Friends through school and family: Refugee girls’ talk about friendship formation

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Abstract
This article explores refugee girls’ talk about friendship formation. Friendship is a complex process and a subjective experience. The study participants stressed similarity and cultural affinity as important criteria of forming friendships. Those who attended schools with a mixture of students described their native peers as having different temperaments and interests. Relatives were referred to as being best friends who one could trust and confide in. This suggests the need for a broad conceptualisation of friendship in research and practice.

Keywords
Friendship, middle eastern-born, migrant youth, resettlement, Sweden

Introduction
Adolescent friendships or the lack thereof influence young people’s everyday lives, educational attainment, health, and well-being (e.g. Almquist, 2011; Bergh et al., 2011; Hjalmarsson and Mood, 2015). Regarding migrant adolescents’ friendship relations, much previous research has been interested in friendships between migrants and natives, since it has been suggested that such friendships are beneficial to the migrants’
sociocultural and psychological adaptation (Berry et al., 2006). Self-reports through questionnaires have been used to measure inter-ethnic friendships, showing, for instance, that migrant youths who identify with their new country report more native friends (Jugert et al., 2017; Leszczensky, 2018), and that over time, while the use of the majority language increases, discrimination is perceived to a lesser extent and friendship homophily decreases (Titzmann et al., 2012). A high percentage of immigrants at school, and insufficient skills in the majority language, are related to less native friends (Titzmann and Silbereisen, 2009). Friendship formation between natives and migrants thus appears to be affected by opportunities to meet and socialise, and consequently, the ethnic composition of the school, school class, and neighbourhood matter (Kruse, 2017).

However, mixed schools do not necessarily lead to a vast increase in migrant–native friendships (Smith et al., 2016), since a sense of sameness, ‘psychological proximity’ (Shih, 1998) and ‘cultural affinity’ (Lam, 2014) appears to be essential for friendship formation. Although attitudes between migrants and natives are positive, migrants may prefer to befriend other migrants with whom they have much in common and vice versa (Scholtz and Gilligan, 2017). As a minority group, migrants may experience discrimination and exclusion and being referred to as ‘Other’, but they may also sense that natives are different and refer to these as ‘Others’ (Jørgensen, 2017; Steen-Olsen, 2013). Most previous work on migrant friendship formation is based on data collected from schools, but some studies explore parents’ influence on children’s friendships (e.g. Nauck, 2001). However, family members are seldom regarded as potential friends in these studies. It has been shown that children have more inter-ethnic relations in families where the parents also have such relationships and support inter-ethnic contacts (Smith et al., 2014; see also Shih, 1998). It can also be presumed that if parents disapprove of the majority culture, for instance, regarding gender roles, clothing, and patterns of peer interaction (Steen-Olsen, 2013), their children may prefer intra-ethnic friends.

Despite much research on immigrants, few studies have targeted the intersectional challenges faced specifically by refugees. Refugees generally have a marginalised position in both their country of origin and the country of resettlement (Pittaway and Pittaway, 2004). Moreover, for females, the social system of certain cultures can add to further marginalisation; preserving face and family honour may restrict girls’ social initiatives and openness towards friendly relations with peers from other groups (Merkin and Ramadan, 2016; Pittaway and Pittaway, 2004).

The study

The purpose of this study is to widen our understanding of refugee girls’ friendship formation, based on consecutive interviews with 12 Middle Eastern-born girls now residing in Sweden with a residence permit. In Sweden, 10% of the children (0–17 years of age) were born in another country, and one-fourth of all Swedish children are of foreign origin (both their parents were born abroad). The most common nations of origin for these children are Syria, Iraq, and Somalia (Statistics Sweden, 2017). Immigrants from these countries are mostly refugees (or relatives to refugees).

Sweden has for long, since the 1970s, been generous in granting residency to refugees, whom have inclusive rights to welfare benefits (Sainsbury, 2012). Despite the
social support, refugees in general have great difficulties in finding paid employment (Bergnehr, 2016), which results in that many refugee children grow up in disadvantaged areas and experience school failure and physical and mental health issues (FORTE, 2017; Statistics Sweden, 2017). The past decades, with war and conflicts around the world, refugee migration to Sweden has escalated (Statistics Sweden, 2019), and with it neighbourhood and school segregation increased (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). Compared to their native peers, migrant children in general appear to have more problems with friends in school. They are more prone to being involved in bullying (to bully, to be bullied or both; Carlerby et al., 2013), and youths with low socio-economic status (SES; who usually are of foreign origin) are less popular among their peers at school compared to those with higher SES (Hjalmarsson and Mood, 2015).

