Geographica 46

Zinaïda Sluijs

# Producing Spaces of Solidarities

## Exploring Folkbildning with Asylum Seekers in Rural Sweden

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**Abstract**
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This thesis explores the role of folkbildning, the Swedish tradition of non-formal popular adult education, for asylum seekers placed in small towns and cities in Sweden. Despite its role in the reception, support, and inclusion of asylum seekers in Sweden, folkbildning has received limited scholarly attention as a potential space of solidarities with, for, and by asylum seekers. This dissertation argues that folkbildning constitutes an important space where solidarities are enacted and negotiated. Practices of folkbildning solidarities are multiple, contested, and negotiated; shaped by unequal power relations, practised across different spatio-temporalities, involve different actors, and produce varying outcomes. Methodologically, the research builds on ethnographic participatory observations of study circles, interviews, and creative collage workshops with study circle leaders and participants. The dissertation contributes to geographies of solidarity by analysing how multiple spatialities shape different solidarities while simultaneously being reshaped through them.

The thesis consists of four research articles. **Article I** examines the practices and discourses of volunteers and study circle leaders. Building on an intersectional framework, it analyses how solidarities can both challenge and reproduce power asymmetries shaped by, amongst others, gender, age, race, family status, class, and citizenship. **Article II** is a methodological discussion of the creative and participatory methods introduced to address challenges in conducting participatory research. Concretely, I describe how collage workshops and card-based discussions enabled the inclusion of diverse experiences in ways that productively aligned with folkbildning's horizontal and participatory pedagogy. **Article III** explores how spaces of folkbildning are produced as spaces of solidarity through negotiation among different actors about what folkbildning solidarity is, how and where it should be practised, and what its outcomes are. The paper shows how different spatialities are co-constitutive of different practices of solidarity. A similar argument is made in **Article IV**, which explores the interrelation between solidarities and ruralities. The paper analyses how rural spaces shape particular practices of rural folkbildning solidarities and how folkbildning solidarities also contribute to the production of ruralities.

*Keywords:* solidarity, migration, asylum, popular education, study circles, space, rural, Sweden

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*Dedicated to lifelong learners,*
*popular and public education,*
*and the grassroots movements*
*which enable lifelong learning for all.*

*Dedicated to all those who cross,*
*contest and counter the borders*
*which scar land and our imaginations*[1].

[1] Inspired by the poster of Felix Meritis's Abolitionist Assemblies #2: Borderline States.

# Acknowledgements

It is unsettling to write about solidarity in a time where words have often felt powerless. I therefore wish to open the acknowledgements by naming some of the solidarity spaces that have been formative to my time in Uppsala and at Uppsala University. In particular, I want to acknowledge the work done by the No One Is Illegal network supporting people without a residence permit in Sweden and people facing deportation; HejQT for creating and maintaining a queer scene in Uppsala; and Academics for Palestine (AFP), Workers and students Swedish Academia for Palestine (WASSAP), and the people behind the Uppsala Declaration of Conscientious Objection and the Uppsala Campaign for a Policy of Ethical Academic Ties (PEAT) for pushing the university to apply and safeguard ethical research policies, practices and collaborations that do not violate human rights or international law. As of the writing of this dissertation, Uppsala University has still not taken responsibility to cut ties with Israeli institutions complicit in the unfolding of a genocide in Palestine.

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# List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

I. Sluijs, Z. (2024) 'I Am Like Their Swedish Mother'. Conceptualising Maternalism and Power Asymmetries during Solidarity Practices with Asylum Seekers. *DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, 11(2): 50-65.

II. Sluijs, Z. (2026) More Than a Course, More Than a Method: Study Circles as a Pedagogical and Research Method Working With Asylum Seekers Across Language Barriers and Differences. *Area* 58, no. 2: e70088.

III. Sluijs, Z. Folkbildning as Spaces of Solidarities: Popular Education and Study Circles for Asylum Seekers in Sweden. Unpublished manuscript, under review with an international peer-reviewed journal.

IV. Sluijs, Z. Learning (in) Rurality: Popular Education for Asylum Seekers in Rural Sweden. Unpublished manuscript, submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal.

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# Contents

Prelude: Collage by a participant ..... 18

1. Introduction ..... 21
Folkbildning solidarities ..... 23
The spatiality of folkbildning solidarities ..... 25
Rurality and folkbildning solidarities ..... 27
Contested solidarities ..... 28
Aim and research questions ..... 30
Structure of the dissertation ..... 31

Interlude ..... 34

2. Setting the scene ..... 37
Introducing folkbildning: Defining that which cannot be defined ..... 37
The historical origins of folkbildning ..... 38
Folkbildning today ..... 43
Introducing the study circle method ..... 45
Targeted study circles for people in the asylum process ..... 47
Introducing the fieldwork context ..... 49
Introducing the organisations and study circles ..... 49
Introducing the geographical context ..... 53
Introducing the political context: Swedish asylum policies ..... 55

3. Geographies of solidarities ..... 63
The sociological and political roots of solidarity ..... 64
Conceptualising migrant solidarities ..... 66
Geography matters: Towards a spatial understanding of solidarity practices ..... 67
Solidarities as socio-spatial practices ..... 67
Solidarities as place-based ..... 69
Solidarities as multi-scalar ..... 70
Solidarities as generative and transformative ..... 71
Solidarities as contested and ambivalent ..... 73
Solidarities as embedded in unequal power relations ..... 74
Concluding discussion ..... 76

Interlude ..... 78

4. Conceptualising space(s) ..... 81
The production of social space ..... 81
Space as represented, practised, and lived ..... 81
Space as absolute, relative, and relational ..... 84
The production of rural spaces ..... 86
Concluding discussion ..... 89

Interlude ..... 92

5. Methodology ..... 95
Data collection methods ..... 95
Ethnography, fieldwork, and participatory observations ..... 95
Interviews, collage workshops, and focus groups ..... 103
Data analysis: Coding processes ..... 114
Analysing the collages: Introducing the interludes ..... 115
Reflections on research ethics ..... 117
Seeking access, establishing relations, and informed consent ..... 118
Confidentiality and pseudonymisation ..... 119
Giving voice and creating change ..... 120
Giving back ..... 121
Leaving fieldwork: Have I ever left the field, or is it leaving me? ..... 122

6. Article summaries ..... 125
Article I. 'I Am Like Their Swedish Mother'. Conceptualising Maternalism and Power Asymmetries during Solidarity Practices with Asylum Seekers ..... 125
Article II. More Than a Course, More Than a Method: Study Circles as a Pedagogical and Research Method Working With Asylum Seekers Across Language Barriers and Differences ..... 126
Article III. Folkbildning as Spaces of Solidarities: Popular Education and Study Circles for Asylum Seekers in Sweden ..... 127
Article IV. Learning (in) Rurality: Popular Education for Asylum Seekers in Rural Sweden ..... 128

Interlude ..... 130

Article I ..... 133

Interlude ..... 134

Article II ..... 137

Interlude ..... 138

Article III ..... 141

Interlude ..... 142

Article IV ..... 147

Interlude ..... 148

7. Concluding discussion ..... 151
Spaces of folkbildning as spaces of solidarit*ies* ..... 151
The spatialities of folkbildning solidarities ..... 153
Rural folkbildning solidarities ..... 155
Contested folkbildning solidarities ..... 158
Researching (in) solidarity ..... 161
Looking back and looking forward ..... 163

References ..... 167

Appendices ..... 189
Appendix I: Overview research participants ..... 189
Appendix II: Interview questionnaires ..... 194
1. Interviews with participants in the asylum process ..... 194
2. Interviews with folkbildning employees and circle leaders ..... 195
3. Collage workshops ..... 197
Appendix III: Information letter ..... 198
Appendix IV: Consent form ..... 200

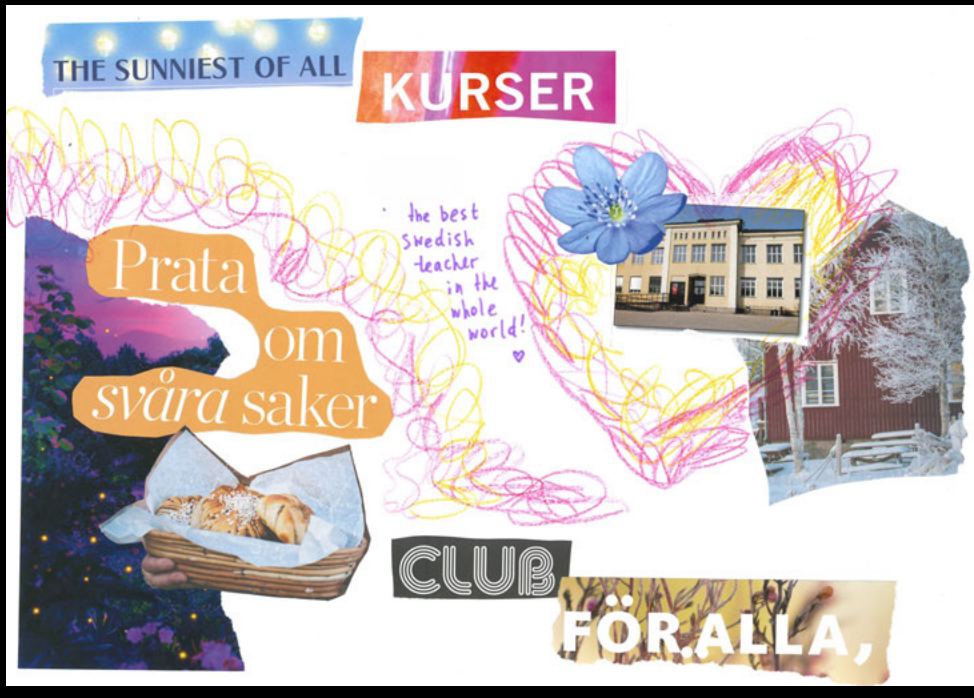
# List of collages

Collage 1 by a study circle participant, 2023 ..... 18
Collage 2 by a study circle participant and leader, 2023 ..... 34
Collage 3 by a study circle participant, 2024 ..... 78
Collage 4 by a study circle participant, 2023 ..... 92
Collage 5 by a study circle participant, 2023 ..... 93
Collage 6 by a study circle leader, 2024 ..... 130
Collage 7 by a study circle participant, 2023 ..... 134
Collage 8 by a study circle participant, 2024 ..... 138
Collage 9 by a study circle participant, 2023 ..... 142
Collage 10 by a study circle participant, 2023 ..... 144
Collage 11 by a study circle participant, 2024 ..... 148

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ABF | *Arbetarnas Bildnings Förbund* (Workers' Educational Association) |
| AMIF | Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund |
| ES | Everyday Swedish (*Vardagssvenska*) |
| ESF | European Social Fund |
| EU | European Union |
| FG | Focus group |
| KBV | *Kulturens Bildningsverksamhet* |
| LGBTQIA+ | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and others |
| NBV | *Nykterhetsrörelsens bildningsverksamhet* (Temperance movement's study association) |
| PAR | Participatory Action Research |
| IOGT | International Order of Good Templars |
| RF-SISU | *Riksidrottsförbundet Svensk Idrotts Studie- och Utbildningsoganisation* (the Educational Association of the Swedish Sports Confederation) |
| RFSL | *Riksförbundet för homosexuellas, bisexuellas, transpersoners, queeras och intersexpersoners rättigheter* (The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Rights) |
| Sfdo | Swedish from day one (*Svenska från dag ett*) |
| SFI | Swedish for Immigrants (*Svenska för Invandrare*) |
| SMA | Swedish Migration Agency (*Migrationsverket*) |
| SOLiDi | Solidarity in Diversity |
| TIA | *Tidiga Insatser för Asylsökande* (Early Interventions for Asylum Seekers) |

# Prelude: Collage by a participant




Collage 1 by a study circle participant, 2023. Anonymised by author.

*Collage by a study circle participant, 2023*
*Collaboratively written narrative based on collage workshop discussions*

Swedish from day one was more than a course. People don't often talk about it, but asylum seekers are a very vulnerable category of people. Other people and media usually generalise the whole thing like "immigrants" or "people from this or that country". But when your life is characterised by waiting, life becomes very difficult. You might lose hope. What if they say no? I will not have a future left. Life is really harsh sometimes, and this place, and course in particular, helps me, has helped me, to wake up in the morning, put on clothes, meet other people, and try to speak a new language. People are here for you to help you to learn it and understand it, to talk and express yourself fully.

I cannot take SFI [the language course Swedish for Immigrants] because I do not have special last four Swedish digits yet, and because I do not fall under the Mass Directive. This course was my best chance of learning Swedish with a native speaker. And it was taken away. (…) I found out about this course at ABF by accident. And I am so grateful for that. So, me and my yet-to-become-wife came here because we wanted to learn the language, and we stayed to begin our journey in studying Swedish. We stayed because we met people we otherwise would not have met, stayed for the atmosphere.

"Swedish from day one" provided me with the opportunity to speak and learn with a Swedish native speaker, which is something extremely valuable and vital for a person who is an asylum seeker. Our study circle leader has become very dear to my heart, making this place calm and welcoming. He is open-minded, open to other cultures; he has no prejudices and never shall put a label on you; his communication was gentle, and he was attentive to mine and everyone in the class's emotions.

Apart from the importance of language on itself, the study circle has also created a safe space. For example, for rainbow people [who identify as LGBTQIA+]. It was a safe space without any prejudices. You could just be yourself. There are no other meeting places like this in the municipality. It is just that you cannot actually meet people in biblioteket [library] because you have to be quiet there and not bother other people. But here, you have a kettle, coffee, and a table, and you can speak out loud and just chit-chat

and have fun. *Fika* [having coffee] unites people together. These memories I will cherish forever. This course improved my mental state and gave me something to hold on to.
It is precious to have people like this in your life. The encounters I have made here have allowed me to slowly unfold myself, daring to talk more about my story and my background. I did not feel any pressure or any boundaries that could have limited me. I felt like I was not judged for who I am. And that is a feeling I am so not used to.

Now that it has stopped, I feel devastated and sad. I used to have a community here, a mentor, but now it is taken away. It is unfair to expect an asylum seeker to integrate smoothly into the society and closing the only opportunity in town to study Swedish at the same time. Taking back the opportunities, we had a chance, a perspective, a worthy course; now it is gone.

I, as an asylum seeker, as a LGBTQI representative, having a background of coming from an invading country, I am already having a lot on my plate. To me, this is all an example of anti-immigration politics that we are faced with. But people will continue coming to Sweden anyway, seeking for help, for a chance to have a brighter and less deadly future. People need support with language learning activities; it is vital. Caring for the vulnerable minorities is caring for all of the people. How many people are left on their own without any language support now? It is heartbreaking.

I am still grateful that this course happened in the first place. It was a short journey, but valuable still and so dear to my heart. I would have never met any of the people I have met there, if these courses would not have happened.

# 1. Introduction

In April 2023, participants of the study circle group "Swedish from day one"—organised by the Workers' Educational Study Association, ABF—received a message from their study circle leader stating that their weekly Swedish language classes would be suspended. The decision to end the activity was taken after the centre-right coalition (also known as the *Tidö* government) announced budget cuts to targeted folkbildning activities for people in the asylum process[2]. Since March 2022, I have been conducting participatory observations in various study circles organised for asylum seekers settled in different municipalities in Västmanland, a county in south-central Sweden. Following the news of the study circle ending, I reconvened the study circle leader and participants for a collage workshop, one of the research methods used in this thesis, to discuss how they experienced the study circles.

These collage workshops and the accompanying narratives occupy a central part of this thesis. They allowed me to include participants with whom I did not share a language, and the emotional and personal discussions during the collage-making process highlight the importance of study circles in people's everyday lives. It is telling that the collaboratively written narrative introduced at the beginning of this chapter (cf. Collage 1) describes the study circle as "more than a course". The maker's experience aligned with that of other participants in the asylum process, as well as with employees and volunteers organising study circles whom I interviewed during the research. Respondents defined study circles not only as educational activities in which asylum seekers were introduced to the Swedish language, but also as important places where they sought social, administrative, material, legal, and educational support throughout the asylum process. As noted in the narrative

[2] In April 2023, as part of the spring budget proposals, the government announced budget cuts to targeted funding for folkbildning activities for asylum seekers. In 2023, the planned budget decreased from 110 to 30 million Swedish kronor (SEK) and was to be cut in 2024 (Prop. 2022/23:1). In January 2026, the funding for targeted activities was officially repealed (SFS 2025:1465). Although the budget cuts were implemented by the centre-right coalition, led by the Moderate Party and supported by the Sweden Democrats, planned cuts had already been announced by the left-green government coalition in 2020 (Prop. 2020/21:1).

accompanying Collage 1, study circles are experienced as important, safe, calm, and welcoming meeting places that give people a reason to leave their homes, establish a routine, forget insecurities related to the asylum process, at least temporarily, make social contacts, and find friends. *Fika*, a social moment of having a coffee together, was especially often mentioned as an important informal social activity and appeared centrally on participants' collage posters, like the cinnamon buns on Collage 1. Experiences of folkbildning as informal and welcoming stand in particular contrast to the asylum process, which, for many participants, is characterised by insecurity as they await a decision on their application while being settled in small, rural towns.

The study circle "Swedish from day one" was part of specific folkbildning initiatives (in Swedish, *särskilda insatser*) that were commissioned by the government following the "reception crisis"[3]. In 2015, Sweden received one of the highest numbers of asylum applications relative to its population per capita within the European Union (EU), and asylum waiting times were increasing (Eurostat, 2016; SCB, 2026b). In response, a left-green government coalition led by the Social Democrats commissioned folkbildning to organise "meaningful occupation during the asylum period and accelerate future establishment in working life and society for those who have been granted residence permits" (SFS 2015:521).

Folkbildning refers to the Swedish tradition of non-formal popular adult education, which emerged in the late nineteenth century out of popular movements—including the labour, temperance, and farmers' movements—and their struggle for democratic political participation. Throughout the twentieth century, it developed into a nationwide and institutionalised phenomenon with study associations and folk high schools organising study circles, courses, lectures, and other cultural or educational activities across Sweden. Folkbildning's pedagogy is participant-led and centres learning through dialogue and practice. Because of their participatory pedagogy, national reach, historical experiences of organising for and with diverse groups and international immigrants, as well as their flexible organisational and pedagogical approaches, folkbildning organisations were considered a suitable actor to provide activities for people in the asylum process (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2022).

[3] Rather than referring to terms such as "refugee crisis", I refer to the term "reception crisis" as introduced by Rea et al. (2019). In line with critiques made by migration scholars who have critically review such crisis discourses, I argue that the latter term shifts responsibility of a presumed crisis away from individuals migrating to acknowledging the role of European asylum, migration, bordering, reception, and austerity policies in shaping what has become known as a crisis (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Rea et al., 2019).

In addition to targeted folkbildning activities, various civil society initiatives, including study associations, churches, and humanitarian organisations, received subsidies from regional County Boards or the European Union (EU) to organise activities for people who had recently arrived in Sweden or were awaiting a decision on their asylum applications. In the municipalities in Västmanland, where this research was conducted, a local geography of solidarity emerged, connecting various organisations, people, and places that support individuals in the asylum process. Apart from the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA, *Migrationsverket*), these civil society actors were often the first contact with Swedish society for people who had recently applied for international protection in Sweden. While study circles focus primarily on language and civic education, depending on the organisation or study association, activities also include cooking, sports, and social activities, neighbourhood walks, or activities for children and families.

## Folkbildning solidarities

In this thesis, I argue that folkbildning constitutes an important space where solidarities for, with, and by asylum seekers are practised and negotiated. By using the notion of "*folkbildning* solidarities", I refer to solidarities that are practised through folkbildning or that emerge from encounters within spaces of folkbildning. This builds further on definitions of migrant solidarities as practices that foster the social, political, economic, and educational inclusion of people who lack formal citizenship and/or residence status (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Oosterlynck et al., 2017; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020). Similarly, folkbildning fills a gap in institutional support by providing social, material, and educational assistance to individuals otherwise excluded from the welfare state. Folkbildning is here both dependent on state funding and countering, opposing, or questioning exclusionary state policies and discourses, highlighting its ambivalent and contentious position as the distinction between state and non-state actors blurs (cf. Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Mescoli & Roblain, 2021).

Practices of solidarity within spaces of folkbildning are varied and involve actors with different understandings of folkbildning and its role for people in the asylum process. The thesis focuses primarily on "civic solidarities" (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019), practised by civil society organisations with people in the asylum process and arising from encounters within civil society spaces.

These solidarities include creating inclusive, informal meeting places where people are welcomed, regardless of citizenship status, language skills, nationality, educational background, or sexual orientation, and where relations of care, support, and friendship can develop. Folkbildning's pedagogy also centres on reciprocal learning, allowing relationships to develop between participants beyond the study circle. Solidarity practices also include material or financial support, such as food, clothing, or transportation tickets, as well as legal and administrative support related to the asylum application process.

The study circle leaders sometimes defined their role and activities as a "bridge" connecting newcomers and longer-settled populations. In their solidarities, they often relied on personal and professional networks to help newcomers gain access to social networks and voluntary or paid employment. Study circle leaders were not always longer-settled residents. Some study circles had (European) migration or refugee backgrounds, and participants in the asylum process were sometimes trained and recruited as study circle leaders. Such practices could also be considered examples of solidarities that promote the inclusion and participation of people in the asylum process within locally based associations, drawing on their interests and skills.

A final dimension of civic solidarities concerns study associations' dependence on state funding. While funding came with particular requirements in terms of the target population (people under the SMA's responsibility) and aim ("strengthen knowledge of Swedish language and society and promote participation in working and social life") (SFS 2015:521), folkbildning employees and leaders highlighted their flexibility with these outcomes and rules, for example, opening up activities to other participants. Additionally, the defunding of targeted activities did not mean the end of study circles for asylum seekers. Multiple associations continued to organise study circles in municipalities where people in the asylum process were still settled, by turning to alternative financial resources such as regional or European funds, internal organisational budgets, or voluntary labour. Such practices, through which study associations redistributed resources and continued to organise study circles irrespective of government funding, can also be considered an example of solidarity.

Apart from folkbildning actors, other actors are also involved in practising solidarity. State funding, for example, enabled access to education and language learning for asylum seekers, which is an example of "institutionalised solidarities" (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Oosterlynck et al., 2017). Finally, participants in the asylum process are also agents of solidarity, offering care,

support and assistance to each other, their study circle leader, or other social groups through engagement in local civil society initiatives. Throughout the research, examples emerged of participants in the asylum process becoming study circle leaders of their own activities, volunteering in local initiatives, and co-organising or joining pride festivities and protests related to migration politics. Such examples relate to Agustín and Jørgensen's (2019) third type of solidarity, "autonomous solidarities", which refers to self-organised practices that take place outside or in rejection of established institutions.

## The spatiality of folkbildning solidarities

Geographical scholarship on solidarity has argued that space matters to solidarities by highlighting how solidarities *take place* in space, are shaped by space, and give shape to spaces (cf. Chapter 3). Space and solidarity, however, are relatively absent concepts in research on folkbildning for asylum seekers and refugees. Existing research is primarily situated within educational sciences and includes reports describing study circle practices and participants' experiences (Dahlstedt et al., 2019; Fejes et al., 2018; Nordvall et al., 2018) and analyses of how informal language cafes (Majlesi et al., 2023; Nordqvist Färnskog, 2025) and study circles for asylum seekers relate to discourses, practices, and experiences of social inclusion (cf. Fejes, 2019; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017, 2022; Osman, 2013).

Previous research is relevant because it highlights the role of folkbildning for people in the asylum process while recognising that this engagement is embedded in uneven power relations. On the one hand, folkbildning has been considered to offer meaningful educational and social spaces where people from different backgrounds meet, are introduced to Swedish society and language, and, through these spaces, participants become active citizens in local (associational) life (Fejes, 2019; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017, 2022; Nordvall et al., 2018). Researchers have also demonstrated that participation in folkbildning fosters feelings of belonging, not only to Swedish society but also at a smaller scale: within the study circle or study association (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2022; Pastuhov et al., 2021; Söderlundh & Heinonen, 2023). On the other hand, folkbildning's engagement with migrants has been critiqued for functioning as "the invisible and extended arm of the state" (Osman, 2013, p. 154), positioning non-European immigrants as deficit-laden, lacking particular knowledge and skills, and reproducing a neoliberal governmentality in which

immigrants are considered responsible for their own integration (Dahlstedt, 2009; Fejes, 2019; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017; Osman, 2013).

In other words, existing research focuses primarily on the meanings, experiences, and discourses of folkbildning but overlooks its spatiality. When space is considered, it is done either by focusing on the physical meeting spaces or by exploring folkbildning's material attributes, such as the material, financial, or spatial resources that enable or challenge the organisation of targeted study circles (cf. Fejes et al., 2018; Mešić et al., 2019). These studies consequently reduce the understanding of space to its material attributes, neglecting the power relations and intersectional dimensions of how spaces are also discursively and socially constructed (cf. Lefebvre, 1991). A notable exception is Nordqvist's (2025) research in which she analyses how church language café spaces are given different meanings by participants. Concretely, church language cafés are simultaneously understood as Swedish schools, service and support centres, social spaces, and sacred spaces. These multiple meanings are not mutually exclusive, but do inform the space's "functions as well as relationships" (Nordqvist Färnskog, 2025, p. 34) and are negotiated based on participants' personal experiences and the physical set-up of language cafés.

By adopting a spatial analysis of folkbildning, this thesis seeks to go beyond understandings of folkbildning as merely an educational practice by considering how it is also a space shaped by and shaping different practices of solidarity. In other words, space matters to practices of folkbildning solidarities. A spatial analysis of folkbildning solidarities not only sheds light on how they reproduce the spaces that give shape to them, but also enables an exploration of how folkbildning solidarities imagine and produce space differently. This matters because it shows that neither folkbildning nor solidarity are uniform, homogeneous, or uncontested concepts. Folkbildning is and has been actively constructed throughout history by various political organisers, educators, diverse participants, and so on, who had particular conceptions of what folkbildning is, how it should be organised, where it should take place, and what (educational, political, national, social, etc.) spaces it gave rise to. Thus, folkbildning refers not only to the physical locations where popular education takes place, but also to spaces of folkbildning produced through material objects, funding flows, everyday activities and routines, policies and formal discourses, and participants' or leaders' experiences and imaginations. In other words, the production of space is a political process in which different actors negotiate different understandings and spatialities of space as absolute,

relative, and relational (cf. Chapter 4). Similarly, geographers have established that space is neither "neutral" (Oosterlynck et al., 2017, p. 11) nor "passive" (Featherstone, 2012, p. 30) as a background to practices of solidarity, but that space and solidarity are co-constitutive. I extend this argument by placing a spatial lens on solidarities and asking the first overarching question:

> *Research question 1: How are spaces of folkbildning produced as spaces of solidarity? How are different spatialities co-constitutive of practices of solidarity with people in the asylum process?*

## Rurality and folkbildning solidarities

Beyond a spatial contribution to folkbildning solidarities, this thesis also contributes to the existing literature by exploring rural folkbildning solidarities. Research on migrant solidarities primarily explores solidarities within urban contexts (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Bauder, 2021; Darling, 2010; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021). Some exceptions to this urban bias constitute research by Schmid-Scott et al. (2020) on rural migrant activism in the United Kingdom (UK), Krifors (2024) on community work in Sweden, and Agustin et al. (2024) on European migrant solidarities. Bringing in a rural perspective allows a rethinking of place-based understandings of solidarity by analysing how rural contexts pose particular challenges and opportunities for migrant solidarities (Schmid-Scott et al., 2020; Woods, 2018). Analysing the interrelation between rurality and solidarity, consequently, counters understandings of rural spaces as homogeneously white or politically disconnected spaces and instead explores how rural spaces should also be conceptualised as political, relational, and contested, characterised by inequalities and processes of othering (Agustín et al., 2024; Krifors, 2024; Schmid-Scott et al., 2020).

Swedish research on civil society and folkbildning has also overlooked the rural context (Åberg & von Essen, 2024). While previous research on folkbildning for refugees and asylum seekers has been conducted in Västmanland (Nordvall et al., 2018; Pastuhov et al., 2021) or has analysed study circles in different geographical locations (Fejes et al., 2018), existing research does not sufficiently engage with questions of rurality. This research addresses this gap by asking the following question:

> *Research question 2: How are folkbildning solidarities shaped by and shaping ruralities?*

## Contested solidarities

An analysis of space as *produced* acknowledges that it is a political product and process, shaped by and shaping social relations (Harvey, 2009; Lefebvre, 1991; Mitchell, 2021). Definitions of space as political and contested align with conceptualisations of solidarity as multiple, contested, and negotiated (cf. Arampatzi, 2017a; Featherstone, 2012; Fleischmann, 2020; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021). Scholarship on migrant solidarities has, for example, argued that, despite the aim of solidarities to oppose exclusion and inequality, all social relations are embedded in uneven geographies and power asymmetries, which are transformed and/or reproduced through practices of solidarity (Fleischmann, 2020; Karaliotas & Kapsali, 2021; Santamarina, 2023; Vandevoordt, 2019). Consequently, analysing the production of spaces of folkbildning solidarities not only allows for a consideration of the political potential of solidarities to create new ways of being and learning together in the "here and now" (Oosterlynck et al., 2017) but also sheds light on the complexities, limits and challenges of solidarities.

In my analysis of how power relations shape solidarities, I build on geographical scholarship that highlights the relevance of intersectional theory in understanding solidarity as practised in space, situated in power relations, and developed across relations of difference (Brown & Yaffe, 2014; Falola & West Ohueri, 2017; Kelliher, 2018; Loopmans et al., 2020; Mohanty, 2003; Santamarina, 2023). An intersectional framework centres the role of power and difference in analysing different identities and experiences of power, privilege, and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1993; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). In Chapters 3 and 4, I further conceptualise power in relation to solidarity and space. In short, I understand power both as the political-economic power of states to govern, execute policies and distribute funding, and as interpersonal relations that both shape and are shaped by structures like class, gender, race, age, sexuality, and so on. Feminist geographers have highlighted that power is "spatially contingent" (Mollett & Faria, 2018, p. 566), shaping people's positions in space and their understandings, perceptions, and experiences of space (Ahmed, 2006; Kinkaid, 2020; Molina, 2007; Simonsen, 2005; Valentine, 2007). Additionally, power is not only reproduced but also contested in and through space. Consequently, intersectionality is particularly relevant for what Mohanty (2003) defines as political solidarities, which are practised across differences and aimed at contesting and transforming racialised, classed, or gendered inequalities (Featherstone, 2012; Mohanty, 2003).

However, geographers have also adopted intersectional theories to argue that solidarities are not inherently positive but are both inclusionary and exclusionary, and both transformative and reproductive of asymmetrical power relations (Kelliher, 2018; Loopmans et al., 2020; Mollett & Faria, 2018). Spaces of solidarity have consequently been defined as contested spaces where differences between people are constantly negotiated (Arampatzi, 2017a; Featherstone, 2012; Karaliotas & Kapsali, 2021; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021). Acknowledging solidarity as contested has also shaped research on migrant solidarities, which has analysed how racialised, gendered, classed, and aged power asymmetries between volunteers and migrants are contested or, sometimes unwillingly, reproduced (Braun, 2017; Fleischmann, 2020; Karaliotas & Kapsali, 2021; Santamarina, 2023; Vandevoordt, 2019).

