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Special Issue Reprint

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# Relational Wellbeing in the Lives of Young Refugees

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Edited by  
Ravi K. S. Kohli, Marte Knag Fylkesnes, Mervi Kaukko and Sarah C. White

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Basel • Beijing • Wuhan • Barcelona • Belgrade • Novi Sad • Cluj • Manchester

*Editors*

Ravi K. S. Kohli

Institute of Applied

Social Research

University of Bedfordshire

Luton

UK

Marte Knag Fylkesnes

Regional Centre for Child and

Youth Mental Health and

Child Welfare

NORCE

Bergen

Norway

Mervi Kaukko

Faculty of Education

and Culture

Tampere University

Tampere

Finland

Sarah C. White

Relational Wellbeing

Collaborative

University of Bath

Bath

UK

*Editorial Office*

MDPI

St. Alban-Anlage 66

4052 Basel, Switzerland

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# About the Editors

## **Ravi K. S. Kohli**

Ravi K. S. Kohli is Professor of Child Welfare at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. He has 20 years of research experience on the care and protection of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and trafficked young people in Europe, focussing on guardianship, social work, asylum determination and foster care. Ravi has published widely in the field of forced migration and children. He is a consultant to international NGOs, and UK Government agencies regarding issues of resettlement of young asylum seekers. In 2013 appointed as a specialist adviser to the UK Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights on the human rights of separated children. In 2015, he completed the first UK based study on the quality of legal advice and decision making for unaccompanied and trafficked children. In 2018 he provided expert advice to the British Parliament on a review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Ravi is the Project leader for NordForsk-funded project Relational Wellbeing in the Lives of Young Refugees in Finland, Norway and Scotland. (2020 to 2024).

## **Marte Knag Fylkesnes**

Marte Knag Fylkesnes is a social worker and Senior Researcher at the Regional Center for Child and Youth Mental Health and Child Welfare (RKBU West) in Bergen, Norway. Her work focus is on migration and family life, equal welfare services and children's and families' experiences in contact with child welfare services. Marte has worked on topics such as cultural sensitivity, foster care and mental health, assessment in child welfare work, emergency work in child welfare, the connection between migration, social networks and well-being for unaccompanied minor refugees as well as migration and foster care. Her interests include migration and refugee research; child welfare and social justice; participation.

## **Mervi Kaukko**

Mervi Kaukko is Professor (Multicultural Education) at Faculty of Education and Culture at Tampere University, Finland. Her research has three primary areas: migration and refugee research especially in relation to childhood and education, intercultural education with a focus on ethical praxis, and practice within the frameworks provided by the theory of practice architectures. Mervi leads the Kone-foundation funded project From Panic Solutions Towards Equal Refugee Education—Participation, Support and Inclusion of Students from Countries in Crisis (KOTI) (2023–2027) and is the Project Manager for NordForsk-funded project Relational Wellbeing in the Lives of Young Refugees in Finland, Norway and Scotland (2020–2024).

## **Sarah C. White**

A leading thinker and analyst of wellbeing in a global context, until 2020, Sarah was Professor of International Development and Wellbeing at the University of Bath. With Shreya Jha, she then founded the Relational Wellbeing Collaborative to advance a more social, integrative and systemic approach to wellbeing. She is particularly interested in working with organisations and communities wishing to apply such an approach in practice, including through action research. In addition to wellbeing, Sarah has published widely on gender, child/youth rights, race, religion, NGOs and participation, with a predominant focus in South Asia.







# Forced Migration: A Relational Wellbeing Approach

Ravi K. S. Kohli <sup>1,\*</sup>, Marte Knag Fylkesnes <sup>2</sup>, Mervi Kaukko <sup>3</sup> and Sarah C. White <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Applied Social Research, University of Bedfordshire, Luton LU1 3JU, UK

<sup>2</sup> Norwegian Research Centre, Postboks 22 Nygårdstangen, 5838 Bergen, Norway; mafy@norceresearch.no

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, 33100 Tampere, Finland; mervi.kaukko@tuni.fi

<sup>4</sup> Relational Wellbeing (RWB) Collaborative, Wells BA5 2PQ, UK; sarah@rwb-collab.co

\* Correspondence: ravi.kohli@beds.ac.uk

## 1. Introduction

In this Special Issue, we consider the ways in which a relational wellbeing approach can be used to understand the lives and trajectories of refugees in general and young refugees in particular. We mainly focus on the lives of young adults who came to the global North as unaccompanied children—that is, without an adult responsible for them when they claimed asylum. Many of the papers report from the Drawing Together project (see <https://www.drawingtogetherproject.org/>, accessed on 11 January 2024). The project focus is on ‘relational wellbeing’ for young refugees—that is, wellbeing that is experienced through actions that repair and amplify a sense of responsibility they and other people have to each other. Hospitality and reciprocity emerge through small acts of fellowship. In time, these build patterns of exchanges between young refugees and those important to them, leading to a mutual sense of ‘having enough’, ‘being connected’, and ‘feeling good’ (White and Jha 2020). This is wellbeing as a shared endeavour. Overall, the project and many contributions in this Special Issue stand at the conjunction between fields of research into wellbeing and refugee studies. The papers span contexts and countries, offering a sense of an international array of experiences, joined by an issue of supra-national importance—that is, the ways interaction and relationality mediate the experiences of becoming and being a refugee.

## 2. Background

Research in the global North shows how pre- and post-displacement risks and barriers negatively impact on the lives of young refugees during the asylum phase. These risks and barriers show themselves in many aspects of their lives, including immigration processes (Cronin et al. 2015), mental health (Parhar 2018), social work (Eide et al. 2018), and education (Kauhanen et al. 2023). As young refugees approach adulthood, they face new challenges. Those who have not been granted leave to remain in a new country risk losing access to education (Allsopp et al. 2015) and housing (Kauko and Forsberg 2018). Some of them face deportation (Allsopp and Chase 2019). The range of obstacles and depth of suffering experienced by refugees in such studies is carefully mapped, as are arguments for protective public policy responses to the needs of young people as refugees (Allsopp and Chase 2019). Researchers also note that even those who win the right to remain carry the strains of another story, that of young refugees, especially young men, as threats or villains (Herz 2018). In contrast to such images, there are also narratives that celebrate the achievements of those who have been allowed to settle and who are considered successful in their new societies. They are the lucky refugees who tend to be portrayed as ‘miraculous exceptions’ (Bourdieu 1979).

But there is a problem in focusing on exceptional problems and exceptional successes. Deploying trouble-centred or sentimentalised narratives risks portraying young refugees as needy, greedy, dangerous or angelic. This type of storytelling can also trap their new

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societies into frames that show those societies as largely reluctant, ambivalent, or hostile donors, with occasional missionary tendencies. Using the words of Adichie (2009), the problem with these stories is not that they are untrue. The problem is that they can become the single story, overlooking the fact that only a minority of refugees are deeply troubled or troubling (Kohli 2007) or trailblazing in terms of outstanding successes. Whatever their source, stories of exceptionality exclude the mundane, the unheroic, and the small contributions made by and towards refugee youth in forging a good life quietly, far from the dramas of individual exceptions. In leaving these quieter engagements largely unexamined, we think that the stories of little steps towards social cohesion, integration and wellbeing among migrants remain subdued, and require re-awakening.

Some research has begun to show that things can go well, both socially and emotionally, for settled refugee youth in their new home countries (Kaukko and Wilkinson 2020), and these youth are not exceptional or miraculous. For example, a large follow-up study with unaccompanied youth in Norway showed that social adjustment, education and employment of young refugees does not differ substantially from those of other young ethnic minorities in Norway (Eide 2000). Similarly, public opinion that has been presented in monolithic ways as anti-migrant is being slowly deconstructed. A number of research studies reveal it to be complex, sometimes contradictory, but often more pro-migration than anti-migration (Pyrhönen and Wahlbeck 2018). Many ordinary citizens have welcomed and befriended refugees (Vainikka and Vainikka 2018). However, despite these glimmering promises within such studies, the lives of refugee youth are not yet delineated in any depth or detail. Specifically, stories of hospitality and reciprocity as ways of drawing together are needed as part of the pulse of living on in new societies. So, in complex contexts, where some stories are brightly lit and others are still in the shadows, a research challenge arises of how to see problems and possibilities as intertwined, where other stories apart from need, greed, danger and exceptional successes can be told. The range of papers presented here seeks to meet that challenge.

So far as we are aware, there are no studies exploring relational wellbeing in contexts of refugee settlement. However, there is a small but growing body of literature which shows that reciprocal networks enable newly arrived migrants to access resources which further their integration. These networks facilitate access to affective, psychological and spiritual resources that are frequently overlooked in research and policy focused on the settlement of new migrants (see, e.g., Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2018; De Graeve and Bex 2017; Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh 2018; Phillimore et al. 2018). The possibility to restore old ties and generate new ties is crucial. As for all people, reciprocal trust and love are important (Eide et al. 2018; De Graeve and Bex 2017), not only as basic human needs, but also as means to re-establish a life worth living. Improved possibilities to communicate online help to connect locally and transnationally (Kutscher and Kreß 2018). Phillimore et al. (2018) assert that the relationships that can sustain newly arrived migrants are crucial but at the same time complex, manifold, non-linear and not sufficiently understood as conduits for wellbeing over time. So, our contributions seek to deepen these newer understandings of the importance of ties within the past, the present and the future.

### **3. The Papers in This Special Issue**

A relational wellbeing approach, as conceptualized by White and Jha in the first paper in this edition, sees people as relational subjects for whom experiences of wellbeing are fundamentally bound up with caring for and sharing with others. The approach is embedded in broader relational theorization in which intersubjectivity is the condition of human existence (Gergen 2009) and wellbeing is generated through the inter-relations of underlying structures and processes (Atkinson 2013). Relational wellbeing thus emerges over time through the interplay of intrapersonal and interpersonal relations. The paper by White and Jha lays the theoretical foundation for many of the other contributions in the Special Issue. It does so through considering people to be relational subjects—first as pilots of their own lives, so to speak, rather than objects to be ferried within the tidal flows

of living, and second as those who navigate alongside others as an intrinsic part of this ebb and flow of life. Allied to this conceptualization is the notion that relationships are the conduits of showing and meeting varying needs. A third element within the logic of connecting people, means and contexts is the ways wellbeing is shaped by environmental, societal and personal 'drivers' that can build, perturb, support or destroy wellbeing. A fourth element focuses on power and the ways it pulses through relationships. Here, power is kaleidoscopic, arranging itself in different forms as people use it, move through it and are moved by it. So, taken in this holistic form, relational wellbeing retains its value in understanding how refugees rebuild ordinary, sustainable lives.

To some extent, the articles explore how people who become refugees appear sometimes to thrive in conditions that are hostile to their wellbeing, so that war and a collapse of their living environments does not destroy them, it enables them to grow. In our second paper, Holte and Söderström consider this through an examination of empirical evidence for 'adversarial growth' in refugees—an umbrella term for a process that shows a person's capacity to 'bounce forward' in the face of vicissitude. In this respect, the term, as used by Holte and Söderström, contains not just the process of seeking equilibrium, but also the emergence of health and psychological re-flourishing that is carried alongside memories and feelings of deep perturbances in life. Here, growth happens because suffering has happened, and there appears to be an umbilical relationship between adverse events and the will to create a livable life. In the 38 empirical studies of psychology-based studies that they review, they identify that growth is shaped by many interacting and overlapping individual, relational and contextual variables. They also show, unsurprisingly, that the third contextual element of White and Jha's exposition of relational wellbeing—the societal drivers—are poorly defined in much of the psychology-based literature, while the individual and relational elements receive more detailed consideration. Importantly, the value to individual refugees of religion and faith-based connections and activities is being gradually delineated with greater precision. In this paper, Holte and Söderström affirm the importance of religiosity and spirituality as aspects of coping and growth. They intertwine the available empirical evidence, arranging it in sympathy with the theoretical framework offered by White and Jha.