The present study provides knowledge on how refugee children talk and reason about friends and friendship formation. Children face the risk of being positioned as passive rather than active in their social relationships, unimaginative and ignorant rather than resourceful and reflective (Bergnehr, 2018, 2019; James, 1994). Migrant children, particularly refugees, are often spoken about in the public and political discourse while their own experiences and voices remain unacknowledged (Wernesjö, 2012). This study focuses on refugee girls’ agency in their social relationships. Moreover, it illustrates that friendship and friends can have varying meanings and fulfil different relational needs and that family members and relatives can be important sources for friendships.

**Theoretical departure**

The proposition that inter-ethnic friendships advance social integration (e.g. Berry et al., 2006) – which justifies studies on the matter – sometimes overlooks general work on friendship that emphasises the importance of similarity, affinity, and common experiences for friendship to evolve (McPherson et al., 2001). Perceived similarity is essential for mutual solidarity and cooperation between peers (Tajfel and Turner, 2001), and similarity in terms of identification, culture, and ways of affirming beliefs and social roles is pivotal to forming friendly relations and avoiding conflicts (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Similarity is indeed a subjective experience; it rests on a feeling of sameness, ‘psychological proximity’ (Shih, 1998) and ‘cultural affinity’ (Lam, 2014). Feelings of similarity often depend on having similar cultural practices, symbols, and forms of interaction. Individuals with shared habitus and cultural expectations tend to understand each other and form relationships of identification and solidarity (Bourdieu, 1990). However, the sense of similarity is relative and prone to change. For instance, a migrant may develop a sense of sameness with other migrants who originate from other national contexts due to common experiences of migration and resettlement (Jørgensen, 2015). Any study of adolescent immigrants’ friendship formation needs to acknowledge the importance that perceived similarity appears to have in how friends are made and demarcations are drawn.

The present study is open towards the conceptualisation of friendship – in our study, the adolescent girls’ talk about, and definitions of, friendship are at the centre. Friendship has previously been defined as a close and equal relationship between non-family members who provide opportunities for sociability or support (e.g. Allan, 1989).
However, this definition has been criticised for ethnocentrism, as distinctions between friendships and other personal relationships may not be equally clear-cut in all societies and groups (Killick and Desai, 2013). It has long been recognised that friendships may have varying degrees of closeness and can involve different forms of interaction (Levinger and Snoek, 1972). Some friendships are more adequately described in terms of power and competition than equality and cooperation (Rose and Rudolph, 2006). Instead of using a fixed definition of friendship, we understand friendship as a complex process involving subjective interpretation (Øksnes and Greve, 2015) and as relationships that are prone to change (e.g. Martinovic et al., 2009; Titzmann et al., 2012).

**Method**

This study is based on the narratives of 12 adolescent girls collected through 18 interviews over 3 years. The material is part of a larger research project with a longitudinal 3-year design that followed newly arrived refugee families and their resettlement practices. Families were recruited through schools where they were given written and oral information about the project. It was repeatedly stressed that participation was voluntary and that it was possible to opt out at any time without any specific reason. The girls’ names in this article are pseudonyms. (The regional ethics committee has approved the project, dnr 2016/4–31.)

Some girls volunteered to participate in consecutive interviews while others participated only once, and some girls wished to be interviewed with a sibling or relative, which we allowed: four interviews were conducted with siblings, and in one of these, a relative also participated. In total, 14 individual interviews and 4 interviews that contained two or three informants were conducted. Three girls were interviewed once, one girl three times, and the others twice. The interviews lasted 20–60 minutes, with an interpreter in attendance. As always in an interview data set, some individuals are more talkative and outspoken than others, and thus, some narratives become more elaborate. The interviewer (native Swede) and interpreter (Syrian descent) were trying to make the girls at ease with the situation and did not press for answers in cases where the girl appeared shy and/or did not give an answer to the particular question. The interviewer (first author) has much experience of conducting interviews with refugee families, and most interviews were free-flowing. The girls appeared to appreciate the opportunity to share their experiences.