In the case of folkbildning, multiple actors are involved in defining and practising folkbildning solidarities with people in the asylum process, including state institutions, funding bodies, study associations, circle leaders, and study circle participants with and without citizenship status. Building on critical scholarship that highlights how migrant solidarities are situated within uneven geographies shaped by, amongst others, racial capitalism (Santamarina, 2023), racialised migration policies (Paré, 2022), and heteronormative asylum policies (cf. Wimark, 2021b), as well as by class, citizenship status, gender, and language (Karaliotas & Kapsali, 2021), the following research question is formulated to explore how folkbildning solidarities are embedded in power relations:

> *Research question 3: How do folkbildning solidarities reproduce and challenge power asymmetries?*

Critical theory highlights the co-production of knowledge and is therefore not only concerned with analysing power but also committed to exposing, reflecting on, and countering potential inequalities (Askins, 2018; Mohanty, 2003; Mollett & Faria, 2018; Sultana, 2007). In other words, critical theories of solidarity not only explore how solidarities are shaped by difference but also emphasise the importance of recognising difference in theorising and practising solidarity (Mohanty, 2003; Sundberg, 2007). Feminist scholars reject understandings of solidarity as emerging from sameness and homogeneity, instead highlighting the inevitability of difference, the difficulty, and the productiveness of building relations across difference (Mohanty, 2003; Mollett & Faria, 2018). Consequently, Mohanty (2003) considers political solidarity a “praxis”

that not only questions or exposes the inequalities and relations of privilege and subjugation produced by racism, imperialism, capitalism, and sexism, but also changes them "from the bottom up" (p. 7).

Critical solidarity scholarship therefore highlights the importance of ethnographic, participatory and collaborative methodologies that centre lived experiences of people involved in and impacted by solidarities (or absences thereof) (Falola & West Ohueri, 2017; Sundberg, 2007), without romanticising "the problem of power and translation" (Mouslim, 2024, p. 16). Consequently, this research builds on an ethnographic and participatory methodology that explores the everyday experiences of folkbildning solidarities by both study circle leaders and participants in the asylum process. Exploring how to include participants' experiences is not only a relevant question to ask in critical scholarship on solidarity with people in the asylum process but also aligns with folkbildning's participant- and experience-based pedagogy. However, including participants with experiences of asylum was challenging due to the diversity of languages and literacies. Additionally, observations indicate that similar barriers challenged the fostering of participant-led study circles. To deal with these challenges, I developed a final research question:

> *Research question 4: How can study circle methods be aligned with participatory research methods to foster the inclusion of the lived experiences of participants in the asylum process, both in research and folkbildning practice?*

Consequently, the thesis also contributes to solidarity scholarship that explores the intersection between research and solidarity by conceptualising research as potential spaces of solidarity, where differences and unequal relations are negotiated and knowledge is co-constructed (Abbas, 2019; Butcher, 2021; Huizinga, 2024; Nagar & Geiger, 2007).

## Aim and research questions

This thesis aims to analyse the relationship between folkbildning, solidarity, and spatiality. Concretely, I explore when, where, and how solidarities are practised with people in the asylum process in and through folkbildning and how space matters to practices of folkbildning solidarities. Focusing on a specific case (study circles for people in the asylum process) in a specific context (small cities and rural towns in south-central Sweden), the thesis answers four research questions introduced in this chapter and summarised here:

1. *How are spaces of folkbildning produced as spaces of solidarity? How are different spatialities co-constitutive of practices of solidarity with people in the asylum process?*
2. *How are folkbildning solidarities shaped by and shaping ruralities?*
3. *How do folkbildning solidarities reproduce and challenge power asymmetries?*
4. *How can study circle methods be aligned with participatory research methods to foster the inclusion of the lived experiences of participants in the asylum process, both in research and folkbildning practice?*

## Structure of the dissertation

This compilation thesis comprises seven chapters that introduce the contextual, theoretical, and methodological framework of this research, and four research articles that constitute the empirical body of this dissertation. Between the chapters, "interludes" present a collage created by a participant, accompanied by a text that offers insight into the creator and their experiences in the study circle. The collages were selected to contextualise, introduce, or exemplify some of the themes discussed throughout the chapters. However, I also hope that the collages serve as a break in the rather academic text and create more space for participants' experiences. The process and relevance of collage-making are discussed in Chapter 5 and Article II. The data from the collages have also shaped the analysis presented in the articles, specifically Articles III and IV, which more explicitly refer to participants' experiences.

Following this introduction, in Chapter 2, "Setting the scene", I introduce the research context and discuss *where* the research was conducted. This chapter introduces folkbildning and the study circle method, the geographical research context, and the organisations where fieldwork was conducted. In Chapter 3, "Geographies of solidarities", I review existing research on solidarity within geography and migration studies and develop my theoretical understanding of solidarity as a place-based, multi-scalar, relational, and negotiated practice. In Chapter 4, "Conceptualising space(s)", I introduce Lefebvre and Harvey's theories of space to lay the foundation for exploring the production of spaces of folkbildning. Additionally, in this chapter, I build on rural geographical scholarship and its conceptualisation of rurality. In Chapter 5, "Methodology", I discuss *how* the research was conducted. This chapter discusses the data collection methods, the data analysis process, and reflections

on research ethics and positionality. Additionally, I describe the collage-making process and the role collages play in the analysis. Chapter 6 presents the summaries of the articles included in this thesis. Following this summary, I include the four articles, which constitute the empirical body of this thesis. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses and concludes the results and answers the research questions by bringing the articles' empirical discussions into dialogue with one another.

# Interlude

Collage 2 by a study circle participant and leader, 2023. Anonymised by author.

*Collage by study circle participant and circle leader*
*Narrative written based on collage workshop discussions*

I am a study circle leader. Here, where I live, I formed a group and we organise a weekly *språkcafé* [language café] in the local sports hall. There we sit in a circle because then people don't sit in smaller groups but sit in one big group. People from this and that country, here we all sit together!

I like a society where there are calm people. That is because we live with calm and kind people; they help us develop in society by building relations between people. If we want to learn something, we need to learn in society. This can be wherever: in the church, in society in general, or in school. We, asylum seekers, to learn the language; we need to go out into society. That is why I chose the picture with the people together and a picture of a study circle leader.

In society, we need to learn. But we also need entertainment and relaxation; therefore, we need tourism! People who pass this town, I tell them, "Stay here, observe the beauty of this municipality". And it does me good to be here as well. Maybe we cannot travel because of money issues, but we are already here, which is why we should profit to the max that we are in this touristic, or rather historic, place.

During a language café, a woman from the church came to talk about the region's history. She said that the holes you see everywhere around you reflect the history of mines and the extraction of resources. Today, people are no longer interested in this, but this town used to be an economic stronghold; it contributed to the development of the national economy. This history contributed to how this village is today. People worked hard for it. They were not passive; they were active! And in life, you need to have this vision of working hard to achieve good things. It inspires me to think about how to preserve this heritage. Also, for us, those who are staying, we need to preserve these places. We cannot only think about those who are present now, but also about the following generations. And we are here in the present; it is not yet history. But tomorrow it will be history. For history to become history, it needs to follow a logic, a linear logic. So, we need to pass on information from one to the other. So, for this history to be preserved, one needs to write, and that is what we are doing with this collage workshop. The writings stay, and the words flee.

# 2. Setting the scene

The collage in the interlude offers insight into how a participant who also serves as a study circle leader experiences participation in the circles and how they were organised. In this chapter, I will introduce folkbildning, the Swedish tradition of non-formal popular adult education, and the study circle method. Subsequently, I discuss the establishment of targeted study circles for people in the asylum process and provide an overview of the concrete study circle activities included in the research. The chapter also introduces the geographical context, including the region (Västmanland) and the municipalities (primarily Arboga, Köping, and Norberg) where fieldwork was conducted. Finally, the chapter concludes with a brief discussion of contemporary Swedish asylum policies.

## Introducing folkbildning: Defining that which cannot be defined

> If someone tells you: "This is exactly the way a study circle should look and this is the way it should work"—You must answer him right in the face: you are a humbug, sir, a genuine humbug, sir! (Richard Sandler, 1937. Translation from Larsson & Nordvall, 2010, p. 8)

> *[B]ildung* is what is left when we have forgotten what we have learned. (Ellen Key, 1897. Translation from Gustavsson, 2013, p. 38)

During my fieldwork, study association employees and study circle leaders often pointed out that folkbildning could not be translated and was difficult to define (see also Gustavsson, 2013). Additionally, the above quotes by Ellen Key and Richard Sandler, two key figures in the history of folkbildning, indicate a reluctance to define, fixate on, or conceptualise what folkbildning and its principal method, the study circle, are.

Folkbildning, the Swedish tradition of non-formal popular adult education, emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century from popular social movements and their struggle for democratic political participation, including the labour movement, farmers, free churches[4], and the peasant movement (Gustavsson, 2013; Laginder et al., 2013). Out of these movements emerged a form of popular education that aimed to provide an alternative to formal, state-led, and bourgeois education, politics, and culture. Instead, it was organised by and for the people. Situating the Swedish tradition of folkbildning in a wider Nordic context, Gustavsson (2013) highlights how it centres participant-led learning rather than formal schooling, in which learning processes are stipulated by curricula. This historical tradition of folkbildning as emerging from popular movements, free from state intervention, and tied to democratic processes and practices still shapes the views of folkbildning by some of the study circle leaders (see, for example, Article III).

One of folkbildning's core principles is that it is "free and voluntary" (*fritt och frivilligt*). This refers to participation being (primarily) free of cost and by personal choice. Additionally, it also refers to folkbildning's independence from state control, "private interests and based on participants' learning needs" (Gougoulakis, 2016, p. 25; Sjöstrand, 2018). However, despite its participant-led and open-ended nature, folkbildning has become a "highly state integrated phenomenon and a mainstream activity in Swedish society" (Laginder et al., 2013, p. 4), a statement other Swedish educational scholars also confirm (Berg & Edquist, 2017; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010).

In the following sections, I briefly explore what folkbildning is, situate it historically and geographically within the history of Swedish popular movements, and discuss its contemporary institutional and pedagogical outlook.

## The historical origins of folkbildning

### The "popular" in popular education

Folkbildning began as a rural phenomenon, with folk high schools (*folkhögskolor*) established in rural areas, targeting farmers' sons to convey agricultural knowledge and increase output amid population growth, whilst also curbing societal problems such as alcoholism (Gustavsson, 2013; Maliszewski,

[4] The Swedish free church movement (*frikyrkorörelse*) emerged in the nineteenth century from revivalist movements challenging the then-state-run Lutheran church and was closely related to the labour and temperance movement (Nordqvist Färnskog, 2025). The free churches include multiple Protestant denominations, including Pentecostal, Baptist and Methodist churches.

2014). The Swedish *folkhögskolor* were inspired by the Danish *folkehøjskole*, established in 1844 by the Danish theologian Grundtvig (Berg & Edquist, 2017; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). In his historical account, Larsson (2013) argues that folk high schools primarily served the agricultural elite by educating farmers' sons in scientific farming and political education. This should be placed in the context of rich farmers gaining access to parliament from 1862 onwards and an economic rationale of educating farmers to become technically skilled farmers and businessmen (Berg & Edquist, 2017; Larsson, 2013). In other words, while folkbildning in the labour movement aimed to transform the socio-political status quo, von Essen and Åberg (2009) indicate that the farmers' movement was reformist, focusing on preserving the social and political order of the countryside amidst increasing industrialisation and urbanisation.

The focus on farming and a wealthier participant population shaped folk high schools' participant population, as up until the 1930s, workers' and women's participation remained relatively low (Larsson, 2013). Alongside the development of folk high schools, the rise of popular movements since the 1870s onwards went hand in hand with the establishment of popular educational activities which targeted the (urban) working classes, including book circles and mobile libraries, but also political lectures and classes on school subjects (Berg & Edquist, 2017; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010).

Historical accounts have highlighted that the Swedish folkbildning tradition is not an isolated phenomenon. Instead, it was inspired by international educational and philosophical ideas. Apart from the Danish origins of folk high schools, folkbildning can be situated in the Enlightenment and its focus on knowledge, morality, and cultural learning, as well as in the German New Humanistic tradition of *bildung*, or "education as personal development" (Gougoulakis, 2016, p. 14; Berg & Edquist, 2017). Despite these international sources of inspiration, the Nordic traditions also exhibit differences. Gustavsson (2013), for example, argues that the Swedish tradition of folkbildning was more utilitarian and aimed at unifying the working class in its struggle for democracy, compared to Norway, where the church played a bigger role in the Norwegian folk high school movement, and Denmark, where national ideologies were central to the development of popular education. The Swedish prefix "*folk*" (people) thus referred to a popular conception of the "regular people" rather than a national(ist) unity (Gustavsson, 2013).

While the focus was on educating farmers and workers who were at that time excluded from formal education beyond seven years of elementary

schooling in the early years of folkbildning, it gradually expanded into an educational phenomenon, educating parts of the population who were excluded from power and who, through education, could become politically active and educated democratic citizens (Gustavsson, 2013; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). Apart from educational literacy, cultural literacy was also central to popular education (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). Social and leisure activities were, for example, considered important for creating a working-class culture outside the bourgeois social, cultural, political, and educational spheres, while also providing an escape from exploitative working conditions (Mitchell et al., 2021; Pries et al., 2022). In other words, popular education was imagined as a transformative educational praxis aimed at constructing a popular class and as a movement that created national identities from below (Berg & Edquist, 2017). Consequently, folkbildning's history and pedagogy are related to emancipatory education in which self-empowerment is considered central for achieving social change (Biesta, 2012; Chang, 2013).

**Folkbildning and the state**

However, folkbildning was not merely outside or oppositional to the state, politics, or formal education. Educational scholars have considered how folkbildning has, from its early stages onwards, been intertwined with state policies, funding and control. In their historical account of the role of public funding for folkbildning, Berg and Edquist (2017) have, for example, argued that the government grants have historically been instrumental in shaping and regulating folkbildning in service of the state and the dominant social order. For example, they discuss how government subsidies in the early 1900s constituted an attempt to direct workers away from "political associations, drinking at tap houses or reading of subversive literature" (Berg & Edquist, 2017, p. 33) and towards more morally acceptable activities. Additionally, government subsidies have shaped the bureaucratisation and institutionalisation of folkbildning. For example, from 1912 onward, funding was provided to libraries for lectures and study circles. This funding came with requirements regarding quality, control, and scope, which encouraged the establishment of nationwide associations (Berg & Edquist, 2017; von Essen & Åberg, 2009). In 1947, folkbildning's funding structure was reformed, and funding increased, which led to the rise of new study associations (Berg & Edquist, 2017; von Essen & Åberg, 2009).

Contemporary scholarship on folkbildning for immigrants has also critically analysed the relation between folkbildning and the state by adopting a

governmentality perspective, highlighting how folkbildning discourses reproduce particular notions of "good citizenship" and how the state transfers the responsibility to convey good citizenship practices to individual immigrants and civil society organisations (Fejes, 2019; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017). Dahlstedt (2009) has, for example, considered how Swedish folkbildning and trade unions have served as "techniques of democratic schooling" (p. 2) that position immigrants as "bearers of [an essentially different] culture" (p. 19) deemed backwards in time and at odds with Swedish democratic values. More recently, in his analysis of the relation between folkbildning institutions and immigrant associations, Osman (2013) has also argued that "institutionalised popular education today often functions as the invisible and extended arm of the state" (p. 154).

**The study associations**

As described above, study associations emerged from popular initiatives, including the labour, temperance, and free church movements (Laginder et al., 2013). In 1894, the first study association was established within the temperance movement by the IOGT, the International Order of Good Templars (*Godtemplarorden*). The introduction of new governmental support in 1912 laid the foundation for today's bureaucratic organisation of study associations and led to the establishment of the Workers' Educational Association ABF (*Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund*) by the Social Democratic Party, its youth movement, and trade unions (Berg & Edquist, 2017).

In 1971, the Temperance Movement's Educational Activities, NBV (*Nykterhetsrörelsens Bildningsverksamhet*), was established through the merger of various educational organisations within the temperance movements, including those associated with the IOGT, the National Templar Order (NTO), and the Blue Ribbon Movement (von Essen & Åberg, 2009).

Simultaneously, in rural areas, associations were established specifically to advance rural interests, such as the non-partisan Young Farmers' Association (*Jordbrukare Ungdomens Förbund*, JUF) in 1918, which in 1959 became the *Studiefrämjandet*[5] study association (Åberg & von Essen, 2024; von Essen & Åberg, 2009). In line with its historical development, this association maintains a strong focus on "animals, nature, environment, and culture" (Folkbildningsrådet, 2024c) and remains independent from party politics (von Essen & Åberg, 2009). A more party-political history appears in the history of

[5] *Studiefrämjandet* can be roughly translated as the promotion or encouragement of studies.

*Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan*[6]. In 1919, the forerunner of the youth movement of the Centre Party (*Centerpartiet*), the Swedish Rural Youth Association (*Svenska Landsbygdens Ungdomsförbund*, SLU), was established (Åberg & von Essen, 2024). To receive state support for its educational activities, the SLU established the Swedish Rural Educational Association (*Svenska Landsbygdens Studieförbund*, SLS) in 1930 (von Essen & Åberg, 2009). In 1967, the 1948-founded Liberal study association (LiS) and SLS merged to form today's *Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan*, to which the Farmer's League (*Bondeförbundet*, today's Centre Party) also joined (von Essen & Åberg, 2009).

Finally, the free church movement also established its own study association. In 1947, youth and student associations tied to the free, Methodist, Baptist, and Mission Covenant Church established the Free Church Study Association (*Frikyrkliga studieförbundet*, FS), which changed its name to *Studieförbundet Bilda för kyrka och samhälle* (Study association *Bilda* for church and society, also known as Bilda) in 2003 (Sjöstrand, 2018; von Essen & Åberg, 2009).

Study associations were also established outside of popular movements. In 1940, organisations within the conservative and right-wing political movements established the study association *Medborgarskolan* (which translates to the "Citizen's school"), guided by humanistic principles (Folkbildningsrådet, 2024c; von Essen & Åberg, 2009). In 1947, *Folkuniversitetet* ("the Popular University") was established by university-based associations that aimed to reach a broader audience with academic research (Folkbildningsrådet, 2024c; Sjöstrand, 2018). Another religiously informed study association is *Sensus*, which emerged out of associations related to the Swedish church (*Svenska Kyrkan*) in the 1930s (von Essen & Åberg, 2009). Finally, two of the more recent study associations include the Muslim study association *Ibn Rushd* (established in 2001, state-funded since 2008) and *Kulturens Bildningsverksamhet* (KBV, Cultural Educational Activities), established in 2010, which focuses primarily on cultural activities. As of 2025, *Ibn Rushd* no longer receives state funding. KBV also ceased operations in response to budget cuts. In other words, when starting fieldwork in 2022, there were still ten different study associations; by 2025, only eight remained.

One study association included in this research is not formally included as part of the ten (or eight) study associations funded by the National Council of Folkbildning (*Folkbildningsrådet*). RF-SISU, the Educational Association of

[6] *Vuxenskolan* can be translated to The Adult School Study Association.

the Swedish National Sports Confederation (*Riksidrottsförbundet Svensk Idrotts Studie- och Utbildningsorganisation*), was established in 1985 and, until 2007, was part of the *Folkbildningsförbundet*, the joint organisation for study associations, now called *Studieförbunden*. In contrast to the other associations, which receive their funding through the National Council of Adult Education (*Folkbildningsrådet*), the sports association *SISU Idrottsutbildarna* receives its folkbildning funding directly from the Ministry of Education (SFS 2015:521; SFS2015:218).

The different ideological roots of these study associations are reflected in their organisational values and, consequently, their different activity focuses. For example, ABF, which has roots in the labour movement, describes democracy, equality and solidarity as its foundational principles (ABF, 2023). In line with its ideological background, *Vuxenskolan's* principal values reflect liberal and humanistic values, centring on equal rights, personal development, and active participation in a liberal democracy (Folkbildningsrådet, 2024c; Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan, 2024). Sometimes, the different historical, ideological, and pedagogical traditions are also reflected in the types of activities offered by the different study associations: RF-SISU, for example, focuses on sports; Folkuniversitetet on courses and lectures; and *Studiefrämjandet* on activities focused on nature and outdoor life (Folkbildningsrådet, 2024c).

## Folkbildning today

*Bildning* translates, following the educational scholar Biesta (2012), to education, self-empowerment, and the process of becoming an active and responsible subject (i.e., subjectification). In line with its historical development, *bildning* is, in other words, opposed to schooling or learning, the instrumental acquisition of skills or the socialisation of individuals into existing norms and habits (Biesta, 2012; Gustavsson, 2013). In the Nordic context, folkbildning is often associated with the concept of lifelong learning (Nordqvist Färnskog, 2025).

Scholars argue that the particularity of Swedish folkbildning lies in its being a nationwide phenomenon with high participation rates. Currently, there are 152 folk high schools and eight national study associations across the country. In 2025, more than 600,000 unique participants were active in one of the eight study associations funded by the Folkbildningsrådet (SCB, 2026a). An overview of the number of unique participants in the different study associations is provided in Table 1. Participation is also high for RF-SISU, which

is not included in folkbildning statistics, but has activities and member organisations across Sweden and, in 2025, included more than 500,000 unique participants in its folkbildning activities (RF-SISU, 2026). Folkbildning remains somewhat of a rural phenomenon, given that folk high schools are often situated in smaller rural communities and that participation is relatively higher in the Swedish countryside (Åberg & von Essen, 2024; Folkbildningsrådet, 2024b). In Västmanland, where this research took place, almost 17,000 people participated in 2025, representing 6.3% of its population and just above the national average (5.7%) (SCB, 2026a).

Table 1. *Overview of study associations in Sweden and their number of unique participants in 2023 and 2025*. Source: RF-SISU, 2025, 2026; SCB, 2026a.

| Study association | Participants | |
|---|---|---|
| | 2023 | 2025 |
| Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund (ABF) | 140,108 | 135,718 |
| Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan | 126,854 | 126,114 |
| Sensus | 99,685 | 91,739 |
| Bilda | 83,466 | 89,360 |
| Studiefrämjandet | 74,865 | 65,717 |
| Medborgarskolan | 57,279 | 62,917 |
| Folkuniversitetet | 52,839 | 57,568 |
| Nykterhetsrörelsens Bildningsverksamhet (NBV) | 32,727 | 36,563 |
| Ibn Rushd | 6,394 | — |
| Kulturens Bildningsverksamhet (KBV) | 13,226 | — |
| *RF-SISU* | *446,489* | *519,560* |

A second particularity lies in folkbildning's relationship with the state, which refers to the formalised cooperation between state and civil society (Laginder et al., 2013; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). Since 1991, funding for folkbildning's activities has been distributed by the National Council of Folkbildning (*Folkbildningsrådet*), an independent, non-profit government agency that represents the study associations, folk high schools, and the Swedish regions and municipalities. It is also tasked with distributing funds between study associations and folk high schools, evaluating, and reporting back to the Ministry of Education (SFS2015:218). Government subsidies for study circles are an important financial resource for study associations and account for about a third of their funding (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010; Sjöstrand, 2018). Other funding comes from local and regional governments, participant fees, and other activities such as contract education (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010; Sjöstrand, 2018).

With this increasing dependence on other funding, Larsson and Nordvall (2010) argue that study associations have become "more business-oriented" (p. 12).

In 2024, the government announced budget cuts to folkbildning's state funding. These cuts affected not only targeted activities such as Swedish from day one and Everyday Swedish, but also more general areas. Following these budgetary changes, the study association KBV ceased its operations. Additionally, debates and changes regarding Folkbildning's funding structure point to processes of recentralising government control, with proposals to increase control or replace Folkbildningsrådet with a government agency (SOU2024:42).

## Introducing the study circle method

Study circles are folkbildning's main pedagogical method, in which a small group of adults learns through practice and dialogue about a topic of their choice, ranging from language and music to crafts and digital skills. The "invention" of the study circle is often ascribed to Oscar Olsson, a member of the labour and temperance movement, who organised the first study circle within the IOGT movement in 1902 (Laginder et al., 2013; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). However, Laginder et al. (2013) nuance the Swedish uniqueness of this method, arguing that Olsson was inspired by study circles of the US-based Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Society (Laginder et al., 2013).

While Sandler's quote at the beginning of this chapter highlights that the study circle should not be defined, the study circle has, in some way, become an institutionalised and bureaucratised method, as study associations need to report the number of meetings, participants, content, and outcomes to the *Folkbildningsrådet* to receive funding. So, while study circles should not be defined, Larsson and Nordvall (2010) argue that a certain ideal type exists, which they refer to as the "study circle grammar", a term they use to point to a shared and institutionalised set of rules that government funding encourages and which sets it apart from the "grammar of schooling". According to Folkbildningsrådet (2026, pp. 22 & 24),

1. study circles consist of a minimum of three and a maximum of twenty participants (including the study circle leader). Participants must be at least thirteen years old and be registered in the population register (*folkbokförda*) or have a temporary residence permit; and,

2. study circle groups meet a minimum of three times and for a minimum of nine study hours. One study hour equals 45 minutes. A group meets a maximum of three times a week.

Complementing this with Larsson and Nordvall's conceptualisation of the "study circle grammar" (2010, pp. 14–15), the following characteristics also define study circles:

3. Participation is voluntary and based on personal interest or commitment;
4. Study circles are open. Pre-existing knowledge is not required;
5. Study circles are a form of non-formal education. There are no curricula, teachers, or examinations;
6. Study circles are participant-led. Learning occurs based on participants' interests and needs;
7. Study circles are characterised by equal and horizontal relations. Instead of teachers, study circles are facilitated or moderated by study circle leaders (*studiecirkelledare*) who might, but do not need to, have existing knowledge or expertise;
8. Learning happens through conversation, dialogue, or practice. Participation is equally distributed between participants;
9. Study circles reflect the diverse political, social and religious interests and civil society organisations in society.

Because of its dialogic, participant-led and horizontal nature, personal experiences are considered central to the educational process. Ideally, the study circle comprises people of different ages and backgrounds to foster learning across differences (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). Additionally, democratic processes are central to the study circle method. The study circle grammar highlights dialogue and equal participation, but democracy also constitutes one of folkbildning's core principles (cf. Folkbildningsrådet, 2026; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). Building on the above-mentioned definitions of *bildning* (Biesta, 2012; Gustavsson, 2013), study circles include both an individual and a collective component, and folkbildning enables participants' self-development and empowerment, which are considered to contribute to the development of society (Folkbildningsrådet, 2026; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010).

## Targeted study circles for people in the asylum process

Following the increase in asylum applications in Sweden and in application processing times, the Swedish government (Department of Education) implemented an ordinance on targeted folkbildning activities for people in the asylum process (SFS 2015:521). Study associations, however, have a longer history of organising activities for and with people with migration backgrounds. In the 1960s, study associations organised language circles, primarily for labour immigrants, laying the foundation for the municipal formal language course SFI (Swedish for Immigrants) (Rosén, 2014). Additionally, popular education also has a history of working together with (and training) "ethnic associations" through which people with migration backgrounds become included within study associations (Nordvall et al., 2018; Pastuhov et al., 2021)

As previously discussed, government-commissioned study circles aimed to provide "meaningful" activities that "strengthen knowledge of the Swedish language and society, and promote participation in working life and society" (SFS 2015:521). This led to the establishment of two study circles: Swedish from day one (*Svenska från dag ett*) in 2015 and, from 2016, Everyday Swedish (*Vardagssvenska*). In 2016, targeted folkbildning activities were organised in 271 out of 290 municipalities and reached 55% of their target population (around 80,000 people) (Bernerstedt & Håkansson, 2017).

While Swedish from day one came with few requirements for how it should be organised and was organised by both folk high schools and study associations, Everyday Swedish was offered only by study associations and had to be organised as a study circle with at least 40 meeting hours (Bernerstedt & Håkansson, 2017). In practice, the difference between these two activities was unclear, and study circle leaders strategically shifted between the two formats while participants and activities remained unchanged. Targeted study circles were organised by all study associations, but funding varied across associations. ABF, NBV, and Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan received the largest grants, and Ibn Rushd and KBV received the smallest grants (Bernerstedt & Håkansson, 2017; Folkbildningsrådet, 2022, 2024a).

Not all study circles included in this research were funded as part of targeted folkbildning activities for people in the asylum process. Organisations also sought other funding sources, such as European funding (e.g., the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund [AMIF] or the European Social Fund [ESF]) or regional grants commissioned by the Ministry of Education and

distributed by the County Board (including the so-called TIA funding and 37a funding[7]).

While study circles can, in theory, be about anything—from handicrafts to political organising, language, or music—commissioned study circles for people in the asylum process focus primarily on language learning and civic education (*samhällskunskap*). Civic education included discussions of Swedish culture, norms, traditions, holidays, etc. The content discussed during study circles organised within different associations sometimes differed. Political discussions were, for example, more common during activities organised by ABF (cf. Article III), and outdoor activities were more central to *Studiefrämjandet* (cf. Article IV). However, depending on which organisation organised what, where, and with what funding, the study circle's content, format, and location varied. For example, activities funded through regional TIA or 37a funding included activities in which language learning was absent (e.g., Rainbow Refugees Sweden) or considered secondary (e.g., sports, sewing, or cooking activities) (see Table 2 below).

When folkbildning's targeted funding decreased in 2023 and, eventually, ended in 2024, Swedish from day one and Everyday Swedish ceased to exist. However, study circles for people in the asylum process did not disappear as study associations shifted to other human and financial resources. Study associations relied on voluntary labour, used organisational budgets, or applied for alternative regional or European funding. Additionally, folkbildning employees described instances of being strategic in response to changing budgets and target populations, noting that they sometimes changed location, target population, or focus to continue providing activities in accordance with funding requirements.

It is important to note that the defunding did not come out of nowhere, even though some participants experienced it that way. In accordance with the decreasing number of asylum applications in Sweden, study circle participation was also declining. While in 2016, more than 19,000 study circles were organised, reaching over 80,000 unique participants, by 2019, the number had dropped to 18,000 people participating in 6,484 circles offered by study associations (Bernerstedt & Håkansson, 2017; Folkbildnings-rådet, 2022). In

[7] TIA refers to *Tidiga Insatser för Asylsökande*, or Early Interventions for Asylum Seekers, and is distributed to civil society initiatives organising activities on the Swedish language, society and labour market, and health (SFS 2016:1363; SFS 2016:1364). 37a funding is issued to support municipalities' guidance and family support for refugees and asylum seekers (SFS2010:1122).

2023, this number further decreased to 5,950 participants across 1,312 study circles, representing 9% of the target population (Folkbildningsrådet, 2024a). A short-term increase was observed in 2022, when 15,768 people participated in 4,104 study circles, an increase that can be explained by the arrival of 50,000 Ukrainian refugees (Folkbildningsrådet, 2024a). In Västmanland, participation rates were slightly higher, and study associations reached 259 unique participants, which was more than 18% of the target population (Folkbildningsrådet, 2024a).

In conclusion, there are some contradictions between the above-mentioned ideal study circle type and targeted study circles for asylum seekers. First, while study circle participation requires registration in the population register, targeted funding enabled participation by people without a national registration number (*personnummer*). Second, while study circles are, ideally, participant-led and responsive to participants' needs, targeted study circles are introduced in response to a top-down-identified need to introduce asylum seekers to the Swedish language and society. While this is not to deny that participants may also identify this as a personal interest or need, I argue that it points to an interesting tension between folkbildning as a bottom-up and a top-down process, as Söderman (2023) also notes.

