a professional footballer, who possessed skills and could contribute. Also, like the previous individual, another participant in the game of football was more interested in expressing his
self image, rather than expressing greater place attachments to the wider community.

“When I’m on the pitch I don’t want to be anywhere else. This pitch is home away from home for me, because here, I can express myself, as you saw, I have talent with this ball. This is one of the things I like about Finland. They provide these things [sports facilities] for everybody, so like now, I believe this thing, that this is the country where my future dreams as a footballer can come true.” - (RP10)

Whilst RP10 express in his narrative, how much he likes being in Finland because of the opportunity to practice his skills, he is nevertheless careful to explain his attachment to the sporting activity itself – football. The game of football is a sport which requires collective efforts through individual roles. The roles and responsibilities assigned to each member can generate in a football game, forms of individual recognitions of talents, skills, and leadership. Through belonging in a football team and through the performances of social roles within a game, the process of attributing quality to self, were employed to resist the experience of liminality. Thus by saying in the example above, ‘I have talent with this ball’, RP10 narratively repositions himself to fight the social positional place, ascribe don him by the asylum process, as an asylum seeker. Through the expression of individuality, self-esteem as a strategy for coping, was produced not only by him, but this was similarly observed in the ways others, like him, acted on their new roles during and after the football games (field notes, July 2010).

There were however other asylum seekers who complained that they were entirely depressed, as I got in the next response to a question concerning playing sports and other leisure activities.

“Well I’ve played football before. I used to have the energy to play when I was at home. But now things are different, I can still play but I just don’t have the energy. Football is something that make me happy...but for some time now my mood is just too low to even want to play...because I enjoy football, but when I start to think I’m enjoying myself, it makes me sad because I think about my situation and my people back home. So I’ve not played.” - (RP7)

Others, like in the next example, found accessing sports venues outside the reception centres difficult since. As RP8 explained, he did not know enough about local places for recreation in their asylum towns.
“I’ve not ventured out too much to go out alone and start looking for where to play football, if that is what you’re asking. Sometimes when I say to myself maybe I just want to go and watch people playing in the field, but even that, I don’t know where to go.” - (RP8)

5.4.4 Male Gender and Transnational Family Roles

The study that consisted of all male participants also opens up questions about the place of gender in the general consideration of adaptive strategies for coping and the expressions of dealing with long-term uncertainties. In the different dimensions of individual characterization of stories, the following analysis shows how male narrators attribute meaning to their situations and the attempts made to give meaning to them. For example, in an interview, a participant made the following comments dealing with the challenges of belonging, “I’m a man, and as a man, my place is to keep struggling no matter the circumstance.” (Interview July 2010). The important note in the example above is the narrative construction of a male figure, to perform a characterization of a male self-image that exhibits resolute power and resilience. Being a man was for the interviewee an important asset, which he narratively employs to construct and achieve a self image for dealing with his situational dilemma (field notes July 2010).

Other participants did not use their gender openly as a way to express any form of coping. In fact, another asylum seeker, interpreted being a male as a problem, as he explained here in reply to the same question,

“I get help anywhere I can find it, but help is hard to find here. Even sometimes... the fact that I’m a man make the whole thing more difficult, like, I’m supposed or even expected to find help for myself... even when I’m sick. I also feel like because most of the people in my centre are mostly men; they just group us together as illegal immigrants from West Africa looking for work in Europe. I don’t’ think that is fair at all” - (RP5)

In the above example, the narrative projection of the male gender is not expressed as an added advantage to seeking asylum. For RP5, being a male asylum seeker has brought unexpected difficulties because as he said further, he was aware of the dominant media discourses about lone male asylum seekers from West Africa to Europe. The perception which the interviewee is also aware of is that men seeking international protection were
often erroneously labelled (interview, May 2010).

In the next set of examples, the narratives express how the maintenance of the original roles within family structures constitutes an important source of social and emotional capital for some asylum seekers.