Parents’ presence in the interview was optional; for most girls, a parent was present in the first interview but not in the ones that followed. In the ‘Results’ section, interviews with a parent present are marked with *. Presumably, the presence of a parent (or a sibling/relative) influenced what the individual girl brought up in the interview, as did the interaction between the interviewee, the interviewer, and the interpreter. We regard the narrating as being co-constructed (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009), that is, it is produced through the interaction between study participant/s, interviewer, and the interpreter. The girls’ answers were affected by our questions. For instance, some of our probe questions contributed to categorised friends into native versus migrant friends, such as ‘Do you have any Swedish friends?’. However, as newly arrived immigrants, we believe it was normal for them to think in terms of Swede – ‘non-Swede’. We cannot say
how the girls themselves defined ‘Swedish’ (e.g. a person having a Swedish passport or residence permit, a person being born in the country, a person with blue eyes and blond hair, and so on), but we can explore how the girls answered such questions.

The study participants were girls born in Syria or Iraq who had been granted refugee status and residency in Sweden with their parents. At the time of the first interview, they were 12–15 years of age and had lived in Sweden for 1 to 8 years but had not received a residence permit earlier than 5 years before the first interview (see Table 1). (In Sweden, it can take years to go through the asylum-seeking process and be granted a residence permit.) All but one, whose family had moved to an inner-city area at the time of the second interview, resided in disadvantaged, suburban neighbourhoods with mainly rental apartment blocks. They were attending or had attended schools in these areas. The schools in two of the neighbourhoods contained almost only students of foreign origin, while one school in another neighbourhood had a more mixed student population up to grade 6. The Swedish school system enables the home to choose a school (although a place at a particular school is not guaranteed). It is rather common to change school at year 6 or 7 (12–13 years of age). Among the participants in this study, all changed school at grade 6 or 7. Some of the girls went to inner city schools with a mixture of native and foreign youths, whereas others chose to stay in schools that were situated in their low SES neighbourhood with almost exclusively students of foreign origin.

The interviews were guided by general questions such as Please tell us about your everyday life. Who do you spend time with and what do you usually do? How do you find school? What do you do during your leisure time, and with whom? Is there anything in life that you wish would change? What do you like and enjoy the most in life? Is there anything that troubles you? What do you wish for in the future? In addition, probe questions were asked, some of which were about friendships.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analytical process began with reading the transcripts repeatedly; the material was coded for talk on friendship. Since few direct questions about friendship formation were put to the interviewees, information on the

| Pseudonym | Age at first interview (years) | Age at last interview (years) | Years in Sweden at first interview | Participated in number of interviews |
|-----------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Amira     | 12                            | 13                           | 3                                 | 2                                 |
| Andrea    | 13                            | 14                           | 5                                 | 2                                 |
| Ava       | 14                            | 15                           | 2.5                               | 2                                 |
| Enya      | 15                            | 16                           | 1                                 | 2                                 |
| Hannah    | 12                            | 14                           | 8                                 | 2                                 |
| Lucy      | 15                            | 16                           | 5                                 | 2                                 |
| Naomi     | 13                            | 1.5                          | 1                                 | 1                                 |
| Nina      | 15                            | 6                            | 1                                 |                                   |
| Rebecca   | 15                            | 16                           | 5                                 | 2                                 |
| Rita      | 12                            | 14                           | 2                                 | 3                                 |
| Ruth      | 14                            | 2                            | 1                                 |                                   |
| Susanna   | 15                            | 16                           | 8                                 | 2                                 |
topic was deduced from talk about school, everyday doings in the family, and leisure
time activities in which friendships appeared. In the thematisation that followed, themes
evolved and were entitled ‘peer conflicts’, ‘social control’, ‘parental control’, ‘family
and relatives’, ‘leisure time activities’, ‘intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic friendships’, and
‘school choice’. There is no room in this study to analyse all of what appeared in these
themes, but the data are rich and will be further analysed in future studies. Here, two
dominant categories on friendship formation – identified from the thematisation – are in
focus: friends made through school and friends made through family.