# Introducing the fieldwork context

## Introducing the organisations and study circles

Although folkbildning activities were held all over Sweden, the fieldwork on which this dissertation builds took place in south-central Sweden. ABF Västra Västmanland was one of the partner organisations involved in the SOLiDi network[8] and consequently became my entry point into the fieldwork. At that time, ABF was organising various study circles for people in the asylum process, including Swedish from day one (Sfdo) and Everyday Swedish (ES), as well as a sewing circle for women in the asylum process. Additionally, ABF hosted activities by Rainbow Refugees Sweden targeting people who applied

[8] SOLiDi refers to the training and research programme "Solidarity in Diversity" that brought together junior and established researchers and non-academic partner organisations from various EU countries. From September 2021 until August 2024, I was part of this network as one of the fifteen "Early Stage Researchers". Alongside conducting my individual research project, I participated in diverse theoretical, methodological and practical workshops which were organised by academic institutions and non-academic organisations. The non-academic partner organisation in Sweden was ABF, which consequently became my entry point into the field (see also Chapter 5).

for asylum on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity, which, at the time, were organised by my main supervisor. My fieldwork context, however, quickly expanded to include other study associations and municipalities as participants and study circle leaders invited me to other activities organised across the region. Alongside ABF, I also conducted participatory observations with RF-SISU, *Folkuniversitetet*, and, to a lesser extent, *Bilda*.

In other words, the sampling of participating organisations resembled both what has been called snowball sampling or more opportunistic on-site sampling (Dahinden & Efionayi-Mäder, 2009; Stratford & Bradshaw, 2021). Concretely, I followed people's recommendations and invitations to various activities and places, and, within each municipality, I attempted to gain an overview of all civil society actors offering activities for people in the asylum process. Throughout the research process, the municipalities where I conducted research also changed depending on where study associations were organising activities for asylum seekers. While I started conducting observations in Arboga, my fieldwork locations expanded to other places, such as Köping, Skinnskatteberg, Riddarhyttan, Valskog, and Hallstahammar. However, following the defunding of targeted study circles and the shifts in Sweden's asylum distribution policy, which increasingly (re)settled people in bigger towns and cities like Köping and Västerås, my fieldwork locations shifted away from these smaller towns and concentrated on places like Arboga, Köping and Norberg.

In addition to government-commissioned study circles, I conducted observations of activities organised by non-folkbildning civil society organisations, such as *Rädda Barnen* (the Swedish branch of Save the Children), the Swedish church (*Svenska Kyrkan*), and a volunteer-led language course. These activities, organised without targeted government funding, included language classes, *språkcaféer* [language cafés], a theoretical driving licence course, cooking activities, social gatherings, and walks around the municipality. While these activities were not organised by formal study associations, I argue that they are part of a broader folkbildning tradition. They resemble study circle activities, centred on language learning and group-based discussions, were defined as study circles, conversation circles (*språkcirklar*), or folkbildning by their organisers or volunteers, and, finally, some of these activities were (previously) organised in collaboration with study associations or took place within study associations' premises. For example, the establishment of an open day care (*öppen förskola*) brought together *Rädda Barnen*, *Folkuniversitetet*, RF-SISU, a local church, and the municipality, who collaborated to

provide a weekly schedule of activities for parents and children, including childcare, language study circles, parenting circles, and sports activities. Another example is the volunteer-organised language course, which, before taking place in a church community hall, had taken place inside an asylum accommodation centre and in collaboration with a study association. An overview of the included study circle activities is provided in Table 2 below[9].

Table 2. *Overview of organisations included in the research and some examples of activities they offered to people in the asylum process during the course of fieldwork.*

| Organisation | Examples of study circle activities for asylum seekers and refugees | Location | Funding |
|---|---|---|---|
| ABF | - Targeted study circles focusing on Swedish language and civic education (e.g., Sfdo & ES)<br>- Study circles for Ukrainian refugees focusing on Swedish, English, and the labour market<br>- Study circles for women: sewing and swimming<br>- Study circles for LGBTQ asylum seekers in collaboration with Rainbow Refugees Sweden | ABF premises or member organisations' premises (e.g., tenants' association) | - Targeted state funding<br>- Organisational budget<br>- Regional funding (TIA)<br>- European funding (ESF) |

[9] In addition to the activities listed in Table 2, I also participated in activities that were not included as data in the thesis, such as a cooking workshop, a book circle, and a protest against the defunding of folkbildning. These were excluded because the content was further removed from the subject of the thesis and because people in the asylum process were not part of the participant group. Additionally, some study circle activities were relevant to the research subject but were not included for practical and ethical reasons. This includes, for example, activities organised by RFSL and Rainbow Refugees (to avoid researcher fatigue, as my main supervisor was already involved there) and activities during the summer months when I was on leave.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bilda | - Language café<br>- Study circles on digitalisation | Church community hall | - Targeted state funding<br>- European funding (ESF, AMIF) |
| *Folkuniversitetet* | - Targeted study circles focusing on Swedish language and civic education (e.g., Sfdo & ES)<br>- Study circles on digital (computer) skills | Classrooms or meeting rooms in a former school building, municipal community house, or sports halls | - Targeted state funding<br>- Regional funding (37a) |
| *Rädda Barnen* | - Discussion circles about parenting<br>- Family activities | Former school building and sports hall | - Regional funding (TIA, 37a)<br>- European funding (AMIF) |
| RF-SISU | - Sports circles (e.g., ping pong, football training, dance, circle training, etc)<br>- Bicycle course<br>- Family activities<br>- Discussion circles about health and cooking activities | Sports halls and surroundings | - Targeted state funding<br>- Regional funding (TIA) |
| Swedish church | - Language café<br>- Walking activities<br>- Cooking activities<br>- Clothing distributions | Church community hall | n/a |
| Volunteer-organised language course | - Swedish language class<br>- Language circle<br>- Theoretical drivers' course | Church community hall | n/a |

*Image 1.* Map of the region. Source data: OpenStreetMap and Kontur Humanitarian Data.

The observations took place in municipalities in the County of Västmanland, primarily in and around Arboga, Köping, and Norberg, with some in Skinnskatteberg, Riddarhyttan, Valskog, and Hallstahammar. Apart from their administrative location in Västmanland, these municipalities can also be considered part of Bergslagen, a region historically central to the Swedish iron and mining industry from the Middle Ages until the late twentieth century. Although Bergslagen's geographical boundaries are unclear and can "produce an image of a homogeneous region" (Heldt Cassel, 2008, p. 106), I consider its industrial mining history relevant because stories of the region's mining and labour history sometimes surfaced during the interviews.

Thanks to their strategic location near Lake Mälaren, places like Arboga, Köping, and Västerås became important commercial and shipping towns that connected the Bergslagen mines to the rest of the world. The maintenance and repurposing of former mining infrastructure in the region, and the multiple museums on the region's industrial and mining history, highlight how this economic history has also become a strategy for place-branding and for attracting tourism to former industrial towns (Heldt Cassel, 2008). Additionally, this industrial history has influenced the contemporary labour market, as manufacturing industries, alongside jobs in the service and public sectors, continue to be important employers in the region.

Arboga is a small historic city in south-central Sweden. The municipality's historic centre, with its cobblestone streets and red wooden houses, is located along the Arboga River. Historically, Arboga was an important political, economic, and merchant town, and its medieval and industrial mining history forms part of the municipality's place branding. Today, the municipality has a relatively small population of fewer than 13,980 inhabitants (Arboga kommun, 2025). According to the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions *(Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner* SKR, 2022), Arboga is classified as a "Commuter municipality near a small town" (*Pendlingskommun nära mindre tätort*), and inhabitants primarily commute to nearby cities like Köping (SKR, 2022). Beyond the historical old town, there are residential neighbourhoods, restaurants, shops, local museums, and multiple church congregations.

About a 20-minute drive from Arboga lies Köping, a slightly larger city with a population of almost 25,000 (SCB, 2025). According to SKR (2022), Köping is classified as a "Low-commuting municipality near a major city" (*Lågpendlingskommun nära större stad*), namely Västerås. Like Arboga, Köping has a historic centre with historic buildings and museums along the riverside, which reflect the city's history as a commercial and industrial town.

The contemporary commercial centre exhibits features of post-1950s urban planning, with wide grey-paved commercial streets lined by three-storey buildings housing restaurants, clothing chains, supermarkets, and other stores at ground level.

Finally, Norberg is a small town with about 5,000 inhabitants, but, like Arboga, is classified as a "Commuter municipality near a smaller town" (SKR, 2022), which is Fagersta. In 2015, the town became known for receiving one of the highest numbers of people in the asylum process relative to its population size in Sweden (Mattar & Gazett, 2015). In response, a large civil society network supporting people in the asylum process and newly arrived refugees was established, a phenomenon that a civil society employee referred to as the "Norberg-model" during an interview. Compared to Arboga and Köping, Norberg is geographically more isolated. Located on the border between the Counties of Västmanland and Dalarna, it has no train station and can only be reached by car or bus. Norberg's centre is small and has two supermarkets, a few local businesses, a public library, and multiple study, sports, or other associations. During the summer, sports competitions, music festivals, and cultural events attract tourists.

## Introducing the political context: Swedish asylum policies

During the asylum application process, the SMA is responsible for handling applications and providing housing, financial compensation, and other assistance (Lag 1994:137). Since 1994, people have been able to choose between accommodation provided by the SMA (called ABO, *Anläggningsboende*) and their own accommodation (called EBO, *Eget Boende*). Sweden's asylum accommodation policy is changing, and since 2025 only those living in SMA-provided accommodation are entitled to daily allowances (SFS2025:57). Responsibility shifts from the SMA to the municipality only upon the receipt of a residence permit

Following the increase in asylum applications in 2014 and 2015, Sweden's initial response seemed to be one of welcome, hospitality, and solidarity, as "refugees welcome" demonstrations were organised in Sweden and civil society initiatives provided humanitarian support for people arriving in Sweden. In August 2014, the then-governing Prime Minister, Frederik Reinfeldt, of the centre-right Moderate Party (*Moderaterna*), delivered a speech appealing to the Swedish people to "open their hearts" and "have solidarity" (SVT, 2014). In September 2015, his successor, the social-democratic Stefan Löfven,

appealed to humanitarian solidarity and Sweden's responsibility to receive refugees in a speech at a "refugees welcome" demonstration in Stockholm[10]. Sweden's initial approach quickly took a turn when, barely two months after Löfven's speech, stricter asylum policies were introduced, including identity checks on public transport and "temporary" border controls at the Swedish-Danish border (Borevi & Shakra, 2019). The political discourse of the governing parties has been to restrict Swedish asylum policies to "the minimum standards of EU laws" (Borevi & Shakra, 2019, p. 8), which, in practice, has meant a shift from permanent to temporary residence permits, and stricter rules for family reunification (Migrationsverket, 2026). Borevi & Shakra (2019) situate the increasing politicisation of immigration policies in the rise of right-wing populist parties, with *Sverigedemokraterna* (the populist right-wing Sweden Democrats) crossing the electoral threshold for parliamentary representation in 2010, winning 5.7% of the votes and 20 out of 349 seats (Valmyndigheten, 2026).

Asylum reception was unevenly distributed not only among EU countries, but also within countries (Malmberg et al., 2016). While south and central Sweden received the largest absolute numbers of people in the asylum process (Nordregio, 2017b), municipalities in mid- and northern Sweden were among those that took in the highest share of people in the asylum process relative to their population size (see Image 2, Nordregio, 2017a).

The disproportionate settlement of people in rural areas can be explained by what Hansen (2018) calls the "refugee dividend". Some municipalities actively argued for receiving more asylum seekers and refugees for humanitarian, economic, *and* fiscal reasons (Hansen, 2018). Similarly, Swedish researchers have argued that welcoming international migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, can counter rural depopulation, increase employment and tax revenues (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; Hudson & Sandberg, 2021; Malmberg et al., 2016), thereby contributing to rural resilience (Stenbacka, 2013). Additionally, research has pointed out that material factors, such as access to housing or temporary private accommodation, have influenced the settlement of people in rural areas during the asylum process (Barthoma et al., 2020; Wimark, 2021b). Rural migration scholarship has also examined how migrants experience living in Swedish rural areas. For example, Scandinavian researchers have analysed how material conditions in rural localities,

[10] The full speech can be read on the website of the Swedish Social Democratic Party, *Socialdemokraterna* (Accessed 2026, July 7th): https://www.socialdemokraterna.se/vart-parti/vara-politiker/stefan-lofvens-tal/tal-pa-manifestation-for-asylmottagande-2015

such as (lack of) access to public spaces, services, and transport, affect living experiences and feelings of belonging and inclusion (Carlbaum, 2022; Herslund & Paulgaard, 2021; Stenbacka, 2023). Additionally, Arora-Jonsson and Larsson (2021) argue that asylum seekers settled in sparsely populated rural areas experience "double isolation—from co-ethnic networks as well as from local society". Practices of "forced residence" (della Porta, 2018; Haselbacher, 2019) in asylum accommodation centres and experiences of liminality, waiting, and isolation can also be considered a tool of migration deterrence within wider European border regimes (Engblom, 2023).

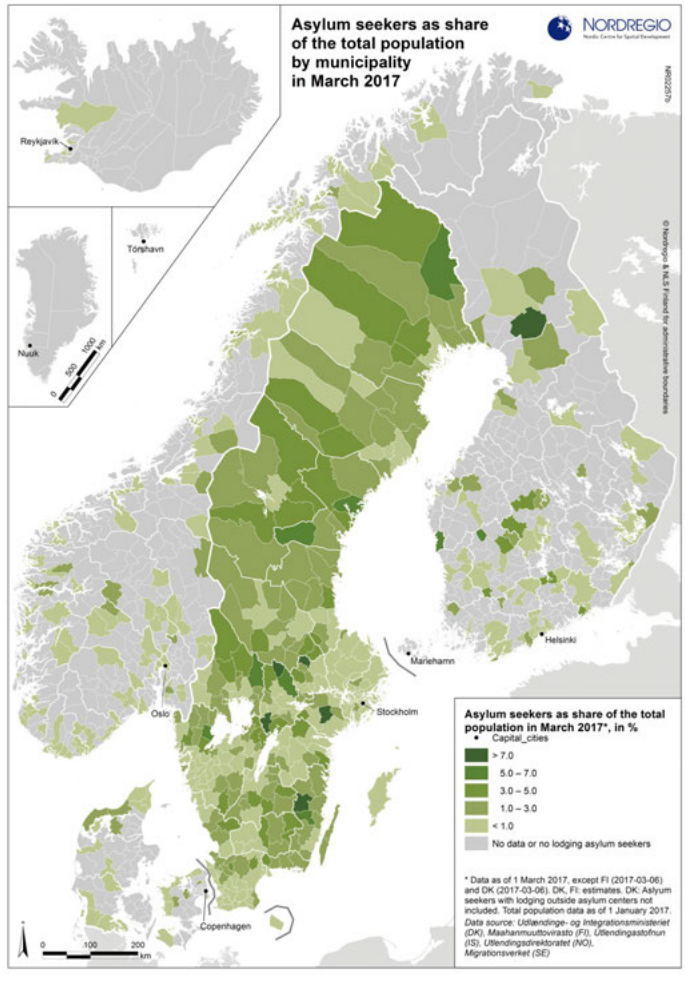



*Image 2.* Asylum seekers as a share of the total population by municipality in March 2017. Source: Nordregio, 2017a.

Apart from providing accommodation, the SMA also has a responsibility to provide and "meaningful activities" (*meningsfull sysselsättning*) for people during the asylum application period, including, for example Swedish language courses but also maintenance work in the asylum accommodations (SFS2025:57). Additionally, the SMA is responsible for providing a civic introduction course (*samhällsintroduktion*) (SFS2025:57). This introduction course is mandatory for people over sixteen and introduces asylum seekers to "the asylum process and Swedish society (…) democracy, norms and values, like gender equality and honour-related violence and oppression, but also issues related to housing, everyday life, and the labour market" (Migrationsverket, n.d.). Refusing to participate in SMA-provided activities can result in a reduction of the daily allowance (SFS2025:57).

The focus on language and civic integration fits within a broader political discourse in which knowledge of language and society becomes a condition for obtaining Swedish citizenship (cf. Borevi et al., 2017; Hudson et al., 2023). While offering language activities is the responsibility the SMA, the SMA has contracted external actors to offer these activities (SOU 2009:19). While this can be done through municipal or private actors, targeted folkbildning activities and TIA funding highlight how the responsibilities to provide language education has also been shifted to civil society, which Engblom (2023) situates in a broader and longer trend of European states outsourcing social responsibilities to civil society. The ambivalent position of civil society actors responding to, countering, or filling gaps in institutional support by the government is further explored in the following theoretical chapter and is also a recurring theme in the articles included in this thesis.

*Image 3*. Study circle set up by *Folkuniversitet*, following a sports activity organised by RF-SISU in the same room in a community centre. Photo by author.

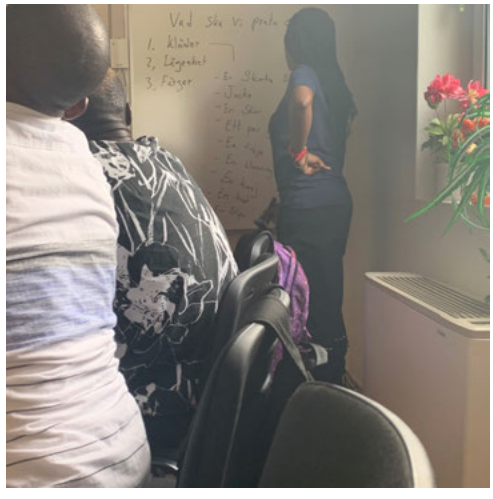


*Image 4*. An ABF study circle started with the question "What shall we talk about?". The participants requested "clothes", "apartments" and "colours". A participant is invited to write out different types of clothing on the board. Photo by author.

*Image 5*. A reading exercise during a study circle organised by *Folkuniversitetet*. Photo by author.

*Image 6*. A sports activity set up by RF-SISU in a sports hall. Photo by author.

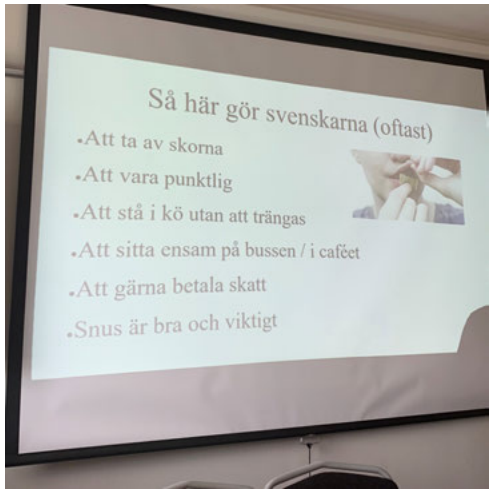



*Image 7*. Picture of a slideshow showing "this is how the Swedes (often) do it". Photo by author.

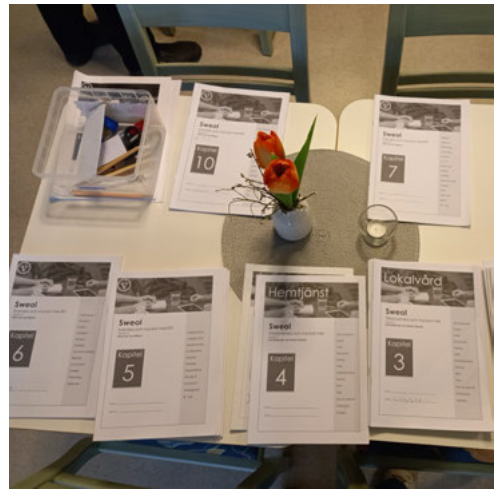



*Image 8*. Booklets for different Swedish levels for the participants of a study circle organised by Bilda in a local church. Anonymised photo by author.

*Image 9*. Outcome of a workshop activity on how to take the study circle outside by creating spaces for shelter and discussion in nature. Photo by author.

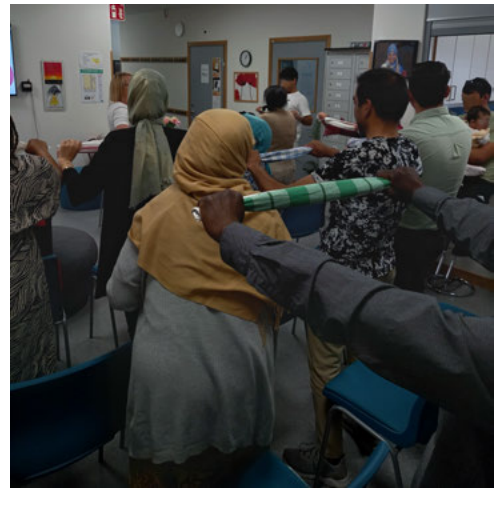


*Image 10*. RF-SISU circle on health. The presenter is introducing exercises one can do at home with a kitchen towel. Anonymised photo by author.

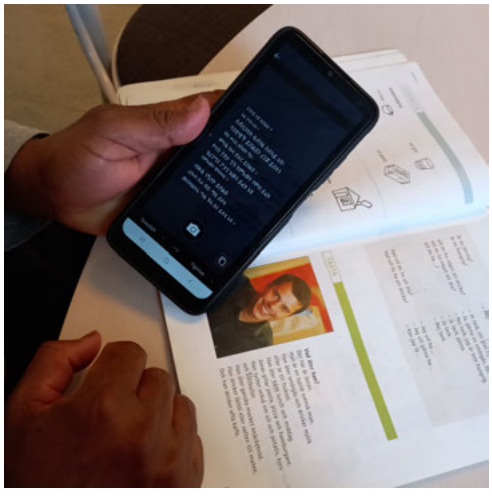


*Image 11*. A participant uses a translation application to translate a reading exercise during a volunteer-organised language course. Photo by author.

*Image 12*. A look inside the study circle premises at ABF, where the room was redecorated with pride flags at the start of a study circle for LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers. Photo by author.

*Image 13*. *Fika*, an important part of the study circle. The study book used during the ABF study circle introduces the Swedish labour unions. Photo by author.

*Image 14*. Food made by some participants alongside a *språkcafé* on health organised by RF-SISU. Photo by author.

# 3. Geographies of solidarities

Solidarity is a "multidimensional" concept that lacks a uniform definition (Bauder & Juffs, 2020). While solidarity has traditionally been associated with left-wing politics and mobilisation, its meaning has varied, been contested, and transformed across geographical, academic, political and historical contexts. Not only do scholars adopt different terms and definitions, but a range of thinkers, as well as political and religious movements, have also (re)defined the term throughout history (Stjernø, 2005).

The same can be argued in the case of migrant solidarities, which have been defined as a "contested imaginary" (Fleischmann, 2020, p. 25) and a "political battlefield" (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019, p. 28) in which different meanings, practices, and outcomes of solidarities are contested. While some movements supporting migrants have framed their engagement as solidarity, solidarity has also been taken up by institutional actors in relation to governing or to oppose migration. For example, the European Asylum and Migration Pact considers solidarity as a practice between nation-states, rather than with or among forced migrants whose mobility is challenged by securitised and externalised borders, increasingly selective integration and citizenship policies, and detention and deportation policies (cf. Agustín & Jørgensen, 2021). Additionally, right-wing populist parties in Europe have taken welfare policies into their political agendas, attracting working-class voters and presenting themselves as agents of solidarity, albeit an exclusionary one towards migrants and immigration (Lefkofridi & Michel, 2017).

In a political-economic context characterised by the neoliberal outsourcing of social responsibilities to individuals and increasingly restrictive immigration policies that constrain people's right to move and to claim asylum, I define solidarity as practices of support that contest the social, political, economic, and educational exclusion of people without citizenship status. In this thesis, I focus on folkbildning solidarities, which refer to practices of social, economic, material, educational, and emotional support for asylum seekers, practised in or through folkbildning or emerging from encounters within spaces of folkbildning. Alongside contesting dominant and exclusionary

discourses, practices, and policies, folkbildning solidarities also depend on state funding and support, a politically ambivalent position I will further explore in this chapter. In sum, I will conceptualise solidarities as place-based, shaped by and shaping spaces, and embedded in uneven power relations that can be reproduced and transformed. Consequently, solidarities are difficult, multiple, contested, and ambivalent practices.

## The sociological and political roots of solidarity

Tracing its conceptual history, the political scientist Stjernø (2005) situates the origins of solidarity in Enlightenment philosophies and classical social theory of the nineteenth century, including the work of Fourier, Leroux, Comte, Durkheim, and Weber. However, the origins of the concept can equally be traced to ancient Greek philosophy on friendship and citizenship, Christian ethics of brotherly love, or ancient Roman law on obligations to pay common debts (Bayertz, 1999; Hooker, 2009).

Sociological and political scholarship often builds on Durkheim's classification of mechanical and organic solidarity (see, for example, Banting & Kymlicka, 2017; Bayertz, 1999; Stjernø, 2005; Thijssen, 2012). While mechanical solidarity refers to social cohesion arising from similarity and homogeneity within a society, Durkheim argues that in modern societies people are integrated through interdependence, difference, and interaction—or, in other words, organic solidarity (Stjernø, 2005). Contrary to Durkheim, who focuses on social cohesion within society, Weber approaches solidarity at a smaller scale and theorises social relationships through which social groups pursue ideal and material interests (Stjernø, 2005). Consequently, Weber identifies relations of solidarity as simultaneously inclusive (constitutive of a "we") and exclusionary (opposed to a "they") (Stjernø, 2005).

Apart from these sociological debates on the nature of solidarity and the role of difference, solidarity has also been situated within theories and movements associated with labour politics and the political left (Featherstone, 2012; Kelliher, 2018; Stjernø, 2005). Stjernø (2005), for example, describes how political theories and labour struggles of the nineteenth century have built on and developed Marxist, anarchist, and social democratic ideas of class-based solidarities between workers. Apart from relating solidarities to labour politics, solidarity has also been linked with religious ethics and the rise of Christian-democratic parties in Europe (Banting & Kymlicka, 2017; Stjernø, 2005).

A point of contention in contemporary theorisations of solidarity concerns the scale at which solidarity is practised or oriented. Much political and sociological research reproduces a notion of solidarity tied to the nation-state and calls for some form of institutionalisation of solidarity within a democratic welfare state (cf. Banting & Kymlicka, 2017; Stjernø, 2005). Hooker (2009), however, critiques nationalist theories of solidarity that are based on shared national membership. Instead, she builds on Young's notion of "differential solidarity" to explore how solidarity emerges from the sharing of a geographical, social, or political space. This is also central to Oosterlynck et al.'s (2017) argument for a shift in the conceptualisation of solidarity from the "spatio-temporal perspective from the territoriality and the longue durée of the nation-state to the *here and now* of the practices of ethnically and culturally diverse people in diverse places" (Oosterlynck et al., 2017, p. 7, emphasis added). Such a place-based understanding of solidarity rejects (cultural) homogeneity—shared norms and values—as the sole precondition of solidarity and instead analyses solidarities as practised in the everyday and resulting from encounters, without neglecting how solidarity practices are connected to places and spaces beyond the local. I will return to this point.

Expanding on previous sociological and political theorisations of solidarity, Oosterlynck et al. (2017) argue that encounters constitute a fourth source of solidarity alongside shared norms, interdependence, and struggle. First, examples of solidarities emerging from struggle include historical labour solidarities and contemporary folkbildning solidarities informed by struggles for asylum rights or access to education for people without formal citizenship. Second, while shared norms and values refer to solidarities emerging from a shared national identity, Oosterlynck et al. (2017) suggest that shared values also emerge from daily encounters and a common or new vision for the local community. In the case of folkbildning, this refers, for example, to participants having a shared vision for a collaboratively organised study circle or for the local, rural or municipal community. Third, interdependence relates to Durkheim's concept of organic solidarity, which results from socio-cultural differentiation (Oosterlynck et al., 2017). In relation to folkbildning solidarities, interdependence involves, among others, the coming together of people with different knowledge and backgrounds in the study circle, encouraging them to translate for one another, share experiences, or help one another with asylum applications. Finally, encounters highlight how solidarities also emerge from informal social interactions (Oosterlynck et al., 2017, p. 6), and folkbildning

examples include the role of the study circles or fika breaks as informal meeting places.

## Conceptualising migrant solidarities

In line with the scalar shift from solidarity as practised within bounded national communities to solidarities practised in the "here and now" (Oosterlynck et al., 2017), scholarship on migrant solidarities has explored how practices, relations and encounters between citizens and non-citizens contest and transform formal notions of belonging through national citizenship (Agustín et al., 2024; Askins, 2016; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020). As such, these scholars have highlighted that migrant solidarities are political, subversive and contentious practices that challenge the dominant social and political order (Karaliotas & Kapsali, 2021; Vandevoordt, 2019).

Agustín and Jørgensen (2019) identify three types of solidarity practices: autonomous, civic, and institutional. These are classified based on the actors involved, the relations established, the spaces and scales in which solidarities are practised, and the varying degrees of contention solidarities exhibit. *Autonomous solidarities*, first, refer to bottom-up activist practices of organising among people with and without citizenship status. They reject institutional cooperation and, consequently, mobilise outside formal state or civil society structures (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019). Agustín and Jørgensen (2019) situate this type of solidarity at the local scale, mainly in urban spaces such as the Greek "City Plaza Hotel", where left-wing activists and refugees live together and pursue horizontal, equal, and participatory relationships. However, I argue that autonomous solidarities also arise in rural spaces, including bottom-up initiatives in small towns that actively oppose contemporary migration policies; self-organised activities by people without citizenship status; anti-deportation protests; and practices of support amongst residents of asylum accommodations that oppose decisions and interventions by the Migration Agency.

Second, *civic solidarities* refer to the engagement of civil society organisations, such as folkbildning and study associations, with migrants (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019). A key characteristic is that they create "spaces of inclusion and encounter" and "mutual learning" (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019, p. 124) in an attempt to combine "the expansion of rights with the shaping of we-ness" (p. 41). Unlike autonomous solidarities, civil society organisations occupy a complex in-between position vis-à-vis the state. Although they are not part of

the state and are (to some degree) critical of state policies, this does not imply "that civic solidarity is against the state" (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019, p. 41). For example, while folkbildning emerged as an alternative to formal state-led education and "free and voluntary" from governmental intervention constitutes a foundational principle, it is largely dependent on state funding for survival. Additionally, study circles for asylum seekers were specifically set up after receiving targeted state funding, further exemplifying the contentious nature of relations between civil society and state institutions.

Third, *institutional solidarities* include formalised relations and practices of solidarity that relate "the civil society arena with institutional policy-arenas" (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2021, p. 865). Examples of institutional solidarities include "sanctuary cities" and "new municipalism", in which municipalities and local state actors, in partnership with civil society organisations, explore local alternatives to national exclusionary policies. A recent example is the rejection by municipalities across Sweden of discussions with the central government on return policies (cf. Nilsson, 2025). Agustín and Jørgensen (2019) consequently call for a differentiation between institutional and institutionalised solidarities. While the latter are practised by the state and include, for example, welfare solidarities, institutional solidarities encompass a wider range of institutions that formalise relations among activists, civil society organisations, migrants, and local politicians (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2021). However, given the centrality of the Swedish state (and its local or regional representatives) in shaping the material and financial infrastructures of folkbildning solidarities, the distinction between institutional and institutionalised solidarities in the case of folkbildning is unclear. Even though I sometimes discuss solidarity practices that can be classified as autonomous or institutional, the analyses in this thesis primarily concern civic solidarities, by which I mean solidarity practices in civil society or within civil society spaces.