These first two papers, balancing empiricism and theoretical delineations, allow other contributions in this Special Issue to emerge and find their places, in contexts of war and peace. For example, Nummenmaa and Allaw write from the thick of conflict in the city of Mosul in Iraq. Their empirical enquiry resonates with White and Jha in illuminating the ways people endure and resist oppression through building social networks when societal ruptures impact on their day-to-day lives. It reveals a 'fragile solace' in a turbulent and dangerous world. Here, they observe the *shattering of the normal* and narratives full of shocks. Their respondents adapt, yet they are far from the notion of 'adversarial growth'. They talk of shrunken lives, hemmed in by distrust and the decline of networks of protection and support. Life is lived under a carapace. Within such circumstances, they examine the ways elements of wellbeing (or indeed 'ill-being') emerge when people are under surveillance by hostile forces around them that seek retribution. The meanings and experiences of solitude and connectivity with others are tested in such circumstances, and faith and community coalesce around risks and opportunities as people navigate toward survival and sustainable lives. For us, in this Special Issue, the value of this contribution lies in the ways Nummenmaa and Allaw anatomize the situations that impel many to leave their homelands, ending up by chance or choice in countries far away. Whether the respondents remained exposed to threats and crises, or whether they knew of those that escaped from them, Nummenmaa and Allaw also show what they term 'relational integrity'—that is, how connectedness with others contains the seeds of hope, safety and comfort through 'protected social constellations' consisting of contacts maintained with friends and family outside their localities. Through the witnessing of others, the respondents exposed to danger feel comforted. Relational wellbeing itself is not surrendered. The rhythms and patterns of ordinary life continue to allow some respite through shared moments of smoking

shisha, playing cards, knitting, exchanging novels, and talking with friends and family whom they felt they could offer and receive affection and care from.

Linking to the volatility described by Nummenmaa and Allaw, Lønning's paper focuses on young Afghan men moving from contexts of danger and harm and seeking sanctuary in Norway. It allows for us to consider how relational wellbeing is experienced on the journey away from a fractured homeland. In this paper, the young protagonists interviewed by Lønning describe not just the geographical movement and its impact on their lives, but also the ways they navigate a relational terrain to stop somewhere and move on. Here, there is the analysis of relationality with the self at the hub of relational responsibility to their families within broader informal networks, as well as key members of their formal networks (immigration and social care authorities). Those left behind, and those encountered on the journey and after arrival, all echo notions of relationality in Lønning's paper in outer worlds. These then enter their inner worlds of sense-making. The reverberations of experiences in the journey are shown to have long lives, continuing long after the contexts and events are left behind. Lønning's protagonists remember and talk about their entanglements with others within material, relational, and subjective dimensions of their and others' wellbeing. As they do so, their stories become the clothes that they wear over the body of their experiences, showing the balances and trades they strike to build and sustain relationships over time.

Molla's paper, echoing some of Lønning's findings in Norway, emphasizes those aspects of relationality that divide and contort people along vertical axes of power, namely how those who are powerful in the Australian context 'other' African refugee youth. As a further continuation of Lønning's considerations, the focus here is on those who have come to a destination country that does not want them. The paper draws together work on wellbeing from Amartya Sen's Capability Approach as well as White and Jha's conceptualizations (see above). It thus broadens the frame and canvas of this Special Issue. The portraiture Molla provides conveys the ways wellbeing is undermined in relation to refugee safety and belonging through racializing youth violence and stigmatizing those who appear to be visibly different from white Australians as dangerous. Molla asserts that this vertical splitting off between powerful/White/good and marginal/Black/dangerous newcomer subjects refugee experiences to intense pressures that undermine their relational wellbeing. The proposition is that because such racialized pressures exist in a country afraid of 'the other', wellbeing is corroded, dignity is fractured, shame is heightened, and belonging within a community of fellowship is dissipated. How Black refugees endure in such bleak contexts is relevant to many countries of sanctuary where White majorities are becoming used to the (permanent) presence of Black people, where there is a short history of migration and where there is no particular language to see anyone who is not White as a member of the nation. Molla's paper, therefore, offers an important dimension to the story of relational wellbeing, namely that the evolution of wellbeing is not without struggles. It is forged piece by piece, layer by layer over time to allow dissipation of divisions between 'them' and 'us'. The prizes of societal coherence, justice, and amity beckon. Some nations have grasped them more than others, as we show in our Special Issue's final paper about Scotland. In Australia, however, these prizes remain elusive.

Haswell's paper extends Molla's focus on the social aspects of relationality for young refugees in a new country to environmental aspects—that is, how their wellbeing is established and amplified through connections with nature. The context is Finland, where migration-based diversity has a shorter history than in Australia. Yet there appears to be a greater sense of calm expressed by respondents in the Drawing Together project in comparison to Molla's enquiry. Haswell focuses on the 'environmental drivers' of wellbeing. Specifically, his focus is on the ways that encounters with nature allow for young refugees to feel restored and attached to others, and how narratives about their pleasant encounters with nature then radiate into childhood memories and future forecasts of wellbeing associated with natural landscapes. In addition to the conceptual scaffolding provided by White and Jha (see above), Haswell uses the work of Russell et al. (2013) to examine

how young refugees come to know, perceive, interact with and live within ecosystems that sustain them now, in the past, and in their wishes for the future. The empirical synthesis that Haswell presents shows the delicate and intricate ways in which relational wellbeing unfolds in their lives, with physical, emotional, and social layers of experiences of nature interlaced together into holistic accounts. Nature is shown as living and breathing for and with young refugees, providing the roots and shoots of recovery of a sustainable life after the ruptures of leaving the country of birth.

Katisi et al. in offering further insights from the Drawing Together project focus on the perceived meanings of specific objects for young refugees in Finland, Norway and Scotland. Their paper particularly highlights objects that evoke an emotional response or a story attached to relational wellbeing. Nominally, the focus of the paper is on the present for young refugees, not their past or their future (those latter time dimensions are inevitably implicated in any account of present circumstances). As they note, it is rare for young refugees to carry mementoes with them as they resettle into new lives in countries of sanctuary. It is rarer still for researchers to engage with them in understanding what such objects mean as part of their emerging day-to-day lives. So, the paper seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the ways a variety of objects hold multiple meanings, refracted through the prism offered by the concept of relational wellbeing. The 15 chosen objects in this paper range from jewelry, mobile phones, toys, decorative and religious artefacts to items of little worth but deep personal value. The paper shows that connection, communication, coherence and continuity offered by objects like these reach into young refugee lives in similar and different ways, each with its own spectrum of meanings. They become part of richer stories of relational wellbeing. Through these objects, old ties stay alive, and new ties are born in ways that balance wellbeing, nostalgia and hope.

In the next paper, Tiilikainen et al. extend the notion of ties to family-like relationships, bringing the focus of relational wellbeing back into the social fold. Here, the authors present the idea that the meanings of kinship and family are being displayed, negotiated, and constantly performed through practices, identities, and evolving relationships. The notion of kinship is thereby transferred from the realm of 'being', (you *are* a family member) to the realm of 'doing', (you *do* family membership). Thus, kinship changes from a solid to a liquid form of living. Considering the importance of fluidity in this way allows for the authors to follow the repeated rhythms and patterns that young refugees note as important in living a life of substance, stability and sustainability. The authors suggest that the assemblages that young refugees use to create this type of life emerge from neither the old nor the new country. Rather, in homage to the work of Homi Bhabha, it is a 'third space', made by young people through hybridizing aspects of different relationships (a friend/brother, a teacher/second mother). In doing such stitching together they create kaleidoscopic new relationalities, contained within, but not defined by, old and new worlds. Yet in this world of re-interpretation and recreation, is not all blue skies and butterflies. Complexities endure, relationships end or become fractured, and 'doing' is a constant, not an occasional, response to changing circumstances. While some relationships evolve and endure, providing practical and emotional support, enhancing reciprocity and connectivity, others ebb away. So, the paper asserts the unending nature of relational wellbeing processes, a means towards building ever shifting and unfolding new lives.

Deveci, in her focus on young people whose asylum claims have been rejected, offers a more somber picture than Tiilikainen et al. Her paper reflects the bleak sense of marginality present in the papers by Molla and Nummenmaa and Allaw. The young people in her study live in hope because they cannot plan very much. They survive because they cannot reach an ordinary life. They too are contorted by the decisions of powerful others, not in Iraq or Australia, but in the United Kingdom. Life and death co-exist in their narratives. Yet they dream of attaining goals, fulfilling aspirations, and seeking educational opportunities despite their precarity. And when they look back at their childhoods, they remember being loved, and how that compares to relational wellbeing in the present, reflected in people in their formal and informal networks helping them to steady their lives and navigate to

safety. For some, their relationship with God is a buffer and a balm. Love within networks, love within their practices of faith and communities of welcome stops the young people from disappearing. Because of the presence of relationality in their lives, they refuse to be ghosts. Instead, they quietly live their lives on the margins. Waiting. The paper by Deveci confirms the ways in which endurance matters, and that many young people without permission to remain are no different to those in the Drawing Together project who can remain, who can plan, and who have the right to have roots in a new country.

Finally, we conclude this Special Issue by showcasing a country that appears (by and large) to welcome refugees. The refugee integration policy paper by Kohli et al. focuses on Scotland, one of the three countries in the Drawing Together project. In itself, the concept of integration is examined in terms of the material, relational and subjective dimensions of relational wellbeing. Specifically, integration is shown as a reciprocal process and outcome, with responsibilities for it working effectively shared by newcomers and citizens alike. This paper does not treat the concept with suspicion, as some commentators do (see, for example, Rytter 2019). While its complexity is acknowledged, integration is broadly presented in this paper as beneficial. For example, the policy frameworks for refugee integration in Scotland provide good evidence of a government's commitment to the welfare and wellbeing of refugees. In practice, for many of the young refugees in Scotland who took part in the Drawing Together project, the country feels like a new home, with opportunities for material benefits, connections through membership of safe and productive networks, and the consequential sense of feeling good.

#### 4. Conclusions

So overall, the papers in this Special Issue cover several countries and many different aspects of the concept of relational wellbeing. In ranging from countries of origin that are bleak to countries of transit and destination where racism, ambivalence and hostility exist, authors show the long shadows cast by violence in differing forms. In offering light in many papers, the colors of young refugee lives are more visible. We show that refugee lives are never atomized or severed from the contexts and communities that they live within or move through. Moreover, their voices and vignettes reveal the people behind refugee numbers. Their stories show that hardship is common. Endurance is a necessity. Hope is a precursor to plans. And plans are evidence of new relationalities in new countries where young refugees can re-establish themselves. To reflect on the theoretical lenses provided by White and Jha, the papers present young refugees as relational subjects, recognizing the ongoing importance of ties of many kinds. Where possible, they move with purpose through life. They also reveal and hide themselves where necessary to get by and get through the borders that surround them. In addition, while they are sometimes lonely, they are seldom unaccompanied. They navigate in the company of others, particularly those that can keep them safe from harm. Through the relationships that they find and make, mutuality and reciprocity show themselves. Their needs are met, and they meet the needs of others. They look up and look around in their contexts, including their relationships with their own sense of self, with other people and with heaven and earth, all of which offer wellbeing and illbeing, depending on the nature of interwoven relationships. For some, the presence of other people's shape-shifting power is present, seeping into everyday experiences, for good and bad, and it lifts them up or pulls them down as they move across geographies and time. The papers here are not instructional in seeking to offer guidance for policymakers, practitioners and other resource holders. But they should attune powerful people to the importance of taking a relational approach when building frameworks of protection and resource distribution. For any reader, we hope you find the papers informative in terms of increasing your sense of wonder at the multiplicity and complexities that are inherent in the relational wellbeing of young refugee lives.

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Article

# Exploring the Relational in Relational Wellbeing

Sarah C. White <sup>1,2,\*</sup> and Shreya Jha <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Relational Wellbeing (RWB) Collaborative, Bath BA2 5ED, UK; shreya@rwb-collab.co

<sup>2</sup> Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, UK

\* Correspondence: sarah@rwb-collab.co

**Abstract:** This paper explores the different ways that relationships and the relational figure in the integrative approach, relational wellbeing (RWB). These are (1) conceptualising persons as relational subjects; (2) relationships as the means through which people seek to address a wide variety of needs; (3) inter-relations between the experience of wellbeing and the underlying factors within persons and their contexts that either promote or undermine wellbeing; (4) relationships serving as conduits of power and the making of identities; and (5) inter-relations between the concepts and methods of research with representations of (persons and) wellbeing. The main thrust of the paper is theoretical, but it is anchored in long-standing research into wellbeing in the global South and practical experience in applying RWB in the global North. Empirically, it draws, in particular, on a case study from Zambia of a ‘meshwork’ of relations between birth and foster parents and children moving between households. This places the relational, rather than the individual, at the centre of analysis. It shows how different dimensions of wellbeing may coincide, but there may also be trade-offs between them. Relationships are bearers of power, and it is the interactions of structure and agency that ultimately limit or engender opportunities for sustained individual and collective wellbeing.