“It's very expensive to call home from here. But I call my people...and my wife back home sometimes twice a week just to find out how they are doing and to know if everything is fine. So I also tell them the situation here, and receive word of prayer from my wife... I can't talk to my children because there's no time but I make sure that my wife tells them that I'm fine... I hear from her about the children, I try to tell her to be calm and patient, things move slowly here... I tell them to keep praying for me, but secretly, I pray them because I know that I'm out of there and they are not... I still feel like I don't call enough because the minutes in the scratch-card when I put it on my mobile phone always ends before I can even finish talking... or say goodbye sometimes.” - (RP9)

For the above narrator, a key way of reaching out to his family was through telephone communications. His inability to be physically with his wife and children was a source of profound distress. However, he was still able to maintain his familiar role of offering care and emotional support even though he was far removed from them. The next example also describes why RP9 endeavour to keep in touch with his family back home.

“For me it's difficult to eat sometimes because I know that my family are not safe, and food for them is scarce... without me there, my wife complain that she can hardly cope... many times I regret how I'm not there, but the political target was me, not them, so I know that staying would have put them in more danger... my wife told me that last them that she's afraid something bad may happen to the children on the way to school so I told her to withdraw them from school and keep them at home... School is important but safety first...You can see how this situation is still affecting me and my family... But hearing them on the phone just reminds me that I have to survive through this thing so that I can also bring them to safety.” - (RP9)

In the example above, RP9’s reasons for making financially exhausting phone calls to family members, who were left behind back home. The process of calling home enables him to engage with the daily routines of his family and also acts a way to be a part of important decision-making for his family. Within RP9’s narrative is also an emotionally laden expression of symbolic values, in the continuation of his role as a father, who is
concerned over the safety and wellbeing of his wife and kids. Finally, RP9 expresses the connection between his present circumstances of seeking safety in Finland as an expressed manifestation of his role and duty, as a father, who is doing all he can to find a safe place for his family. The example above is common with all other participants who expressed various attachments and the sustenance of contacts to family members back home as effective ways to overcome the experience of loneliness and boredom in the reception centers. In all, maintaining their original roles within own family structures, as husbands, fathers, and sons, prior any event that let to their flights was a way to counter the feeling of liminality whilst waiting for asylum in Finland.

“I'm going through medication and group therapy, because of the fear of the unknown… I've a lot of fear in me and this fear is affecting everything I do…everything… the only time I don't think is the moment my wife's voice open on the phone… I know what is going on, and I know what we're talking about. Most times I get very serious because I want to because I want to answer every worry that she has… I tell her to take care of my children and I know that she will…just knowing that I've everything under control with the family is bigger than any therapy… It is really, really difficult, so hard that nowadays talking on the phone and waiting for the next time to be on the phone, is the only stable thing in my life…every other thing is very unpredictable…That is what makes me have this fear in me”
- (RP7)

All the above examples emphasize individual agencies through the maintenance of transnational personal relationships and the males' social roles within their family structures, via telephone conversations and in emails. The importance of the transnational means of communication, as a space for reconstructing and maintaining the social roles, is altogether demonstrated within three themes:

1) On theme of maleness; they feel as males within the families, their social identities as fathers and husbands was of paramount importance to keep their families together whilst here, even when they are not physically present there.

2) On theme of emotional support; they all expressed the feeling of gaining emotional support from their families, as well as giving back emotional strengths to those left behind, through their transnational practices of participations in the affairs back home, and by assuring their families that they would survive their ordeals.
3) On theme of transnational practices: here, the transnational sense of belonging is even more profound, yet implicit to the idea that some of the participants could simultaneously identify themselves with the continuation of family roles over there in the country of origin, whilst facing the ordeal of waiting for asylum, here in Finland.