# Geography matters: Towards a spatial understanding of solidarity practices

## Solidarities as socio-spatial practices

By defining solidarity as a practice, solidarity scholarship has argued that solidarity is not simply a feeling of moral responsibility, a given, an individual act, or a single event, but something which is performed and enacted in place, emerging from relational encounters, shaped by and generative of spaces and

relations (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Brown & Yaffe, 2014; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017; Schilliger, 2020; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020). A practice-based definition understands solidarities not only as direct, visible acts but also analyses the "mundane, everyday practices" (Brown & Yaffe, 2014, p. 44) and how solidarities "become sedimented in time and space" (Schilliger, 2020, p. 532). More specifically, Schilliger (2020) argues that solidarities depend on and are shaped by social, political, spatial, and mental infrastructures. Similarly, folkbildning solidarities should not be reduced to a single act but involve a range of practices, including creating meeting places, offering legal support, sharing knowledge, establishing intimate friendships, organising and participating in demonstrations, or engaging in advocacy work (Schilliger, 2020).

Human geographers have contributed to a conceptualisation of solidarity practices by centring space, place, and scale. Agustín and Jørgensen's (2019) above-mentioned typology specifically addresses the spatiality of solidarities as they explore how different types of solidarities are practised in particular places and spaces (e.g., social centres, cities, NGOs, or institutional spaces) and connect different scales (e.g., local, urban, national, global). By defining solidarity as a socio-spatial practice, geographers highlight that solidarity practices are constitutive of and constituted by relations and space (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019, p. 119). Space is thus "not a neutral background" (Oosterlynck et al., 2017, p. 11) or a "passive backdrop" (Featherstone, 2012, p. 30), but is co-constitutive of solidarity practices (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019).

Such a focus on solidarity practices aligns with definitions of space as produced through human practices (Lefebvre, 1991, see Chapter 4) and feminist geographers' focus on how people shape and give meaning to the world around them through everyday social practices (cf. Simonsen, 2010; Webster, 2016). Similar to a geographical understanding of social practices as contingent on space and time and "continuously developed by individuals and groups" (Webster, 2016, p. 17), solidarities and the spaces they shape or are shaped by should not be understood as static. Bauder (2020) therefore argues that solidarity is a "never finished practice" (p. 1068), a political process, and open to contestation and change.

Defining solidarity as a socio-spatial practice implies recognising that solidarities are both place-based and productive of places and spaces (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Oosterlynck et al., 2017). Additionally, a spatial understanding of solidarities highlights that they are not practised in a vacuum but are always embedded in wider socio-spatial and uneven power relations, which

can be reproduced and transformed (Featherstone, 2012, p. 5; Brown & Yaffe, 2014; Santamarina, 2023; Sundberg, 2007). In other words, defining solidarities as practices requires not only a focus on "*doing* solidarity" (Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020) but also an exploration of what solidarity *does*. Consequently, geographies of solidarity have primarily been situated within critical research epistemologies that understand solidarities as practices opposing injustice, oppression and inequality (cf. Featherstone, 2012) and that analyse the ambivalent outcomes of solidarities. In the following sections, I will further unpack a geographical conceptualisation of solidarity as a place-based, relational, multi-scalar, generative, transformative, and contested practice.

## Solidarities as place-based

The empirical discussions in the articles build on a place-based understanding of folkbildning solidarities, practised in or emerging from relational encounters in the physical locations and buildings where study circles take place. These locations are diverse—including study associations, people's houses, libraries, churches and sports halls—and can be considered examples of informal, "unrehearsed" (Krifors, 2024), or "semi-public" (Peterson, 2017) meeting spaces that are publicly accessible yet more secluded than, for example, streets. These physical places are especially important in small and rural towns where, as Krifors (2024) argues, access to meeting places is becoming increasingly rare.

A focus on solidarities as practised in place and emerging from place-based encounters is central to geographies of solidarities. Previous studies have explored the places where solidarities occur, such as picket lines and squares (Arampatzi, 2017b; Brown & Yaffe, 2014), workers' (Roca, 2020), community centres (Veronis, 2007), schools (Schuermans & Debruyne, 2017), village pubs (Shaffrey, 2023), and the workplace (Vandenabeele & Debruyne, 2019). Research on migrant solidarities has primarily focused on urban contexts, exploring either practices of solidarity within urban spaces or the city itself as an actor of solidarity, as is the case with solidarity or sanctuary cities (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Bauder, 2021; Darling, 2010; Kreichauf, 2026; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021). However, research on rural migrant solidarities is gradually emerging, analysing the role of political and civil society actors (e.g., mayors or voluntary organisations) responding to European dispersal policies, which increasingly place asylum seekers and refugees in small and rural towns (Agustín et al., 2024; Haselbacher, 2019; Krifors, 2024; Sotkasiira, 2023; Woods, 2022).

Despite the centrality of physical and place-based encounters, scholars have argued that solidarities can also emerge from virtual, fleeting, or anonymous encounters among people who remain unknown to one another (Horgan, 2017; Stierl, 2018). Thanks to the internet, social media, and digital technologies, solidarities, communication, and relations can also be fostered between geographically distant people, movements, and places (Griffin, 2025; Leontidou, 2012; Rahbari, 2021; Stierl, 2018). Examples of digital solidarities can also be identified within spaces of folkbildning, including the organisation of online study circles, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, or the role of digital communication channels in recruiting or staying in touch with (former) participants.

## Solidarities as multi-scalar

Despite being place-based, geographers have argued that solidarities are not place-bound (Amin, 2004; Massey, 2005; Oosterlynck et al., 2017). Building on a relational understanding of space, these studies argue that the sources and effects of solidarities transcend bounded places and connect across scales. First, considering the multi-scalar sources of solidarities, they depend on the coming together of "individuals, ideas, policies and activist tactics that were highly mobile crossing geopolitical, ideological and cultural borders" (Brown & Yaffe, 2014, p. 36). Definitions of solidarity as multi-scalar align with theorisations of solidarity infrastructures, which explore how solidarities are enabled or challenged by wider physical, material and spatial infrastructures (e.g., buildings, financial resources, banners), as well as immaterial social, mental, emotional and affective practices and relations (e.g., friendships, alliances, shared knowledge, mood, or atmosphere) (Griffin, 2024; Schilliger, 2020). An example of the multi-scalar sources of solidarity is provided by Schuermans & Debruyne (2017), who, in their research on ethnically diverse schools in Belgium, conclude that solidarities within schools depend on and are shaped by networks that extend beyond the schools' physical location, including teachers' personal values or social networks, as well as other organisations in the schools' neighbourhood, the city government and regional educational policies. Similarly, spaces of folkbildning can be considered as "meeting places" (cf. Massey, 2005), not only shaped by the locations and contexts where solidarity takes place, but also by translocal flows of people, ideas, histories, material resources, relations, and communications. The data presented throughout the articles, for example, analyse how folkbildning

solidarities depend on or are shaped by folkbildning's histories of (labour) solidarities, the nation-wide material infrastructure of study associations and folk high schools, associations' ideological principles, different funding sources, and study circle leaders' or participants' personal biographies, experiences, or social networks.

Second, geographers have analysed the multi-scalar outcomes of solidarities, considering how they create relations between people, places, and organisations across geographical distances and scales. For example, solidarities can involve the development of relations between movements in different geographical locations (see Brown & Yaffe, 2014 on the anti-apartheid movement) or the establishment of alliances between organisations or between civil society and (local) state actors (Agustín et al., 2024; Arampatzi, 2017b, 2018). In their research on anti-apartheid solidarities, Brown and Yaffe (2014), for example, explore how connections and communications were established between movements in South Africa, the United Kingdom, and globally. More broadly, solidarities can transform notions of local or national communities and experiment with alternative forms of social, political, or economic inclusion beyond citizenship status (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Arampatzi, 2017b; Askins, 2016; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020). Such practices may be place-based, yet they can also intervene in scales beyond the local. For example, research on migrant solidarities has argued that local and personal solidarities arise in opposition to what people consider unjust (inter)national policies which dehumanise and illegalise immigrants (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Montes & Paris Pombo, 2019).

Similarly, the outcomes of folkbildning solidarities can impact relations beyond the "there and then" of the study circle. For example, relations established between people through the study circle can last into asylum accommodation, shape relations to other civil society organisations, or impact feelings of belonging in the municipality or Swedish society more generally. Additionally, participants' engagement in different religious, political, educational, migrant, or cultural associations can foster relations between organisations, as people bring information, skills, knowledge, and participants from one association to another.

## Solidarities as generative and transformative

A conceptualisation of solidarity as a socio-spatial practice, shaped by and shaping relations and space, points to a third conceptualisation of solidarity as

generative (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Featherstone, 2012; Oosterlynck et al., 2017). First, considering the production of spaces, historical research has explored how solidarity practices within the labour movement led to the establishment of physical infrastructures, such as the People's Houses in Italy (*Casa del Popolo*) and Sweden (*Folkets Hus*) (cf. Kohn, 2003; Pries et al., 2022). Additionally, urban scholarship has analysed how solidarities transform urban spaces by countering the exclusion, segregation, or invisibilisation of certain populations. Examples include urban protests against racial segregation and violence in the United States (McCann, 1999), the occupation of squats by illegalised migrants in Greece (Karaliotas & Kapsali, 2021), or the creation of meeting spaces between men and women from different castes and classes in India (Vemuri, 2022). The transformation of spaces also refers to the creation of translocal connections between movements and places, which I discussed in the previous section.

In addition to establishing places or producing spaces, solidarities have also been conceptualised as generative and transformative of identities, subjectivities and relations. Building on a definition of solidarity as a contentious political practice that opposes exclusion and oppression, Featherstone (2012) has defined solidarity as "world-making" (p. 9) and "reshaping the world in more equal terms" (p. 4). In the case of migrant solidarities, citizenship status remains a structural barrier to equality, social inclusion, and national belonging. Consequently, building on political theories of "acts of citizenship" (Işin, 2009), migration research has analysed how migrant solidarities can act or perform equality and, as such, foster relations between people that transcend legal categories of (non-)citizen (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Oosterlynck et al., 2017; Rygiel, 2011; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020). This aligns with geographical scholarship on migrant solidarities that highlights the political potential of everyday encounters and co-presence through which exclusions at the national level are contested by everyday practices of acting as equals in (urban) space (Askins, 2016; Bauder, 2016, 2020; Darling, 2017; Karaliotas & Kapsali, 2021). As such, solidarity becomes a prefigurative political praxis through which alternative social, political, or economic practices and relations are explored and performed (Arampatzi, 2018; Karaliotas & Kapsali, 2021).

Folkbildning solidarities can likewise be conceptualised as generative and transformative practices. For example, the democratic struggles of various popular movements gave rise to folkbildning institutions (e.g., workers' libraries, study associations and *folkhögskolor*), led to the construction of political and social meeting places such as People's Houses (*Folkets Huset*) and

People's Parks (*Folkets Park*) (cf. Pries et al., 2022), and shaped modern institutions such as the Swedish education system and public libraries (cf. Berg & Edquist, 2017; Larsson, 2013). Additionally, historical examples of folkbildning solidarities have shaped political subjectivities by contributing to the creation of a unified popular working class (cf. Bauder, 2020; Berg & Edquist, 2017; Gustavsson, 2013). The articles in this dissertation likewise explore how contemporary folkbildning solidarities have led to the establishment of meeting places (cf. Article IV) and the development of relations between organisations (cf. Articles III and IV). Additionally, building on a definition of solidarities as practices that contest the exclusion of asylum seekers, the articles also discuss how folkbildning solidarities attempt to create more horizontal relations between and amongst study circle leaders and participants by centring dialogue (cf. Article II) or democratic decision-making (cf. Article III), by developing personal and intimate relations (cf. Article I), and by fostering the development of political subjectivities by mobilising for protests (cf. Article III) or training asylum seekers to become study circle leaders (cf. Article IV).

## Solidarities as contested and ambivalent

Despite conceptualisations of solidarity as generative and transformative, research has shown that the outcomes of migrant solidarities are multiple, ambivalent, and contested among different actors (Ramírez March, 2022; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020; Vandevoordt & Fleischmann, 2021). To account for the multitude of actors involved in defining and practising solidarity, Fleischmann refers to "*solidarities*, in plural form" (p. 25, emphasis in original). In other words, the contested character of solidarities has a double meaning: migrant solidarities are not only practised in opposition to exclusionary national state policies, but solidarities are also contested among different solidarity actors (Fleischmann, 2020). Consequently, spaces of migrant solidarity are characterised by both cooperation and conflict among the various (local) state, civic, and grassroots actors, who negotiate the meanings and outcomes of solidarity, political strategies, and relations to state institutions (Arampatzi, 2017b; Chazan, 2019; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021). In the articles, I expand on these discussions by considering not only how the meanings, strategies, and relations of solidarity are contested, but also how different actors negotiate the spatialities of folkbildning solidarities (cf. Article III).

A recurring theme in conceptualisations of solidarities as contested is their relationship to state institutions and funding. Agustín and Jørgensen's (2019)

earlier-mentioned typology shows how different types of migrant solidarity relate to varying degrees of contention. Autonomous solidarities reject formal and state institutions, while institutional solidarities involve collaborations with, for example, local governments. Civic solidarities occupy an in-between position and cannot simply be conceptualised as "against the state" (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019, p. 41). Instead, they maintain an ambivalent relationship to the state, in which civil society organisations negotiate between "tactical closeness" to and "critical discomfort" with state institutions (Darling, 2024; Mescoli & Roblain, 2021).

Similar tensions appear in Berg and Edquist's (2017) historical overview of the relationships between folkbildning and state funding, showing how state policies and funding have constructed folkbildning as "free and voluntary" while indirectly serving public functions. Osman (2013) raises similar concerns regarding folkbildning for and with immigrants. The articles in this dissertation also explore the role of targeted state funding in shaping the ambivalent outcomes of folkbildning solidarities, which both transform and reproduce assimilationist and one-way integration policy discourses and practices (cf. Articles I and III).

Discussions of the contested and contentious relations between solidarity movements and state institutions intersect with debates within solidarity scholarship on (de)politicisation. In the case of a transnational feminist solidarity movement between Canada and South Africa, Chazan (2019) demonstrates that solidarity's meanings and strategies are dynamic, and consequently that processes of de-, re- and politicisation are not linear but can change over time. This research contributes to these discussions by analysing how dependence on and withdrawal of state funding affects how, where, and with whom folkbildning solidarities are practised.

## Solidarities as embedded in unequal power relations

Acknowledging spaces of solidarities as contested means recognising that negotiations over what solidarity is do not happen in a void. As previously discussed, solidarities are always practised within unequal power relations. In this thesis, I identify power relations in two ways. First, I build on studies exploring the ambivalent relations between different levels of government and civil society organisations and consider power as shaped by and shaping differential access to material and financial resources and the power to make (or contest) political decisions (Berg & Edquist, 2017; Darling, 2024; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021; Mescoli & Roblain, 2021). Second, power relations also refer

to how interpersonal relations between longer-settled volunteers and forced migrants are shaped by, among other factors, gender, race, class, language, and citizenship status (Fleischmann, 2020; Karaliotas & Kapsali, 2021; Santamarina, 2023; Stock, 2019; Vandevoordt, 2019).

The recognition of differences is central to intersectional feminist theorisations of solidarity, which argue against a universal female experience of oppression and instead highlight how feminist solidarities are shaped by different experiences and power hierarchies between women, including those marked by gender, race, class, religion, geographical location, citizenship status, and so on (Abbas, 2019; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020; Mohanty, 2003; Rahbari, 2021). Consequently, critical and feminist geographers have called for an intersectional analysis of how (unequal) power relations shape solidarity practices and how solidarities' outcomes can simultaneously be in- and exclusionary (Kelliher, 2018; Loopmans et al., 2020; Mollett & Faria, 2018).

An example of how solidarities are shaped by structural inequalities is provided by Hooker (2009), who introduces the concept of "racialised solidarity" and argues that political solidarity is challenged by structures of racial difference, which result in differential responsibilities, sympathy, and empathy towards people who are visually or culturally marked as different. Previous scholarship has explored how racial and gendered differences shape migrant solidarities, analysing how such solidarities can reproduce the hierarchies they aim to contest. For example, in the case of spaces of migrant activism in Scotland, Santamaria (2023) argues that, despite activists centring care and reproductive work in their solidarity, gendered, classed, and racialised divisions of labour persisted within the solidarity networks she studies. Consequently, research on migrant solidarities has concluded that the outcomes of solidarity practices are ambivalent, meaning that they can simultaneously contest and reproduce humanitarian logics of governmentality and the exclusionary mechanisms of border, migration, and asylum politics (Fleischmann, 2020; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Ramírez March, 2022; Vandevoordt, 2019). While Articles I and II focus on interpersonal power relations, Articles III and IV also analyse the relation between folkbildning and power relations by considering the various state and non-state actors involved in producing spaces of folkbildning as spaces of solidarities.

Understanding solidarities as having ambivalent outcomes does not imply drawing normative or binary distinctions between "good" and "bad" solidarities. By recognising the multiple, potentially ambivalent outcomes of solidarities, I want to nuance the notion that solidarity is necessarily positive,

inclusive, generative, or transformative, even as it might aim to be all these things. Instead, a critical and feminist perspective centres difference and power in its analysis and explores how solidarities can simultaneously have reproductive and transformative outcomes. Consequently, feminist scholarship has highlighted that solidarity is difficult and hard work, requiring the simultaneous building of bridges across social, political, and economic differences while recognising different positionalities, privileges, and global power geometries (Mohanty, 2003; Vemuri, 2022).

## Concluding discussion

In this chapter, I have laid the foundation for the dissertation's theorisation of solidarity and defined solidarities as practices of support for people lacking formal citizenship status. The articles included in this thesis discuss various practices of folkbildning solidarities, including the establishment of physical spaces for informal encounters or political mobilisation, the provision of practical, material, legal, emotional, or financial support, the formation of personal relations and friendships, and the organisation of free courses for people otherwise excluded from formal education.

Building on geographies of solidarities and research on migrant solidarities, I define solidarities as place-based, relational, multi-scalar, generative, transformative, and ambivalent practices. Expanding geographers' analyses of the places and spaces that shape and are shaped by solidarities, the articles in this dissertation go beyond viewing solidarities as merely relational practices and highlight how they are co-constitutive of different spatialities. While geographical scholarship argues that solidarities are place-based and not place-bound, the articles in this dissertation show that, alongside conceptions of solidarities as practised in and giving shape to relational spaces and places, absolute and relative spatialities also interrelate with practices of folkbildning solidarities. Consequently, the contested nature of solidarity practices can be further explored by examining how the spatialities of solidarities are multiple and contested. In the next chapter, I will further develop this argument by conceptualising space.

# Interlude

Collage 3 by a study circle participant, 2024. Anonymised by author.

*Collage by a study circle participant, 2024*
*Narrative written based on collage workshop discussions*

The theme of the poster is myself and my process. Red is the current phase. Yellow represent the process of being and participating with ABF. The direction markers represent that this is a process that is not linear but that I am constantly going back and forth. I am not always coming to the activities because of my situation, which is represented by the red area. Red is the fear of meeting others, the fear of being judged. Red are worries, insecurities, and nightmares.

Light blue is now, after meeting ABF. And now I am happy. There is togetherness. Which is why I included the word *tillsammans* [together]. The images represent happiness, togetherness, comfort. This process is also linked to a period of coming out. Dark blue is the future. Apart from the language, I also want to gain other knowledges, like computer knowledges.

It was *bra att veta* ABF [good to know ABF]. ABF has a LGBTQ perspective. Here, it is okay to express myself. That helps me. They help us to talk openly about ourselves. That is our biggest challenge, because of where we came from. But here, there is no reason to hide. Maybe that is also part of my future: the dark blue, that ABF can maybe also help with offering psychological help.

The yellow area is represented by two images: One image where they are making a person, and another which shows supporting and helping someone to come out. I chose the picture of the making of a person because we come from a different culture, belief. ABF helped us to adapt to the current situation. If something is not working, they will tell us; for example, they help us not to live in isolation, privately, not talking openly. We come here, and then we understand. And then finally, the hiking man represents to go forward and this is represented by three images: First, happiness. Two, feeling comfortable. And three, the togetherness. This is what I feel here, while and after participating at ABF.

I am already here, at the light blue. But it is not only ABF; I am also engaging with the *kyrkan* [church], RFSL, an organising committee for a local pride … They all helped me to open up.

# 4. Conceptualising space(s)

In the previous chapter, I discussed how spaces of solidarity are multiple, contested and negotiated. Different actors can have a multitude of experiences or imaginations of spaces of folkbildning and of how they can or should be produced as spaces of solidarity with people in the asylum process. The collage and narrative introduced prior to this chapter highlight that folkbildning cannot be understood in isolation, but that different spaces and places are interrelated. Different places, organisations, personal experiences, and routine activities play an important role in how people perceive and understand space. For example, the maker of the collage discusses how they relate specific processes (e.g., learning, belonging, coming out) and feelings (e.g., "fear", "happy") to particular times and places, while also acknowledging that these feelings and experiences can change over time.

In other words, space matters to solidarity and folkbildning. In this thesis, I consider not only how the meanings, practices, and outcomes of solidarities are contested, but also how different spatialities of solidarities are negotiated among actors. To do so, I build on Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and on Harvey's extension of Lefebvre's triad, in which he considers that spaces are simultaneously produced as absolute, relative, and relational. The chapter also discusses how these theories of space relate to rural space. Throughout the chapter, I concretise my theoretical framework on space by referring to examples of spaces of folkbildning solidarities.

## The production of social space

### Space as represented, practised, and lived

Space is a central concept in human geography. However, it is a contested concept that lacks a uniform definition. In this chapter, I clarify my use of space as a multi-dimensional concept, produced through abstract and discursive representations, individual and social imaginations, and socio-spatial practices. To arrive at this definition, I build on Lefebvre's (1991) seminal

work, “The Production of Space”, and on geographical scholarship that has extended, applied, and materialised it (Grip, 2010; Halfacree, 2006; Harvey, 2009; Heldt Cassel, 2003).

Despite being a sociologist, Lefebvre has had a significant influence on human geography. Following geography’s structuralist “spatial turn”, the conception of space shifted from being a pre-defined object to be studied, an empty container outside or separate from society, to a more dynamic understanding of space as socially produced, intertwined with social relations, and constantly changing (being made, contested, and remade) (Molina, 2007). Countering the conception of space as a container, Lefebvre (1991) defines space as a social process and product, shaped by and shaping social relations, and dialectically produced (and contested) across three dimensions of space: perceived, conceived, and lived. Each dimension can be related to specific practices that produce space: spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces (Harvey, 2009; Lefebvre, 1991). The dimensions of the spatial triad can be separated analytically, but are ontologically related and in dialectical tension with one another (Harvey, 2009; Lefebvre, 1991).

First, *perceived space* concerns the material spaces we physically encounter and interact with sensuously. According to Harvey (2009), “[w]e touch things and processes, feel them, see them, smell them, hear them, and infer the nature of space from those experiences” (p. 142). Perceived space relates to *spatial practices*, which include the social and material infrastructures, daily routines, assigned usages, and flows of people, capital, and commodities that make up space as materially and sensuously perceived (Harvey, 1990, 2009; Lefebvre, 1991). In the case of spaces of folkbildning, flows of funding are spatial practices insofar as they are part of the material and financial infrastructure that shapes the production of folkbildning. From the perspectives of people using spaces of folkbildning, these spaces are sensuously perceived through the material infrastructure, including the physical buildings, the times and places where study circles are organised, routine practices, including what is discussed and what people use the spaces for, and the in-and-out-going of participants.

Second, *conceived space*s are produced through *representations of space* and refer to abstract conceptions of space held by scientists, planners, academics, politicians, etc. (Lefebvre, 1991). This is dominant space, imposed top-down, informing and ordering material space, social relations, and the practical use of space. For Lefebvre (1991), dominant conceptions represent space as an abstract container that serves the social-political order, with fixed

boundaries, stripped of difference, and "waiting to be filled by a content" (p. 170). Representations of folkbildning can be analysed through policy documents or organisational discourses on what folkbildning is and how it should be organised for people in the asylum process. In other words, representations also include prescribed rules and norms for expected behaviour in or use of space (Halfacree, 2006). While Lefebvre (1991) highlights how dominant or hegemonic representations of space serve the capitalist social order, different representations of space coexist and can be in tension with one another. This has also been explored by rural geographers (cf. Frisvoll, 2014; Heldt Cassel, 2003) and is further explored in Article III.

Third, *lived spaces* relate to *representational spaces* and refer to space as directly experienced by inhabitants or users (Lefebvre, 1991). This includes people's lived, embodied and emotional experiences of using the spaces they frequent, as well as the symbolic, artistic, literary, and poetic representations of space (Lefebvre, 1991; McCann, 1999). According to Lefebvre (1991), lived space is dominated space, "passively experienced", "which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (p. 39). In other words, building on a multi-dimensional theorisation of space, Lefebvre (1991) points to the possibilities of conflict between dominant representations and dominated experiences of space. In the case of folkbildning, lived space refers to the everyday experiences and discourses of participants and study circle leaders, as well as artistic or literary representations of how participants ascribe meaning to these spaces. The collages, in which people visually and metaphorically represented their experiences of living in small cities and towns in Sweden and of participating in study circles, can be considered an example of this.

Lefebvre (1991) argues for a unitary perspective in which the three dimensions of the spatial triad cannot be separated, although empirical applications have done so for epistemological purposes (see, for example, applications by Grip, 2020; McCann, 1999; Wimark, 2021c). These three dimensions of space are dialectically interrelated and mutually constitutive. Space is, in other words, simultaneously material, mental, and social (Lefebvre, 1991). For example, in Article III, I discuss how abstract representations shape the material organisation of spaces of folkbildning and how these, in turn, inform experiences of folkbildning spaces. Conversely, biographical experiences, dreams, and aspirations influence people's use of space, which can be shaped by, align with, or contrast with dominant representations of spaces and their usages.

By arguing that space is produced and multidimensional, Lefebvre highlights that space is both a political process and a product, shaped by tensions, conflicts, and negotiations over different conceptions and experiences of space among differently positioned actors. According to Lefebvre (1991), "space has no power in itself" (p. 358), but power is expressed in and through space, and conflicts—or negotiations—"in space (…) become contradictions of space" (p. 365). While Lefebvre locates tensions primarily between dominant representations of space and lived experiences, differences can also be analysed by exploring competing representations of space (cf. Frisvoll, 2014; Heldt Cassel, 2003) or by analysing how differently positioned people produce and experience space differently (cf. Kinkaid, 2020; Simonsen, 2005). By centring difference and conflict, Lefebvre (1991) highlights the possibilities for alternative experiences, usages, and productions of space, counter-hegemonic resistance, and the production of "differential space" from the bottom up.

## Space as absolute, relative, and relational

Harvey (2006, 2009) has expanded Lefebvre's spatial triad by combining space as material, discursive, and lived with space as simultaneously absolute, relative, and relational. This allows for a theorisation of space in which the role of human agency, social intent, and socio-spatial practices is centred in the production and transformation of spaces, and for a conceptualisation of space as multiple, comprising multiple spatio-temporalities (Harvey, 2009; Mitchell, 2021). Rather than asking "what is space?", Harvey (2009) asks "how is it that different human practices create and make use of different conceptualisations of space?" (p. 140). By introducing a three-by-three matrix, Harvey (2006, 2009) argues that different representations, perceptions, and experiences of space produce spaces that are simultaneously absolute, relative, and relational.

First, Harvey (2009) defines *absolute space* as "fixed and immovable" (p. 134). It refers to space as a pre-defined, bounded, and ahistorical backdrop in which actions and events occur. Objects, things, people, or places occupy distinct locations in space that, for example, can be located on a map. Absolute space is considered "distinguishable from time" (Harvey, 2009, p. 134), which is also understood as absolute, universal, measurable, fixed, and linear. In other words, absolute space (and time) is defined as pre-existing or independent of social relations, rather than as co-constituted by them (Harvey, 2009). Absolute spaces, such as private property or nation-states, are produced as

physical locations or bounded territories with identifiable boundaries, insiders, and outsiders (Grip, 2020; Harvey, 2006). In the case of folkbildning, absolute space refers to the physical and walled locations where study circles take place, but also to the production of folkbildning as closed, neutral, and bounded classroom-like spaces where learning for asylum seekers happens inside, or as closed and separatist spaces for a specific target group (cf. Article III).

Second, *relative space* refers to space as consisting of relationships between objects, people and places (Mitchell, 2021). Contrary to space as fixed and immovable, relative space is the "space of processes and motion" (Harvey, 2009, p. 135). Space is relative because it is variable and dependent on relative positions in space-time (Harvey, 2006, 2009). Consequently, space and time are related, as distances and movement depend on people's relative position in space and on access to money, time, technology or different modes of transportation (Harvey, 2006, 2009). In Articles III and IV, for example, I discuss how the relative spaces of folkbildning consist of relations among different locations and organisations and how issues of mobility and accessibility shape the production of spaces of folkbildning solidarities.

Finally, *relational space* builds on an understanding of space, time, and society as inseparable, with social relations shaping space and vice versa (Harvey, 2006, 2009). Things or events cannot be analysed in isolation but must be understood as always related to and shaped by "everything else going on around it" (Harvey, 2009, p. 137). Consequently, space (as interrelated with time) is "open, fluid, multiple, and indeterminate" (Harvey, 2009, p. 137), a conception of space that aligns with Massey's (2005) theory of space and place as multiple and open to change depending on the relations coming together. A relational understanding of folkbildning considers it not as a bounded space, but as a "meeting place" (cf. Massey, 2005), shaped by the coming together of historical traditions, social practices, people, places, organisations, funding, policies, dreams, and so on, all of which converge in the "here and now" of the study circle. Consequently, because spaces of folkbildning are shaped by changing relations and different socio-spatial practices, spaces of folkbildning solidarities are also open to change and transformation.

By treating space as produced through relations, a relational understanding also recognises how spaces are embedded in and shaped by power geometries (cf. Massey, 2005). In the case of folkbildning, power can refer to the role of state funding and policies. For example, folkbildning solidarities are shaped by state policies, including migration policies they respond to and/or contest. Funding structures can also shape power relations between the state and civil

society organisations and affect what is organised, by whom, for whom, and with what aim (cf. Article III). Beyond structural power relations, folkbildning solidarities are also shaped by interpersonal power relations. In Article I, I explore how asymmetrical power relations, shaped by, amongst others, gender, age, race, class, and citizenship status, can not only be transformed but also reproduced through practices of folkbildning solidarities.

Mitchell (2021), however, warns against relational understandings of space shaped by power geometries that neglect the dialectical interrelation between relationality and absolute and relative understandings of space. In other words, space is not only produced as open, dynamic, and progressive but is also produced as closed, bounded, and fixed through material spatial practices (Mitchell, 2021). Different spatialities exist simultaneously and are in dialectical tension with one another. Spaces are simultaneously material, discursive, and social, *and* absolute, relative, and relational (Harvey, 2006, 2009; Mitchell, 2021). The decision to focus on one or the other is an analytical choice and "depends on the nature of the phenomena under investigation" (Harvey, 2009, p. 141). The data presented in Articles III and IV make this concrete by showing how different spatialities give shape to distinct practices of solidarity.