**Keywords:** relational; wellbeing; relationships; relational subjects; power; research methods

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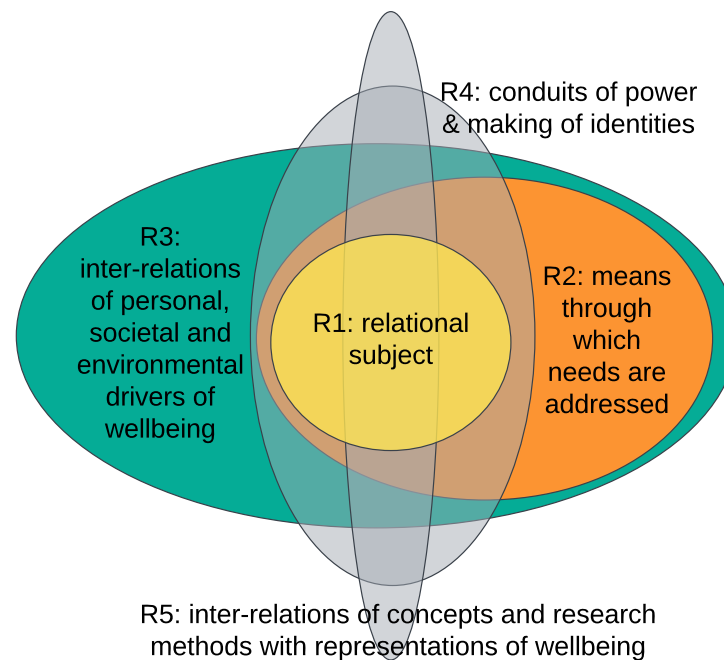
## 1. Introduction

“I feel that the NHS Trust cares about me as a whole person of BAME background, not just as a member of staff.”

This statement represents what wellbeing at work would mean for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME)<sup>1</sup> staff at a National Health Service (NHS) hospital trust in the UK, as formulated by them in a recent workshop we held. It captures the essence of a relational approach to wellbeing; that at the heart of wellbeing is the interactive experience of being seen, known, respected, and even loved (‘cared for’). It acknowledges, in addition, the interconnections between different aspects of life (‘as a whole person’) and how being is situated in particular contexts (‘of BAME background’). This reflects the core inspiration of the Drawing Together project, which has catalysed this Special Issue: that young refugees should be recognised and appreciated as whole, rounded people, reflecting particular histories, and growing and developing as they interact with near and distant others. The statement calls for a certain orientation, a person-centred approach, which needs to be complemented by structures, processes, and cultures that help sustain it. The main case study in this paper explores one such cultural institution: a meshwork of kin in rural Zambia, in which children move between different households to share resources, maximise opportunities, and give and receive care.

When we have presented the relational approach to wellbeing in different forums, one of the (critical) comments that has recurred is that ‘the relational is doing a lot of different work’. This is true, and in this paper, we seek to respond to this criticism by setting out more explicitly the different kinds of work ‘the relational’ is doing. This paper therefore explores

the different ways that relationships and the relational figure in relational wellbeing (RWB). These are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Relations in relational wellbeing.

First, (R1) and central is the conceptualisation of persons as relational subjects. This acknowledges people as subjects *of* their own lives rather than simply objects of other people's attention. At the same time, it recognises that people are subject *to* other forces, as they are forged in their relationships with others and their material and social contexts. The second (R2) way that relationships figure in RWB concerns the function of relationships. Relationships are seen not simply to be constitutive of people as subjects but also the means through which people seek to address a wide variety of needs. The third place at which relationships feature is the inter-relations between the experience of wellbeing and the underlying factors within persons and their contexts that either promote or undermine wellbeing (R3). We call these the 'drivers' of wellbeing. The fourth and fifth relational aspects do not focus specifically on wellbeing but draw on relational social science more broadly. We include them within the model because they are critical to understanding the RWB approach as a whole. The fourth function of relationships (R4) is thus to serve as conduits of power and the making of identities. This may be seen as an aspect of the relational subject but it is of such importance that it merits a distinct point of its own. The fifth (R5) points to the inter-relations between the concepts and methods of research with representations of (persons and) wellbeing. This cautions us to reflect that all conceptions of wellbeing are 'made things', constructs that we use to help us make sense of complex reality that bear the mark of the tools of their making and intentions of their makers.

The paper begins with a brief introduction to the philosophical underpinnings of the relational approach and its understanding of the relational subject (R1). We then look more specifically at what this means for wellbeing and explain why we talk about three interlinked dimensions of wellbeing and resist breaking wellbeing down into separate domains. This inevitably raises the issue of the relationship between representations of wellbeing and the concepts and methods used to generate them (R5), which recurs throughout the paper. The next section considers relationships as the means to meet needs (R2). We look at how this is similar to and different from the ways that other wellbeing approaches consider the connections between relationships and needs and possible reasons for the differences. The following section presents a case study from our research in Zambia. This presents a 'meshwork' of relations between birth and foster parents and children

moving between households.<sup>2</sup> Taking such a focus allows us to place the relational, rather than the individual, at the centre of analysis and explore what these theoretical points mean in daily life. In particular, it enables us to observe how the different dimensions of wellbeing may coincide, but there may also be trade-offs between them. It also illustrates how different experiences of wellbeing can be traced to interactions between the underlying factors that shape persons and the context, which we categorise as the personal, societal, and environmental drivers of wellbeing (R3). The next section returns us to a more theoretical discussion regarding the implication of relational interactions in the transmission of power and the constitution of identities (R4). This is a major topic which we can only touch on here, but we wanted to include it for the sake of completeness. The conclusion seeks to bring all these arguments together and reflects on what they mean for the place of the relational in relational wellbeing.

## 2. Forms of the Relational

### 2.1. Relational Subjects (R1)

RWB is rooted in the broader field of relational social science, as Atkinson et al. (2020, p. 1914) describe:

“Relational theories reject the primacy, or even the pre-givenness, of the individual. . . . Instead, relations and interactions precede the definition of both individuals and collectives, of material things and immaterial values, of places and histories; relationality is inherent to who the individual is.”

This is a significant challenge for wellbeing research that has overwhelmingly conceived of wellbeing as an individual and largely inner state. It requires most immediately a shift to conceiving individuals not as independent sovereign entities but as relational subjects forged in their relations with others and their societal contexts. It suggests, in addition, that if we want to understand what promotes—or undermines—wellbeing, we need to move our focus from the individual to these relationships. Most radically, it suggests that wellbeing may be sustained by, and even a property of, interactions within a relational meshwork rather than belonging to individuals at all.

As with many apparent polarities, the individual–relational axis is more a continuum than an absolute binary. There are some theories, without question, which assume individuals to be completely independent units, rational actors who act single-mindedly in pursuit of individual interests. The majority of social researchers, however, recognise that some degree of relational interaction is fundamental to the process of becoming human (and also many other forms of being). Examples of theorists who emphasise the importance of relationality span the historical and disciplinary spectrum, including Marx and Engels in political economy, Einstein in physics, Buber (1970) in theology, Benjamin (1988) in psychoanalysis, Bowlby (1969), Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) and Gergen (2009) in psychology, Deleuze and Guattari (2004) in philosophy, Thaler and Sunstein (2008) in economics, Putnam (2000) in political science, Bourdieu (1977), and Emirbayer (1997) in sociology, among many others, including almost all in social anthropology. Relational thinking is also evident in the worldviews of Indigenous peoples, which are characteristically founded in the interdependence of humans with other beings and the earth (Artaraz and Calestani 2015; de la Cadena 2010; Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009).

The question then is not so much *whether* relationships are important, but *how*. The spectrum runs from those who see individuals as essentially independent beings who require relationships with others to flourish, to concepts of assemblage which radically de-centre the human person, emphasising the coming together of multiple forms of structure, affect, materiality, technology and life forms in particular times and places (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Atkinson et al. 2020). Rather than fixing our position at one point along this spectrum, we seek to hold in tension the multiplex dimensions of human experience. These mean that the importance of being recognised as ‘a whole person’ with a unique identity that has some continuity over time and across different spaces, exists alongside knowing oneself essentially intertwined with others and having expressions and experiences of self

and others that shift markedly between different contexts. Identifying persons as relational subjects does not require fixing a single form that relationality can take. Rather, a major component of the relational approach is greater awareness of the influence of context, which affects both the experience of personhood and the stories we use to describe it.

This influence of context is evident not only in everyday experience but also in the ways that different forms of research construe wellbeing, which we characterise as R5 in Figure 1. There is a clear interaction between the observer and what is observed. Questionnaires and interviews and statistical and narrative forms of data and analysis have been shown to shape research outcomes in very different ways (e.g., Schwarz 1999; Camfield et al. 2009). As we explore further below, the questions you ask and the methods you use to pursue them thus have a significant impact on the representation of persons—or wellbeing—that you produce (White 2016).

## 2.2. Relational Wellbeing

If ‘being’ is, as Gergen (2009, p. xxvi) remarks, ‘ambiguously poised as participle, noun, and gerund’, what does this mean for wellbeing? Most straightforwardly, and most commonly, the ‘being’ in wellbeing is used as a gerund (a verb used as a noun), which is attached to a particular (human) Being, a noun. While one of the key promises of a wellbeing approach is to provide an integrated ‘whole of life’ perspective, wellbeing has increasingly been re-colonised by the predominant academic and professional tendency towards subdivision and specialisation. Wellbeing thus becomes divided into different segments, which reflect different aspects of life. So subjective wellbeing (SWB) is defined as being happy or satisfied with your life (e.g., Diener 2000), and psychological wellbeing (PWB) is defined as optimal psychological functioning or feeling fulfilled (e.g., Ryan and Deci 2001). Wellbeing in the context of health and wellbeing (HWB) is understood as a positive state of physical and mental health. Less common but gaining in salience is economic wellbeing, which considers how people are doing in economic terms. Following this logic, ‘relational wellbeing’ is also used by some to refer to the ‘relational segment’ of life, using it to assess the strength or extent of family relationships, for example (see, e.g., Greenfield and Marks 2006). Alternatively, ‘relational wellbeing’ may be used somewhat differently to describe the quality of relationships themselves (see, e.g., Flora and Segrin 2003). This application is more similar to that of ‘environmental wellbeing’, which usually refers to the functioning of ecosystems or quality of biodiversity, rather than a measure of what degree of benefits people are gaining from their interaction with the physical environment.<sup>3</sup>

There are two further aspects to note about this segmentary approach to wellbeing and its tendency to slip back into the old ways of doing things. First, while the ‘well’ qualifier suggests a shift from a deficit to an affirmative model of human beings (White 2010), these terms increasingly identify dimensions of human beings which do not necessarily carry a positive charge. Thus, feeling sad is described as having low SWB, not as having subjective illbeing. Second, a process of reification has taken place, in which the segmented terms have come to appear not as aspects of a unitary wellbeing but as ‘real things’ in their own right. Thus, ‘economic wellbeing’, ‘psychological wellbeing’, and ‘health and wellbeing’, amongst other terms, have taken on lives of their own, designating distinct areas of intellectual, employment and business specialisation. They have become new market niches, and thus new creators of value across a broad range of academic, professional, and commercial activities, each with its associated set of experts and interests (see also Davies 2015).

In our approach, we aim to position ‘being’ as a participle rather than a gerund or noun. This reflects our view that wellbeing is better seen as a process that happens over time, emerging via the interactions between people and other beings, places, and things, rather than an inner state or an aspect of life which belongs to an individual. Viewing wellbeing as a process does not imply that it is constantly fluctuating or unstable. Since processes are often repetitive and recursive, they may produce reasonably durable equilibrium states. As Capra (1982, p. 287) comments with respect to systems, however, it is important to

recognise that such states are not inert and given but the ‘flexible yet stable manifestations of underlying processes’.