The notion of belonging, from all the above examples is more reflexive, and touches on the core process of remaking a sense of belonging with others who are not physically present in the same country. The ultimate outcome for all the individuals above is the desire that their family members should be reunited with them at the end of the asylum process. However, in the meantime, the experience of liminality whilst waiting for asylum is embedded within the strong desires by all to reunite with their family members as a source of existential stability and for the return of normalcy to dislocated lives.

The examples have particularly shown that through transnational practices of male social roles within families, some of the asylum seekers have endeavoured to construct a sense of self, as a way to resist the experience of liminality. Indeed as the previous example shows, keeping his thoughts about his family alive was RP7’s only source of existential stability to counter the inherent unpredictability of the asylum process that imposed the feeling of liminality on him.
6. Conclusions: The Multiple Narratives of Belonging within a Liminal Context

This thesis has examined the narratives of West African asylum seekers in Finland who are waiting for final decisions to their asylum applications. To be clear, the various narratives in the previous chapter, just like Bruner (1986) opines, cannot be regarded as mere representations of life experiences. Following Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) views on the production of scientific discourses, I suggest that the analysis in the previous chapter can be regarded through the frame of an intersubjective production of knowledge, in which I have analyzed inter alia, oral and written narratives of lived experiences as told by the West African asylum seekers in my study.

In the course of analyzing data in the previous chapter, I have taken a cue from Marita Eastmond’s (2007: 249) discussions that meaning is generated through stories and also that meaning is attached to a phenomenon, which is being experienced. I have therefore endeavoured in the analysis to show how the individual asylum seekers themselves, made sense of their experiences through the stories and accounts of the events they narrated.

As Eastmond (2007) also made clear, story-telling itself, is a way to restore continuity and identity especially for individuals who are aiming to alleviate their social situations. By heavily relying on Riessman’s explanations of the relevance of narrative analysis to a qualitative study (2008), I have shown through my analysis how the medium of storytelling is important to the West African asylum seekers’ abilities to reflect on the experiences of the past in relation to the larger structures that organizes their experiences of the present. From the analysis, I have found that the act of storytelling, itself, was a powerful means for negotiating the uncertainties and discontinuities, which were common to the experiences of the participants in the research.

The core process of the analysis was to avoid the repeated focus on the lives and experiences of asylum seekers solely within Finland. Rather, by adopting Koser’s (1997) discussion of the ‘asylum cycle’ to this thesis, my research proposes a perspective that

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23 Here, I refer back to the debates on the nominalist vs. realist approaches to forced migration study in the
examines various stages of the asylum experience, which starts from the countries of origin. In this way, my study differs from some of the previous studies presented in the literature. By using Koser’s ‘asylum cycle’ to the thesis, I have endeavoured in the previous chapter to analytically structure the sequencing of life events in order to cover the asylum experiences prior to the arrivals in Finland and during the time of asylum-waiting in Finland.

The adoption of Koser’s asylum cycle to the thesis was therefore not only utilized to explain the process of seeking asylum, but the notion was expanded in this thesis through a narrative frame of analysis. To this end, I have found in my data, three narratives of the asylum experience as told by the West African asylum seekers in the study. These were located within the narratives of events pre-flight, during flights, and in exile whilst in Finland. Altogether, they shape the experiences of the entire asylum cycle for the individuals in this thesis, whilst they wait for final decisions to their asylum applications.

Through the organization of the asylum experience that starts from the country of origin, I have been able to locate within the narratives of experiences prior to Finland, that asylum seekers suffer the loss of power first in their countries of origin and during the irregular migration journeys to Finland. In relation to this finding, I was able to find within the oral and written narratives of all the asylum seekers in the research, the overall narrative of powerlessness and loss, which once combined, speaks to the experience of volatilities and instabilities in the lives of all the participants in the study.