## The production of rural spaces

Building on an understanding of space and solidarity as co-constitutive also implies recognising how the rural context shapes practices of folkbildning solidarities. Rural geographers have turned to the work of Halfacree (2006, 2007), who builds on Lefebvre's triad in his conceptualisation of rural space as consisting of rural localities, formal representations, and everyday rural (Frisvoll, 2014; Stenbacka, 2023). First, *rural localities* refer to the material, physical, and natural environment and are constructed through particular practices of rural production and consumption (Frisvoll, 2014; Halfacree, 2006). Second, *formal representations of the rural* refer to how ruralities are represented and commodified in, for example, policy documents (Frisvoll, 2014; Halfacree, 2006). Finally, the *everyday lives of the rural* refer to the multiple and incoherent ways in which people live, appropriate, and symbolically represent rural space (Halfacree, 2006). These different dimensions of rural space are interrelated, as human practices are informed by particular representations of rural areas that shape people's everyday lives or are contested through alternative imaginations and practices (Halfacree, 2006). Similar to Lefebvre's

conceptualisation of space as a political process and product, the production of rural space is a social and political process in which different actors perceive, represent, or experience space differently. For example, rural geographers have explored how competing representations coexist and how dominant representations of rural space may conflict with the everyday routines, practices, and experiences of rural living (Frisvoll, 2014; Halfacree, 2006; Heldt Cassel, 2003).

Applying Halfacree and Lefebvre's triad to research on rural refugee migration, Stenbacka (2023) explores the relationship between rural space and integration in Sweden. She argues that rural integration is shaped by the material rural locality (e.g., legal policy frameworks, the presence of responsible institutional actors), representations of rural spaces (e.g., as spaces where municipal and civil society actors are closer to local populations), and everyday experiences, challenges and successes (e.g., social interactions in public spaces, access to public services, expected social behaviour of migrants, and experiences of racism) (Stenbacka, 2023). Stenbacka's (2023) research is particularly relevant for highlighting how different dimensions of rural space shape integration processes, practices, and experiences, and vice versa.

Nordic rural migration research has also analysed how international migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers experience living in rural areas (see, for example, Carlbaum, 2022; Herslund, 2021; Sotkasiira, 2023; Stenbacka, 2012; Wernesjö, 2015). Particularly relevant is the role of spatial practices, such as distribution policies or access to public services, in shaping experiences of rural living (Stenbacka, 2012). Additionally, Swedish research has also pointed to how people's experiences can be shaped by the physical context, including weather conditions (Herslund & Paulgaard, 2021), interactions with and use of the natural environment (Stenbacka, 2012), or access to public transportation or a car (Carlbaum, 2022; Wimark, 2020).

While a relational understanding of rural space counters understandings of rurality as absolute, homogeneous, or fixed, and instead highlights how multiple and contested meanings of ruralities coexist, Harvey's (2006, 2009) previously introduced framework can contribute to an understanding of how rural spaces are also be produced as (temporarily) fixed, closed, or permanent (cf. Halfacree, 2006; Heley & Jones, 2012). Building on Harvey's (2006, 2009) understanding of space as consisting of multiple spatialities, this thesis contributes to theoretical understandings of rural spaces as multiple, contested, and produced, and analyses how rural spaces are simultaneously produced as absolute, relative, and relational ruralities.

First, absolute ruralities produce rural space as a bounded "thing in itself" (Harvey 1973, in Harvey 2009). Applied to rural spaces, absolute ruralities can be produced through formal representations (e.g., maps) of rural areas as bounded territories, or through spatial practices, such as asylum distribution policies that produce rurality as characterised by particular criteria (e.g., access to housing). Second, the spatiality of rural spaces can also be conceptualised in relative terms, in which ruralities are understood and analysed through distances, access, and travel times between particular places. In Article IV, I consider how a relative understanding of rurality can also be understood through the production of rurality as relatively different from urban spaces, which previous research has also understood from a relational perspective (Heley & Jones, 2012). A relational spatiality conceptualises rurality as interrelated with other spaces (cf. Massey, 2005). Rural migration scholars have applied a relational understanding to rural spaces by arguing that ruralities are both shaped by local dynamics *and* translocal relations, policies, and processes which extend beyond the rural place (Heley & Jones, 2012). For example, researchers have analysed how experiences of rural living are shaped by translocal social networks, friendships, feelings of belonging, communications, economic practices and relations that transcend geographical boundaries (Grip, 2025; Hedberg & do Carmo, 2012; Webster, 2017; Wernesjö, 2015).

Building on Harvey's conceptualisation of space as simultaneously absolute, relative, and relational, Article IV analyses the relationships between folkbildning and solidarity through these different and sometimes overlapping rural spatialities. While the analysis of the production of rural space is not exhaustive in this thesis, I hope this theoretical framework lays the foundation for an understanding of rural spaces as complex and contested spaces that are simultaneously embedded in global networks and relations, and shaped by particular local and individual conditions. As such, the thesis's place-based exploration of the relationship between folkbildning, spatialities, and solidarities in south-central Sweden contributes not only to an analysis of how rural spaces shape particular solidarities, but also to an analysis of how socio-spatial practices, such as solidarities, produce particular ruralities.

## Concluding discussion

Conceptualisations of (rural) space as socially produced, multiple, and contested align with conceptualisations of solidarity as "contested" (Arampatzi, 2017b) or "negotiated" (Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021). As argued in the previous chapter, studies highlighting the contested character of migrant solidarities primarily focus on solidarity as practices that contest formal institutions, policies and discourses or on how different actors negotiate different meanings, strategies, and outcomes of solidarities. This research contributes to geographies of solidarity by exploring how the spatialities of solidarities are also multiple and contested. Different actors have multiple understandings of where and how solidarities should occur, how open or closed, inclusive or exclusive spaces of folkbildning solidarities should be, and how spaces of folkbildning solidarities relate to other spaces, such as national or rural spaces.

To explore how spaces of folkbildning are produced as spaces of solidarity and how different spatialities relate to different practices of solidarities, I combine theories on the social production of (rural) space by Lefebvre, Harvey, and Halfacree. While Lefebvre and Harvey laid important foundations for understanding space as produced and for critiquing dominant space as the product of capitalist relations of production, their frameworks have also been critiqued and expanded by, among others, feminist scholars. Feminist and queer readings of Lefebvre's triad have highlighted the necessity of analysing everyday practices, gender relations, and embodied differences in producing and experiencing spaces (Grip, 2010; Kinkaid, 2020; Simonsen, 2005). Similarly, feminist geographers have critiqued postmodernist geographies, like that of Harvey, for overlooking the complexity of power relations, for privileging class over differences shaped by, among other things, gender and race, and for neglecting differences within social groups (Bondi, 1990; Bondi & Domosh, 1992; McDowell, 1991). Additionally, feminist, postcolonial, and queer theorisations of space have critiqued the Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism of spatial scholarship and have called for the necessity of a politics of place which considers how spaces, cities, and places are produced through, and productive of patriarchal, colonial and imperial relations, gendered and racialised divisions of labour, and embodied difference (Bondi & Domosh, 1992; Katz, 2001; Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1991; Rose, 1993; Roy, 2016).

While this dissertation does not provide an exhaustive review of the feminist critique and revision of Lefebvre's and Harvey's theories of space, feminist geographies' focus on gender, power, and everyday experiences has

shaped the research's methodological framework. Additionally, in Articles I and II, I adopt an intersectional analysis to understand the (re)production of social differences and asymmetrical power relations within spaces of folkbildning. Finally, the spatial analysis of folkbildning solidarities presented in Articles III and IV also includes an examination of how the production of spaces of folkbildning solidarities is shaped by (and shaping) power relations.

# Interlude

Collage 4 by a study circle participant, 2023. Anonymised by author.

Collage 5 by a study circle participant, 2023. Anonymised by author.

# 5. Methodology

Learning through practice and dialogue is central not only to the study circle pedagogy but also to the methodology of this research. In this chapter, I explain *how* the research was conducted. The chapter is structured chronologically, beginning with the start of my research position and my first contact with participating organisations, moving into the data collection and analysis methods, and concluding with reflections on leaving the field.

Key to this chapter are the three methods at the core of the research process: participatory observations, semi-structured interviews, and collage workshops. Using multiple methods aligns with a theoretical framework that considers space as produced through different dimensions (see Chapter 4). While participatory observations allowed me to explore how study circles are organised materially and spatially, interviews and collages allowed me to examine formal representations and how they align with, and conflict with, people's experiences and expectations of folkbildning. Collage workshops were particularly relevant for exploring the more symbolic, non-verbal, and metaphorical expressions of how people experienced living in rural areas and participating in study circles. Throughout the chapter, and woven into the discussions of different methods, I also reflect on research ethics, positionality, and power relations.

## Data collection methods

### Ethnography, fieldwork, and participatory observations

Ethnography is a form of writing and inquiry that centres on the exploration of everyday life and practices and relies on researchers immersing themselves in the research context, for example, through participatory observation. Participatory observations are a common method in geography, as they enable in-depth understanding of the relations and practices occurring within and across places (A. Watson, 2021). Pastuhov and Sivenius (2020) have argued that ethnographic methods are relevant to researching popular adult education

because they align with folkbildning's flexible, open-ended learning processes and allow researchers to explore both the social practices and lived experiences of study circle participants. Participatory observations were particularly relevant for this research project, as they helped analyse where, how, and for whom study circles in the asylum process were organised and build trust and understanding before conducting interviews.

**Entering the "field" and conducting exploratory fieldwork**

> I am always, everywhere, in "the field". (Katz, 1994, p. 72)

How does one enter the field? When does one enter the field? And where even is the "field"? I am not the first to ask these questions, yet they have been central to my research journey. Previous research has argued that fieldwork and researchers' personal lives are integrated (Wimark et al., 2017). In some ways, my fieldwork began in August 2021, when I left Belgium and drove to Sweden to start a doctoral position at Uppsala University. Settling into a new country and discipline led to an embodied experience of what Katz (1994) describes as the blurring of "the boundaries between 'the research' and everyday life; between 'the field' and not; between 'the scholar' and subject" (p. 67). As a newcomer, I navigated a new political, social, linguistic, and institutional context. I applied for my personal registration number with the SMA, began reading about Swedish migration, asylum, and integration policies, and started learning Swedish through various language classes offered by the university (Swedish for Academics), the municipality (SFI), and *Folkuniversitetet*, with support from friends and colleagues, and through participation in various study circles for asylum seekers (e.g., Swedish from day one).

Although my move to Sweden marked the start of this research project, I refer to the fieldwork period as the time during which I conducted participatory observations at various study associations in south-central Sweden. In November 2022, I met with ABF employees for the first time to discuss the course and the expectations of the research project. ABF became my first fieldwork contact, as there were already existing collaborations between the study association and my main supervisor and because ABF was a partner organisation in the SOLiDi network in which I was hired. As part of my training within SOLiDi, I was required to conduct an internship ("non-academic secondment") at ABF, which, in practice, became an exploratory fieldwork phase. I participated in various study circles organised for asylum seekers and

gained an overview of the activities, actors, and places relevant to folkbildning activities for asylum seekers across Västmanland.

As described in Chapter 2, my initial contact with ABF shaped the scope and context of the ensuing data collection. For example, my initial presence at ABF prompted study circle leaders and participants to invite me to other activities. Additionally, through ABF, I became involved in a local so-called integration network of various state and non-state actors that supported asylum seekers settled in the region. Beyond familiarising myself with research context and organisations, this exploratory fieldwork phase was also important for building rapport and trust with both study circle leaders and participants before data collection.

**Negotiating participation**

When I started the research, I planned to conduct a Participatory Action Research (PAR) in which circle leaders and participants would be actively involved as research collaborators at various stages of the research process. PAR is a cyclical and collaborative research process in which research participants are included throughout the research process, from planning to data collection, analysis, and output, and is committed to social change and justice (Kindon, 2021; Kindon et al., 2007). Feminist scholars have highlighted the relevance of participatory methodologies and the importance of working together *with*—rather than merely writing *about*—people (Askins, 2018; Caretta & Riaño, 2016; Kindon et al., 2007).

Through exploratory fieldwork, my participation in study circles, and informal discussions with representatives from the respective associations about the research process and outcomes, I began experimenting with what PAR could look like in the context of this research project. However, as I describe in Article III, I faced various challenges. Who, for example, constitutes the "community" to be included in the research process? While I held exploratory meetings with ABF employees about the course of the research, participants in the asylum process were not equally involved at such an early stage. During exploratory and preparatory discussions, study association employees often expressed interest in participating in the research project but were hesitant to collaborate, as they did not want to compromise my independence as a researcher. In line with Pratt (2007), who stresses that denying participation is an act of agency, I did not want to impose collaboration, recognising the time and resources it would require from civil society organisations and people.

Another challenge was that my fieldwork resembled a "patchwork ethnography" (Günel & Watanabe, 2024), in which I travelled back and forth between the fieldwork locations and Uppsala. While this enabled me to build relationships before data collection, it also limited my ability to be consistently present and highlighted my in-between position as a participatory researcher, neither fully inside nor outside of the respective organisations (see also Acker, 2000; Carling et al., 2014; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Thulemark et al., 2025).

There were also practical challenges to including participants in the asylum process as research collaborators. For example, language barriers limited in-depth conversations. High participant turnover, driven by asylum application rejections, relocations, and deportations, also hindered long-term contact with a consistent group of study circle participants. In other words, there is no uniform group of "participants in the asylum process"; different people have different capabilities, interests, or expectations of participating in research activities. There were also institutional challenges, particularly in the ethical review processes, which require obtaining ethical approval before data collection and limit the naming of potential co-producers of knowledge (Blake, 2007; Manzo & Brightbill, 2007).

Scholars have also nuanced PAR's emancipatory potential, instead highlighting "PAR is not without power inequalities" (Askins, 2018, p. 1281) and how participatory research relations can "reproduce the very inequalities they seek to change" (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 2; Kesby et al., 2007; Pain, 2004). Feminist research has consequently highlighted the need for reflexivity to avoid asymmetrical, hierarchical, and potentially exploitative research dynamics (Askins, 2018; Bondi, 2003; Caretta & Riaño, 2016; Kindon et al., 2007; Moss, 2005). This includes power relations between researchers and participants, shaped by, amongst others, citizenship status, gender, ethnicity, professional employment, or language, as well as similar power asymmetries shaping the interactions between participants. For example, PAR could privilege the inclusion of participants with whom I share the language.

Despite these challenges, I continued to explore how to foster participation and inclusion while recognising the limits of conducting PAR. Inspired by researchers who argue for the establishment of personal relations, the necessity of an ethics of care, and the constant negotiation of research relations, I considered it important to develop relations beyond data collection (Cahill, 2007b; Huizinga et al., 2025). Concretely, I navigated my role by engaging in personal, reciprocal conversations and offering practical assistance where I could. The flexible ethnographic research methodology also allowed me to

have informal conversations with various participants about the course of the research and to plan research encounters based on people's availabilities and interests. For example, upon inquiring about conducting focus group interviews, participants sometimes reflected and proposed who should be part of these discussions. Additionally, collage workshops were sometimes registered as study circle activities, benefiting the study circle associations. Finally, the use of collages also served as a creative exploration of how to include participants' lived experiences despite language barriers (see Article II).

**Doing fieldwork: Conducting observations**

After obtaining ethical clearance from the Swedish ethical review authority (Dnr 2023-00012-01), I shifted from an exploratory to a data collection phase. Based on the overview of actors, organisations, and places I obtained through exploratory fieldwork, I contacted representatives of the respective organisations to ask whether they wanted to be included in the research. After obtaining written consent, I began conducting participatory observations for data collection purposes. Because participant turnover was high, I reintroduced myself at almost every observation, asked for written consent from (new) participants, and reminded people about the research purposes. Thanks to the preceding exploratory fieldwork, many participants already knew me and the research purposes and could, for example, help with translating for new participants.

In addition to continuous participation in various study circles and network meetings from 2022 until 2025, I resided in the region for about 4.5 months, including three months in the spring of 2023 and 1.5 months in the spring of 2024. Living in the region and having access to a car allowed me to communicate clearly about the period of my presence, participate more consistently, and meet participants according to their availability. Additionally, it allowed me to explore the region and its history, giving an insight into what living in these rural areas would entail. However, this is not to say that my personal living situation was comparable to that of a person staying in state-provided accommodation. For example, I was able to go home, received financial support from a fieldwork grant, and sometimes stayed in private accommodation where I could host friends or family.

Scheduling fieldwork was primarily based on practical considerations (e.g., PhD courses, deadlines, or SOLiDi workshops). Because my fieldwork locations were spread across the region, I concentrated my observations in one location (nearby Arboga, Köping, or Norberg) at a time for about 1.5 months,

but sometimes travelled to other municipalities on days or afternoons when no activity was scheduled. Restricting fieldwork somewhat in time and place allowed me to be more consistently present in one place and communicate transparently about the duration of my presence, without losing contact with study circle participants and leaders in other places.

During participatory observations, I tried to engage as much as possible as a regular study circle participant by, for example, participating in the language classes, sports or cooking activities, and fika breaks. Alongside observing, I sometimes engaged more as a study circle leader/volunteer, setting up or cleaning the space, making coffee, or helping fellow participants by translating or explaining an exercise. I took written notes of the content of the activity and what people were saying and doing. These fieldnotes were completed, digitised, and pseudonymised immediately after the observations. Sometimes, fieldnotes were discussed during the interviews, allowing me to ask for clarifications on specific observations.

In addition to participating in specific study circles, I also participated in meetings of a local cooperative network. These allowed me to become familiar with the various organisations, sustain relationships, and stay current with the constantly changing numbers of asylum seekers in the region and activities offered in the municipality. Sometimes, I participated in online meetings, allowing me to stay informed about (upcoming) activities and maintain contact with the organisations even when I was not conducting fieldwork. My presence in these networks was sometimes also of use to the participating organisations; I shared relevant information or contributed with practical support. For example, the overview I gained during my exploratory research enabled me to help the local cooperative by creating a schematic overview of the activities offered within the municipality and flyers to distribute to participants (see Image 15).

**Positionality: Navigating multiple roles**

Alongside data collection, participation in study circles also became part of my own Swedish language-learning process. I argue that this is a unique positionality that has enriched the data collection process compared to existing research on study circles for people in the asylum process in Sweden, which builds on interviews and participatory observations by people who already possess the skills taught (Fejes, 2019; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2020, 2022; Mešić et al., 2019; Pastuhov & Sivenius, 2020).

*Image 15.* Anonymised flyer created for local integration network. Photo by author.

Feminist geographers have highlighted the role of positionality in shaping people's understanding of the world and the development of research relations (Haraway, 1988; McDowell, 1992; Nagar & Geiger, 2007; Rose, 1997). For example, my position as an outsider to Sweden impacted my interest in topics such as how Sweden and Swedishness are represented. My own position as an immigrant served as a point of connection with some participants, a finding other researchers have also experienced (Blasko, 2025; Carling et al., 2014; Webster, 2016). People were often surprised and curious upon learning I was not Swedish. Sharing experiences of navigating Sweden allowed for personal conversations in which we bonded over frustrations, homesickness, or funny misunderstandings.

However, despite similarities, it is important to highlight that my experiences as a white, middle-class, educated, employed, and childless young woman are not equivalent to those of people applying for asylum in Sweden. Contrary to many participants, I moved here for work; I was not placed in the region by the SMA. I also did not experience racism, classism, islamophobia, trans- or homophobia in the ways that were recurring realities for many participants living in Sweden.

Feminist researchers have highlighted that research relations are embedded in power relations shaped by "differences in social status, power, and resources between the interviewer and the subjects" (McDowell, 1992, p. 408). In this case, being a university-employed, English-speaking, white, European researcher shaped hierarchies during certain research encounters. In interview settings, I often observed how going through a consent form or turning the recorder on affected the more personal rapport I otherwise had with participants, who suddenly grew quiet and waited for me to ask questions.

Acknowledging the situatedness of research, feminist geographers have also argued that power is not always in the hands of the researcher; positionalities and power relations change throughout the research process or depending on the context (Caretta, 2015; Fisher, 2015; Sultana, 2007; Valentine, 2005). For example, Carling et al. (2014) identify how adopting a "student identity" (p. 44) can impact the hierarchical relation between researchers and participants. Similarly, my gender, age, and university affiliation led some people to see me as a student whom they wanted to help obtain her degree. In other instances, as I will discuss later, gender, sexuality, and age shaped the research encounters as participants approached me in a flirtatious way.

In addition to acknowledging how positionalities are relational and context-dependent, my role as a participatory observer changed over time and depending on the activity. During the exploratory fieldwork phase, I engaged more as a "participant-as-observer" (Bryman & Bell, 2019, p. 224), actively learning the language during the study circles. As Carling et al. (2014) note, researchers' insider-outsider positions depend on various markers of difference or similarity, which are relationally constructed. While my whiteness often led people to assume I was part of the organisations, my lack of Swedish language skills served as an embodied marker of my position as an outsider to the organisations.

Pastuhov and Sivenius (2020) have also conducted participatory observations in study circles and highlighted the risk of participating researchers becoming positioned as co-teachers. Similarly, Carling et al. (2014) consider how researchers might be positioned in roles "they themselves do not identify with" (p. 41). As my Swedish language skills improved, I also noticed how participants and leaders often asked me for assistance during study circle activities. Similarly, during collage workshops, some participants wanted the conversations to be in Swedish, even if we otherwise spoke French or English, because they wanted to practice their Swedish, while others sought confirmation when speaking about whether they were saying it "right". To address this,

I gradually shifted my position from a "participant-as-observer" to an "observer-as-participant" (Bryman & Bell, 2019, p. 224), in which I reduced my interference in the activities and adopted a more silent, observing role.

## Interviews, collage workshops, and focus groups

While participatory observations allowed me to focus on study circle practices, including the physical organisation, routines, and what people do and say, I also conducted interviews to explore how people experienced and defined study circles and their role in the asylum process. In total, I conducted 38 semi-structured interviews, 10 group collage workshops, and 4 focus groups with employees, circle leaders, volunteers, and participants in the asylum process (or those who had recently had their refugee status recognised). Three interviews and two focus groups were conducted online or in a hybrid format. Two interviews were conducted with the help of an interpreter. Individual interviews lasted around 45–60 minutes, and group interviews (focus groups and collage workshops) lasted between 90 and 180 minutes.

With participants' consent, interviews were recorded. This allowed me to transcribe the interviews verbatim, listen more attentively, and refer to direct quotes throughout the research. Interviews were transcribed manually, through a transcription company, or using university-approved transcription software, with data stored locally. In three instances, participants did not want to be recorded. During the collage workshops, I recorded only the discussions to give participants time to get into the collage-making process. Three collage workshops were not recorded because the groups were too large. In hindsight, video recording, as done by Hosseini (2025), could have been a valuable addition for capturing the collage-making processes.

In Appendix I, I provide an overview of the interview respondents, their diverse roles and backgrounds, and the type of interview in which they participated. In general, participants were diverse in age, gender, nationality, and length of time in Sweden. Study circle participants came from countries such as Turkey, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Nigeria, Ukraine, and Russia. All included study circle participants were adults, and their ages ranged from 18 to 50 years old. While some participants had a university background, others had not completed any formal education. Some people had been in Sweden for only a couple of weeks or months, while others had been there for as long as eight years. A majority of the participants had applied for asylum and were awaiting a decision on their

asylum application or appeal, but some participants had refugee status or received a residence permit during the course of the research project.

Study circle leaders and employees were an equally diverse group. While most leaders had Swedish citizenship, some had a (European) migration background and had moved to Sweden a long time ago, while others had a more recent background of applying for asylum or refugee status in Sweden. As also indicated in Appendix I, study circle leaders were both employed by study associations or acted as volunteers. As described in Article I, volunteers organising study circles for people in the asylum process were mainly, but not exclusively, retired women. Additionally, some people in the asylum process were included by the study circle associations as leaders or volunteers.

**Semi-structured interviews: Sampling and drafting the interview guide**

Contrary to informal conversations during, before and after participatory observations, semi-structured interviews allowed me to take the time to sit down with a participant, giving them the time to discuss their experiences in their own words. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) consider interviews to be social, inter-relational, and inter-subjective processes in which knowledge is co-constructed by researchers and participants. Although I set the agenda as a researcher by drafting a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews enabled me to be flexible with the interview guide. For example, I added or reframed questions based on field observations or allowed participants to divert the subject during the conversation. Nonetheless, having an interview guide to return to allowed for comparability across the interviews.

Most participants were recruited on-site through participatory observations and based on the practical consideration that 1) they were willing to be interviewed and 2) that we shared a language in which the interview could be conducted. From all circles I observed, I interviewed the respective leaders or volunteers, except for people who did not want to be interviewed[11]. However, due to language barriers and difficulty finding interpreters, I had more trouble recruiting participants in the asylum process. Consequently, collage workshops became an important method to include participants' experiences across linguistic differences (see below and Article II).

[11] In total, three people either declined to participate or were unable to do so because of personal reasons. In one case, this concerned the leader of an activity I had participated in during my exploratory fieldwork and which had been discontinued by the time I started data collection. In the two other instances, I succeeded in interviewing other respondents who were also responsible for organising the respective activities. Consequently, these examples of non-participation did not negatively affect the data collected.

I only started recruiting interviewees after having conducted observations. This, I hoped, would improve trust and informed consent. Interviews were conducted at the time and place chosen by the participant. Although some interviews were conducted in people's homes, offices, or local cafés, most were conducted at the locations where study circles took place. Geographers have highlighted that the location of an interview influences the research encounter and its power relations (Longhurst, 2003; Pratt, 2002; Valentine, 2005). Similarly, conducting interviews at the study circle's premises could pose ethical challenges, as this location may blur the distance or independence I maintain from the respective associations or make participants more inclined to share positive experiences. Nonetheless, the location allowed for interviews to take place in a quiet, familiar place chosen by the participant.

An interview questionnaire was drafted as part of the ethics application procedure (see Appendix II). The interviews were aimed at gaining an insight into how people experienced organising or participating in various study circles for people in the asylum process. As also recommended by Valentine (2005), the questionnaire was structured to begin with more general questions about how people experienced living in the municipality or how they would describe the activities they participate in or organise. Gradually, the questions progressed into more abstract or sensitive questions such as group dynamics or potential challenges, difficulties, or conflicts. Because previous research has warned that interview settings can resemble traumatic interrogation experiences, for example, from the SMA or that migrants would feel the need to justify their biographies (Huizinga et al., 2025; Lenette, 2019; van Liempt & Bilger, 2012), I refrained from asking participants about their reasons or trajectory of migrating to Sweden. Instead, I focused the interview on the period starting from when people arrived in Sweden. While interviews with participants in the asylum process focused more on experiences of and interactions during the study circle activities, I included more abstract and conceptual questions in the interview guides with study circle leaders and employees, such as how people defined folkbildning or solidarity.

The interview guide was not a rigid questionnaire that I followed strictly, but served as a tool to think through the (Swedish) phrasing of specific questions and to have a possible structure or follow-up questions at hand in case conversations would flow less organically. Depending on the respondent, certain questions were removed because they were too abstract, others were rephrased or added based on fieldwork observations. For example, the reoccurrence of leaders and participants mentioning integration as an important

motivation or expected outcome of study circle participation led me to dedicate a part of the interview to how people defined integration and its relation to study circles. Additionally, following the budget cuts, I included questions on the relation to government funding during interviews with employees and leaders. Finally, the interviews brought to the fore the overlapping and contradictory experiences people had with study circles. This led me to include concrete follow-up questions about how people defined and experienced differences or diversity within the study circle, which in turn led to the development of discussion cards (see below and Article II) to foster discussions of the study circle as a meeting place.

**Collage workshops**

To include participants with whom I did not share a language and to create space for more symbolic, metaphorical and non-verbal expressions of study circles, I started conducting collage workshops. In Article II, I discuss and describe the use and relevance of collages as a research method by situating them within the literature on creative, participatory, and art-based methods in asylum, migration, and refugee studies (Hunt, 2023, 2024; Jeffery et al., 2019; Lenette, 2019, 2022; Mijic & Parzer, 2022; Moralli, 2024; O'Neill, 2008; O'Neill et al., 2019; Soğancı, 2022; Stavropoulou, 2024). Collages, more specifically, are relevant to enable discussions and representations of personal and emotional experiences beyond verbal and textual expressions (Hosseini, 2025; Pizzolati, 2025; Soğancı, 2022; Vacchelli, 2018). This is particularly relevant in a multilingual setting, as collages require few language skills and allow participants to represent their experiences visually (Hunt, 2023; Jeffery et al., 2019; Mijic & Parzer, 2022; Moralli, 2024).

In total, I conducted ten collage workshops with groups and one during an individual interview. Each lasted between two and three hours. As recommended by previous scholarship on collages, the workshops were guided by one open question (either "How do you experience this activity?" or "How do you experience living in …"), which probed for lived experiences and which was formulated as open as possible to allow participants to construct their own narrative (Butler-Kisber, 2019; Pizzolati, 2025; Soğancı, 2022). Anticipating that the group would be linguistically diverse, I translated the workshop's guiding question into multiple languages and encouraged participants to help one another or use digital translation tools. After the collage workshop, participants were asked to describe and explain their collages, ensuring they had

*Image 16.* Collage making workshop. Photo by author.

the opportunity to narrate their own work and avoid misinterpretations (Culshaw, 2019; Stavropoulou, 2024; Vacchelli, 2018).

Conradson (2005) has argued that conducting focus groups within existing communities can foster greater trust and familiarity among participants. Similarly, for the collage workshops, I tried to convene an existing study circle group with their leader. However, in some instances, participants for the collage workshop were recruited by the respective study circle leader, who invited former participants to join. In line with Conradson (2005), I experienced greater difficulty in facilitating group discussions in the latter case, as more people expressed a desire to discuss their collage privately with me. Additionally, recruiting collage participants through the study circle posed ethical difficulties, as we had no prior relationship of trust to build on, and I was not aware of how the study circle leader had recruited them. In one instance, the circle leader's call for workshop participants led to 20 people showing up (of whom 11 participated in the collage-making). The group was too large, and most participants did not know each other, which limited the possibilities for follow-up discussions. In another instance, the respective study association had drafted a flyer inviting people to participate in "a

workshop on how it is to live as an LGBT person in Sweden", which did not transparently inform people about the research purposes of the activity and would give people the wrong impression of the activity's purpose and outcome. Such examples point to the previously discussed challenges of participatory research in which participants' well-intended actions conflicted with institutional ethical requirements.

The varying and volatile participant groups posed practical challenges for conducting collage workshops and group interviews. For example, participants arrived late, cancelled at the last minute, or there were too many (new) participants. Some people finished early. Consequently, the collage workshops often became more individual, and collective reflection was difficult to organise. Despite participants asking to talk privately (rather than presenting their collage in a group) or struggling to foster group discussions, participants still shared experiences and memories with others, helped each other find images or translate for one another, or commented on each other's work, pointing to the relational and collaborative potential of creative workshops (cf. Moralli, 2024; O'Neill et al., 2019).

A particular challenge related to the use of creative methods concerns their inclusivity, as people might not be comfortable, experienced, or interested in creative activities (Hunt, 2023). To address this challenge, I organised activities at a different time than the usual study circle activity, or in one instance alongside it, so that participants could choose to participate. While some participants expressed unfamiliarity or insecurity about making collages, I did not observe any particular group being overrepresented in the workshops. People of various ages, genders, nationalities, languages, and educational backgrounds joined the activity.