Seeing wellbeing as a process emphasises the interflow of different dimensions of wellbeing. Thus, when we asked people in rural India and Zambia what it meant to live well<sup>4</sup>, they typically mentioned first the material dimension of ‘having enough’. This, however, was rarely considered at an individual level but overwhelmingly in the context of the relational concerns of being able to *care* for one’s family and *share* with wider kin and neighbours. Here, we encounter the corollary to the emphasis on being *cared for* that was proposed by BAME staff at the NHS hospital trust: caring is a reciprocal activity, both caring and being cared for matter, and the two often go together. This reflects the second, relational, dimension of wellbeing, which we can summarise as ‘being connected’. The third, subjective dimension (‘feeling good’), was expressed both in terms of how people felt about themselves and how they were viewed by others. The following statement, in which a Zambian man explained why he had given his brother-in-law such significant support, demonstrates how closely the material, relational and subjective are intertwined and how reciprocal relations of care can extend across the generations:

“By helping both the sides I was not looking at my direct personal benefit because they being relatives, I felt maybe at one point that you never know who is going to help whom; because maybe if I helped my relatives maybe at some point they also help me or my children, or maybe it is their children who help my children. My wife’s relatives also look at me as being a good person.”<sup>5</sup>

Conceptualising wellbeing in terms of co-constituting dimensions also speaks to the BAME staff’s concern with being cared about as ‘a whole person’. RWB does not divide aspects of life into different ‘domains’, which can then be separately assessed. The reasons for this are primarily philosophical but also practical. While domain models are valuable in drawing attention to different parts of life, they are fraught with boundary problems: what goes where? These may arise at the design stage as different analysts construct domains and place items very differently. They also raise serious issues about the value of cross-study comparisons, especially where single domain scores are used, which may carry similar labels but be comprised of very different items from one study to another. What researchers have in mind may also be quite different to the way that research subjects see things. Such discrepancies can become evident if cognitive debriefing is undertaken in conjunction with numerical scores. For example, our research with a domain model of wellbeing used mixed methods, giving us both a verbal answer and a score in response to our questions (White and Jha 2014). We frequently found that when we asked a question about one domain, people would answer by talking about another. For example, a question about family relationships might bring a response about economic circumstances: ‘How can there be harmony in the house when there is no rice?!’<sup>6</sup> Factor analysis can also demonstrate such discrepancies, as items fail to load onto the domains they were assumed to represent. In our research, for example, we found that all questions about anxiety tended to correlate with each other, suggesting that people were answering in terms of their feelings of worry rather than the focus of those worries, as we had expected when designing the questions.

As the examples above show, the material, relational, and subjective dimensions of wellbeing are interleaved and co-constitutive. While analytically we may distinguish them, we need to hold this lightly. We need to remember that these are *our constructs* and ways of thinking that help us obtain a better grasp on complex realities rather than ‘real things’ out there in the world. In particular, we need to resist the danger of separating out ‘material wellbeing’, ‘relational wellbeing’ and ‘subjective wellbeing’ as if they were distinct entities. To do this takes us back into domain thinking and a mechanical model which views wellbeing as the sum of the three dimensions. However, it is important to note that being inter-related does not mean that the dimensions are necessarily in harmony. There may, on the contrary, be significant tensions and trade-offs between them, as we explore through the Zambia case study below.

### 2.3. Relationships as the Means through Which Needs Are Addressed (R2)

While the definition and specification of needs may vary, few would deny that for wellbeing to be experienced, needs must be addressed. How needs are defined is a major debate in itself, of course, which is beyond the scope of our present discussion. In broad terms, however, RWB follows the capability approach in conceptualising needs in terms of what people can do and be, think and feel, rather than as the material goods or other entities that may be the means to satisfy such needs. For example, what people need is the capability to be well nourished rather than a particular form of food or even calorific intake (Sen 1983). We follow Amartya Sen in maintaining that the core capabilities should be elaborated within contexts rather than Martha Nussbaum in seeking to establish a universal list (Sen 1993; Nussbaum 2003).

The distinctive addition of the RWB approach is to point to the role relationships play as the means through which needs are addressed—or capabilities achieved. Here again, it is important not to overstate the difference with other wellbeing approaches. Subjective (SWB), psychological (PWB), and multi-dimensional approaches to wellbeing all recognise the significance of relationships in meeting needs.<sup>7</sup> The difference is in the range of needs that relationships are seen to meet, the range of relationships that are therefore considered and the character that relationships are understood to have. With respect to needs and types of relationships, wellbeing approaches generally emphasise primarily the psychological and emotional support that personal relationships bring to individuals. Those with a stronger grounding in political science or economics may, in addition, draw on social capital theories to acknowledge the collective benefit (e.g., at the neighbourhood level) of relational goods such as trust and conviviality. With respect to the forms of relationships, in both cases, relationships are generally seen as a ‘good thing’ and as optative—one may choose to have or not to have a relationship. This is linked to relationships being generally seen as positive; according to this theorisation, if a relationship becomes negative, one simply opts out (Adams 2005).

In RWB, relationships are seen to enable a far wider range of needs to be addressed, not simply the psychological or emotional. This is consequent on the relational understanding of wellbeing itself, which concerns how people are doing materially and the terms on which they are able to interact with others, in addition to how they are thinking and feeling. Placing the relational at the centre of both personhood and wellbeing also means that relationships are not seen as a matter simply of individual choice; by virtue of being human, one is intrinsically in relation to a whole range of other beings. Rather than relationships being seen as intrinsically good, this means they simply *are*—solidary and contradictory, supportive and ambivalent, moral and instrumental, fluid and stuck.

When we look into the disciplinary and methodological ancestries of these different perspectives on wellbeing, there are two possible reasons for the different readings of the relational in RWB compared with mainstream approaches: geographical/cultural and methodological. SWB, PWB and most multi-dimensional approaches to wellbeing have been generated via psychological and clinical testing in the global North, allied with statistical analysis of large-scale survey data. RWB has been generated instead via sociological and anthropological qualitative research in the global South. Let us consider the geographical issue first. Put simply, this is the question: are the societies where RWB has been developed simply ‘more relational’ than those where SWB and PWB originate? There is indeed some evidence for this. If we suspend our qualitative sensibilities for a moment and imagine a global cultural spectrum between an emphasis on individual freedom and autonomy at one end and an emphasis on harmony and responsibility to others at the other, numerous studies show that societies of the ‘North’ and ‘West’ tend to cluster at the former end, while those of the ‘South’ and ‘East’ tend to cluster towards the latter (Miller et al. 2011; Triandis 1999).<sup>8</sup> Compounding this, it may well be that relationships are particularly omnifunctional in contexts where there is a large informal economy and an absence of much (or anything) in the way of state-based welfare (see, e.g., Wood and Gough 2006; Gough and McGregor 2007). This would suggest that relationships are more central and

more multiplex in the kinds of societies where RWB has been developed than they are in the global North. We also, however, need to take note of the classic claim of anthropology that in seeking what is to be learned from another society, one can come to see more clearly neglected aspects of one's own. Recognising the importance of relationships to wellbeing in other contexts may thus help to draw attention to their significance 'at home'. This encourages us to reflect not only on the role of relationships in our personal experience but also on the strong sociological and anthropological tradition pointing to the significance of relationality in the North and West (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Brownlie 2014; Connell 1987, 1995; Mattingly 2014; Young and Wilmott 1962).

Whatever the 'real' differences regarding the relative salience of relationships in different societies, there is no doubt that these are dwarfed by the disciplinary and methodological differences in the genesis of RWB and other wellbeing approaches. The different ways in which approaches to wellbeing perceive the relational can be traced ultimately to the diverse purposes for which those approaches are designed. This question of purpose is the hidden element that underlies the differences in concepts and methods. The predominant purpose of most contemporary wellbeing approaches is to assess, to produce comparable scores at different levels, and to produce standardised rankings across diverse cases. SWB is the purest version of this, with its focus on 'how happy' people are. This may be assessed either by a single variable (usually life satisfaction) or across three dimensions of current emotion (affect), overall life satisfaction, and a sense of meaning or purpose (or 'eudaemonic wellbeing'). PWB is rather different in that it is concerned more substantively with what makes for good psychological health or optimal psychological functioning. Nevertheless, it is also commonly about assessment in a clinical or quasi-clinical (self-help) setting. Multi-dimensional approaches, such as the OECD's 'better life' index, are also about comparative assessment, this time typically in a public policy context.<sup>9</sup> While RWB can indeed be used for comparative assessment, this is not its primary purpose. Its purpose is to understand the experience of wellbeing in people's everyday lives, as far as possible, in their everyday language and then to explore the underlying factors that make wellbeing more or less likely, again first via observation of the dynamics at play and then via critical analysis. The basic orientation of RWB is the particular, towards capturing the quality of wellbeing within the specific context, rather than extracting distinct elements which can be ranked quantitatively against those from other contexts. In RWB, comparative assessment tends thus to concentrate on the case as a whole, exploring whether the dynamics that have been observed in one example hold true in another.<sup>10</sup>

In the previous two sections, we considered some of the theoretical underpinning of relational wellbeing: the relational understanding of personhood comprising both multiplex individuals and interconnection with others, the constitution of wellbeing via three interlinked dimensions, the inevitability of relationships and their importance in enabling people to meet diverse forms of needs, and the significance of research methods and objectives in shaping representations of wellbeing. In the next section, we present a case study from our research in Zambia, which explores how these theoretical points appear in social practice.

### 3. Case Study: A Meshwork of Kin

Children shifting between households is a common feature of kin-based support across much of Africa, as well as other parts of the world (see e.g., Carsten (1991) on Malaysia and Leinaweaver (2008) on Peru).<sup>11</sup> Specific practices differ, and we describe here only those we encountered in the course of our own research in Chiawa, Zambia. Reasons for children moving varied but generally involved the provision of care and/or labour. Stays ranged from short-term visits to virtual adoption. Motivations were often mixed. A wealthier relative might take the child of a poorer household, for example, at once to relieve his parents of an extra mouth to feed, to offer him the chance of better schooling, and to bring in another pair of hands to help with housework and the care of their own children. Children also sometimes initiate a move. People explained the practice to us via a general



idiom of collective identity ('they are all our children') and a generalised web of reciprocity ('you never know who is going to take care of the other one day'). Such terms reveal a textbook case of the relational subject introduced above: the sense that one's own identity is fundamentally intertwined with that of others and that this is sustained via material, as well as other forms of interconnection and support.

Our study location of Chiawa is a rural area of Zambia adjacent to a national park. We undertook research for two periods of approximately three months each in 2010 and 2012. This involved a survey conducted with an average of 390 people in each round of fieldwork, plus 46 case study life histories. Chiawa is an area of great contrasts. Large agri-business plantations existed alongside villages in which most households farmed at least some land, but few had irrigation or access to any but the most basic implements. Petty business or odd jobs also helped to eke out a living. The main source of employment was luxury safari lodges, where approximately 20% of the men we interviewed worked, mainly in domestic service on short-term, insecure contracts. A few women took on very low-paid work on commercial farms. Local amenities were very basic, with major markets, hospitals and government offices across the river, accessible only by a ferry that ran from dawn until dusk.<sup>12</sup> A fuller description of the methods, data, and analysis on which this section draws is available in White and Jha (2021).

The idea of 'meshwork' is set out by the anthropologist of material culture, Tim Ingold (2016).<sup>13</sup> Brown (2022, p. 59) describes it as follows:

"Ingold starts from Mauss' metaphor that humans find a place for themselves by sending out tendrils with which to connect and bind to others (Mauss 1954 cited by Ingold 2016, p. 10). These lines are dynamic, and framed as 'lines of becoming', in the sense that they can be used to visualise people's growth and movement (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, pp. 224–25, cited in Ingold 2013, p. 132). In places, many lines may be bundled together, twisted, looped and intertwined; in others, lines may travel alone (Ingold 2013, 2016)."

The 'meshwork' that these lines together create is not an inert settled grid, but living and growing as the lines interweave, knot, persist together, or connections unravel as people move on within their lives. It is never complete or made but always in the making. In this case, the loops, twists, and knots which constitute various forms of fostering relationships are the means through which individuals, households and family groups seek to sustain and advance wellbeing. Viewed as a whole, the meshwork may itself be seen as a collective attempt to ensure that as many as possible children and others who are vulnerable do as well as they can in a situation of high dependency ratios, in part due to HIV/AIDS, and generalised economic precarity (Harland 2008).

While the meshwork as a whole may seek to sustain wellbeing, that does not mean that wellbeing is inevitably assured for the individuals and households connected within it. In fact, fostering can pose serious risks to wellbeing, with trade-offs and contradictions evident both between different actors and between different dimensions of wellbeing. Recalling their time as a child spent in others' households, people often spoke of mental and physical hardship, discriminatory treatment, and sometimes outright cruelty. While adults might subscribe to idioms of kin unity, it was clear that these were in contest with narrower notions of self and self-interest, which favoured 'one's own' over 'other' children. There was a general understanding that for the child and the family of birth, fostering involved a trade-off between the subjective comforts of living together at home and the hoped-for material benefit of going to stay with better-positioned kin. Thus, some who had lived in kin households as a child described how they felt emotionally abandoned, believing that birth parents could not love them, as they did not come to save them from intolerable treatment. Birth parents spoke of suffering the loss of their children's companionship and worrying about their children's welfare. Mothers talked of the fear that children would 'forget I am their mum'. Samuel, who had suffered as a child in kin households and yet placed his own children with kin who lived nearer to better schools, described this trade-off quite explicitly. When his children told him of problems in their foster families, he said, he

counselled them to endure and obey their foster parents rather than forfeit their education by returning home:

“Sometimes you pretend all is well. Sometimes you have to pretend that certain situations are just ok when they are not.”