Analytical departure

Our analytical departure is that interviews stimulate narratives that contain talk about
oneself and one’s position in the world. Through narration, the person reflects on herself
and others, together with and stimulated by the interviewer (and other participants in the
interview, such as, for example, an interpreter), and influenced by her social and societal
context. Depictions emerge of how she understands herself, her relationships and the life
she lives at the moment. The interview stimulates a ‘rewriting of the self’, that is, a
reflection and (re)construction of who I am and why things are the way they are
(Freeman, 1993; Schiff, 2017). When analysing the overall narrative in each interview,
we can explore how the girls ‘perform identities’ and how they are ‘doing difference’,
that is, how they value and categorise themselves in relation to others and how they
justify their positions (Hey, 1997; Mauthner and Hey, 1999). Individuals talk and act,
and understand themselves, in relation to social structures (i.e. power relations). The girls
in the present study can be seen as structurally underprivileged – they are newly arrived
refugees of minority ethnicity, and they live in low SES households. Power relations in a
given national and social context influence experiences, one’s sense of self and agency,
and are expressed through language and practices (Mauthner and Hey, 1999). This
approach informs our analysis of the girls’ talk.

Results

The ‘Results’ section begins with analyses of the school as an arena for friendship
formation, and it includes reasoning on student composition and friendship opportuni-
ties, intra-ethnic friendships, inter-ethnic friendships, affinity, sameness, and difference.
This is followed by a part analysing how the family can be a resource or restriction as
regards the adolescents’ friendship formation, and it includes talk about trust, friendships
with relatives, and organised leisure time activities.

Friends through school

Previous research indicates that the student composition of the school influences the
opportunities for friendships with natives – more native students increase native-migrant
relations (Kruse, 2017; Titzmann and Silbereisen, 2009). But other studies find that a
heterogeneous student population does not necessarily lead to a vast increase in migrant–
native friendships (Smith et al., 2016). The present study included girls attending
homogeneous as well as heterogeneous schools and classes, and who justified their friendships with exclusively other migrants in different ways. Some understood their lack of native friends was due to them attending schools that were almost entirely migrants-only and residing in almost entirely migrants-only neighbourhoods. Others argued that they had chosen a homogeneous migrant school since they wished to be with migrant peers with whom they felt affinity and sameness and with whom they shared common experiences. Still others were more elusive in their answers: they did not have an answer to explain their preferences, but when analysing their narrative overall, it seems that familiarity and sameness were important criteria. Rita, for instance, attending an almost migrants-only school where she had friends, answered the question ‘Do you have any Swedish friends?’ as follows:

Rita: No.
Interviewer: You don’t socialise with any Swedes?
Rita: No, just a girl in my class, I talk to her.
Interviewer: Would you like to have Swedish friends?
Rita: Not now.
Interviewer: Not now?
Rita: No.
Interviewer: Why? […]
Rita: I don’t know. (Rita, interview 1)

Rita says that she does not desire native friends but answers ‘I don’t know’ to the question of why. However, later on in the interview, she emphasises how much she likes her neighbourhood (that is almost exclusively inhabited by migrants), indicating that the sense of affinity and sameness that she gains from socialising with other migrants is important to her. In the consecutive interview, 1.5 years after the first, she had changed school to secondary school (grade 7). She had chosen to attend the school in her neighbourhood, which was notorious for its low educational levels and social problems. On the question of whether it was easy or hard for her to choose the school, and whether she and her parents considered an inner-city (more mixed) school, she answered,

Rita: No, I wanted this school, really.
Interviewer: Was there a particular reason for this?
Rita: Like, most of my classmates, they wanted this school, so then I wanted it too, because of my friends, like I know many here. (Rita, interview 2)

That having friends at (the new) school connoted a sense of safety and contentedness is not in any way remarkable or strange. It is, however, noteworthy and needs recognition if we are to understand the mechanism for friendships and reasons for school choice. The sense of sameness and affinity appears central in friendship formation and thus leads to a preference for friendships with migrants and/or native peers. Another example of this is Hannah’s narrative. Hannah attended a heterogeneous school but when asked about her general feelings about school, in the first interview, she referred to being happy about recently having got two new classmates who were originally from the Middle East like her. Later on, she stated that she would enjoy their company in the mother-tongue class
(hemspråksundervisning) – she would not have to go to this class alone. In the same interview, Hannah brought up the awkwardness of being/feeling different from her native peers in that her parents were unemployed while her native classmates’ parents were all in paid labour. Not only did her national, linguistic and cultural origin differs from her native peers, but also her and her family’s present circumstances.