When using creative methods in groups, scholars have also nuanced the transformative effects of these methods, highlighting the persistence of power (im)balances between researchers and participants and amongst participants (De Leeuw & Hawkins, 2017; Frazier, 2019; Hunt, 2024). As recommended by Hunt (2024), I tried to participate in the collage-making process, but apart from one occasion, I was unable to do so, as I wandered around the room offering assistance, for example, by seeking specific images amongst the magazines or asking follow-up questions for guidance (see Appendix III). This made the collage workshop a more informal and collaborative activity than semi-structured interviews.

During the collage workshops, I struggled to navigate the multiple, overlapping roles of being a researcher, circle leader, and participant. For example,

during a collage workshop with three women who had not completed any formal education before arriving in Sweden, I found that the participants positioned me as a teacher and often asked for approval of their work. This was also apparent during the making of Collage 4, when one woman was writing descriptions of the images and asking me for corrections to her spelling. When trying to redirect her from describing the images to discussing her experiences of living in Sweden, she changed the sentences into "me and my children bike to the forest", making me wonder whether this is her experience or a projection of my question. Because of the lack of a verbal follow-up conversation, the data were insufficient to write an accompanying narrative as I was able to do for other participants whose collages have been included in this thesis. In other words, despite being a method aimed at fostering more collaborative research encounters across language barriers, differences in language and literacy continued to shape research relations and, when analysing the workshop data, I noticed how I gathered richer data from conversations with people with whom I could speak French, English, or Swedish.

Finally, creative methods have been applauded for being able to reach new audiences (Leavy, 2009). However, exhibiting creative methods comes with specific ethical challenges, such as confidentiality and anonymity (Frazier, 2019). The collages included in this thesis have been anonymised in accordance with the commitments made in the ethical review process. This, however, comprises the aesthetics of the posters and limits the ability to acknowledge the maker's work. Additionally, research has questioned the transformative outcome of creative methods to reach new audiences and change anti-immigration discourses (Jeffery et al., 2019). Similarly, apart from being included in the thesis, the collages were primarily exhibited in academic settings[12]. During the first collage workshop, participants decided to send their collages to a Parliamentary interpellation about folkbildning's recent budget cut, and during another collage workshop, the idea arose to exhibit the collages in the municipality. However, due to disagreement among participants over whether and how to exhibit the collages, this idea was not pursued. Nonetheless, Hunt (2023) recognises that creative research can still contribute to the development of relations amongst the participants, even if it does not always foster relations to the local community. Similarly, in Article II, I discuss how the research

[12] In 2024, the collages were exhibited at two conferences, namely SOLiDi's closing conference in Belgium and Mimers *Forskarkonferens* in Sweden. Despite being academic contexts, both conferences also included non-academic organisations and participants.

methods shaped relations between participants and their study circle leader, and how they also aimed to contribute to study circle practices.

**Focus groups**

While collage workshops aimed to foster dialogue about different experiences, participants were often engaged in a more individual collage-making process. Focus groups, consequently, enabled more collective discussion and meaning-making amongst the participants, but required a shared language. Feminist geographers have highlighted the value of focus groups for capturing the collective and contextual processes of producing and negotiating knowledge amongst participants (Pratt, 2002; Wilkinson, 1999). Given the importance of bringing different participants together, I conducted not only collage workshops but also four focus groups (FGs), which allowed me to explore people's experiences while analysing the interactions, negotiations, and potential (dis)agreements and discussions between different participants.

Each focus group served a distinct purpose. FG1 was one of the first interviews I conducted with various ABF employees and leaders. The FG allowed respondents to introduce their association and ongoing activities and facilitated a collective discussion of expectations and practicalities of the research process. FG2 was conducted with employees from different study associations to collaboratively prepare a SOLiDi report on the role of public pedagogies and (governing) institutions for folkbildning, and to explore a more collaborative approach to writing research output. Eventually, five participants from two study associations took part. FG3 brought together members of a local cooperative network to discuss the different organisations' activities and how the members perceived the role of the network. Finally, FG4 brought together a study circle leader and their participants for a follow-up discussion, using cards to elicit dialogue on how people defined "meeting places".

The relevance of focus groups lies in bringing together different people (either a leader and participants, or people from different organisations) and analysing how participants discussed, complemented, and contradicted each other's experiences and definitions (Pratt, 2002; Wilkinson, 1999). A relevant example was the use of cards during a focus group on defining meeting places, as the (re)ordering of categories visually highlighted distinct experiences and expectations, eliciting discussion among participants. Additionally, focus groups can become generative encounters in which knowledge sharing among participants can lead to collective action (Caretta & Vacchelli, 2015; Pratt, 2002). Examples include participants gaining awareness of each other's

experiences, as well as the above-mentioned decision to send collages to members of parliament or the collaborative writing of the research report.

However, focus groups also align with the research's theoretical framework of space as socially produced (cf. Chapter 4). By bringing together participants and leaders in focus groups and collage workshops, the methods enabled an examination of overlapping and conflicting expectations, representations, and experiences. FG1 and FG2 explored how different organisations negotiated the production of spaces of folkbildning solidarities, while FG4 also highlighted how representations and experiences of folkbildning collide (cf. Article III).

While focus groups are sometimes argued to be more horizontal methods that reduce the researcher's power (Wilkinson, 1999), scholars have also pointed out that power relations continue to shape the research encounter (Valentine, 2005). This concerns not only the relation between researchers and participants but also relations among participants. For example, the presence of a study circle leader could affect participants' ease in sharing experiences or in contradicting the leader. To address such challenges, I began focus groups and collage workshops by emphasising the importance of listening, respect, and confidentiality. Additionally, I sought to engage the study circle leader as an equal participant and remained vigilant to ensure all participants had opportunities to speak or respond. Nonetheless, such strategies are not catch-all solutions, and power relations between participants may persist during group interviews and focus groups. For example, the discussion about whether to exhibit the collages also illustrates how internal group dynamics and power relations between participants can shape research methods and outcomes. During the discussion, one participant (who had not taken part in the collage-making process) dominated the conversation, arguing that exhibiting the collages would not stop deportations. Because she repeatedly brought the conversation back to deportations in Sweden, the atmosphere in the group shifted, and participants who had initially been interested in organising an exhibition became visibly distressed or disengaged from the discussion.

**The language(s) of the interviews**

Watson (2004) has argued that learning the language of the fieldwork context can improve trust and understanding of the research context. Having experienced that many study association employees and circle leaders were less comfortable speaking English, that many participants in the asylum process did not speak English but were learning Swedish, and that much of the relevant literature was in Swedish, I quickly realised it would be essential to learn

Swedish. However, Watson (2004) argues that the choice of which language to learn is a political choice that affects whose experiences are included. Interviews were conducted in Swedish, English, and French. Consequently, participants from English- or French-speaking countries, or those who had learned English, were overrepresented in the sample of interviewees, while people who spoke Arabic, Farsi, or Tigrinya, or had completed less (or no) formal education, were underrepresented. In addition to affecting who is included in the research, the language of the interview might still be people's second (or more) language, which could also impact respondents' comfort and ease in discussing their lived experiences.

Initially, I had considered hiring an interpreter, but practical and financial challenges limited my access to interpreters active in the region. Working with interpreters comes with challenges, such as confidentiality concerns, misinterpretations or mistranslations, and power asymmetries (Valentine, 2005). Consequently, I wanted to avoid asking participants to translate for each other during individual interviews. In agreement with two participants, a Russian-speaking acquaintance participated digitally to assist with interpreting two interviews. Although I had expected the digital presence of an interpreter to disrupt the conversational flow of the interviews, the conversation nonetheless unfolded organically. During our interview, one participant discussed the importance of her expressing her emotions in Russian.

In another attempt to bridge linguistic differences and include participants with whom I did not share the language, I introduced collage workshops, which enabled the participation of a linguistically diverse group, encouraged participants to represent their experiences visually, and, when conducted in groups, led to participants collaborating with and translating for each other. During group interviews, participants sometimes switched between English and Swedish, and I or others helped translate for other participants, sometimes using digital translation tools. To foreground the multilingualism of the research encounters, Articles III and IV include quotes in the original language of the interview alongside their English translations.

**Why I am no longer doing walking interviews**

Go-along, mobile, and walking interviews are often considered relevant methods for ethnographic and geographical research, as they highlight the co-constructive relationships between knowledge and place, people's everyday routines or spatial practices, and how people experience, understand, and assign value to different places (J. Anderson, 2004; Carpiano, 2009; Jones et al.,

2008; Kusenbach, 2003; Lee & Ingold, 2006; Wiederhold, 2015). Additionally, walking interviews can reduce power asymmetries between researchers and respondents by fostering participation and positioning participants as "tour guides, storytellers, (…) [and] local experts" (Wiederhold, 2015, p. 608; see also J. Anderson, 2004; Carpiano, 2009; Huizinga, 2020). More specifically, within migration studies, mobile methods and walking interviews have been considered relevant for capturing how people experience places, interact with and within their physical environments, and how feelings of (non-)belonging, inclusion, and exclusion relate to particular or multiple places (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018; O'Neill, 2018; O'Neill & Hubbard, 2010; Sotkasiira et al., 2020).

Given my interest in people's experiences of being settled in small and rural towns in Sweden, the role study circles played in people's establishment, and the spatiality of folkbildning solidarities, walking interviews seemed particularly relevant to this research project. Additionally, I expected walking interviews to be a fun activity that would also help me become more acquainted with the geographical fieldwork context through the eyes of the research participants.

However, when conducting mobile interviews, I encountered specific challenges related to my and my research participants' (mainly gendered) positionality, which informed my decision to stop conducting walking interviews. For example, while some female participants (often mothers) declined to participate in walking interviews, older male participants seemed keener to do so. This could be related to challenges with the inclusivity of the method, as women might have family duties that restrict them from participating in longer walks, as Carpiano (2009) has indicated. However, in line with reflections on how gender and sexuality impact research relations (Kaspar & Landolt, 2016; Sultana, 2007; Wimark, 2017), I experienced walking interviews with men to be flirtatious. I struggled to keep our discussion focused and often experienced discomfort with the compliments and remarks I received during the walks, particularly from male respondents.

During a go-along interview, a study circle participant wanted to take me along to the gym. However, sharing this space meant I struggled to maintain physical boundaries, and the conversation often slipped into compliments about my physical appearance. In another instance, during an interview with a study circle leader in the car, I tried to wrap up the conversation multiple times, but the participant kept bringing in new discussion points while turning the motor on and off, steering how long the conversation would last and how

long I would remain in the car with him. Finally, during a go-along interview, the participant took me to a lake outside of the town. When the conversation diverted and the respondent started making more aggressive and racist claims towards other participants in the asylum process, I felt physically unsafe for the second time. This was an emotionally disturbing experience which altered my research practices (see also Wimark, 2017). Considering that go-along interviews were, at that point, not providing information that differed greatly from that in more formal interview settings, I decided there and then to abandon walking interviews altogether.

## Data analysis: Coding processes

Interview transcripts and digitised fieldnotes were coded manually and using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. I conducted thematic coding to identify recurring themes within and across the data. Data analysis was iterative and circular as I moved between data collection, data analysis, and (re)reading literature (Cope, 2003).

A first phase of data analysis occurred during and alongside data collection. For example, alongside taking field notes, I also summarised emerging themes in separate sections, resembling what the qualitative researchers call memos or codebooks (Cope, 2021). Additionally, Longhurst (2003) argued that note-taking during interviews can function as a first step in the data analysis. Similarly, I digitised written notes with timestamps to categorise the interviews by topic.

While transcribing the interviews, I concurrently conducted "open coding" (Strauss, 1987): I identified key concepts, topics, and themes emerging from the data. These emerging codes were both inductive descriptions of what was said and more deductive codes which referred to theoretical concepts from the literature or related to the emerging research questions (Cope, 2021). Open coding often went hand in hand with Strauss' (1987) second coding phase—"axial coding"—in which codes were restructured into overarching themes, identifying recurring topics within and across the data. For example, initial codes included descriptions of people's experiences of rural living, motivations to participate, and more theoretically informed codes such as expressions of (non-)belonging or practices of solidarity.

The ensuing coding processes, however, differed depending on the research and writing phase. The writing of Article I went hand in hand with a more

"selective coding" (Strauss, 1987) process. Informed by observations of moralistic intervention, participants' discourses of social proximity, and literature on solidarity, power, and paternalism, I specifically coded interviews with volunteers with these themes in mind. Following the second fieldwork period, which ended in June 2024, the coding process shifted to a more open, inductive, and axial approach to coding the entire dataset. I identified themes that emerged across the data (e.g., the role of language learning, integration, and the relation to state funding) and recoded interviews, encouraged by questions from seminars and supervisions about how space mattered to all of this. Consequently, writing Article III again occurred alongside a more selective coding process, in which I returned to existing codes and recoded interviews for themes related to spatiality and solidarity (e.g., places of folkbildning, study circles as school-like, more than a course, meeting spaces). Finally, the writing of Article IV relied on existing codes on rural living, but the analysis of these codes was deepened by reading rural migration literature. In other words, writing was an important step in the cyclical data analysis.

## Analysing the collages: Introducing the interludes

Hosseini (2025), who has also used collages in his research on migration and belonging in Sweden, questions how to translate the "deep richness and multilayered visual language of collage into written words" (p. 409). The narratives included as interludes demonstrate how visual data can be incorporated into the research output, beyond individual quotes.

The narratives were based on discussions during and after the collage workshops. As described in Article II, the idea emerged from participants' suggestions to send the collages to members of parliament. Since I was already recording the conversations for research purposes, I proposed to transcribe them into a text that the participants could correct and change. Of the seven participants, one wanted to write her own narrative, one made changes[13], and one did not want the collage to be sent to parliament.

The transformation of data into narratives is not new. It resembles other methods, such as narrative inquiry, in which researchers (co)produce stories from interview transcripts (e.g., Leavy, 2009; Nasheeda et al., 2019); narrative productions, in which participants and researchers collaboratively write texts across multiple sessions (Montenegro et al., 2023; Ramírez-March &

[13] This collage and the collaboratively written narrative have been included as the prelude to this thesis (cf. Collage 1).

Montenegro, 2023); or the transformation of interview transcripts into (found) poetry (e.g., Butler-Kisber et al., 2003; Hosseini, 2024). These methods make the co-productive and situated nature of knowledge more explicit than researcher-selected quotes in traditional academic publications (Montenegro et al., 2023; Nasheeda et al., 2019; Wiles et al., 2005).

Writing the narratives started by transcribing the interviews verbatim or completing notes taken during the collage workshops. Unlike the "regular" interviews, the transcription did not occur chronologically, but I connected each transcription to a person's collage. Based on the transcript, I edited the text into a coherent narrative, but I tried to limit additions or edits to the transcripts to a minimum and stay as close as possible to participants' own words.

Depending on the length of the discussion, writing the narratives followed a slightly different process. For shorter interviews, I maintained the discussion order, removed questions and personal identifiers, joined paragraphs, and sometimes added a linking sentence or made a grammatical correction. For longer interviews, narrative writing required more editing, as including the full transcript would be too long. Instead, I compiled parts of the transcription that discussed the same subjects and included only data that referred to elements in the collage. This was, for example, the writing process for the narrative accompanying Collage 2. Finally, some collages, like Collage 8, included mainly text, and for the narrative I transcribed, translated, and anonymised the text on the collage, adding additional relevant or related quotes from the discussions in brackets.

In other words, writing the narratives became a way to analyse the collages, which, as I describe in Article II, "resembled the non-linear collage-making process as I cut and pasted parts of the interviews into new narratives, moving back and forth between the audio, collage, transcript and, ideally, the participants" (Sluijs, 2026, p. 6). However, after the first collage workshop, I decided to end this participatory writing process due to practical time constraints.

Acknowledging that this method affirms the authority of the researcher to analyse, write, structure, and publish the narratives, I echo Montenegro et al. (2023) and argue that the narratives do not "give voice" to the participants. Instead, they highlight the co-constructive nature of the research encounters by creating space for participants' lived and emotional experiences, without overlooking the researcher's role in selecting or editing them, and by inviting audiences to make their own analysis (Montenegro et al., 2023).

In this thesis, I have included the collages and narratives as interludes placed between chapters, introducing and binding them together. In line with

a feminist epistemology, I wanted to find a way to centre personal accounts and experiences within the constraints of academic publishing. This aligns with Wiles et al. (2005), who argue that longer narratives allow for more personal and contextualised accounts, in contrast to individual quotes taken out of context from the longer interview.

Considering that I collected 54 collages, not all collages are included in the dissertation. Some collages were omitted because there was less material to write narratives about, either due to language barriers, a lack of time to discuss during the workshop, or because the participants made more descriptive posters. Second, I did not want to include the collages merely as floating text between the articles; instead, I carefully selected them based on how they related to the discussion and analysis in preceding or subsequent chapters/articles included in the thesis.

## Reflections on research ethics

Given that the data would contain sensitive personal information, including ethnicity, political opinions, political and philosophical beliefs, and sexual orientation, I applied for ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Agency (Dnr 2023-00012-01). However, research ethics are more than institutional procedures; participatory researchers have argued that research ethics

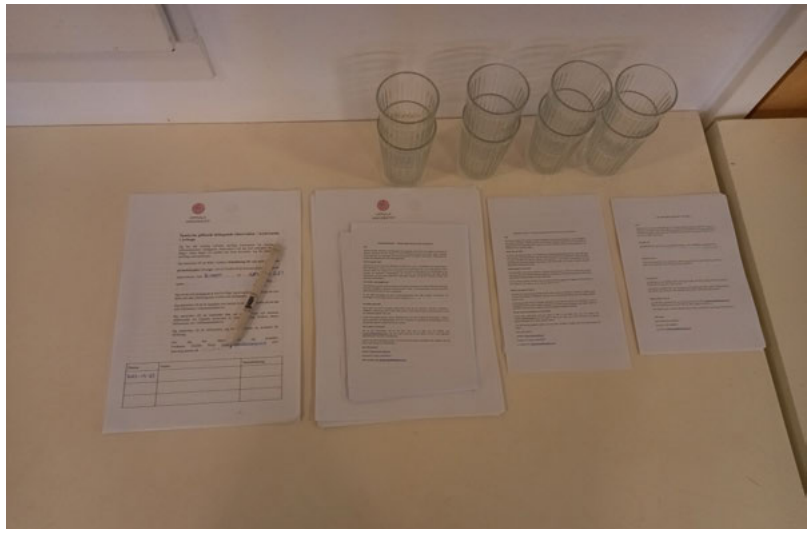


*Image 17.* Set-up of the information letters and consent form during a participatory observation. Anonymised picture by author.

is a relational practice, informed by an ethics of care, and lasting throughout (and beyond) the research process (Cahill, 2007b; Lenette, 2019; Manzo & Brightbill, 2007; Ratnam & Drozdzewski, 2022; Wilson & Darling, 2021). To account for such relational and processual ethics, I included ethical reflections throughout the chapter and in relation to specific methods. In this section, I address additional reflections on access and informed consent, confidentiality, giving voice, and giving back.

## Seeking access, establishing relations, and informed consent

Previous research has highlighted the importance of establishing relationships beyond data collection when conducting participatory research with people in the asylum process (Huizinga et al., 2025). Earlier, I discussed how I adopted a more processual approach to ethics by engaging in exploratory participatory observations before conducting interviews. Apart from establishing trust, this also helped me clarify the research purposes for participants with whom I experienced language barriers, as I relied on recurring encounters and received translation assistance.

During the exploratory phase, I introduced the research verbally, and upon starting data collection, I formalised informed consent through written letters and consent forms (see Appendices III and IV). Previous research has warned that informed consent forms can create more hierarchical research encounters and can be tricky when working with people without a permanent residence status (Darling, 2021; Huizinga et al., 2025). Nonetheless, obtaining written consent was crucial to my process of seeking access as I (re)negotiated informed consent at various points throughout the research. Concretely, I reintroduced the information letters during participant observations, interviews, and collage workshops, which reminded participants of my dual presence as a participating researcher and of their right to ask questions or withdraw consent. Additionally, research has highlighted the importance of emphasising the independence of research from support institutions when working with vulnerable populations (Darling, 2021). To avoid participants feeling pressured to participate or share certain experiences, I used the information letter to emphasise my independence from the SMA and the study associations, and to highlight the confidentiality of the interviews. Thanks to my long-term presence, people became acquainted with the research purposes and helped translate the information letters. Nonetheless, I also drafted a shorter leaflet with information in English, Swedish, Ukrainian, and Arabic.

During participatory observations, I set up a system for participants to sign throughout the activity (see Image 17). This was relevant because participants often arrived at different times, and I wanted to avoid pressuring people to follow the group when signing the consent form. During interviews, I discussed the information letter verbally at the start, and interviewees were asked to sign the consent form only at the end of the interview. Finally, recognising that some people in the asylum process might be reluctant to sign documents (Darling, 2021), I also allowed people to sign with only their first name, signature, pseudonym, or initials.

## Confidentiality and pseudonymisation

Confidentiality can be complicated when conducting research in smaller communities where participants might recognise each other, even when personal identifiers have been removed or replaced (van Liempt & Bilger, 2012). Additionally, principles central to participatory research, such as agency and collaboration, might be in tension with institutional requirements on confidentiality and anonymity (Lobo et al., 2021; Manzo & Brightbill, 2007). In line with what I promised in the ethical application, I pseudonymised the data by replacing personal and place names with generic or fictional alternatives, even if participants did not want to be pseudonymised. Although this infringes on people's agency to represent themselves and have their knowledge or (creative) output recognised (Lenette, 2019; Manzo & Brightbill, 2007), I argue that in the small communities where I conducted research, naming one participant poses challenges for the confidentiality of other participants who do not wish to be named. Additionally, to protect participants' confidentiality, the empirical results include only relevant contextual information and generalised personally identifiable information. When taking pictures, I was mindful not to include people's faces or to blur personally identifiable information where necessary.

Rural scholars have warned that pseudonymisation "risks erasing the distinctiveness and diversity of rural places and even acts as a possible 'rural erasure'" (Ishihara, 2025, p. 89; Seelig, 2021). Consequently, I decided to introduce the geographical context in Chapter 2, but have refrained from naming the municipalities or linking the people's pseudonyms to the names of organisations or municipalities.

## Giving voice and creating change

Creative and participatory methods have been considered valuable for reversing exploitative research encounters and for creating more horizontal relations between researchers and participants by fostering collaboration, enabling participants to represent themselves and contributing to societal or political change (Askins, 2018; Manzo & Brightbill, 2007; O'Neill et al., 2019; Pain, 2004). Scholars, however, have also adopted a critical perspective that addresses the limits, failures, and (ethical) challenges of participatory research (Askins, 2018; Frazier, 2019). For example, despite aiming for more collaborative relations, participatory research remains embedded in, and potentially can reproduce, unequal or exploitative relations (Askins, 2018; Frazier, 2019). Additionally, scholars have highlighted the limits of agency and (self-)representation by questioning whether "giving voice" risks becoming an act of speaking *for* others without reflecting on why a person is silent, silenced, or unheard (Lenette, 2019; Montero-Sieburth, 2020).

While this thesis began with an epistemological interest in lived experiences, its article-based format meant that the representation of people's diverse experiences was constrained by publication guidelines. A telling example is Article II, which, despite describing the relevance of visual and dialogic methods, includes no collages. Through the interludes, I have sought to create space for the diverse and nuanced lived experiences of various participants. However, scholars have identified that researchers often retain final authority over the analysis and publication (Caretta & Riaño, 2016; Moralli, 2024). Similarly, the authority to write, select, and pseudonymise these experiences remained primarily in my hands.

Apart from challenges related to collaboration and inclusion, I have also experienced difficulties regarding PAR's commitment to changing the conditions of injustice and inequality. What does change mean, and how can it be measured? Like Frazier (2019), I struggled to navigate an increasingly restrictive and xenophobic political context while acknowledging that these structures lie beyond my capacity, as an individual doctoral researcher, to change. Nonetheless, as Carling et al. (2014) indicate, participants might place me in a position of authority. In two instances, participants questioned how the research would bring about structural change in the position of migrants in Sweden.

While acknowledging the limits of PAR, I have been inspired by the possibilities of participatory methods and have explored alternative definitions of "change" in the context of the research, without overstating or romanticising

its transformative or emancipatory potential. For example, I considered how the research could impact the study circle or study association. As mentioned above, ABF was part of the SOLiDi consortium. Such institutional collaborations and international knowledge exchanges are, as Huizinga et al. (2025) argue, one way to collaborate beyond data collection. For example, presentations on folkbildning inspired a Maltese SOLiDi member to include the study circle methodology in his master's thesis on financial literacy in labour unions (cf. Grima, 2025). Article II also discussed how the research contributed to study circle practices. There, I examined how aligning research and study circle methods became a practical exploration of how study circles can organise activities beyond language learning and create space for discussions of different experiences and expectations.

## Giving back

In addition to contributing to change, ethical considerations also involve how to "give back" to participants. In the context of specifically focus group interviews, Conradson (2005) considers that providing refreshments (e.g., fika), creating opportunities to discuss with others, allowing participants to take the final product home (e.g., collages), or offering financial contributions can be ways to provide something in return for people's participation. Having secured a fieldwork grant, I also used my funding to provide fika during collage workshops or to pay for the order when organising an interview at a café. Additionally, I offered a 150 SEK gift card to a local grocery store after concluding individual interviews with participants in the asylum process. I decided not to give gift cards following group interviews as it was difficult to anticipate the number of participants. I also did not offer gift cards to study circle leaders; I assumed that most had some form of income. However, financial compensation comes with ethical challenges (Head, 2009); it does not automatically resolve power issues or exploitative research (Bose, 2022). To avoid buying off people's consent, I offered the gift card after the interview. As recommended by Head (2009), I stressed that these gift cards were not a payment but rather a gift to thank people for taking the time to speak with me.

Apart from giving back financially, previous research has argued that sharing (preliminary) research results can constitute a way to "give back" or "check in" with participants (Cahill, 2007a; Caretta, 2016). For example, in FG2, I invited participating organisations to collaborate on writing a research report. This also became a way for me to share and discuss preliminary

research results. ABF employees were also invited to SOLiDi conferences, where I presented interim research results. Finally, following this PhD, I aim to present some of the final results to interested participants. Through such dissemination, researchers act as a "critical friend" (Huizinga et al., 2025), reflecting on the opportunities and challenges of civil society organisations while recognising how they are situated, and possibly constrained, by contemporary political and economic contexts.

Finally, feminist scholars have highlighted informal, interpersonal ways to "give back" by examining the everyday practices of solidarity that researchers can engage in. For example, Huizinga (2024) emphasises the importance of a relational ethics of care, including establishing relations, attentive listening, and offering practical support. Similarly, I provided practical support where I could and within my capabilities. For example, I helped translate letters, review CVs, make calls, and give rides, or simply lend an ear. However, I also declined assistance, such as when a study association asked me to write their evaluation report to their funder, because this would have blurred my independence from the association and compromised the confidentiality of the interviews.

## Leaving fieldwork: Have I ever left the field, or is it leaving me?

> How do you deal with a fieldwork that constantly evaporates every second I look away? How to do fieldwork when every time I arrive here, participants have been moved, deported, left the region or the country, and activities have been suspended, or funding has run out. Asking for a friend. (Fieldnotes, August 2023)

Feminist geographers have highlighted that the field is "not only a geographical location but a set of relations nurtured, contested, and developed during the course of long fieldwork phases" (Caretta & Cheptum, 2017, p. 415). Acknowledging the relational nature of fieldwork and that fieldwork relations can persist over time and across space, consequently, implies recognising that leaving the field can be a complicated process (Caretta & Cheptum, 2017; Katz, 1994).

To my regret, I could not continue fieldwork indefinitely, as I also had to set time aside for analysis, writing, and training. Nonetheless, between and after periods of data collection, I experienced how fieldwork relations

persisted. Through digital and social media, I stayed in contact with some participants, who shared updates on their asylum applications and personal lives, whether in Sweden or abroad. I also received invitations from organisations about upcoming meetings and activities. This sometimes made it difficult to resist fieldwork FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and led me to participate in activities when I had planned time for analysis and writing.

Researchers have argued for the importance of communicating transparently about one's engagement (Huizinga et al., 2025). Throughout the research process, I communicated about my temporary presence through the information letter and verbal reminders. With the end of a fieldwork period approaching, I reminded people about my upcoming departure, communicated about when I would return and planned final interviews or goodbye-fikas.

However, leaving the field can sometimes weigh more heavily on researchers than on participants. Similar to Pastuhov and Sivenius (2020), who experienced that study circle participants can be indifferent to a researcher's presence and that rather than leaving the field, the field was "evaporating in front of my eyes" (p. 67), leaving the field also turned into a humbling reality check for me.

*Image 18.* Leaving the field with cake. Photo by author.

> My more intense and longer presence in multiple activities and the recent turn towards more personal and emotional one-on-one conversations made me aware that I had to clearly communicate that my presence here was coming to an end. After hearing about a participant's passion for baking, I ordered a cake from her and invited people to a final goodbye-fika. I invited people verbally during the activities and shared an invitation in the group chat. I had organised the activity on a Friday when the *öppen förskola* [open day-care] was open for participants to visit, but no specific study circles were planned. I hoped that this would mean that my goodbye moment would not overlap with other activities. However, as the day approached, I started receiving texts from participants saying that they could not attend because they had other plans or a meeting with the Migration Agency. In the end, almost none of the participants I had met in the past months showed up. Instead, there were many new faces of people I had never seen before. Instead of the special goodbye fika I had hoped this moment would turn out to be, I ended up distributing cake to children I had never met and who congratulated me on my birthday after receiving a slice of cake. (Fieldnotes 2023)

Apart from a "failed" or humbling fieldwork exit, I often felt as though I was not leaving the field but that the field was instead leaving me. For example, participant turnover across the various municipalities was high, as people were often relocated or, in some cases, deported on short notice. Additionally, the end of the budget for folkbildning activities in April 2023 meant that multiple study circles ended once funding ran out. As of the writing of this dissertation in 2026, most of the study circle activities I once participated in have ended because fewer people apply for asylum in Sweden and people are increasingly placed in larger cities, closer to SMA offices. The local cooperative network is meeting less frequently. Study circle leaders who were in the asylum process but received a negative answer moved abroad, and some leaders who were formally employed left their posts. Although a feeling of an evaporating or disappearing fieldwork initially prevailed, these moments eventually prompted a rethinking of the research process. For example, the suspension of budget and some activities led to the introduction of collage workshops (see below and Article II), shifted my attention to organisations and places where activities were still ongoing, and stimulated my interest in understanding the role and influence of state policies and funding.

# 6. Article summaries

## Article I. 'I Am Like Their Swedish Mother'. Conceptualising Maternalism and Power Asymmetries during Solidarity Practices with Asylum Seekers

*Sluijs, Z. (2024). 'I am Like Their Swedish Mother'. Conceptualising Maternalism and Power Asymmetries During Solidarity Practices With Asylum Seekers. DiGeSt-Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, 11(2):* 50-65.