Children from poorer households may experience an immediate material benefit in moving to live with wealthier kin or from village to town. They do not necessarily enjoy, however, the same food or standard of living as others in the household and may have to do significant amounts of labour. This may reduce the material benefit they experience, for example, if their household labour restricts their access to school or the energy and time they have for their studies. Even if an overall material benefit remains, such treatment may cause emotional and psychological harm, as their experience of being exploited clashes with their expectations that they should receive fair treatment at the hands of kin. More generally, in addition to trade-offs between the material and subjective dimensions of wellbeing, there is a temporal one: the hope that hardship endured now will result in improved quality of life in future. Much of this rests on expectations of schooling, which in Chiawa, like many other places, is seen as the portal to employment and a better life. However, while schooling is typically promised as part of the fostering package, it may not always be forthcoming, and even if it is, it may not necessarily translate into better outcomes in the longer term.

Children’s movement between households can similarly have contradictory effects on the relational dimension of wellbeing. If things go well, the pre-existing relationships are strengthened. A child’s close connections with wealthier relatives may prove a valuable resource for her whole birth household, providing a basis on which to seek help in times of trouble. If things go badly, the relationship may be harmed, especially if the birth parents feel they need to intervene on their child’s behalf. But there is another danger, too. This is that the relocation will be too successful, that the child will come to identify with her new household rather than the household of birth. This has both a relational aspect—that the original parent–child bond will be compromised—and a material one—that the child will give any future support to the foster family rather than her family of birth.

In this section, we viewed the meshwork in terms of the wellbeing outcomes that it secures. This shows that while the meshwork may help to sustain higher levels of wellbeing overall, the benefits are not equally shared, and some participants may actually experience harm. Relationships may be contradictory, as well as solidary, and there are trade-offs both between present and future and between different dimensions of wellbeing. In the next section, we investigate in a little more depth some of the reasons for this differentiation of outcomes, as we consider the underlying factors that promote or undermine wellbeing.

### *3.1. Inter-Relations of Personal, Societal, and Environmental Drivers of Wellbeing (R3)*

Viewing wellbeing as a process and particular experiences of wellbeing as the outcome of the interaction of other underlying factors leads inevitably to the question: what are these factors? Researchers from different traditions will inevitably answer this in different ways, but our research has led us to identify three kinds of ‘drivers’ of wellbeing: personal, societal, and environmental. In categorising the drivers in this way, we again seek to resist the academic tendency towards segmentation. Personal drivers generate variability between individuals. They include factors such as personality, personal history, personal endowments, and direct interactions with others. Societal drivers, on the home ground of sociology, characterise the structures and processes that generate variability between social groups. They include factors such as the organisation of the economy, forms of social difference and inequalities, policy and politics, institutional structures and processes, technologies, social norms, and culture. Environmental drivers recognise the interdependence of all living beings and the earth. They draw attention to issues such as space, place, built environment, climate and biodiversity, pollution, and ecological sustainability.

As with the dimensions of wellbeing, these forms of drivers are constantly interacting and empirically intertwined. While there is a ‘givenness’ to individual variability, such

as a person's genetic inheritance, the way this develops depends vitally on how it is engaged with the social and environmental context. What is important is to hold all aspects in tension, not to lose individual differences to an overarching social or environmental determinism, nor to ignore the role of social structures and processes in shaping individual lives or the biosphere.

Having set out some of the theory behind the drivers, we now explore how they appear in the social practice of the child-fostering meshwork. It is the personal dimension of drivers that is most immediately evident at the surface of the interview transcripts. Narratives described foster parents' dispositions as kind and generous or mean and calculating. In general, it was the characters of others that appeared most highly coloured, especially when things had gone wrong. However, the self emerged as a relational presence when people described how they overcame hardships or resolved problems. The statement of Deborah, a widow who was HIV positive and had placed her three children each with different relatives, gives an example of this.

"I think what gives more faith in myself is the way that I look at life, the way I do things especially . . . the most important thing is I value the life of my children. . . because I look at myself as one. If I don't do it, if I don't have faith in what I am doing, I don't [have] faith in myself . . . how am I going to support my children? Because for now although I am a single woman my children are happy. I am able to find the few things that they need at school."

Deborah's comment 'although I am a single woman' refers to the fact that both economically and culturally, women who are without a husband tend to have it hard in Chiawa. In her case, however, she has been able to counteract this 'societal driver' via her intelligence, endowments, strength of character, and skills in social navigation<sup>14</sup>. During her husband's illness, Deborah took over the family finances and became a successful entrepreneur. This financial capacity meant that she was able to bear all her children's expenses so they would not be felt as a burden on their households of residence. She also guarded against any problems arising via staying in close touch with all her children, either via good relationships with the foster parents or the support of friendly intermediaries. This helped significantly to reduce the tensions and anxieties attendant to having one's children at a distance. Here again, we see the interweaving of subjective, relational, and material dimensions of wellbeing.

The same combination of strong moral character and relatively advantaged social and economic position was evident with Samuel (introduced above). By contrast, Faith, a very poor widowed mother of five, expressed great ambivalence about her oldest son's placement in the home of her husband's niece. The strong, active descriptions of Samuel and Deborah are replaced by an uncertain, anxious, passive narrative in which all of the initiatives are taken by others, and Faith feels at the mercy of people whose motivations she doubts. While she recognises that her son is better off in his new family, she fears that he will be lost to her:

"What will happen is that they would not like my son to come to me. They would prefer for him to be closer to them because then, when he is employed, he will support them. That will somehow pay them back for having supported his education."

Across the case studies as a whole, this interlinkage between strong personal character, better socio-economic endowments, and being able to negotiate more extensive personal networks on more positive terms is striking. Directions of influence are multiple. In Samuel's case, for example, he was born into a relatively advantaged household (his father had a regular salaried job) and was able to obtain a relatively good education despite suffering serious disruptions as a child due to the breakdown of his parents' relationship. He is also part of the lineage from which the Chieftainess of Chiawa is drawn; although as the lineage is large and the play of power within it complex, the social advantage this gives him should not be overstated. At the same time, Samuel has had to work hard to attain

his current position, which is significantly due to his own initiative, intelligence, industry, and social dexterity. His situation is, in turn, structured via wider societal factors. These include the opportunities that have been open to him because of his gender and the laws regarding the ownership and use of land, which mean that he cannot gain legal title to the land he farms and is vulnerable to its expropriation.

It is important also to situate the ‘societal drivers’ within the particular context. In Chiawa, while social differentiation is clearly visible among the local population, no one outside a very small elite is very well off. As we have seen in Samuel’s statement above, the relationships remained very delicate. This is in part due to the ‘societal driver’ of the meshwork as a whole: kinship. While some kin may be quite wealthy while others are very poor, statements such as ‘they are all our children’ indicate a strong ideology of unity and mutual support. In general, kinship may produce a somewhat levelling effect and certainly constituted an extra motivation to maintain good relations. For example, even when he was clearly wealthier and more socially influential than the people with whom his children were lodging, Samuel was extremely cautious about saying anything that they might experience as criticism and sought, above all, to keep the relationship good, even if he felt he needed to withdraw his child to place them somewhere with better prospects.

What, then, of environmental drivers? Geographical proximity is clearly an issue: it is easier to nurture relationships when people are nearby, and you can have regular contact. Distance is, of course, relative. Both Faith and Deborah had a son living with kin in the capital city, Lusaka. Deborah kept in regular touch via the good offices of a local lorry driver, through whom she sent whatever her son needed. Faith, on the other hand, was dependent on her son’s visits home to hear how he was doing. For her, Lusaka might almost be another world.

Looking beyond differentiation between individuals to the system as a whole, the poverty and vulnerability which animates the meshwork is underwritten by an environmental context of exposure to drought, flooding when the dam upstream opened its sluice gates, and threats to life and livelihoods by wild animals. This physical precarity is aggravated by the societal driver of regressive land laws noted above. This points to a larger pattern that societal and environmental drivers are deeply intertwined, just as we noted above for the societal and personal. Another example is geography. We have seen how important the lack of good schools in rural areas is in motivating households to place their children with others. At one level, this is about the local environment—what amenities are available. At another, of course, it is about politics and economics, the choices about where governmental resources should be invested, and the broader position of Zambia in the overall distribution of global resources. As we have seen most catastrophically with climate change, while it is vital to pay proper attention to the earth and other beings on their own terms, their evolution is critically shaped by societal conditions and the human activities to which they give rise.

### *3.2. Conduits of Power and the Making of Identities (R4)*

In this section, we introduce very briefly the final function of relationships, their role as conduits of power and the making of identities. In some ways, this returns us to where we began with the relational subject, as it requires us to consider in more detail the making of subjects and subjectivities and the ways that interpersonal interactions are implicated in the making of social difference.

In approaching this topic, we follow Foucault’s (1978) argument that power relations are not exterior to, but immanent within, other types of relationships (such as economic, family, or sexual relationships). This means that

“power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations”. (Foucault 1978, p. 94)

Power constitutes relationships and the immediate effects of the inequalities within them. Rather than emanating from ‘above’ from an abstraction like ‘the state’ or ‘the bourgeoisie’, Foucault sees power as generated from below, such that

“Major dominations are the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations” (*ibid.*)

In feminist and anti-racist work, such abstractions are brought closer to home as theorists explore how gender or race are ‘done’ and how forms of social difference are not just given but achieved via everyday social interactions. For example, West and Fenstermaker (1995, p. 9) describe how

“Rather than conceiving gender as an individual characteristic, we conceived of it as an emergent property of social situations: both an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and a means of justifying one of the most fundamental divisions of society.”

Individuals perceived to belong to a particular category are encouraged to ‘live up’ to the expectations associated with that category (e.g., that women should behave in an appropriately ‘feminine’) way and engage in action ‘at the risk of’ an assessment according to the expectations of that category (e.g., black students in majority white societies being expected to excel at sport but not in other subjects) (West and Fenstermaker 1995, pp. 23–24).

Mama (1995) takes this further into quite intimate relationships as she studies

“the nuances and intricate sets of social etiquette and behaviour, of betrayal and collusion, of inversion and resistance that constitute racism as a social process” (Mama 1995, p. 46)

Noting how women friends of Nigerian descent in London challenge one another as to whether they are ‘black enough’, for example, Mama shows that policing of behaviour happens within social categories as much as it does across them.

Following these theorists encourages us to push the analysis of relations within the meshwork a little further. This would see the impoverishment and disempowerment of Faith as an *outcome* of her engagement in the meshwork on very disadvantaged terms, succumbing to ‘the risk of’ gender assessment according to local stereotypes regarding women living without a husband. By contrast, Samuel’s economic viability and social standing would appear as the outcome of his ability to ‘live up to’ gendered scripts about ‘a man of power’ who is

“self-reliant, hardworking and successful. He provides all his family’s needs and helps his kin. He does not show fear, he is always calm and decisive, slow to anger but will defend his own and his family’s honour. He does not complain in hard times or show pain. He is generous and people come to him for advice”. (Dover 2001, p. 99)

Considering this example makes it clear how such interactions occur not just between people but also within them. Such internal dialogues may lead people to conform to positive expectations, as in Samuel’s case, or to combat negative ones in Deborah’s, as she seeks to make a good life for herself and her children “although I am a single woman”.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper uses a combination of theoretical discussion and case study analysis to explore how the relational figures in relational wellbeing. It sets out a distinctive approach to wellbeing that derives from a relational ontology and qualitative research in the global South. Our experience of applying RWB with BAME staff in the NHS hospital trust shows that it transfers without difficulty to global North contexts, using both participatory methods and quantitative assessment. In setting out the basics of the approach here, we therefore invite others to see how it can be tested and extended in different contexts and using other methods.

The paper shows RWB to be an integrative approach, which approaches wellbeing ‘in the round’ as having at once material, relational and subjective dimensions. While these dimensions often reinforce one another, they may also be in tension, and people may

consciously trade off present wellbeing in the hopes of a better future. People use relationships to satisfy a wide range of needs, especially in contexts where resource distribution is profoundly unequal, and state welfare provision is very limited. While we can imagine such relationships as a meshwork, with multiple overlapping loops, ties and knots which make it seem substantial, we also recognise that these relationships are living things; they need to be tended to and nurtured; and they can be damaged, severed, or simply wither away. Navigating the relationships which sustain wellbeing involves considerable skill, both at the personal and the collective level.