In my research, I have found that asylum seekers experience social and spatial isolation; boredom and loneliness; and anxiety related stress; as well as social and emotional hardships. Altogether, they influence the experience of liminality throughout the entire asylum process. My data shows that through storytelling, in which efforts to survive the asylum ordeals are narrated, and through the actual participations and practices of belonging within informal social networks, asylum seekers engage in the active process of countering the experiences of liminality whilst they wait for asylum.

introduction of this thesis, in which I suggested that the view on asylum taken for this thesis is to emphasize both the individual’s subjective experiences of reasons of forced migration and the structures that classify them into the category of refuge or asylum seeker.
A sense of belonging was achieved by most of the West African asylum seekers in the research, within the different levels of involvements and practices in religious activities; sports; the expressions of ethnic and national community within specific places like grocery shops; and through the maintenance of transnational roles within own family structures. These findings and their implications for considering further research are discussed in the following sections.

6.1 Narrative of Powerlessness and Loss
Within all the narratives that expressed powerlessness and loss, the act of narrating was often used to connect past events of loss and victimization prior and during irregular migration journeys to reflect on present predicaments of asylum waiting in Finland. The feeling of liminality that surrounds the entire asylum process, as my data suggests, also stems from the volatile life-situations in the country of origin, and the uncertainties that dominate irregular migration journeys, in which the loss of power over migration choices is a key problem. In particular, the stories of past experiences of broken trusts and loss of power were for example, used to compare the feelings of anxieties and frustrations towards the experience of liminality induced by the asylum process itself. In many instances, the loss of power during irregular migration journeys, was a constant source of connective reminder to the lack of own role during the asylum-waiting process in Finland.

The feelings of powerlessness are also present in how some asylum seekers expressed the lack of choices over their impeding relocations to various dispersal locations of reception centres. Most of the West African asylum seekers openly expressed their mistrust of the dispersal process and feared this was a ploy to eventually deport them out of Finland. Even though some disclosed that they were informed of their impeding relocations, the lack of clarity and the feeling of uncertainty that surrounds the entire asylum process meant that stress and anxiety was a common feeling amongst all the participants facing dispersal. During the months of doing participant observations, I became personally aware of the heightened levels of anxiety that some of the participants experienced as they continued to wait in limbo, either for news concerning their individual applications, or the fear of deportation as a result of a rejected asylum application.

The feeling of powerlessness and loss was embedded within other narratives by some
participants, in which they expressed their inability to locate social networks in their new dispersal centres in sparsely located and geographically isolated places. During my fieldwork, I found that most of the dispersal locations for asylum reception centres were in Finnish towns and municipalities with little or no existing immigrant communities. Even though most of the participants told me that these locations were generally safe, a sense of personal insecurity was however commonly shared as they felt themselves alienated in a strange place with no social or cultural links.

This experience of alienation was interpreted by some as symbolic of their current status, of not belonging anywhere, whereas, others regarded the lack of cultural or social support in the new reception towns as a sign of social rejection and exclusion. Most of the asylum seekers in my study therefore relied on each other, through the experience of new friendships within the reception centres, as sources of emotional strength and community. In sharing these stories, I have been able to locate a meta-narrative of liminal belonging in all the various construction of powerlessness and loss in the data.

6.1.1 Meta-Narrative of Liminal Belonging
In relation to Malkki’s (1995) notion of ‘refugeeness’, in which displaced individuals within a liminal space lose their sense of place and culture, the meta-narrative of liminal belonging is noticeable in my data along two interrelated extractions of the ‘refugee’ experience. This meta-narrative was constructed by all, firstly, within the general narratives of ‘sufferings’ and ‘hardships’.

The narratives of sufferings and hardships were present in the construction of a shared sense of social-positional solidarity, shared with other refugees and asylum seekers, who are in the same excluded social category as they are. The meta-narrative of liminal belonging was overall shaped by the expressions given to the negative experiences that the West African asylum seekers encountered during the entire asylum process, which begins from the country of origin. For example, the meta-narrative of liminal belonging was present in the ways most participants, identified themselves with others in their countries, who have lost their homes and communities due to socio-political repression, and through being forced into exile.