This paper analyses the practices and discourses of volunteers and study circle leaders, and how they perceive their own roles and the role of study circles for people in the asylum process. Drawing on participatory observations of study circles for people in the asylum process and interviews with study circle leaders, I begin by noting that volunteers are often retired, white women with Swedish citizenship who draw on personal and professional caregiving experiences. Consequently, there is a particular division of labour among circle leaders, shaped by factors such as gender, age, race, family status, class, and citizenship status, which also shapes the relations between study circle leaders and participants.

The paper demonstrates that solidarity is not inherently positive or transformative, but that solidarities can both transform and reproduce asymmetrical power relations. By arguing for a theoretical shift from paternalism to maternalism, the paper highlights the importance of examining the gendered and feminised role of care in practices of folkbildning solidarities. By exploring the relation between solidarity and care, the paper addresses the complex and ambivalent outcomes of solidarities, considering how folkbildning solidarities can lead to the establishment of intimate, personal, emotional, and caring relationships that counter or transform hierarchies between student and teacher or citizen and non-citizen, while also reproducing power asymmetries that position volunteers as moral educators who instruct racialised, non-European, and particularly Muslim, participants on essentialised conceptions of Swedish gender and family norms.

# Article II. More Than a Course, More Than a Method: Study Circles as a Pedagogical and Research Method Working With Asylum Seekers Across Language Barriers and Differences

*Sluijs, Z. 2026. More Than a Course, More Than a Method: Study Circles as a Pedagogical and Research Method Working With Asylum Seekers Across Language Barriers and Differences. Area* 58, no. 2: e70088. *https://doi.org/10.1111/area.70088.*

This article is a methodological discussion in which I explain how I addressed challenges in conducting a participatory research project committed to including the experiences of not only study circle leaders but also study circle participants who are in the asylum process. First, the inclusion of people in the asylum process in the research was particularly challenged by language differences. Second, conducting participatory research as a junior scholar led me to question how I could report more critical findings, including tensions within solidarities and ambivalent outcomes, constructively while also centring participants' experiences.

To address these challenges, I turned to creative and participatory methods, including collage workshops and card-based discussions, to facilitate both individual and collective discussions about people's overlapping and conflicting experiences and expectations of being settled in small cities and rural towns in south-central Sweden and of participating in study circles.

Both collage workshops and card-based discussions were inspired by the study circle method and its pedagogical focus on experience-based and dialogic learning, as well as feminist epistemologies' centring of differential lived experiences and their countering of power asymmetries. This paper argues for researchers to align their methods with research participants' knowledge, skills, and practices, and exemplifies what alignment could look like in practice. Not only did the research activities take inspiration from and place in the study circle setting, but by bringing together study circle leaders and participants to reflect on their experiences, the research also aimed to contribute to existing study circle practices.

# Article III. Folkbildning as Spaces of Solidarities: Popular Education and Study Circles for Asylum Seekers in Sweden

*Zinaïda Sluijs*
*Unpublished manuscript, under review with an international peer-reviewed journal.*

This paper researches how spaces of folkbildning are produced as spaces of solidarity. Theoretically, the paper builds on Lefebvre's theory of space as socially produced, multiple, and contested, and Harvey's conceptualisation of space as simultaneously absolute, relative, and relational. Methodologically, the data come from participatory observations and interviews with study circle leaders and participants to explore how spaces of folkbildning solidarities are represented, perceived, and experienced, and how these relate to different spatialities.

I argue that spaces of folkbildning solidarities are multiple and contested as different actors negotiate different understandings of what folkbildning solidarity is, how and where it should be practised, and what its outcomes are. The paper contributes to folkbildning and solidarity scholarship by conceptualising solidarity not only as a relational practice but as co-productive of absolute, relational, and relative spatialities. As such, the paper contributes to conceptualisations of solidarities as complex, multiple, and ambivalent by analysing how not only the meanings and practices but also the spatialities of solidarities are contested and negotiated. In other words, the paper demonstrates that the production of spaces of folkbildning solidarities is a complicated, multi-dimensional process in which various actors with different positionalities are involved.

# Article IV. Learning (in) Rurality: Popular Education for Asylum Seekers in Rural Sweden

*Zinaïda Sluijs*
*Unpublished manuscript, submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal.*

The final article explores the role of the rural context for practices of folkbildning solidarities with people in the asylum process. Building on a theoretical framework that considers rurality as produced, and solidarity and spaces as co-constitutive, the paper analyses how practices of folkbildning solidarities are both shaped by and shape ruralities. Methodologically, I build on participatory observations of study circles, interviews, and collage workshops with study circle leaders and participants who are in the asylum process to explore how folkbildning solidarities are shaped by rurality and how different ruralities are, inversely, also produced during and through study circles for people in the asylum process.

The paper first explores how absolute, relative, and relational understandings of rurality shape specific rural practices of folkbildning solidarities, including the provision of physical meeting spaces, a focus on mobility, and the establishment of inter-organisational solidarity networks in rural areas. Subsequently, the paper explores how absolute, relative, and relational understandings of rural spaces are also produced through folkbildning solidarities, including understandings of rurality as synonymous with nature and outdoor life, outdoor life as inherently Swedish, nature as unequally accessible, nature as something to be enjoyed, and rural places as shaped and transformed by translocal relations and processes, such as international migration.

As such, this article contributes to solidarity scholarship, which has primarily focused on urban contexts, by highlighting the importance of rural areas as spaces of arrival and solidarity, while acknowledging that rural solidarities are also embedded in and reproduce social hierarchies.

# Interlude

Collage 6 by a study circle leader, 2024.

*Collage by a study circle leader, 2024*
*Narrative written based on collage workshop discussions*

The image that I placed at the bottom right represents flow. It is what I hope. The result. The outcome. Change. Development. That they embrace other cultures and values.

How can I get there? What do I already do, and how do I get there?

That's what I am asking myself.
The image at the top left is me at home asking if what I am doing is right.
Many times, I asked myself: Am I doing right? How do we continue?
I am really insecure sometimes.

The image at the bottom left is what I feel: I am pushing them. First, they are lost. But then, I come, and I push. I tell them: "No, you are strong! You will make it!"

The rings in the middle are from an artwork. It represents the rings of life. I link this to the structural context affecting migration and migrants' prospects.
Society does not always help, despite everything.
Society could help, there is help; and the help could work. But society simply doesn't. This is a negative element represented on the poster.
Why is there, for example, only emergency help for people suffering from a mental illness?

But I love what I do. The image of the people together therefore represents the sense of community that emerges within the group.
If I am part of the group? I want to be part of them, but there is a hierarchy.
I have always had a problem with hierarchy. I like to place myself on the sideline. Let others take over or something. I like to listen in.

But they are the ones who don't know anything else. They are raised like that. There is an adult in the room. Especially when it is a teacher. So, we just have to sit quietly. Not do so much.

But I want to be part of it, with them. And dance!

# Article I

# Interlude

Collage 7 by a study circle participant, 2023. Anonymised by author.

*Collage by a study circle participant, 2023*
*Narrative written based on collage workshop (upright) and interview (italic)*

My poster is called “life”, or “liv” in Swedish. These are not only my dreams, but mostly my dreams. My dream is to see the ocean and a *zubr* [bison]. I dream about travelling. I dream to have a house by the ocean. I want to learn how to ride a horse. And I want a little dog for my daughter so that they grow up together. I have always dreamed of a big house for my family: my parents, my husband’s parents, my brother, grandmother, … that we all live together. They live in Russia. That is not my country. I was an immigrant there. It is not easy for me, my big leave from Russia. But Moscow is in my heart forever.

For now, when I think of home, I think of Moscow. *Here, nothing in particular is very important to me. At least yet. I like the garden in front of my house, but only because of the actions I have taken myself there.* There, I have a good feeling; I pray, I listen to music. *I like it because we have been organising barbecues there; I have called my friends there. We brought life to that place. Because it is actually usually pretty empty; nobody uses it. I like that we have kind of combatted the emptiness. We kind of brought in the action there*.

*I haven’t set my roots yet. I have only been here for four months, but I haven’t really met the locals; I haven’t really gotten to know the place itself truly (…) I go to the förskola [open day-care], but mostly for my daughter. (…) I would probably prefer it if there were some other kinds of Swedish courses. But unfortunately, in this place, there are no other options. The ABF programme here was closed.*

*I tried very hard in the past to have a good life. I went to university, I worked a lot. (…) When I came to Sweden, I had to abandon everything, and my quality of life dropped significantly. I want to work, but I cannot do that for now because I don’t have a permit. (…) For now, I am trying to help other people for now as much as I can. For example, I have some clothes that I don’t really need, and I give them away. But I can’t contribute more. I can’t go to work.*

*Here, you either go to the förskola or you just have to stay home, maybe go to the forest. No other options. (…) I want to draw or paint, go to master classes. Maybe open a master class myself!* Maybe one day I will be referenced as the “superstar” of “Swedish painters”.

# Article II

# Interlude

Collage 8 by a study circle participant, 2024. Anonymised by author.

*Collage by a study circle participant, 2024*
*Narrative written based on collage workshop discussions*

*One woman arrives later at the activity. She sits down next to another participant and looks curiously at the papers spread across the table. She wants to participate, but the question "how do you experience the study circle?" does not make sense for her, because it is her first time participating in the activities at ABF. Instead, I ask her what she hopes the activities will be like. This is her response:*

"I want to meet new people, interact, and maybe learn new things. I want to learn about the culture. Have some fun and enjoy. Maybe learn a bit. A fun activity would be to do something different, like drawing."

*When I come back to her, her poster is titled "What it feels like being in summer". It is October; she arrived two months ago, so the activities on the collage are a projection of what she hopes summer in Sweden to be like and listing things she has never done yet: Hiking, camping, climbing.*

"My first two months have been a little hard. Meeting new people. There are new ways of doing things. Migration. But we learn by going through difficult things. It is difficult, but that's how you learn."

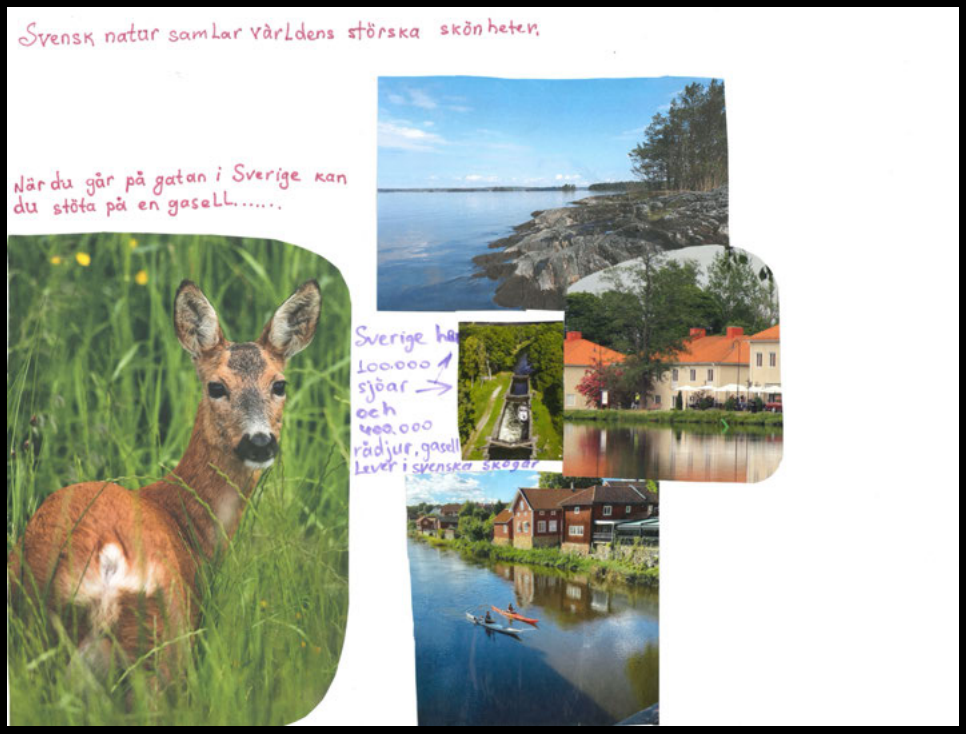
"I want to learn about Sweden. How to interact with people. There is no way to do that here. Here, we are always inside in the shelter, sleeping all the time. Now we only have activities once a week. It would be better if we would have more interactions. It is hard to interact. We only interact with other asylum seekers. But we all think alike. We are all enslaved. To learn how they do things, you need to interact. You cannot know if they are good or bad people because we are only meeting with other Africans.

In Stockholm, there are other activities, like cooking, but we cannot go to Stockholm, and such activities do not exist here. Here, I swim and go to the gym. RFSL pays for that. But we need to interact; these are things you do alone; you do not interact in the gym or the pool. I want to go to the theatre, watch a movie, do activities in the community.

We want to come out and show who we are instead of living in hiding."

# Article III

# Interlude




Collage 9 by a study circle participant, 2023.

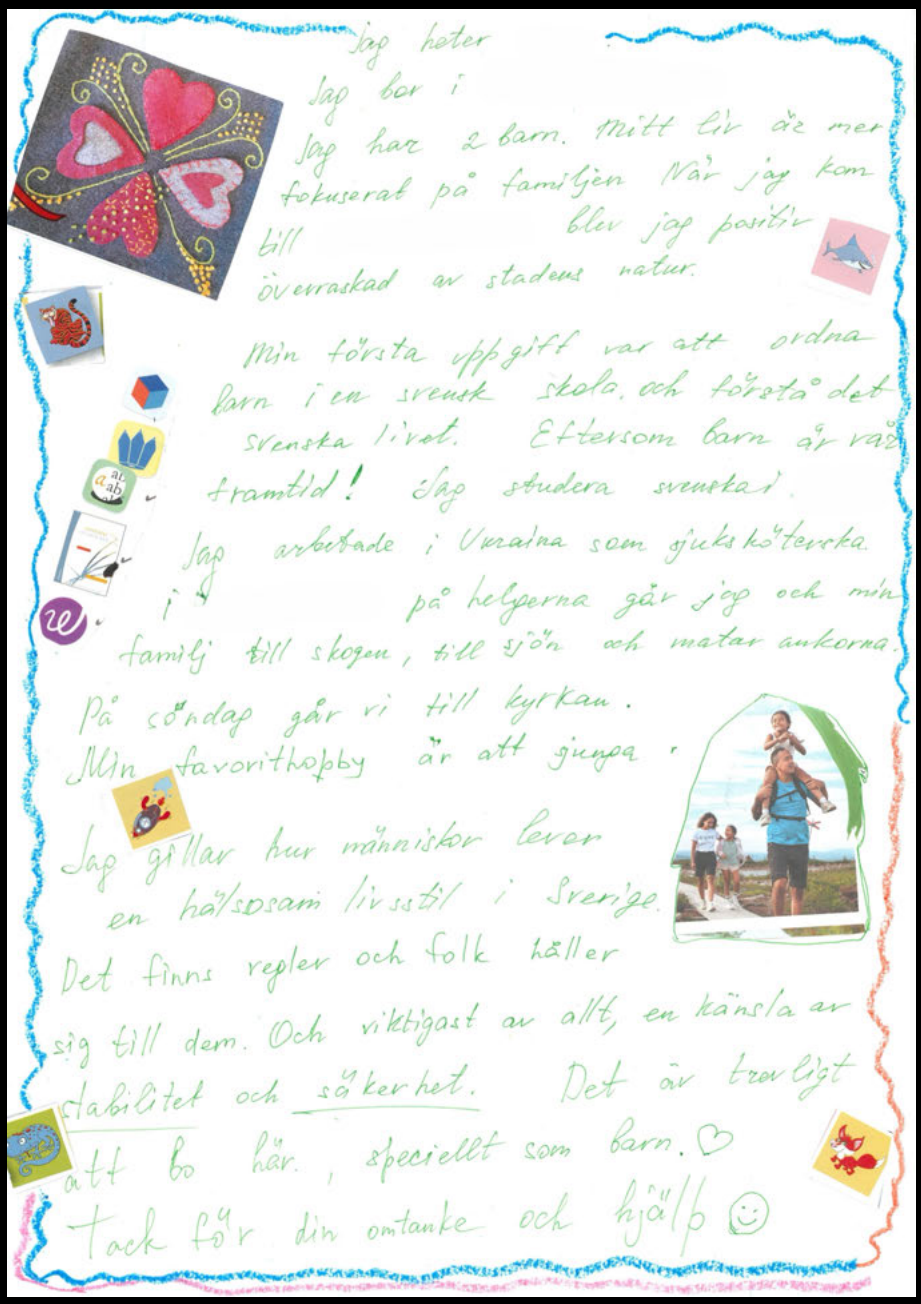
*Collage by a study circle participant, 2023*
*Narrative written based on collage workshop discussions*

I wanted to make a poster about Swedish nature. I love Swedish nature a lot. The forest, the lake, the animals. My phone is full of pictures I took of Swedish nature. The first time I went to the lake here in town, I thought, "wow". It was winter, and I went there with [name], my neighbour. The snow was 25 or even 30 centimetres thick. We could walk on the ice. Cars were even driving on the ice! Cars drove on it!

I am from Azerbaijan, where the nature is nice, but it is always very warm. I don't like it too hot, but in my home country, it is never cold. The water never turns into snow. It was so special when I saw that the first time.

Previously I lived in Stockholm; Stockholm is also nice. There are many nice places, restaurants, shops. I was looking to buy a charger for months, and I couldn't find it. I went to visit some Azerbaijani friends in Stockholm, and I found a charger in one second! But so many people! And the nature there is not as nice. So, there are advantages and disadvantages.

The nature here is really nice. I go out every day, maybe not always for long or not very far. But every time friends visit; we go to the lake. Apart from those friends in Stockholm, I don't really have friends here. I talk to everyone, but I only have one friend here. Everyone is much older, and they are the same age. Except [name], and a Russian-speaking woman. We are friends.




Collage 10 by a study circle participant, 2023. Anonymised by author.

*Collage by a study circle participant, 2023*
*Narrative based on translation collage and follow-up interview*

My name is […]. I live in [name town]. I have two children.

My life is mostly focused on my family. When I came here, I was positively surprised by the nature of the city. My first assignment was to enrol my children in a Swedish school and [for me and my children to] understand Swedish life [how people live, eat, celebrate]. Because children are our future.

I study Swedish [at SFI and SFA]. [I am still a student, and I cannot speak Swedish very well. But I am interested to see and understand Sweden. And I want to work as an assistant nurse in the future]. I worked in Ukraine as a nurse. [But I am not looking for a job right now because I am still studying and I do not know enough Swedish. But I am not a fast student because I am helping my children with their school, both in Sweden and Ukraine. If we would learn Swedish, it would be easier to find a job. I need the language to start a job. I worked for 20 years without a break. I miss my job a little bit. But I understand that I cannot be hired without Swedish. … And to learn Swedish will take a lot of time with my brain. I am stressed because of what is happening in Ukraine.]

Here, on the weekends, I and my family, we go to the forest and feed the ducks. On Sundays, [once a month], we go to the church. [There we made some Swedish friends]. [We go there to learn Swedish at the *språkcafé*. It is an important place, because it is a cultural place. A place where you can get to learn Swedish culture and meet people from different cultures, Afghanistan, Somalia, Africa, ...] My favourite hobby is to sing.

I love how people live a healthy lifestyle in Sweden. There are rules, and people follow them. And most important of all, a feeling of stability and security. [I feel that me and my family are secure here. That it is calm. I have everything to live here and be happy.] It is lovely to live here, especially as a child.

# Article IV

# Interlude

Collage 11 by a study circle participant, 2024. Anonymised by author.

*Collage by study circle participant, 2024*
*Narrative written based on collage workshop discussions*

My first poster includes the two study circle leaders. And the group is us, asylum seekers from Africa. The car is ABF. It is supporting LGBTQ. The Swish is because I want the government to support this activity and have more activities for asylum seekers. ABF is the vehicle. They are good teachers. They are helping asylum seekers.

My second poster is about the current deportation of LGBTQ people by the government, who control the deportation. With RFSL, we are organising demonstrations in Sweden to send a message to the government that what they are doing is illegal. They are murdering people. Here we live freely, but when we are going back, LGBTQ people can be jailed or killed.

So, my message to the government is to stop the deportation. There is no pride in a detention centre. We are not here in Sweden for Swedish fika or kronor. We are here for the freedom of speech and expression.

Next month, we are organising protests. We got a warrant to demonstrate. The idea came from us, and then RFSL accepted.

We are protesting the current political atmosphere and people being deported. This will be my first protest. In my country, you cannot demonstrate. You will be attacked. Here, there is freedom of picketing and demonstrating. Here, the police accepted.

I am excited. At least I will be able to express my feelings without the fear that someone will judge me. I also hope that the government stops mass deportations. Especially of LGBTQ people who will face prosecution and difficult times.

# 7. Concluding discussion

## Spaces of folkbildning as spaces of solidarit*ies*

This thesis opened with an interlude featuring a collage by a participant in an ABF-organised study circle, "Swedish from day one" (Collage 1). The collage was created during the first collage workshop organised within this research, held immediately after the Swedish government announced the suspension of funding for targeted folkbildning activities for asylum seekers. Through the collage, the maker described the importance of folkbildning as spaces of solidarity with asylum seekers, particularly queer asylum seekers, in Sweden. The accompanying narrative highlights how she experienced spaces of folkbildning solidarities as enabled top-down, through state funding and study circle leaders' personal involvement. Concretely, state funding enabled study associations to create safe spaces for people who experienced forced migration and homophobia and who face the consequences of increasingly restrictive migration politics in their everyday lives. Additionally, she positioned the study circle leader as an important actor of solidarity, transforming spaces into welcoming spaces, acting as a "mentor", and attending to people's individual needs and emotions. For the maker of the collage, the end of the budget has meant the end of this solidarity space, leaving her feeling as though she has lost perspective while she awaits a decision on her asylum application.

The collage introduced prior to this concluding chapter (Collage 11) was created by a participant during a workshop organised at the end of the data collection process. By then, targeted study circles had ended, but because asylum seekers remained, ABF continued organising activities for them in that municipality, relying on volunteers and internal budgets. The accompanying narrative to Collage 11 describes not only how solidarities involve the provision of language classes or civic education by study associations and through state funding, but also points to more political and contentious practices that contest the lack of institutional state solidarity in funding study circles and the lack of protection for LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers.

Folkbildning solidarities, as both collages indicate, include practices such as creating safe spaces, protecting migrant and LGBTQIA+ rights, and fostering relations not only among study circle participants but also between longer-settled residents and newly arrived asylum seekers or refugees. Consequently, folkbildning solidarities contribute to the development of new political subjectivities that enable people to assert their presence and leave their (political) mark on the local or national community, irrespective of their legal status or prospects of staying in Sweden or in that municipality. In other words, solidarity is not only practised by study associations or other civil society organisations, but asylum seekers themselves are also solidarity actors who produce and transform spaces of solidarities. For example, Collage 11 highlights how asylum seekers are positioned as solidarity actors who protest the Swedish deportation regime and bring together intersecting struggles within spaces of folkbildning, including the defunding of folkbildning and the protection of migrant and LGBTQIA+ rights.

The collages and narratives in this thesis point to a central conclusion: solidarity is neither a singular nor an individual act. It is practised in different spaces, at different times, by and among different actors, and produces various outcomes. Consequently, it would be inaccurate to define solidarity with a single definition or to assume a pre-defined outcome. In this thesis, I have therefore conceptualised solidarity as a socio-spatial practice that is contingent on social relations, space, and time, while also constructive of them. This work has been inspired by geographical scholarship, such as Brown and Yaffe (2014), which defines solidarity as multi-scalar practices. Concretely, solidarities rely on and give shape to relations, networks, and resources that transcend the physical place where solidarities take place and "seek to intervene at more than one scale simultaneously" (p. 38). Similarly, I have shown that folkbildning solidarities rely on multiple sources, including people's translocal social networks, biographical experiences, folkbildning histories, and different funding streams, while also acknowledging how folkbildning solidarities impact relations within and beyond the study circle, for example, by shaping how people travel, experience a sense of belonging, or participate in and across various places at multiple scales, including the local association, the municipal, the national, the international, or diasporic communities.

In sum, folkbildning solidarities are multiple and should be understood as such. This includes, first of all, recognising their multiple practices, ranging from more humanitarian forms of material assistance to more intimate forms of emotional support, or political practices such as mobilising for protests.

Second, folkbildning solidarities include multiple actors who have different understandings of what solidarity is, how it should be practised, where, and with whom. While previous solidarity scholarship has analysed that the meanings, practices, and outcomes of solidarities are multiple and contested between the various actors involved, in this thesis, I have argued that spatialities of solidarities also matter, as they are multiple as well. Different spatialities of solidarity, taking place in and shaping absolute, relative, and relational spaces, coexist, overlap, reinforce, or contradict one another.

## The spatialities of folkbildning solidarities

In this thesis, I went beyond an understanding of folkbildning as merely an educational practice by exploring it as a space that is produced, reproduced, contested, and transformed through different representations, experiences, perceptions, and imaginations of what folkbildning for asylum seekers is or should be. This brings me to the first research question answered in this thesis:

> *Research question 1: How are spaces of folkbildning produced as spaces of solidarity? How are different spatialities co-constitutive of practices of solidarity with people in the asylum process?*

Building on Harvey and Lefebvre's theories of space, Article III argues that spaces of folkbildning should be understood as simultaneously absolute, relative, and relational, produced through formal representations, spatial practices, and people's lived experiences or imaginations. Contributing to previous research on migrant solidarities, like that of Agustín and Jørgensen (2019), which highlights the co-constitution of space and solidarity, I have shown how different spatialities shape different practices of solidarity, and vice versa.

First, absolute spatialities emerged across the data, which understand folkbildning as fragmented spaces, consisting of different, physical, and unique locations where folkbildning solidarities are practised, with each location associated with different practices. Additionally, multiple respondents referred to spaces of folkbildning as bounded classroom spaces, where neutral learning takes place and politics are kept outside. Such absolute folkbildning solidarities align with more one-way or assimilationist integration policies, discourses, and practices in which study circle leaders are positioned as teachers or moral educators on Swedish language, practices, and norms.

Second, relative spatialities, which understand space as composed of relations among people, places, and organisations, also produce particular folkbildning solidarities. For example, relative understandings of folkbildning as a network of organisations sharing the commonality of being different from formal education informed practices and outcomes such as democratic decision-making and the fostering of relations among study circle participants (cf. Article III). Additionally, understandings of rural spaces as relatively different from urban spaces (cf. Article IV) shaped particular rural practices of folkbildning solidarities, such as organising excursions or offering transportation tickets that improve people's mobility within rural regions. Inversely, rural practices of folkbildning solidarities were also generative of relative spatialities. Folkbildning solidarities were productive of relations between people, places and organisations, and the establishment of an inter-organisational cooperative network constitutes a clear example.

Third, a relational spatiality conceptualises spaces of folkbildning as diverse, open-ended, and constantly changing meeting spaces. They are constantly reshaped and transformed through the multi-scalar networks of people, places, relations, histories, material infrastructures, and so on coming together in the "here and now". Relational spaces of folkbildning are co-constitutive of folkbildning solidarities. This includes practices that centre on the importance of establishing personal and emotional relations and consider folkbildning solidarities as flexible and adaptable to people's different skills, needs, and interests, as well as to the geographical or political contexts. These relational, interpersonal, and adaptable practices of solidarities cannot be understood as isolated from people's biographical experiences or personal aspirations, folkbildning's historical tradition of emancipatory education, the (inter)national political context, geopolitical conflicts, migration policies, asylum accommodation(s), and the local context. This includes the physical and natural environment, the municipal context, the asylum accommodation, or other civil society organisations.

In conclusion, by exploring how spaces of folkbildning are produced as spaces of solidarity, this thesis contributes to folkbildning research scholarship with a spatial analysis of folkbildning and to geographical solidarity scholarship by highlighting how different spatialities relate to different solidarities. While geographies of solidarity conceptualise solidarities as relational practices, shaped by and giving shape to relational spaces, this research expands such analyses by exploring how, alongside producing relational spaces, different practices of solidarity *also* give shape to absolute and relative

spaces. Consequently, while relational geographical scholarship has argued that solidarities are place-based but not place-bound, this research has shown how solidarities are also place-bound, practised within, shaped by, and (re)productive of absolute spaces, such as the study association premises.

In addition to analysing the production of spaces of folkbildning solidarities through different spatialities, the research also shows how they relate to other spaces, such as national and rural spaces, which should equally be understood through different spatialities. Throughout the articles, I discussed how folkbildning solidarities relate to discourses and practices concerning the inclusion of people in national spaces, among other things. Identifying the connection between solidarity and national spaces is not new. In earlier chapters, I mentioned how previous solidarity scholarship conceptualised solidarities as tied to national membership or how contemporary research on migrant solidarities explores how solidarity practices transform notions of inclusion and belonging beyond national citizenship status. However, as Grip (2020) has also shown, a spatial analysis highlights how folkbildning solidarities not only transform but also (re)produce absolute notions of the Swedish national space as bounded with identifiable in- and outsiders, with integration as the process of entering that containerised space.

## Rural folkbildning solidarities

Apart from exploring the interrelation between solidarities and national space, the thesis has also contributed to research on folkbildning and migrant solidarities, which have overlooked the role of rural space, by asking the following question:

> *Research question 2: How are folkbildning solidarities shaped by and shaping ruralities?*

Ruralities matter because they shape how folkbildning solidarities are practised, and, inversely, folkbildning solidarities also shape and transform how people understand ruralities. First, asylum and reception policies influenced where folkbildning solidarities took place. While at the start of this research, people were still disproportionately settled in small and rural towns because of material realities (e.g., access to housing) and formal representations of rural areas as spaces where folkbildning actors are socially and geographically closer to the inhabitants, asylum accommodation policies changed throughout

the research as people were increasingly resettled closer to SMA facilities, leading circles in smaller localities to be ended or relocated. Study associations' engagement with people in the asylum process mirrored these policy changes: initially, folkbildning took place in smaller localities, but over time, activities were discontinued and concentrated in the larger municipalities where people were relocated.

Second, the rural context shapes people's experiences of folkbildning and, consequently, how folkbildning solidarities are practised with asylum seekers. For example, limited access to public transportation makes mobility a central issue in the practices of folkbildning solidarities. These practices include study associations organising activities close to accommodation centres, offering bus tickets or rides, and arranging activities that improved what Wimark (2020) has called people's "mobility capital", such as neighbourhood walks, driving theory, or bicycle courses. Conversely, folkbildning solidarities also shaped experiences of ruralities, as participants' experiences of living in smaller cities and towns changed as they got to know the town and other residents through study circles.

Bringing Articles III and IV into conversation with one another and understanding the co-constitution of folkbildning and ruralities through Harvey's (2006, 2009) absolute, relative, and relational dimensions of space contribute to rural analyses of solidarities. First, rural spaces were produced as relative spaces in the sense that they were considered relatively different from, though interconnected with, urban spaces. Additionally, in line with Harvey's focus on mobility within relative space, different people had different experiences of mobility depending on their particular positionalities, shaped by, amongst others, class, gender, and sexuality. For people awaiting a decision on their asylum applications, experiences of rural living were characterised by both mobility and immobility. People were often relocated across the country or region, but experienced their personal mobility to be restricted within the municipality. Such experiences of immobility shaped asylum seekers' mobility within spaces of folkbildning as people participated in multiple associations. This led to the production of relative spaces of folkbildning, in which different places became interrelated, and organisations began to coordinate and cooperate. Consequently, folkbildning solidarities were not only directed towards people in the asylum process, but also between organisations as they coordinated their activities, shared information and recommendations about funding applications or local migration dynamics, and sometimes organised activities collaboratively. Finally, experiences of rurality, as characterised by

geographical and social proximity, also informed folkbildning solidarities; for example, leaders recruited participants by knocking on people's doors, and participants informed fellow residents or newly arrived residents about upcoming and ongoing activities.