If the surface of wellbeing comprises the meeting of needs, including the capabilities to be connected and feel good, these ‘outcomes’ are generated by the interactions within a set of underlying drivers. Just as the dimensions of wellbeing comprehend both the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ aspects of human existence, so too do the drivers extend from the personal through the societal and environmental. Acknowledging all three forms of drivers helps to overcome disciplinary divisions that emphasise the individual while ignoring the systemic, or the structural to the erasure of agency, or the human to the exclusion of the wider biosphere. But viewing the drivers in this way also has a practical dimension: in mobilising for change, people need both to acknowledge and confront resistance within themselves, and identify and address external obstacles, while becoming increasingly aware of the ways in which these at once interact and are distinct.

Underlying all of this is a relational ontology, which views people as relational subjects, navigating their own lives while being essentially intertwined with others. Critically, however, when wellbeing discourse is typically rather shy of power, we have seen that these relationships are not neutral but bearers of social difference and inequality. Different people begin with different endowments of personal characteristics, social positioning, and environmental access. Interpersonal interactions may exacerbate or ameliorate such differences, as they are shaped by broader resources, systems, and structures. Agency that is exercised at this level will serve to mitigate, reinforce, or combat hegemonic dynamics of domination and enablement, and it is these that will ultimately limit or engender opportunities for sustained individual and collective wellbeing.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We recognise the limitations of this amalgamated term, ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’. We use it as shorthand, whilst acknowledging that it is an artificial category that implies a unity across multiple diverse communities.

<sup>2</sup> This case is discussed in much more detail in White and Jha (2021).

3 Economic wellbeing may also be used in this more expansive way, to describe how the economy as a whole is doing.  
 4 'Wellbeing' was not a term that was familiar to people in these local contexts. We therefore asked people about 'living well',  
 which as a more tangible construction was more easily understood by our research participants.  
 5 This quote is drawn from our research in Chiawa which is introduced in the case study section below.  
 6 Comments like this are very common, and have been noted many wellbeing researchers.  
 7 We describe these different understandings of wellbeing in much more detail, including their approach to relationships, in White  
 (2016, 2017).  
 8 We recognise that these are deeply flawed indices of polarity, and use them only as shorthand. As has been amply demonstrated,  
 these compass point categories suppress critical differences between highly diverse societies, and are markers of cultural politics  
 rather than real geographies. Nevertheless, as these are terms commonly used in academic wellbeing debates, we feel we must  
 address them here.  
 9 The OECD Better Life index can be found at <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/#/11111111111> (accessed on 20 October 2023).  
 10 Our paper considering whether the tenets of self-determination theory are supported by our Zambia data is an example of this  
 kind of comparative approach (White and Jha 2018).  
 11 Naming these practices is contentious—locally they are simply seen as parenting. 'Fostering' and 'adoption' can evoke formal,  
 state-aided processes. 'Circulation' suggests a systemic process, and 'child mobility' may stand for migration. 'Fostering' is the  
 most common term in the literature. For simplicity, therefore, we use this term here, and distinguish linguistically between 'birth'  
 and 'foster parents', despite the fact that this is not the practice in Chiawa.  
 12 A new bridge and road have since been built.  
 13 Other writers also use the term, see for example Escobar (2008).  
 14 For more on social navigation see Vigh (2009).

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Article

# Adversarial Growth among Refugees: A Scoping Review

Mira Elise Glaser Holthe and Kerstin Söderström \*

Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, 2418 Elverum, Norway

\* Correspondence: kerstin.soderstrom@inn.no

**Abstract:** Background: The main aims of this scoping review are to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing knowledge about adversarial growth among refugees, and to gain insight into the complexity of post-trauma development. Methods: We applied a systematic search strategy resulting in the inclusion of 43 quantitative and qualitative empirical studies. Our findings underscore the prevalence of growth as a common phenomenon among refugees, emphasizing the positive associations with problem-focused coping, optimism, positive reappraisal, religiosity, and social support. Additionally, this review sheds light on the qualitative experiences and outcomes of growth, particularly pro-social outcomes, and the cultural and religious aspects of growth processes. Findings concerning the role of time and post-migration factors on growth processes highlight the need for more studies among established refugees. In sum, the findings supplement and lend nuance to pathology-oriented research, while acknowledging the severity of suffering and trauma and their consequences for individuals. We suggest that further research should focus on existential aspects and theories of growth: compassion, altruism, and pro-sociality following trauma, and the importance of religious and cultural elements in growth processes.

**Keywords:** post-traumatic growth; adversarial growth; refugees

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Who and What Is a Refugee?

As of the beginning of 2023, more than 108 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced due to humanitarian reasons, natural disasters, or conflicts. Among them, 53.2 million are internally displaced, 32.5 million are refugees, and 4.9 million are asylum seekers (UNHCR 2023). According to the 1951 UN refugee convention, a refugee is someone compelled to leave their country due to persecution, war, or violence, possessing a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or group membership. Although most displaced individuals find refuge in developing countries, primarily in the Middle East and Africa, the influx of refugees into European nations peaked in 2015, subsequently leading to more restrictive immigration policies. Most of those arriving in Europe since 2016 face prolonged stays, sometimes spanning years, in refugee camps characterized by dire living conditions. The situation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kluge et al. 2020; Piguet 2020).

The ongoing Russian–Ukrainian war has resulted in over eight million refugees settling in Europe (UNHCR 2023). Refugees from other conflicts face closed borders, heightened movement restrictions, economic disruptions, and nationalistic sentiments. Concerns have been raised by aid and human rights organizations regarding inconsistent government asylum determinations, discriminatory public attitudes, and varying interest in different refugee groups (Amnesty International 2022; Bø and Fuglestad 2022; Fiankan-Bokonga 2022).

Analyses of newspaper coverage in Spain and Norway of immigrants and asylum seekers highlighted two significant news frames: refugees as victims and refugees as a threat (Franquet Dos Santos Silva et al. 2018). A third discourse is the depiction of unique refugees who, seemingly against all odds, have grown wiser and stronger through their

hardships. These frames contribute to normative concepts stereotyping refugees as either 'good' or 'bad', "worthy" versus "unworthy" (Malkki 1996) and create social distance between the hosting society and refugees as 'the others'. Gender stereotypes further perpetuate biased representations, portraying women and children as passive victims and males more often as potential threats (Szczepanik 2016). These media portrayals shape public perceptions, limiting understanding of refugee experiences to a superficial, negatively skewed perspective (Malkki 1996). Refugees see the negative representation of their image as leading to hatred towards them (Aldamen 2023).

Not only public media but also the research community has been criticized for reinforcing distorted perceptions of refugee populations. Psychological research, particularly on trauma and adversity among refugees, has faced criticism for its focus on dysfunction and maladaptive responses rather than acknowledging growth and positive adaptation (Al-Krenawi et al. 2011). However, recent years have seen a surge in publications on adversarial growth.

In this article, based on the work of Holthe (2023), we attempt to balance the claim that psychology has been obsessed with the negative in people (Ingram and Snyder 2006) by presenting new research findings and psychological theories on post-adversarial growth, such as Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995) theory of post-traumatic growth (PTG) and Joseph and Linley's (2005) organismic valuing theory of growth. We wish to contribute to a nuanced understanding of adversarial growth among refugees, challenging stereotypes and highlighting the role of host countries in shaping outcomes. Our objective is to offer an overview of current knowledge on adversarial growth among refugees, identify gaps in the research literature, and discuss implications for policy and further research.

This review builds upon and supplements earlier reviews by Chan et al. (2016) and Sims and Pooley (2017) and the recent replication of the Sims and Pooley review to include relevant publications from 2016 to 2023 by Sultani et al. (2024). Additionally, it compares with Şimşir Gökalp and Haktanir's (2022) meta-synthesis of qualitative studies only on the post-traumatic growth (PTG) experiences of refugees, the review by Von Arcosy et al. (2023) where the relationship between PTG and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was investigated, and the most recent review by Sultani et al. (2024) including research on the use of therapy in promoting PTG. The present review finds its place in this pool of past and recent reviews by incorporating post-migration factors, more qualitative studies, and an expanded search strategy. All 43 reviewed publications are listed in an appended table for reader reference.

Together, the previous and present reviews are expected to form a firm evidence base that contributes to "re-story existing narratives of refugee suffering, so that endurance, talent, and hard work, add to the ways young refugees are represented within discourses on refugee integration within the policies, practices and public perceptions of receiving countries" (Kohli et al. 2023).

### *1.2. Experiences of Adversity and Consequences for Health*

Many refugees have undergone a multitude of potentially traumatic events over prolonged periods, both before and during flight and after resettlement (Berger and Weiss 2003). Forced relocation itself can be considered a traumatic event, with common adversities including physical and sexual assault, persecution, torture, witnessing the deaths of loved ones, starvation, disease, and the destruction of homes and belongings (Chan et al. 2016). Exposure to war- and flight-related trauma is associated with a range of negative psychological and psychosocial health effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and harmful substance use (Fazel et al. 2005; Silove et al. 1997).

The role of post-migration factors on refugees' wellbeing has received less attention, but existing studies indicate that stressors such as loss of social and occupational roles, social isolation, discrimination, poverty, and ongoing conflict in the country of origin consistently predict depression more strongly than war exposure (Keles et al. 2016; Miller and Rasmussen 2010). Existing literature reviews on adversarial growth (Chan et al. 2016;

Sims and Pooley 2017) suggest a need for more studies on how time and post-migration stressors might influence growth processes.

Given the challenging experiences of many refugees, medical and psychological research has understandably focused on traumatic experiences and their negative consequences (Sims and Pooley 2017). The interest in refugees' mental health, particularly PTSD, gained prominence following the American Psychiatric Association's recognition of PTSD in 1980 (Pupavac 2006). While PTSD literature has provided valuable insights, it has predominantly focused on maladaptive responses and risk factors, neglecting equally crucial factors indicating and supporting resilience and healthy adaptation (Al-Krenawi et al. 2011). A singular focus on psychopathology may impede recovery and obscure the potential for growth, as argued by Shakespeare-Finch and Lurie-Beck (2014). We align with Al-Krenawi et al.'s (2011) statement; just as health cannot be defined as the absence of disease, traumatic experiences cannot exclude competency and growth. Moreover, a more inclusive approach to post-trauma development is necessary, based on the observation that most survivors of war do not show evidence of a diagnosable psychiatric disorder (Jayawickreme et al. 2019; Şimşir Gökalg and Haktanir 2022).

### 1.3. Central Concepts and Theories of Adversarial Growth

The belief that confronting and grappling with significant life difficulties can lead to positive change and transformation is rooted in ancient myth, literature, and religion. However, it was only in the 1990s, with the rise of positive psychology, that Western psychology's interest in post-traumatic growth significantly increased (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). Various concepts and theories focusing on healthy adaptation after adversity emerged, including hardiness, thriving, stress-related growth (Park et al. 1996), benefit finding (Affleck and Tennen 1996), adversity-activated development (Papadopoulos 2007), salutogenesis (Antonovsky 1987), and resilience (Rutter 1987). Resilience, according to Bonanno (2004), is the most common natural reaction to trauma, differing from PTSD and chronic grief. While both resilience and growth theories share several features, resilience is often described as "bouncing back" after trauma, whereas adversarial growth can be conceptualized as "bouncing forward", involving a transformative component resulting from the struggle with trauma (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004).

In this review, we use adversarial growth as an umbrella term encompassing two comprehensive and widely applied theories: Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995) theory of post-traumatic growth (PTG) and Joseph and Linley's (2005) organismic valuing theory of growth. The Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) theory provides a functional-descriptive model of growth, explaining how individuals grow, with a primary focus on social and psychological explanatory factors. The 21-item Post-traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) measures five growth factors: relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life. The PTGI and the 10-item PTGI-short form (SF) (Cann et al. 2010) are widely used scales for measuring post-traumatic growth.

Joseph and Linley's (2005) organismic valuing theory of growth accounts for why individuals are motivated to pursue growth, in addition to how growth occurs. Rooted in existential and humanistic psychology, this theory perceives humans as active agents with an innate drive for growth, emphasizing the importance of meeting fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the social environment (Joseph and Linley 2005).

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Review Question

Considering the context outlined above and with the goal of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of adversarial growth in refugee populations, our primary review question is broad: "What is currently known about adversarial growth in refugee populations?" Furthermore, we ask:

- Which factors or circumstances co-occur with adversarial growth?
- How are experiences and expressions of adversarial growth described in the reviewed qualitative literature?
- What is still poorly understood or understudied?