In similar terms, within this meta-narrative of liminal belonging, the various stories of
irregular migration journeys, as victims at the mercy of smugglers during exilic flights; and as sufferers of social and geographical isolation were narratively connected to reflect on the existential state of living in limbo. Altogether, the meta-narrative of liminal belonging is common to the experiences of loss of social networks and the sense of in asylum reception locations, which causes the experience of experiencing social isolation.

These common experiences were constructed by most of the asylum seekers in the research, to express a sense of social-positional liminal belonging in Finland, in times of temporality and uncertainties, to an exclusively marginalized social group. The overall sense of place and attachments to the main stream of Finnish society by most in the study remained ambiguous due to their temporary immigration status. This feeling of ambiguity is however in contrast to the overwhelming expressions of intentions to finally settle in Finland by all the West African asylum seekers, at the end of the asylum process.

This identified meta-narrative of liminal belonging was particularly clear from how some participants described to me their experiences of remaking relationships with others, who occupy the same liminal spaces as they do. Liminal belonging within marginal spaces includes living within the physical places of the asylum reception centres, and the long space of time of existing and occupying the social position as an asylum seeker. Of particular example is when some of the asylum seekers described their current living conditions within asylum reception centres as mere transitory places, where they did not feel at home.

In Malkki’s (1995) discussion, the example given of refugees occupying a liminal space in refugee camps is here similar to the findings from my research that asylum seekers experience liminality within the various asylum reception centres. Within these reception centres, here referred to as a physical space of liminality, access to broader societal associations was expressed by all the West African asylum seekers as severely limited. In other words, the experience of liminality, as I have discovered through the research, is nowhere more exemplified than in the expressed feelings of temporality imposed by the formal measures of social exclusion, through the asylum procedure of relocating asylum seekers to areas where they do not have ethnic communities.

I summate here that the process of formal exclusion of asylum seekers to various dispersal locations of asylum reception centres, evokes in the individual asylum seeker, a sense of
belonging to an exclusive socially positioned and isolated group, who occupy a liminal space. Similar findings can be located in Hynes’ (2007) analysis, where the practice of dispersal is described as having ‘an extra layer’ of liminality to the already difficult process that asylum seekers negotiate.

I have found that the social status of the West African asylum seekers in this thesis, as liminal individuals facing temporality and uncertainty, following Turner (1967), places them in a structurally marginal social position, hence they remain socially invisible to the mainstream of the Finnish society. Nonetheless, as I have shown in the previous chapter, individuals existing within this structurally marginal position develop and experience friendships by relying on the practices of social exclusion, to evoke the experience of liminal belonging to a marginal category. I liken this meta-narrative of liminal belonging, from my data, to similar suggestions by Eastmond (2007), in which she reiterates that shared stories of social and spatial commonality are sometime called upon by individuals aiming to alleviate their current situations. This is deemed important to the process of restoring a sense of continuity and a common identity (2007: 251).

However, in contrast to the negative experiences of liminality, I found that the efforts to cope with the ordeal of waiting for asylum were often implicitly and explicitly represented in the various instances of involvements and participations. This as I shall discuss further, is expressed by all in the research, through various survival efforts, and participations within informal social networks, as a counter to the experience of liminality.

6.2 A Sense of Belonging through Participations
From my data, I have found that in a bid to overcome the experience of social isolation, a sense of belonging was constructed within participations in informal social networks. Framed within this context, the sense of belonging was achieved for most in the study, through being involved in various activities of participations. A sense of belonging was also located in the remaking of social memberships within specific places and in specific social settings. As some participants endeavoured to make sense of their current predicaments, their involvements and participations within informal social networks were used to describe how they gained access to social and emotional supports.
In the course of doing ethnographic research for this thesis, I have learnt how the expressions of powerlessness as a result of experiences before and during the process of seeking asylum in Finland, negatively impedes on asylum seekers’ abilities to fully function whilst waiting for asylum. The engagements in participants observations for this research, has also provided me with a first-hand experience of the levels of anxiety and stress that accompanies both the process of dispersal, and the impact of isolation on the social and emotional wellbeing of some of the West African asylum seekers in the study.