In the interviews, when they reasoned about, and tried to understand, why they did not befriend natives, the girls who had opportunities to meet and socialise with natives because they attended heterogeneous schools positioned the natives as ‘Other’, as being different from them. However, seldom (except Hannah, once) did they refer to differences in material standards and SES, but only to cultural habits and temperament. In the interview containing Hannah and Susanna, who were siblings, and their cousin Lucy (interview 2 for all three girls), Lucy was asked the question of whether she had any native friends at school. She answered ‘no’, and the question made Hannah and Susanna laugh out loud. The conversation went on:

Interviewer: No. How come?
Lucy: I don’t really know.
Interviewer: You laugh [to Hannah and Susanna]. Why do you laugh? [. . .]
Lucy: But they are not like me [the natives].
Susanna: You don’t have things in common. That’s what [makes the question] funny.
(Lucy, Hannah, Susanna, interview 2)

Later on in the interview, the girls elaborate on differences between themselves and native Swedes, arguing that it is easier to hang out with other migrants and intra-ethnic friends since you have common ground and similar experiences, so that, as Susanna states, ‘you don’t have to explain’ and justify their family’s way of living, such as traditions and cultural ideals. In the first interview with Susanna, where she was interviewed alone, she also drew on differences but referred to temperament, saying: ‘I have some Swedish girls in my class but I don’t hang out with them much. Their temperament differs from mine’. When, later on in the interview, she said that she spoke amicably with her native classmates and might hug them but still would not become friends with them, the interviewer asked ‘Why?’ Susanna answered,

I don’t know. We are not used to them, like they are different. I don’t mean they are different, but like, they are in other ways. We talk about things we like. They talk about things they like. (Susanna, interview 1)

Andrea and Rebecca were sisters who were interviewed together. They reasoned in similar terms. Also, like Susanna, they avoided positioning the native Swedes as being radically different, trying to nuance the picture. Andrea and Rebecca attended a mixed inner city school, and presented a number of reasons for why they did not have native friends, namely, there were no native girls in the class, the class was divided into separate friendship groups, and they did not live in the same area as the natives. But like other girls interviewed, they also brought up differences in temperament and taste.
Andrea: In some way, like if you talk about something, the Swedes they think, they think that what we talk about is weird, but we think it’s just normal to talk about such things. And we, we may think that what they talk about is weird, but they usually talk about such things, right, and they think it’s normal. But everyone is different, so there may be an immigrant who acts like a Swede, and there may be a Swede who’s like us.

Rebecca: Like, it’s all the same. (Andrea and Rebecca, interview 1)

General theory on friendship formation suggests that homophily in friendships is commonplace. The person prefers, and seeks to befriend, individuals who she deems similar to herself (McPherson et al., 2001). The results of the present study support this argument. Theories on social integration, on the other hand, propose that friendships with natives are beneficial for adolescent immigrants’ sociocultural skills, psychological adaptation, and opportunities to progress in society (Berry et al., 2006). This may be the case, but we must not underestimate the value that a sense of connectedness and sameness has also for migrant youths, and the implications this may have for their friendship preferences. Having said this, we will now turn to analysing the girls’ talk about friendships through family and relatives.

**Friends through family**

Any family provides a person with social relations (wanted or not) that in varying ways can help or hinder her relationships with others. Through their personal networks, parents and other family members can provide friendship opportunities (Shih, 1998; Smith et al., 2014). In the present study, all the girls appeared to spend much time with their families; commonly, they referred to family outings and family dinners as something they enjoyed and spent weekends and holidays doing. Such events often involved other relatives and related families, and they provided opportunities for friendship and socialising. Ava, for instance, referred to spending time with ‘my families’ when answering the question ‘What do you enjoy the most in your everyday life, at school or at the weekends’:

Ava: What I enjoy the most is my life with my families.

Interviewer: To be with your family, OK. What do you do that’s so much fun, spending time at home or...?