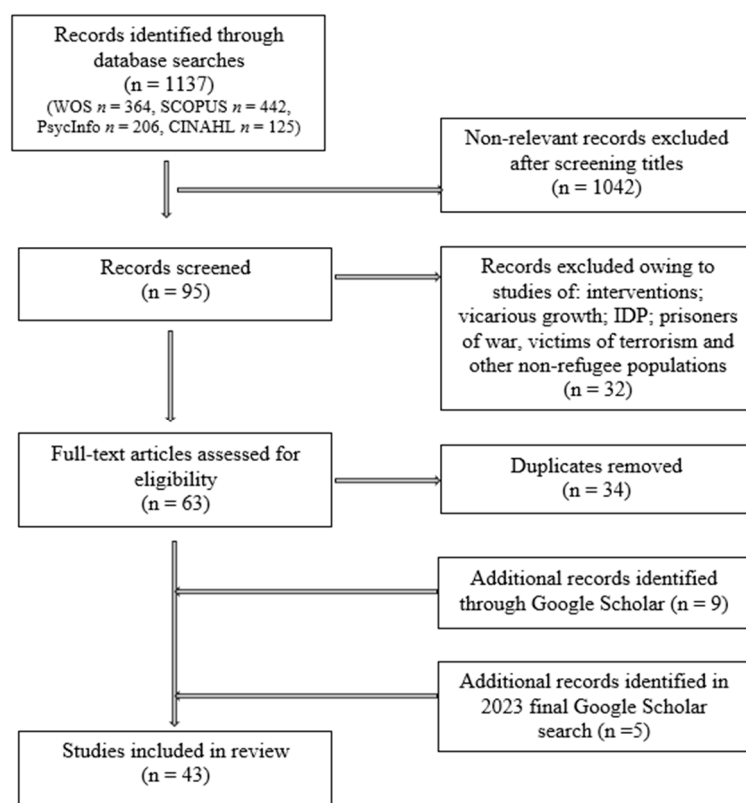
To address these questions, we adopted a scoping review approach (Arksey and O'Malley 2005) which shares characteristics with systematic reviews, such as being systematic, transparent, and replicable, while allowing for a broader exploration of the literature within a more expansive conceptual framework. Unlike systematic reviews, a scoping review typically does not assess the quality of the included studies. It does not typically assess the quality of included studies (Grant and Booth 2009; Peterson et al. 2017). The review proceeded through five stages as outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005): identifying the research question; identifying relevant studies; selecting studies; charting the data; and collating, summarizing, and reporting the results.

Inclusion criteria encompassed both quantitative and qualitative empirical articles published in peer-reviewed journals and full-text PhD dissertations, specifically focusing on exploring growth resulting from adversity among refugees, written in English, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish. Exclusion criteria included non-empirical work, review articles, books, book chapters, conference papers and presentations, intervention studies, vicarious growth, and studies about prisoners of war, victims of terrorism, and other non-refugee groups. Studies exclusively centered on internally displaced persons (IDPs) were also excluded.

## 2.2. Search Strategy

The initial search encompassed all published research studies up to fall 2020 on positive, post-traumatic, and adversarial growth among refugees in the interdisciplinary databases SCOPUS and Web of Science. The search term combination "refugee\* AND growth" covered relevant articles across all databases. To enhance search robustness using controlled subject terms, additional searches were conducted in subject-specific electronic databases, namely PsycINFO, CINAHL, EMBASE, and MEDLINE, using combinations such as "refugee\* OR asylum seeker AND post-traumatic AND growth". Although searches in EMBASE and MEDLINE did not yield new hits, six additional studies were identified in PsycINFO and CINAHL. A subsequent search in Google Scholar for publications between 2020 and November 2023 added five more studies to the review, resulting in a total of 43 included studies. A flow chart depicting the study selection process is presented in Figure 1.

Of the 43 included studies, 16 were published between 2003 and 2015, while 27 were published between 2016 and 2020/23, indicating a growing research interest in post-adversarial growth among refugees in recent years. The studies encompassed quantitative, mixed methods, and qualitative approaches, focusing on individuals predominantly from Asian and African countries. Most quantitative studies had a cross-sectional design, while qualitative methods primarily involved individual semi-structured interviews analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) or thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012).



**Figure 1.** Flow chart study selection process.

### 2.3. Analysis

Initially, the first author engaged in a close and iterative reading of the selected papers using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012) to identify key content and patterns, resulting in an initial set of codes. In the subsequent step, codes were organized into broader categories, reflecting commonalities and variations in the data. This process facilitated the identification of overarching themes that encapsulated key aspects of adversarial growth, providing preliminary answers to the research questions. Regular meetings and discussions between the authors ensured consensus on the emerging themes and their interpretations. The analytic process did not follow a linear progression; instead, it involved continuous refinement and revision as the researchers gained insight into the complexity of the results. The final stage of the thematic analysis involved synthesizing and organizing the identified themes into a coherent narrative. This narrative aimed to provide insightful answers to the research questions, shedding light on the multifaceted dimensions of adversarial growth among refugees. Throughout the analysis, the researchers strived to maintain reflexivity, acknowledging their own perspectives and potential biases to enhance the rigor and validity of the thematic analysis.

Detailed information on each included study, including study design, population, outcomes, and key findings, is presented in “Table A1: Descriptive and Key Findings from All Included Studies”, available in Appendix A. Throughout the text, we refer to Table A1, rather than all authors, when findings are repeated across many of the studies.

### 3. Results

The primary objective of this review was to offer an in-depth understanding of adversarial growth in refugee populations. The research questions focused on identifying factors and circumstances associated with growth, exploring how adversarial growth is experienced and expressed, and assessing gaps and understudied aspects related to adversarial growth in refugees. The question of aspects in need of further investigation is addressed in the Discussion section.

Adversarial growth emerges as a dynamic process shaped by various interacting individual, relational, and contextual factors. The complexity is categorized into five main sections, detailed in Table 1, which provides a reader's guide.

**Table 1.** Overview of results in themes and their sub-categories.

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3.1. Prevalence of Growth in Relation to PTS, Trauma Load, and Sociodemographic Variables
3.1.1. Post-traumatic Stress and Adversarial Growth
3.1.2. Number and Characteristics of Adversity
3.1.3. Sociodemographic Correlates
3.2. Individual Factors Related to Growth
3.2.1. Optimism and Positive (Re)Appraisal
3.2.2. Agency, Hope and Future Orientation
3.2.3. Cognitive Coping Styles
3.2.4. Coping by Doing and Consciously Avoiding
3.3. Social, Religious, and Cultural Variables and Aspects of Growth
3.3.1. Social Support and Sharing
3.3.2. Religiosity and Spirituality as a Source of Strength
3.3.3. Growth Nourished by Culture and Worldviews
3.4. Personal Experiences and Manifestations of Growth
3.4.1. Self-Image as Survivor with Newfound Strength and Wisdom
3.4.2. Changes in Life Priorities—Perspectives, Purpose, and Meaning
3.4.3. Compassion, Empathy, and Pro-Social Engagement
3.4.4. Growth, Mental Health, and Wellbeing
3.5. The Interplay of Time, Place, and Post-Migration Factors
3.5.1. The Passing of Time
3.5.2. Post-Migration Factors

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### *3.1. Prevalence of Growth in Relation to Post-traumatic Stress, Trauma Load, and Sociodemographic Variables*

#### *3.1.1. Post-Traumatic Stress and Adversarial Growth*

Like in all the previous reviews, we found that post-traumatic stress does not preclude adversarial growth, and vice versa. Growth was reported across all studies, even in clinical samples with high PTSD levels. PTSD symptoms and emotional distress were generally described as substantial. The relationship between post-traumatic stress and growth appears to be inconclusive or nuanced. There were no associations in some studies (e.g., Ai et al. 2007), a significant linear association reported in some studies (e.g., Cengiz et al. 2019), and a curvilinear relationship when considering age and trauma type (Shakespeare-Finch and Lurie-Beck 2014). Wen et al. (2020) identified that the score of PTG and PTSD grew together until a certain point, and after that, the PTSD scores would rise, while the PTG score would diminish. These mixed findings on the relationship between PTG and PTSD are in line with the findings of Sultani et al. (2024).

With one exception, all quantitative and mixed methods studies used the PTGI (PTGI-SF, PTGI-C-R) to measure growth. Not all studies reported the PTGI scores. The range of PTGI scores is from 0–105, with higher scores indicating more perceived growth. The distribution of PTGI scores were as follows:

8 studies: high or relatively high PTGI scores (range 64.96–84.49)

5 studies: moderate PTGI scores (range 49.11–62.54)

2 studies: low PTGI scores (range 44.10–47.4)

#### *3.1.2. Number and Characteristics of Adversity*

Findings regarding correlations between PTGI scores and trauma load differed, with some studies showing significant positive associations (Acquaye et al. 2018; Hussain and Bhushan 2011), a dose–response relationship where higher trauma loads correlated with lower PTGI scores (Rosner and Powell 2006), and others finding no significant relationship (Powell et al. 2003; Sleijpen et al. 2016; Ssenyonga et al. 2013). Notably, trauma load appears to exhibit a clearer relationship with PTSD symptoms than with growth (see Table A1 in

Appendix A). Some studies highlighted that trauma type and characteristics predicted PTGI scores (Kroo and Nagy 2011; Ochu et al. 2018). Additionally, former refugees reported higher growth levels than internally displaced persons (IDPs), suggesting an association between growth and experiences based on group membership (Powell et al. 2003; Rosner and Powell 2006). These findings align with earlier meta-review conclusions that trauma characteristics influence the relationship between growth and distress (Shakespeare-Finch and Lurie-Beck 2014). In summary, post-traumatic growth is common and co-exists with, rather than replaces, distress and disorder.

### 3.1.3. Sociodemographic Correlates

The review suggests that a young age (Kopecki 2010; Powell et al. 2003) and female gender are positively associated with growth (Sultani et al. 2024), but the findings are mixed and inconclusive (see Table A1, Appendix A). In specific studies (Acquaye 2017; Hussain and Bhushan 2011; Kopecki 2010), females reported significantly more growth than males. However, Cengiz et al.'s (2019) study found only slightly higher PTGI scores among females. Other studies found either no difference between the sexes (Kira et al. 2018; Powell et al. 2003), or the opposite, that males reported significantly higher PTGI scores than females (Ochu et al. 2018; Kroo and Nagy 2011).

Inconsistent results were observed in studies assessing the association between income sufficiency and growth. Two studies found an association between sufficiency of income and growth (Cengiz et al. 2019; Rizkalla and Segal 2018), while two did not (Ersahin 2020; Rosner and Powell 2006).

Despite indications of the roles of gender, age, and income, this review cannot pinpoint clear sociodemographic correlates, emphasizing the need for detailed contextual descriptions and attention to gendered trauma load and coping strategies in future studies.

## 3.2. Individual Factors Related to Growth

Capturing the essence of the findings from many of the reviewed studies is Copelj et al.'s (2017) description of the process of growth as based on openness to opportunities and experience, increased awareness of personal strengths, social connectedness, and a proactive approach to dealing with situations.

### 3.2.1. Optimism and Positive (Re)Appraisal

Having positive world assumptions, a positive disposition, and using positive appraisal and reinterpretation to find constructive aspects of one's traumatic experiences, were described as positively related to and predictive of growth across studies. Strategies such as a positive refocus on planning, putting into perspective and actively suppressing competing activities, significantly and positively predicted growth. Participants used positive reframing to modify and accept their surroundings, and positive (re)appraisal also mediated the positive effect of other variables on PTG (see Table A1, Appendix A).

### 3.2.2. Agency, Hope, and Future Orientation

Hirad (2018) describe forward movement—in thoughts, beliefs, and actions—as an overarching theme of refugee PTG. Future orientation, forward thinking, goal-directed behavior, the ability to set long-term goals, and willful thinking were positively associated with growth in several studies. Participants reported that they had become better at tolerating uncertainty and felt more open to new experiences (see Table A1, Appendix A).

Hope, defined as a positive motivational state resulting from (perceived) agency and available pathways towards important goals (Snyder and Lopez 2001), was positively associated with PTG in several studies (Abraham et al. 2018; Şimsir et al. 2018; Umer and Elliot 2019; Uy and Okubo 2018). Participants described hope as a motivational factor that aided goal- and future-oriented coping (Copelj et al. 2017; Copping et al. 2010; McCormack and Tapp 2019). Ai et al. (2007) highlight the motivational value of the perception—whether

illusory or not—of having the means to accomplish positive outcomes, and Kroo and Nagy (2011) found agency thinking necessary for all goal-directed thoughts.