By doing ethnographic research on West African asylum seekers in Finland, I have been able to locate in my data some vital areas that deserves further considerations. My data shows that activities that allow the involvement of asylum seekers with their surrounding environments can go a long way in alleviating the key problems of loneliness and boredom, which if not alleviated can develop into major psycho-social problems for the individual.

In my research, I discovered that participation in the game of football was for example, immensely valued by those who became reengaged in social activities through the sport. Through being reengaged via football, some of the participants in the research were able to achieve a feeling of attachment towards their specific surrounding environments. This was for some a form of individual empowerment, which was then employed to exercise social participation during and after the game. Ager and Strang (2004) have noted similar observations, in which the suggestion is made that social participation is more experienced as real, at the local levels, in neighbourhoods and in social locations, where such participations provide context to how individuals feel a sense of belonging. Through the display of roles and own skills during and after the game, I discovered in some of my participants a renewed sense of a self image that contrasts the feeling of loss of self esteem and the negativities imposed by the experience of liminality. I locate this finding to similar references made by Valtonen (2008), in which she suggest that for immigrants, the possession of role constitutes a form of participation.

I have also found that through participation in the game of football, some of the participants were able to engage in face-to-face interactions with others who do not share their experiences of social isolation and liminality. This practice alone enabled for all the participants the necessary source of acquiring social bridging capital (Putnam 2000). For example, by introducing themselves to the local youths in the area, through playing
football, social bridging connections were established from the new acquaintances and other friendly associations were formed during and after games. I refer this finding to what Putnam (2000: 23) suggest by saying that social bridging capital, when gained, is necessary for developing new relations with the surrounding environment and enables efforts to move ahead. The sense of belonging within participation in sports, from my data, also shares similarities to Kristin Walseth’s (2006) suggestion that concrete forms of communities among members of marginalized groups can indeed be generated with face-to-face contacts through sports.

Furthermore, in this study that consisted of an all male participant, the findings from my data also suggest that for male asylum seekers, the ability to continue one’s role as a father, husband or son, is one way of ensuring continuity and the feeling of participation. Also, the role of male figures within African families was a subtext to the manners, in which some of the West African asylum seekers approached efforts to stay connected with their families left behind.

In my study, most of the men who expressed various ways of continuation of roles as husbands and fathers, also described how this is a way to counter liminality. I found that a common avenue for maintaining continuity within family structures were through telephone conversations and through emails. Because these processes were expressed by some of my participants during fieldwork, as profoundly personal issues that give them great pains, there was the general unwillingness to give details about family members left behind. In spite of this, the ability to maintain one’s roles within family structures, as I have discovered, does not only touch on the social aspects of male roles within the family, but they were immensely valued by all as a source of emotional stability.

I have located in my data that through the continued participation within family structures, whilst in exile, individual agency and the power to construct a transnational sense of belonging was achieved by some asylum seekers. This finding is reflective of Bree, Davids, and De Haas’ (2010) discussions, that transnational practices and activities can indeed ease the process of dealing with efforts to consolidate a sense of belonging in periods of existential liminality. A sense of personal self-esteem was also gained by all the participants who continued to be part of the decision making processes back home. Telephone conversations with families left behind as I have found in my study, are an important
practical resource or asset for asylum seekers’ efforts to participate in the family activities back home and a major communicative tool for achieving a transnational sense of belonging. In addition, the uses of telephones and emails are viable assets and functional capital resources for dealing with the experiences of boredom, loneliness, and a sense of continuity to their lives.