Second, a relational spatiality sheds a different light on the interrelation between rural spaces and spaces of folkbildning solidarities. Applying Harvey's (2006, 2009) definition of relational space as produced through relations and, consequently, of space and time as interrelated shows how people experienced rurality in relational terms and how experiences of rurality can change over time. In Article IV, for example, I discuss how rural folkbildning solidarities, including practices focused on going out to get to know the local municipality or its natural surroundings, affect people's sense of belonging and their experiences of rural space. Such practices contest the notion that folkbildning solidarities take place in bounded classroom spaces and instead consider how spaces of folkbildning solidarities are inseparable from the rural context and the different experiences, challenges, and interests that participants bring to the study circle.

Despite relational spatialities opposing absolute spatialities, absolute understandings of rural space also emerged in the data, highlighting how spaces of folkbildning are contested spaces, with overlapping and conflicting spatialities. In this thesis, I have defined how absolute spatialities conceptualise rural space as something "fixed and immovable" (Harvey, 2009, p. 134). The data reveal how rurality was constructed as a physical and unchanging background, inherently Swedish, and synonymous with nature and outdoor life. This reproduces rural space as a fixed thing "out there" to which people in the asylum process could and should be introduced, either through excursions or by learning inside about Swedish social or outdoor life through, for example, presentations and slideshows. This places people in the asylum process in what Osman (2013) has called a "deficit position", not only lacking skills in the Swedish language and values, but also in Swedish outdoor practices.

Bringing Articles I and IV into conversation with each other shows how folkbildning solidarities also reproduce absolute national spaces. In these spaces, Sweden and Swedishness are described as fixed and exceptional. While Grip (2010, 2020) has discussed how gender equality is central to the production of a Swedish space that is differentiated from culturally distant and different "others", Article IV also indicates how particular understandings of Swedes are produced as more interested in, accustomed to, and more respectful of nature than people from other countries and cultures. Outdoor life was

presented as something which should be enjoyed. Asylum seekers, who come from non-European backgrounds, were to be taught how to enjoy and respect nature. In line with discussions on paternalistic and maternalistic tendencies of migrant solidarities in Article I, educating migrants about Swedish nature and particular Swedish rural practices and routines is not merely a moralistic discourse and practice. It also carries nationalistic and culturally racist undertones, which essentialise cultural differences.

In conclusion, exploring how space and solidarity are co-constitutive also requires analysing the specific context in which solidarities are practised and how they shape and are shaped by it. A rural perspective contributes to solidarity scholarship by highlighting how rural contexts shape particular practices of folkbildning solidarities and the challenges and opportunities migrant solidarities in rural areas face. Additionally, rural practices of solidarities produce different ruralities that align with, reproduce, and transform existing relations, subjectivities, and normative or expected usages of spaces.

## Contested folkbildning solidarities

In this thesis, I have built on a definition of space not as neutral or uniformly experienced, but as shaped by and shaping social practices embedded in unequal power relations that are both reproduced, left unquestioned, and contested or transformed in the process of (re)producing spaces. Similarly, solidarity scholarship highlights that solidarities do not occur in a void but are embedded in and reproductive of uneven geographies of power. In an attempt to contribute to these discussions and explore how power relations intersect with folkbildning practices, this thesis has answered the following question:

> *Research question 3: How do folkbildning solidarities reproduce and challenge power asymmetries?*

While previous research on folkbildning has considered how folkbildning practices and discourses can position people in the asylum process as lacking skills or knowledge of the Swedish language and particular Swedish norms or practices, this research contributes to such critical analyses by adopting an intersectional analysis of folkbildning practices. This understanding considers differences based on, among others, citizenship status, race, class, religion, sexuality, gender, age, and educational or professional background.

The recognition of difference and power relations recurs across the articles as I explore how power asymmetries are reproduced in and through the study circle encounters (cf. Article I), and how differently positioned actors have different understandings and experiences of space, which are related to different practices of solidarity (cf. Articles III and IV). For example, in Article I, I observed a gendered division of labour, as volunteers were often older, white, female, longer-settled residents who took on more intimate, caring, and personal tasks. Article I also critically analyses how perceived differences in gender, race, age, religion, and family status shape relations and intersections between longer-settled volunteers and participants in the asylum process. On the one hand, practices of care and closeness highlight the political potential of folkbildning solidarities to foster the development of personal and intimate relations across differences, for example, in citizenship. On the other hand, as Braun (2017) also notes, the research indicates that intimacy, care, and closeness co-exist with and reproduce hierarchical relations in which volunteers are positioned as older, more experienced caretakers or moral educators who educate newcomers—particularly single men, Muslims, or people racialised as different—on Swedish norms and values, particularly gender equality, family relations, and sexuality.

In addition to exploring interactions between study circle leaders and participants, I also identify asymmetrical relations among participants. Some participants described how groups formed among those who spoke the same language, lived in the same place, or participated in the same study circle activities. In the methodology chapter, I also discuss how group dynamics among study circle participants shaped research encounters, as in the collage workshops.

An intersectional analysis of folkbildning solidarities also shows how differentiations were produced between different groups of immigrants. Article I discusses how some volunteers framed certain cultures and religions as backwards compared to an exceptional image of Sweden and how Ukrainian refugees were constructed as different from "other" asylum seekers. Similar dynamics appear in Article III, where I argue that states' "selective" (Paré, 2022) and "racialised solidarities" (Hooker, 2009), with different rules and funding for Ukrainian refugees, led to the creation of separate activities for different immigrant groups.

However, folkbildning solidarities do not inevitably reproduce such exclusionary, racialised, or selective solidarities. For example, while state funding came with conditions regarding the target population or outcomes of such practices, in multiple instances, study circle leaders and folkbildning

employees highlighted that they approached state funding flexibly, adapting the activity content or expanding the target population to meet the needs of individuals. In other instances, the creation of separate or exclusionary activities should be understood as a practice of solidarity that enabled the creation of a safe space, as was the case, for example, for LGBTQIA+ participants (cf. Article III). These findings suggest a queer analytical direction for further exploration. Given that participants identifying as LGBTQIA+ often mentioned restricted access to particular activities and requested separate activities, and that previous research indicates they have experienced being settled in rural areas differently (Wimark, 2020, 2021b, 2021a), exploring folkbildning solidarities through a queer lens would deepen an understanding of the spatialities of solidarities and their—possibly ambivalent—outcomes.

Finally, power also operates at a more structural level. A red thread throughout the articles concerns the role of state policies and funding in shaping the scope, place, target population, and outcomes of folkbildning solidarities with people in the asylum process. Building on Agustín and Jørgensen (2019), I have defined folkbildning solidarities as practices of "civic solidarities" that both depend on and contest state policies and discourses. While folkbildning emerged as an alternative to formal education and in opposition to the political exclusion of the popular masses, it also developed into an institutionalised phenomenon that is highly intertwined with government policies, support, and funding (cf. Berg & Edquist, 2017; Laginder et al., 2013; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). Folkbildning solidarities with people in the asylum process should be understood within such a historically produced, contentious relationship with state institutions, in which folkbildning occupies a contentious position towards state policies and discourses.

While state funding and integration policies shape how folkbildning with immigrants is supposed to occur, this does not mean that study circles inherently or only act as the "extended arm of the state" (Osman, 2013). Practices of folkbildning solidarity are complex. They can reproduce exclusionary state policies or leave them unquestioned, while simultaneously filling gaps in social and educational support, out of the conviction that people in Sweden deserve to be included and to participate in the local community, regardless of their citizenship or residence status. Folkbildning solidarities do not exist outside the state and institutional solidarities, but are practised in the productive tension between state governance and resistance. Despite their dependence on state support, the political significance of folkbildning solidarities lies in the contestation and flexible transformation of state-imposed restrictions into

practices of participation, redistribution and belonging beyond the boundaries of formal citizenship.

## Researching (in) solidarity

Power relations operate in complex and intersecting ways. In this thesis, I have explored how folkbildning solidarities simultaneously both reproduce and transform, question, and counter structural inequalities. Starting from the assumption that no relation is free from power, I have argued that it is important to critically examine how folkbildning solidarities, despite good intentions and the importance of folkbildning for people during the asylum process and beyond, are embedded in structural hierarchies.

Building on previous research and my own findings, which show that folkbildning solidarities also reproduce one-directional learning processes, in contrast to the more experience-driven and horizontal pedagogy of folkbildning (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017; Nordvall et al., 2018; Osman, 2013), I have explored how folkbildning practices can be transformed and adapted to include participants' experiences and create more reciprocal and dialogic learning processes.

However, not only are folkbildning solidarities embedded in power relations, but research relations are as well. Both folkbildning and participatory research aim to expose and contest hierarchical and exclusionary relations shaping processes of knowledge production. As several of the authors mentioned earlier in this thesis have pointed out, folkbildning's pedagogy centres on horizontal, participatory, and dialogic learning and values learning from experience rather than top-down imposed curricula. Similarly, participatory methodologies consider how knowledge production is embedded in power asymmetries, which they aim to contest by incorporating new perspectives, introducing methods that involve participants in the process of knowledge production, and embracing personal experiences and the plurality and situatedness of knowledge and experience.

My own research encounters were also informed by hierarchies that shifted with the context. For example, being an English-speaking researcher employed at Uppsala University positioned me as an outsider to the associations. Additionally, my whiteness, language skills, and citizenship status set me apart from participants in the asylum process, leading me to experience that study circle leaders and participants sometimes approached me as a co-leader. Different literacy levels, language skills, and temporary residence statuses

also constituted barriers for participants in the asylum process. Faced with challenges such as language barriers, participant turnover, and constantly changing fieldwork conditions, I experimented with methods to improve participant inclusion. Realising that circle leaders were experiencing similar challenges in conducting participatory study circles, this research answered the following question:

> *Research question 4: How can study circle methods be aligned with participatory research methods to foster the inclusion of the lived experiences of participants in the asylum process, both in research and folkbildning practice?*

Building on the introduction of two methods (collages and card-based discussions), I conclude that one way to align study circles with participatory research methods is to centre dialogue, creativity, and flexibility in processes of knowledge production. First, dialogue enabled learning processes that emerged from sharing and learning from different lived experiences. This dynamic contrasts with approaches that hold differences at a distance or "outside" in favour of neutral and conflict-free learning spaces and processes. However, creating space for discussion also poses challenges in how to translate the learning outcomes of different experiences into (study circle) practice(s), and the research encounters have also indicated that group discussions and dynamics can lead to tension and discomfort when two participants have opposing or contradictory experiences and opinions.

Second, creativity can be unlocked through methods that foster dialogue beyond (only) verbal expressions by embracing visual and embodied knowledge. This allows for new perspectives and experiences to be included despite language barriers. The methods centre on lived experiences and avoid consensus-making or majority decision-making, instead focusing on dialogue across differences. Concretely, the collages created space for people to express different experiences and expectations, which sometimes led to friction but also understanding among workshop participants. By creating a horizontal environment in which leaders were invited to participate as equals, the collages also allowed study circle leaders to share their experiences, doubts, and vulnerabilities.

Third, flexibility means being cognisant, reflexive, and responsive to participants' differential interests, needs, and skills, rather than applying a uniform method or approach. In other words, the methods proposed in this research are not catch-all solutions, and challenges persist. While collage

workshops were relevant in some instances, they also reinforced barriers to participation. Not everyone might feel comfortable crafting, and language differences challenge follow-up discussions. Further exploration of the possibilities and limits of different research and pedagogical methods, and of how they foster reciprocal learning in multilingual study circle settings, would therefore contribute to folkbildning research and practice. Finally, flexibility also encompasses the challenges posed by institutional contexts that both enable and constrain participatory practices in research and folkbildning practices, such as time and financial resources, guidelines, ethical frameworks, and academic writing outlets. The challenge and opportunity lie in further exploring how participation is fostered within and beyond institutional frameworks and funders' guidelines.

In conclusion, the use of creative and participatory methods complemented individual and group interviews by creating space for emotional and visual expressions of people's experiences and aspirations, and for exploring similarities and differences between participants' experiences and expectations. By exploring research methods that enable dialogue, creativity, and flexibility, the research is productively aligned with folkbildning's horizontal and participatory pedagogy. Consequently, the research shows how solidarity research can make both methodological and practical contributions by exploring ways to move beyond observation and analysis to also support solidarity practices.

## Looking back and looking forward

If there is one thing to remember from this thesis, it is that space matters for practising and theorising solidarity. Space is not a neutral backdrop to solidarities; rather, space and its uneven power geometries are constitutive of solidarities and their outcomes. Understanding solidarities spatially requires not only understanding the context, existing power relations, and social, political, and economic structures, but also analysing how space shapes who practises solidarity with whom, where, and how, and which spaces are produced, imagined, transformed or contested in the process. In the contemporary Swedish and European political context—characterised by austerity policies, the erosion of universal welfare services, increased marketisation of public services, defunding of (popular) education, an increasing focus on border securitisation and externalisation, temporary and conditional access to rights, and the criminalisation of migrant and migrant solidarities—practices of solidarity and

their spatial (re)imaginations become increasingly central and politically necessary. Folkbildning, with its historical role in political struggles related to access to education, culture, and political participation, can, in particular, be an important actor supporting people formally excluded from these arenas.

Folkbildning has historically occupied a contentious and ambivalent position towards the state, an in-between position which becomes increasingly important to reflect upon in the contemporary political context. The changing dependence on state funding—simultaneously characterised by general defunding and more short-term, project-based funding—does not lead to straightforward patterns of de- or re-politicising solidarities, in which folkbildning solidarities become more or less oppositional to exclusionary state policies and discourses. While some organisations continued offering activities after the subsidies ran out, many study circles were discontinued.

Additionally, while some organisations highlighted the need to find alternative funding or remain flexible with commissioned funding, two folkbildning actors also mentioned in the interviews the possibilities for folkbildning to help people prepare for the (then upcoming) citizenship tests, which were symbolically introduced on the 6th of July 2026, Sweden's national day. Folkbildning's flexible practices align with relational, open-ended, and transformative solidarities, adapting to changing contexts and participant populations. However, such anecdotal projections of the future purpose of folkbildning for asylum seekers also point to the possibilities of folkbildning solidarities to function, as Osman (2013) warns, as the "extended arm of the state" (p. 154), reproducing or leaving unquestioned the outsourcing of social responsibilities to civil society and increasingly restrictive, selective, racialised, conditional, and exclusionary asylum, migration, and integration policies.

To maintain their contentious character and avoid becoming fully interwoven with and dependent on state policies, folkbildning solidarities will need to continue questioning, countering, and critiquing the contemporary exclusionary policies and practices they respond to and that shape their engagement. Such political solidarities do not erase or revoke differences but instead acknowledge and work with people's different positionalities and lived experiences. In doing so, folkbildning solidarities can contribute to the production of more just and equal societies in which longer-settled residents and newcomers build shared futures, departing from encounters in the "here and now".

Building "solid" and sustainable networks, relations, and practices of political solidarities will have to include the people affected by different types of solidarity, or the absences thereof. By including people in the asylum

process as active agents not only in receiving but also in practising solidarities, political solidarities can be fostered for, with, and by people in the asylum process, or without a residence permit or citizenship status.

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# Appendices

## Appendix I: Overview research participants

| Pseudo-nym | Role[14] | | | Gender | Region Of Origin[15] | Type of data collection [16] | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | P | L | E | | | O | INT | FG | C |
| Adil | X | | | Male | East-Africa | X | X | X | X |
| Akida | X | | | Female | Middle Africa | | | | X |
| Albert | | | X | Male | Northern Europe | | | X | |
| Albin | | | X | Male | Northern Europe | | X | X | |
| Alina | X | | X | Female | Eastern Europe | X | X | | |
| Amir | X | | | Male | Southern Asia | | | | X |
| Andrey | X | | | Male | Eastern Europe | | | | X |
| Aruzhan | X | | | Female | Western Asia | X | | | X |
| Asmayra | | X | X | Female | Western Asia | X | X | | |
| Ayoub | X | | | Male | Southern Asia | | | | X |
| Bacia | X | | | Female | Eastern Africa | X | | | X |
| Bilen | X | | | Female | Eastern Africa | | | | X |

[14] P = study circle participants; L = study circle leader (paid or voluntary); E = employed by a study association, a folkbildning institution (*Folkbildningsrådet* or *Studieförbunden*), or the respective civil society organisation. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, I have decided not to link individual participants to their respective organisations.
[15] Based on UN Statistics Division's Geographical Regions.
[16] O = observation; INT = individual interview; FG = focus group interview; C = collage workshop. Participants included only through observations were not presented in this overview.

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Carl | | X | | Male | Northern Europe | X | X | X | X |
| Celeste | X | | | Female | Eastern Africa | | | | X |
| Christopher | X | | | Male | Western Africa | X | X | | X |
| Daisy | X | | | Female | Eastern African | | | | X |
| Daniela | X | | | Female | Eastern Europe | | | | X |
| Darna | X | | | Female | South-Eastern Asia | | | | X |
| Davit | X | | | Males | Western Asia | X | | | X |
| Delara | X | | | Female | Southern Asia | X | | | X |
| Deniz | X | | | Non-Binary | Western Asia | X | X | | X |
| Derya | X | | | Female | Western Asia | | | | X |
| Diana | | X | X | Female | Southern Asia | X | X | | |
| Elena | X | | | Female | Eastern Europe | X | X | | X |
| Elsa | | | X | Female | Northern Europe | X | | X | |
| Elyas | X | | | Male | Western Asia | X | X | | |
| Emmanuel | X | X | | Male | Middle Africa | X | X | | X |
| Esther | X | | | Female | Eastern Africa | X | X | | X |
| Faiza | X | | | Female | Eastern Africa | X | | | X |
| Femi | X | | | Female | Eastern Africa | | | | X |
| Flora | X | | | Female | Eastern Europe | X | X | | X |
| Genet | X | | | Female | Eastern Africa | | | | X |
| Gloria | X | | | Female | Eastern Africa | X | X | | |
| Grace | X | | | Female | Western Africa | X | X | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hannah | | X | | Female | Northern Europe | X | X | | X |
| Hannes | | X | X | Male | Northern Europe | X | X | | |
| Hawa | X | | | Female | Southern Asia | X | | | X |
| Hawwa | X | | | Male | Eastern Africa | X | | | X |
| Heydar | X | | | Male | Southern Asia | X | X | | X |
| Hilda | | X | | Female | Northern Europe | X | | | X |
| Ida | | | X | Female | Northern Europe | X | X | | |
| Iman | X | | | Female | Southern Asia | X | | | X |
| Izabella | X | | | Female | Western Asia | X | X | | X |
| Jamila | X | | | Female | Southern Asia | X | | | X |
| Jannah | X | | | Female | Eastern Africa | | | | X |
| Jimiyu | X | | | Male | Eastern Africa | | | | X |
| Johan | | | X | Male | Northern Europe | | X | | |
| Joseph | X | | | Male | Eastern Africa | X | | X | X |
| Kalyna | X | | | Female | Eastern Europe | | | | X |
| Khalil | | | X | Male | Western Asia | X | X | X | |
| Kiara | X | | | Female | Southern Asia | | | | X |
| Lara | | X | X | Female | Western Asia | X | | X | |
| Lars | | | X | Male | Northern Europe | X | | X | |
| Leni | X | | | Female | Eastern Europe | X | | | X |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lovisa | | | X | Female | Northern Europe | X | | X | |
| Ludivine | X | | | Female | Middle Africa | X | X | | X |
| Mahdia | X | | | Female | Southern Asia | X | | | X |
| Marco | X | X | | Male | Central America | X | X | | |
| Maria | | X | | Female | Northern Europe | X | X | | |
| Marit | | | X | Female | Northern Europe | | | X | |
| Maryam | X | | | Female | Southern Asia | | | | X |
| Mathilda | | X | X | Female | Northern Europe | | X | | |
| Mebratu | X | | | Male | Eastern Africa | X | X | | |
| Mette | | X | | Female | Northern Europe | X | | X | |
| Milo | X | | | Male | Western Asia | X | | | X |
| Morten | | | X | Male | Northern Europe | X | | X | |
| Nadiya | X | | | Female | Eastern Europe | | | | X |
| Nilüfer | X | X | | Female | Western Asia | X | X | | |
| Noor | X | | | Female | Southern Asia | X | | | X |
| Nuru | X | | | Female | Eastern Africa | X | | X | X |
| Olof | | X | | Male | Northern Europe | X | X | | |
| Paul | X | | | Male | Middle Africa | X | | | X |
| Per | | | X | Male | Northern Europe | X | | | X |
| Robert | X | | | Male | Eastern Africa | X | | | X |
| Robin | | | X | Male | Northern Europe | X | | X | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Samir | | X | X | Male | Western Asia | X | X | X | |
| Selam | X | | | Male | Eastern Africa | | | | X |
| Sergiy | X | | | Male | Eastern Europe | | | | X |
| Shirin | X | | | Female | Southern Asia | X | | | X |
| Sigrid | | X | | Female | Northern Europe | X | X | | |
| Simge | X | | | Female | Western Asia | X | | | X |
| Sophia | | X | | Female | Northern Europe | X | X | | |
| Soraya | X | | | Female | Southern Asia | X | | | X |
| Svetlana | X | | | Female | Eastern Europe | | | | X |
| Tilde | | | X | Female | Northern Europe | X | | X | |
| Tobias | | | X | Male | Northern Europe | | X | | |
| Tove | | | X | Female | Northern Europe | X | | X | |
| Valeria | X | | | Female | Eastern Europe | | | | X |
| Vasyl | X | | | Male | Eastern Europe | | | | X |
| Viktoria | X | | | Female | Eastern Europe | | | | X |
| William | X | | | Male | Eastern Africa | X | X | X | X |
| Wilma | | X | | Female | Northern Europe | | X | | |
| Zara | X | | | Female | Eastern Europe | X | | | X |

# Appendix II: Interview questionnaires

## 1. Interviews with participants in the asylum process

**Introduction**

Present myself, the research, and discuss ethics and consent.

**Introduction questions**

- Personal background (e.g., age, nationality, previous education, employment, length in Sweden, places where they lived, etc)
- Role and engagement in folkbildning organisation (e.g., role, duration)
- Description of the activities offered to newcomers

**Personal questions**

Daily life and activities:

- How is living in […]?
- How does a day in your life look like?
- What places are important to you?
- What places do you often go to?
- How often and where do you participate in folkbildning?
- What do you find most difficult about your establishment in Sweden?
- What are the advantages and challenges of living in […]?

Motivation:

- Why do you participate?
- How did you hear about the organisation/activity?

**Defining questions**

If we talk about … what do you think of?

- Folkbildning / organisation / activity
- Solidarity
- Integration
- Education [(ut)bildning]

**Central questions**

About folkbildning

- What role does folkbildning play for you/newcomers in Sweden?
    - What does the study circle format contribute in comparison to other (more formal) forms of education?
    - What opportunities/challenges are there?
- What is important for you/ a newcomer to learn?
    - What is a successful outcome?
    - What makes a good education or meeting place?
- How would you organise activities/this study circle if you were to decide?

    - What would you do?
    - Where would folkbildning take place?

About the relation between folkbildning and belonging
- What is your relationship with this place (where folkbildning takes place)?
    - How do you feel in this place?
    - Are there other places you like to go to/often visit/feel safe in?
- On living in (rural) Sweden:
    - What was/is the hardest thing for you about settling in Sweden?
    - What do you think about living in the countryside?
    - What are the advantages/challenges of living in …?
    - Where would you like to live? Why?
    - What role has participating in folkbildning played for your settlement in … / Sweden?
    - What has adult education not helped you with?

**Closing questions**
- Is there anything we discussed today that you think is particularly important?
- Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important?

End the interview. Thank the respondent for their time. Repeat the information from the beginning. Read and sign the informed consent form.

## 2. Interviews with folkbildning employees and circle leaders

**Introduction**

Present myself, the research, and discuss ethics and consent.

**Introduction questions**
- Personal background (e.g., age, nationality, previous education, employment, length in Sweden, places where they lived, etc)
- Role and engagement in folkbildning organisation (e.g., role, duration)
- Description of the activities offered to newcomers

**Personal questions**

Daily life and activities:
- How does a day in your life look as a study circle leader?
- What places are important to you? Where do you often go to?
- How often and where do you participate in folkbildning?

Motivation:

- How did you become engaged as a study circle leader / within study association?
- What is the purpose of the activity?

**Defining questions**

If we talk about … what do you think of?

- Folkbildning / organisation / activity
- Solidarity
- Integration
- Education [(ut)bildning]

**Central questions**

- What role does folkbildning play for newcomers in Sweden?
    - What does the study circle format contribute in comparison to other (more formal) forms of education?
    - What opportunities/challenges are there?
- What is important for a newcomer to learn?
    - What is a successful outcome?
    - Why is the Swedish language central to the activity?
    - What does civic education [*samhällskunskap*] include?
- Where does folkbildning take place?
    - What makes a good education or meeting place?
- How do you define your engagement?
    - How would you define your role?
    - How would you describe your relation to / interactions with participants?
    - Would you define your engagement as political, solidarity, or something else?
    - How do you relate study circles' guiding principle of being free and voluntary to the activities commissioned by the government?
- How has organising study circles for newcomers impacted your engagement?

**Closing questions**

- Is there anything we discussed today that you think is particularly important?
- Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important?

End the interview. Thank the respondent for their time. Repeat the information from the beginning. Read and sign the informed consent form.

## 3. Collage workshops

**Introduction**

- Introducing the research, collage-making activity & research ethics
- Presentation round

**Guiding questions (either/or)**

- How did/do you experience the activities at [name study association/organisation]?
    - What do/have the activities mean(t) to you? Is the activity important to you? Why (not)?
- How did/do you experience living in [name municipality]/Sweden?
    - What places are (not) important to you?

**Follow-up questions on folkbildning**

- How would you describe the activity/organisation (e.g., to someone who has never been here)?
- What do you do here?
- What do you like/ not like about the activity?
- What did you learn? What did you not learn? What did you want to learn?
- What are your goals/motivation to participate?
- Are you engaged in other places? Is this place different? If so, what makes it different?
- Do you also have adult popular/public education in your country? How does it compare to what we do here?
- Did the activity play a role in your arrival/settlement in Sweden? If so, how? What has it (not) helped you with?
- How would you describe the group dynamics? How would you describe your interactions or relationships with other participants/volunteers?
- How would you describe your relation to the organisation?

**Questions for after the collage-making process**

- Ask participant to explain/describe their poster.
- What would the title of your collage be?
- If presented in group: Comparisons, themes, or differences between the multiple collages?

# Appendix III: Information letter

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## Information letter - interviews

I am Zinaïda Sluijs, a PhD student in Human Geography at Uppsala University and Educational Sciences at KU Leuven. I am conducting a research project on "folkbildning for and with newcomers in rural Sweden". I would like to ask you if you want to participate in this research project. This document will give you some information about the research and what it means to participate.

**What is the research project about and why do you want me to participate?**
The purpose of the research project is to understand what the role is of folkbildning for newcomers in rural Sweden and how it influences feelings of belonging. For this reason, I will interview both newcomers and longer settled folkbildare who live in rural towns in Sweden and who participate in folkbildning activities for newcomers. The research is part of a larger European project on "Solidarity in Diversity" (SOLiDi). The application has been reviewed and approved by the Ethical Review Authority 2023-00012-01.

**How will the research be conducted?**
I will participate in participatory observations at various folkbildning organisations, including [name organisation], from [date] until [date]. This means that I will participate in various activities (for example study circles, sports or cultural activities) and will afterwards take notes about my observations. In addition to the observations, I will conduct interviews, walking interviews and focus groups with people who agree to participate with oral or written consent.

Interviews will last between one and two hours and will take place in a quiet place, as chosen by the respondent. With consent, the interviews will be recorded, and afterwards transcribed and pseudonymised, which means that personal sensitive information will be removed or replaced with general substitutes. Recordings of the interviews will only be used to facilitate the transcription process. During the interviews, the participant and the interviewer could engage in creative activities such as drawing, mapping or making collages. Potential markers of identification will also be pseudonymised and replaced with alternatives.

**Possible consequences and risks of participating in the project**
Participation in interviews may cause you to relive unpleasant memories from your migration. If this is the case, you can contact the researcher who can inform you where to seek help. For emergency help contact 1177's medical support: www.1177.se or call 1177. Medical support in Västmanland is offered by Råby vårdcentral och asylhälsa in Västerås: call 021-17 60 00.

It can be that participating could make you feel uncomfortable or observed. I would like to stress that I will respect your confidentiality and will never use personal information without your written or oral consent. The information you provide will only be handled at Uppsala University and will NOT be passed on to any other authority, such as the Migration Agency. Your participation does not affect any decision-making processes. at other authorities. Additionally, there is always the possibility to explicitly withdraw from the research project, without any negative consequences for the research. You can direct any questions or such requests to the researcher or the responsible person at your organisation (see below).

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**What happens to my data?**
Your answers and results will be treated in a way that prevents unauthorised access. According to the EU Data Protection Regulation, you have the right to access the data about you processed in the study free of charge and, if necessary, to have any errors corrected. You can also request that the recording and /or transcription about you be erased and that the processing of your personal data be restricted. If you wish to access the data, please contact the responsible researcher Zinaïda Sluijs (see below). The Data Protection Officer can be reached at dataoffice@uu.se. If you are dissatisfied with the way your personal data is processed, you have the right to file a complaint with the Data Protection Authority, which is the supervisory authority.

**How do I get information about the results of the project?**
The results will be published in, amongst others, scientific journals, at conferences or in the form of non-scientific output such as policy reports or online articles or blog posts. In these publications, only parts of interviews will be presented in combination with results from other interviews. This means that your personal story will not be published in full. If you wish to access the results, you can contact the researchers at any time (see below).

**Insurance and compensation**
There is no additional insurance coverage and there is no compensation for participating in the study.

**Participation is voluntary**
Your participation is voluntary and you can choose to withdraw at any time. If you choose not to participate or wish to discontinue your participation, you do not have to give a reason, nor will it affect your future care or treatment. If you wish to withdraw from participation, please contact the person in charge of the project (see below).

**Contact details**
Responsible researcher: zinaida.sluijs@kultgeog.uu.se
Responsible contact person [organisations]: [email address]

With kind regards

**Zinaïda Sluijs,**
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# Appendix IV: Consent form

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**Informed consent - interview**

I have received oral and / or written information about the research and have had the opportunity to ask questions. My questions about the study have also been answered. I may keep the written information letter.

I give my consent to participate in the study «**folkbildning for and with newcomers in rural Sweden**» and I know that my participation is completely voluntary. I am aware of that I can stop my participation at any time without giving any explanation.

I consent to the processing of data collected about me as informed in the information letter.

I consent that gathered data about me is stored and treated electronically at Uppsala University by responsible researcher as has been informed about in the information letter.

I give my approval of using the information I have given for research purposes.

Signature participant ……

Name ……..…….

Date ……

By signing this I declare that I have explained the research purpose for the participant above and gathered consent from the participant. The participant has also received a copy of the research information.

Signature researcher ……..……

Name ……..

Date ……..……

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