Ava: No, not at home. We go to town. We go, like, we go to my aunt, my mum and my sisters. We shop, we eat, and then we go back home, and then we go out. That’s fun. (Ava, interview 1*)

Ava talks about her families (in plural) and displays that family life can involve more than one (nuclear) family. Many of the girls in the data had relatives close by and had rather extensive social networks. Some had female relatives who lived nearby and were close in age, whom they referred to as best friends or as important persons whom they could trust and confide in. Trust, to talk openly about one’s thoughts and emotions, was brought up by several girls as being exclusive to only a few close relative friends and did
not apply to non-relative friends at school. Friends at school were by some referred to as being ‘false’ (Susanna, interview 2) or ‘fake’ (Lucy, interview 1), or as Nina stated when she explained why she did not wish to socialise outside school with any of her migrant friends from school: ‘I know how they are, these girls. (...) They talk rubbish about one another’ (Nina, interview 1*). Compared to friends at school, who could not be trusted, a close relative could be a trusted friend. Susanna, for instance, referred to her cousin Lucy as her best friend who knew everything about her and was someone she loved, while Lucy’s older sister was another relative who offered support and company:

She is great support. [...] Like, she’s always there for you whenever you want. When I phone her up [...] I can talk to her about anything. [...] She has been through what I have been through. (Susanna, Hannah and Lucy, interview 2)

Nina, however, did not have relatives of her age and gender living close by and had thus no such relation to befriend. Also, Hannah remarked on her not having a best friend since ‘all the other cousins have someone at their age besides me, who they can confide in’ (Hannah, Susanna, Lucy, interview 2).

Siblings also came across as providing important social relationships and were talked much about as good friends and as persons that enabled new contacts and facilitated friendship formation. In the first interview with Lucy, she answered the following on the question ‘What do you find most fun in your life right now, like in your everyday life and at the weekends?’:

Lucy: To spend time with my [big] brother and sister.
Interviewer: OK. What do you usually do?
Lucy: I’m mostly with my sister because she has female friends and the like, and she usually takes me to town. We hang out and talk, like that. She takes me out with her friends, for example to a restaurant or somewhere. And she has taken me to another neighbouring city together with her friends. (Lucy, interview 1)

As the interview with Lucy indicated, which is also found in some of the other girls’ narratives, siblings could be regarded both as friends and people who through their social networks could offer opportunities for friendship. These results indicate that friendship can be many things. A friend can be a friend at school, but a different kind of friend can be a close relative. They are both friends but in varying ways; they are not exclusive, but rather complementary.

Parents can both enable their children to meet and form friends but also restrict them in this, through their ideals, concerns, financial resources, and fostering norms and strategies. Organised leisure time activities for children are part of the everyday life for many families around the globe. Such events promise opportunities for making friends, but are often costly for the family. Some of the girls who participated in the present study attended or had attended organised leisure time activities. For girls from Christian families, it was common to attend the scout club through the local church. (The membership fee for the scout club was approximately EUR18/year, which made it an affordable activity for most.) Ava, who depicted her first year in Sweden as hard, with
few friends and harassment from peers at school, referred to the scout club as a place
de a place where she made friends. She said,

Things are better now, yes. At first, I was totally lonely, but then I joined the scout club, and
then I made lots of friends there. And they live in the same part of town as I, so now things
are fine. (Ava, interview 1*)

Hannah and Susanna, who were sisters, also attended the scout club once a week and said
it was an important place for enjoyable activities, socialising and meeting other peers. In
addition, they took music lessons and were members of an ensemble where they met
other girls and boys.

However, due to the scout club’s religious affiliation and location, and the costs for
lessons at the music, culture and drama school, such activities may not be for all, and the
parents of some girls disapproved of their spare time engagements. Enya attended the
scout club but stopped, explaining,

I used to go, but it’s rather late, when I’m at the scout club, and I’m not allowed to be out
late, because it gets dark, so my mum won’t let me go. That’s why [I stopped going]. (Enya,
interview 1)

Amira, a girl with a great interest in playing soccer, was training and playing on a regular
basis in a soccer team that consisted of native and migrant girls, but her mother made her
stop since she wanted Amira to focus on school (Amira, interview 1* and 2*). Another
girl, Naomi, who also had an interest in soccer and played in her country of origin, had
not joined a club although her parents approved. Her mother wanted her to join a club
where the majority of the players were natives, but had difficulty finding such a club near
where they lived (Naomi, interview 1*). Parents thus have the power both to facilitate
and restrict their children’s opportunities to socialise and make friends, but parents also
are hindered and/or encouraged to support their children’s friendships by structural,
financial and social circumstances.