Some participants in the research, as I observed, found a sense of continuity in religious devotions, and embarked on the process of remaking community membership through belonging to a church congregation. Through the acts of church attendance, and through participations in religious rituals like prayers and fellowshipping with others during and after religious services, new informal associations were developed by some of the West African asylum seekers in the research. The expressions of spiritual connectedness to places of religious worship were variously described as a source of emotional support just as the formal and informal processes of establishing membership to a church, provided for some the feeling of security through belonging to a church community. In a discussion that portrays similar findings, Hynes (2007) maintains that asylum seekers, who experience liminality, are sometimes actively engaged in the processes of place-making and remaking belonging. Findings from my data suggest that personal and emotional security is the kinds of social and emotional capital gained for asylum seekers through socio-religious activities.

Further findings from my data suggest that the processes of place-making and belonging also occur within socio-culturally symbolic places found within African-owned grocery shops. During field observations, I was able to locate the formation of ethnic attachments, which were reified through spoken languages, the cultural symbolisms of home-food, and through the expressions of community within specific grocery shops. The grocery shops were thus viewed by some as places of ethnic or national communities. Indeed I have found that the lack of a familiar ethnic community in Finland, for all the West African asylum seekers in this thesis, meant that specific places like grocery shops, which were mostly patronized by other established residents of African descents, were regularly visited by some participants to counter the feeling of social isolation and loneliness.

I was particularly struck by the efforts by some participants to engage in the remaking of community through the expressions of national commonality and ethnic associations with the others of African origins, who also visited the shops. In discussing this finding, I refer
to Warner’s (1994) notion of belonging, in which the mechanisms of social and cultural identification through national and ethnic associations become a means for individuals to construct feelings of belonging.

From my data, informal social networks were used by all the participants to explain the kinds of assistances and the feelings of social support gained through participation. Informal social networks were similarly used by all, to describe how they gained practical information resources such as: legal advice, names of relevant places and locations, job seeking information and the places to inquire about employment, and the meanings of some local norms and other local habits.

In Coleman’s (1998) discussion on social capital, references are made to the activities of actors within specific structures, from which functional resources, agency, and social and emotional capital can be gained in the process. The finding also supports Valtonen’s (2008:53) discussion that social capital can be produced through social connection, participation in social network, and through forms of group support. For the participants (not all), who had expressed gaining these practical resources, social capital was gained to deal with their day-to-day routines, as well as to cope with the stress and the frustrations caused by the ordeal of the entire asylum process. Within this context, the processes of place-making and remaking of belonging were thus employed by the West African asylum seekers in this thesis, to resist their existential state of liminality.

The experience of the entire asylum process, which includes experiences prior arrival in Finland and during the long wait for asylum, directly leads to the experiences of boredom, frustration, stress, and the feeling of loss and liminality. The study has also shed more light on the understanding of belonging for persons living in existential temporality and uncertainty because they do not yet enjoy full legal membership in Finland.

Through my thesis, I have endeavoured to expand on the empirical body of work that is concerned with the discourses on irregular migrants, and how the long processes that precedes the granting of asylum ultimately impacts on the experiences of liminality for asylum seekers in Finland. Theoretically, this thesis adds to the debate on the framing of the concept of belonging, when temporality and the liminality about the sense of belonging and place are seriously under question. By showing through my data that a sense of belonging can be acquired within the liminal spaces of social solidarity and within
participation in informal social networks, I suggest here, like Jørgensen (2010) that at the level of individual experiences, belonging is indeed a reflexive and non-reflexive way of making community even whilst occupying a liminal space in time.

In light of the findings from the study, a larger research that includes the voices of more asylum seekers should be considered in order to examine more examples of social engagements (or the lack of) by asylum seekers, with their surrounding environments and neighbourhoods. I have located in my data that the experience of liminality can indeed be alleviated if asylum seekers are engaged in meaningful activities, and are made to feel a part of the society, whilst they wait for asylum.