**Concluding discussion**

Friendship is an elusive concept and thus not easily pinpointed; it is culturally and
socially situated and formed and subjectively experienced (Øksnes and Greve, 2015).
This study has revealed a diversity of conceptualisations and demarcations of friendship
formation as they come across in refugee girls’ narratives. We have explored how the
girls, through their positioning, were doing ‘difference’ and ‘othering’ as well as con-
structing belonging and connectedness (Hey, 1997; Mauthner and Hey, 1999). The girls
expressed the necessity of shared ways of talking, common experiences, and joint
activities for friendly interactions to unfold and friendships to develop. They also
referred to *friendship* and *friends* in different ways, illustrating that these concepts are
best conceptualised as dynamic with varying meanings. Friendships at school may be
something other than friendships to relatives. The meaning of *friends*, as it comes across
here, tends to be conflated with other relationship categories, such as *cousins* or *class-
mates*, and to involve varying degrees of closeness (e.g. Levinger and Snoek, 1972). Our
study makes apparent that friendships with family members can constitute a more
intimate category of relationships than friendships in school. Peers in school could even be denounced as deceitful gossipers, which highlights the potential of conflict and power in friendship relations (Rose and Rudolph, 2006). Keeping close friendships within the family network may be a strategy to control flows of information and to avoid stigmatising gossip (cf., Merkin and Ramadan, 2016; Pittaway and Pittaway, 2004).

The girls in this study generally did not refer to their own and others’ SES in their talk about friendship formation. However, we suggest that SES indeed has implications for friendships, which is supported by other Swedish studies (Hjalmarsson and Mood, 2015; Plenty and Mood, 2016). A sense of sameness and similarity can be connected to SES. In this study, the girls were underprivileged in that they resided in comparatively poor households in deprived areas. They and their families lived on scarce means and had challenges of various kinds due to being (poor) refugee migrants. This affected their lives and opportunities, and feasibly their cultural habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1990). As this study indicates, parental attitudes and financial resources can restrict the child’s participation in after-school activities, which affect opportunities for (inter-ethnic) friendships.

The present study has sought to understand adolescent refugee girls’ subjective experiences of friendship at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, refugee status, and relative economic disadvantage. It has previously been argued that females tend to engage simultaneously in family duties and interactions with friends, in a manner that is less commonly observed among men and boys (Allan, 1989; Bittman and Wajcman, 2000). It has also been suggested that refugee girls and women are at risk of experiencing marginalisation in their personal social networks, and in society, based on their migrant status, hierarchical structures and low SES (FORTE, 2017; Pittaway and Pittaway, 2004). Theories on cultural differences provide complementary understandings of refugee friendship formation: the girls in the present study originated from Iraq and Syria, which are generally considered collectivistic cultures (Merkin and Ramadan, 2016). This collectivistic outlook may explain the emphasis on friends through family that appeared in the girls’ talk.

The results of this study suggest that research must not disregard the central importance of experienced similarity in migrant (and native) youths’ friendship formation. This supports previous theories and empirical findings about friendship formation (McPherson et al., 2001). Although it has been argued that friendships with both natives and same-ethnic peers are essential for migrant adolescents’ well-being and social opportunities (Berry et al., 2006), studies indicate that there are no detectable differences in friendship quality between co-ethnic and inter-ethnic friendships (Alvarez et al., 2016). This suggests the need for research on migrant–migrant friendship formation too, and friendship formation per se, regardless of origin. Furthermore, although school is an essential arena for friendship formation, other social locations need recognition, such as the family and relatives. More research is needed that explores friendship formations with family members and relatives and the implications of such friendships. This study argues for a broad conceptualisation of friendship that includes family members and other relatives. *Friends* can mean many things and have different purposes. Also, further work is needed on how friendships evolve during leisure time and on refugee boys’ understandings and experiences of friendship formation.
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