My suggestion is that the current policy of asylum dispersal, which is done on a no choice basis for asylum seekers, should be reviewed in light of this research. Relocation or dispersal, which has become part of the asylum procedure in Finland, adds to the already difficult experiences of the entire asylum process. I suggest that this practice is readily a continuation of the experience of displacement for most asylum seekers. Efforts should therefore be made to ensure that individuals, who experience liminality as a result of their experiences of volatilities and displacements, should not be subjected to further practices of formal exclusion and physical isolation.

The issue of gender, which was examined for men in this thesis, should be broadened to include women asylum seekers from the sub region to give a different angle to the issue of transnational family roles, which was not examined in my thesis. It would also be interesting to investigate whether a deeper feeling of loneliness and separation from family members exists, if men and women from West African countries were compared. The activities that I participated in for this thesis were mostly with men.

An open question can also be suggested to ascertain what kinds of activities and in what levels of involvements can female asylum seekers source informal social networks. Similarly, a larger study that is aimed at examining asylum seekers’ transnational social networks and how this enables a transnational sense of belonging should be considered in light of the issues of family reunifications and the efforts by displaced people to keep their families together, or at least maintain their roles within them, whilst in exile.

Furthermore, researches that compare the experiences of different asylum seekers and
refugees living in the various reception centres all over Finland should be done to ascertain the impacts of current dispersal policy on asylum seekers in Finland. In this way, studies that are in their research designs focused on examining the long-term effects of asylum-the entire asylum process on the health and wellbeing of asylum seekers in Finland is also deemed important. Such studies can go a long way to investigate impacts of the asylum process on the successes of possible integration into the mainstream of the Finnish society, especially for those who, after long waits, are finally granted asylum.

In the process of doing ethnographic research, I found that the heightened experience of liminality that is present throughout the period of waiting for asylum in Finland, deepen the sense of temporariness to individual lives, and impedes on efforts to remake new social associations and a sense of belonging.

My experience during this research has exposed to me the lives of individuals in Finland, who are daily engaged with the ambiguity of forming relationships of belonging, whilst essentially existing within socially fluid liminal spaces. I have found from my research that a sense of belonging for all the asylum seekers in this study, which were expressed through various forms of counter-narratives, and in the actual practices of involvements, constitutes counteractions to the experiences of liminality whilst waiting for asylum. It is therefore in the process of achieving a sense of belonging, rather than the actual outcomes to those efforts, that this thesis locates asylum seekers’ resistance to the experience of liminality.
7 Bibliography

Primary Sources of Data:

1. ORAL INTERVIEWS WITH WEST AFRICAN ASYLUM SEEKERS: Altogether 10 voice-recorded interviews collected between September 2009 and August 2010.

2. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES: 4 hand-written narratives; Collected between September 2009 and April 2010.


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PICTURE SHOWING MAP OF ASYLUM RECEPTION CENTRES IN FINLAND: Source Online: http://vastaanottokeskusinfo.wikidot.com/aloitus date: 10.02.2011


9.1 Appendix 1: Picture Showing the Locations of Asylum Reception Centres in Finland In March 2010.

Asylum Reception Centres in March 2010.
Picture: Interior Ministry.

9.2 Appendix 2: Sample of The Study’s Interview Guide

Background Information of Participants:

Age
Sex
Family
Nationality
Education background
Marriage/Civil Relationship Status

**Home and Journeys:**
Talk about your home and your occupation.
What made you live?
How was the Journey to Finland?

**Seeking Asylum in Finland:**
How long have you been in Finland?
Did you apply for Asylum immediately?
What happened after you applied?
Do you know when you will get a decision?

**Free-Time/Leisure/Relationships:**
How do you relax?
Have you made friends where you live?
Are you able to meet with friends as often as you would like?
Have you met people from your country or with same ethnicity?
What does meeting them mean for you?
Do they make you feel at home?
Do they live in the same places as you?
Do you get assistance from them/and or others?
Do you intend to live in Finland after getting asylum?

**Religion/culture:**
Do you have a religion?
Have you always being religious?
Do you attend religious meetings?
Where (if yes), and How Often?
What does attending mean for you?