### 3.2.3. Cognitive Coping Styles

The review findings are somewhat inconclusive, but indicate that problem-focused coping (i.e., coping aimed at resolving the stressful situation or altering the source of the stress) and cognitive restructuring coping strategies are positively associated with PTG (Copelj et al. 2017; Ersahin 2020; Kopecki 2010; Ochu et al. 2018; Rosner and Powell 2006). Yet, Ai et al. (2007) found no effect of problem-focused coping on growth, and pointed out that the successful use of problem-focused coping requires the ability to identify solution options, which might be difficult in a migration or postwar context. Kopecki (2010) did, however, find a positive relationship between the use of problem-focused coping strategies and growth, possibly because being actively involved with a problem might increase feelings of self-efficacy, strength, and new possibilities in life. Similarly, Ersahin (2020) concluded that problem-focused coping probably promoted growth through helping individuals become more active in rebuilding their lives, and seeking social support and religious togetherness.

### 3.2.4. Coping by Doing and Consciously Avoiding

In line with Hobfoll et al.'s (2007) action-focused approach, taking action based on conscious decisions to change one's life for the better, e.g., pursuing educational and career aspirations, was found to aid coping and the overcoming of past trauma and present stressors (Copelj et al. 2017; Teodorescu et al. 2012; Wehrle et al. 2018). Emotional avoidance is often associated with negative outcomes, such as prolonged grief. However, avoidance also serves adaptive functions, such as helping individuals regulate the emotional pain of a loss (Bonanno et al. 1995). While a negative relationship between avoidance coping and PTG was reported by Ai et al. (2007), findings from other studies indicate that avoidance coping might be beneficial in some cases. For example, Uy and Okubo (2018) found that, while trauma disclosure and the construction of a trauma narrative aided coping, participants found it helpful to avoid thinking about trauma in their everyday life, through staying busy and focusing on their future goals. Conscious efforts to steer focus away from negative loop-thinking and painful memories was found to be a helpful coping strategy by Şimşir et al. (2018) and Maung (2018). Similarly, conscious efforts during the early stages of post-migration to detach from national identity served as a defense against being reminded of painful experiences (Kim and Lee 2009). For some participants, long-term avoidance coping, rather than attempts to integrate trauma narratives through effortful rumination, was crucial in defining a positive, future-oriented life philosophy (McCormack and Tapp 2019).

Acceptance and positive reinterpretation coping might be most adaptive in situations that are not controllable by direct action (Updegraff and Taylor 2000). A philosophy of acceptance, particularly in processing painful experiences, was described as central for growth in several studies (e.g., Copelj et al. 2017; Copping et al. 2010; Maung 2018; Taylor et al. 2020; Uy and Okubo 2018). Examples of such coping were practicing patience and motivational self-talk, focusing on what could be learned from one's own experiences and how to move forward (Şimşir et al. 2018; Uy and Okubo 2018), and normalizing one's own psychological reactions, while focusing on the positive aspects of one's own situation and maintaining hope for the future (Abraham et al. 2018; Maung 2018).

## 3.3. Social, Religious, and Cultural Variables and Aspects of Growth

Moving from the individual to the larger social and cultural level, a consistent finding across studies was that social support predicted and facilitated growth (see Table A1, Appendix A), while a lack of social support and connectedness was associated with lower levels of growth (Ferriss and Forrest-Bank 2018; Taylor et al. 2020). Furthermore, exposure to war-related trauma seems to spark off prosocial behavior (Canevello et al. 2022).



### 3.3.1. Social Support and Sharing

Importantly, both giving and receiving support fostered growth. Relating to others was described both as a contributor and an outcome of growth (Copping et al. 2010; Hiraad 2018). A significant positive connection was found between the interpersonal factor of the PTGI, and distress and depression, indicating that those suffering the most evaluate positive relationships more highly (Cengiz et al. 2019; Powell et al. 2003; Rosner and Powell 2006).

Collectivistic cultural values, e.g., prioritizing the benefit of others over self, and a strong collective bond helped participants cope successfully in exile, as relationships with family, friends, and community were sources of purpose and hope (Hiraad 2018; Hussain and Bhushan 2013; Shakespeare-Finch et al. 2014). Trauma disclosure and the availability of someone trusted to talk to was described as important for wellbeing and growth, and participants built growth-promoting relationships both with fellow refugees and with locals in the new country (Abraham et al. 2018; Kim and Lee 2009; Şimşir et al. 2018; Sutton et al. 2006; Uy and Okubo 2018).

Social support and belonging are well known predictors of health and wellbeing and protection from poor mental health. Being a refugee often means separation from family and group, leaving the individual vulnerable and alone. This review indicates that those who manage to establish new relationships, maintain old ones, and have the capacity to seek and give social support, more often experience post-traumatic growth. However, trust, energy, and proactive contact seeking are often scarce in several phases of the refugee journey. In situations of danger, unpredictability, and distrust, more protective survival strategies can be expected.

### 3.3.2. Religiosity and Spirituality as a Source of Strength

Religiosity and spirituality emerged as significant themes in 21 studies and were generally positively related to growth and PTGI score (see Table A1, Appendix A). Rather than merely a growth outcome, participants described religious beliefs as a consistent source of strength, support, and wellbeing. Post-trauma religious changes mainly implied a strengthening of religiosity and were described as central in processing, accepting, and coping with life events. Religious faith, principles, and practices facilitated the development of meaning and coming to terms with trauma impact. It provided hope for the future, and helped participants let go of the past and accept fate. Religious beliefs also served to meet important emotional needs, through providing comfort and social support both in a spiritual sense and in a more practical sense, i.e., from religious communities. Religious teachings, such as compassion and acceptance of life events based on God's will or karma, both mirrored and fostered growth. Moreover, Hussain and Bhushan (2013) described growth and resilience as integral parts of a Buddhist upbringing, where suffering in life is considered the rule rather than an exception.

Ersahin (2020) found that, when used as a coping mechanism, turning to religion predicted growth over and above the strength of religiosity itself. Maier et al. (2022) referred to religious coping as something that 'complements nonreligious coping by offering responses to the limits of our personal powers' (p. 3).

Positive religious coping can include religious forgiveness and reappraising God as benevolent, while negative religious coping can include underlying spiritual struggles and views of God as punishing. The findings concerning the relationships between growth and positive versus negative religious coping were somewhat inconclusive. Kroo and Nagy (2011) found that negative religious coping was positively related to total PTGI score, while positive religious coping was positively related only to the subscale "Relating to Others". Ochu et al. (2018), on the other hand, found that positive religious coping was positively associated with PTG, both directly and indirectly through its effect on dispositional forgiveness. Maier et al. (2022) reported that the relationship of dysfunctional appraisal and wellbeing among refugees is mediated by spiritual needs, and furthermore, that negative religious coping, i.e., hardships interpreted as a punishment or threat, mediates the relationship between spiritual needs and wellbeing.

However, both positive and negative religious coping were weakly positively related to PTS, possibly because those who already exhibit higher levels of distress more often use positive religious coping (Ochu et al. 2018).

### 3.3.3. Growth Nourished by Culture and Worldviews

Several studies underscored the significance of delving into and considering cultural characteristics, strengths, and worldviews when seeking to comprehend growth mechanisms. Kroo and Nagy (2011) discovered that a value-based approach to life, emphasizing respect and gratitude, was associated with cultural characteristics linked to growth. The healing process highlighted the importance of collective identity (Prag and Vogel 2013), with some authors noting 'a tenacity for life as rooted in strong cultural values' among participants (Copping et al. 2010; Ferriss and Forrest-Bank 2018).

Many refugees come from societies where religion and spirituality play a significant role as life guidance, emotional support, and a source of meaning and group coherence. The findings indicate that religiosity is a crucial contributor to post-traumatic growth, potentially providing strength to endure and accept hardship. However, the receiving countries may be oblivious to the healing powers of religious belief, and those settling in secular Western societies may find little resonance with this spiritual dimension of life, creating potential gaps in mutual understanding (Maier et al. 2022).

## 3.4. *Personal Experiences and Manifestations of Growth*

### 3.4.1. Self-Image as Survivor with Newfound Strength and Wisdom

Participants across studies expressed growth outcomes as an increased awareness of personal strength and wisdom, along with a sense of personal and social responsibility. Rejecting a 'victim identity', they perceived themselves as survivors, emphasizing positive outcomes from their hardships. Adversity led to increased maturity, coping resources, life perspective, and knowledge to overcome future challenges. Participants learned to tolerate and accept life's challenges and uncertainty, becoming more patient and flexible (Copelj et al. 2017; Ferriss and Forrest-Bank 2018; McCormack and Tapp 2019; Prag and Vogel 2013; Shakespeare-Finch et al. 2014; Şimşir et al. 2018).

From rebuilding life from scratch, participants acquired new skills, recognized personal strengths, and expressed pride in their achievements. Surviving adversity also fostered increased self-trust and self-capabilities, along with a heightened drive and capacity for self-actualization. Participants reported more courage to take risks and shape their future in personally meaningful ways (Hirad 2018; Hussain and Bhushan 2013; Maung 2018; Sutton et al. 2006; Wehrle et al. 2018).

### 3.4.2. Changes in Life Priorities—Perspectives, Purpose, and Meaning

Commonly described growth outcomes involved changes in life priorities and an increased appreciation for life. Participants, through their experiences, developed an understanding of their life's purpose. Comparisons between their present situation and earlier circumstances or with those less fortunate led to new priorities and perspectives informed by gratitude, fostering a desire to give back to others (see Table A1, Appendix A).

Descriptions of new insights and perspectives were often related to existential dimensions, aligning with the organismic valuing theory of growth (Joseph and Linley 2005). For example, many participants felt more tolerant, sought peace with others, experienced closer connections with people and humanity, and felt closer to their 'genuine selves' after their experiences. Moreover, personal fulfillment and a more meaningful life were experienced by those concerned with, and supporting, others in need (Gilpin-Jackson 2012; Hirad 2018; Hussain and Bhushan 2013; Maung 2018; Sesay 2015).

Participants across studies were engaged in the search for meaning and purpose from their experiences (see Table A1, Appendix A). A particularly salient change across the reviewed studies was that of more intimate and meaningful relationships. Participants emphasized that they created meaning and purpose in life by valuing, protecting, and

caring for others (Copping et al. 2010; Gilpin-Jackson 2012; Hussain and Bhushan 2013; Kim and Lee 2009; Shakespeare-Finch et al. 2014; Sutton et al. 2006; Uy and Okubo 2018). A sense of meaning might be both a source and an outcome of the many findings describing increased compassion and altruism, described next.

In growth theories, meaning making involves understanding and reinterpreting a traumatic situation to rearrange one's core beliefs and goals and regain control. According to Frankl (1963), the primary motive of humans is to find meaning and value in their lives, essential for surviving trauma and suffering. Tekie (2018) found that average scores on meaning in life were significantly related with PTGI scores.

### 3.4.3. Compassion, Empathy, and Pro-Social Engagement

Participants across studies described how their trauma and survival broadened their consciousness, resulting in more inclusive empathy and compassion. It inspired a philosophy of giving forward, reflecting gratitude for finding safety in their new country. Enhanced concern for others' welfare and a deeper understanding of others' struggles helped participants connect socially and form meaningful relationships (see Table A1, Appendix A).

The search for positive learning outcomes of their own experiences, combined with an increased compassion, empathy, and sense of responsibility, was commonly described as inspiring pro-social engagement. Several participants found a newfound purpose in life—using their experience to help others and promote social justice. Their own experiences of suffering and survival provided a deepened sense of personal agency to help and empower others (Gilpin-Jackson 2012; Hussain and Bhushan 2013; Maung 2018; Shakespeare-Finch et al. 2014; Taylor et al. 2020; Uy and Okubo 2018). Engaging in various activities, such as political activism, community involvement, advocating for their people, and general social justice, fostered self-esteem, self-efficacy, and personal recovery, providing meaning and purpose (Hussain and Bhushan 2013; Sutton et al. 2006; Uy and Okubo 2018).

Proactive and pro-social behavior emerged as catalysts for growth, fostering closer relationships and facilitating personal development (Copelj et al. 2017; Wehrle et al. 2018). These findings align closely with Hobfoll et al.'s (2007) action-oriented approach, emphasizing the transition from contemplating meaning to engaging in meaningful actions as a promoter of growth.

### 3.4.4. Resilience, Health, and Wellbeing

Resilience, defined by Bonanno (2004) as a relatively stable trajectory of healthy functioning after a highly adverse event, is shaped by an interplay between psychological, biological, social, and cultural factors. Ungar (2008) highlights the ecological nature of resilience as the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, and of the individual's family, community, and culture to provide these in culturally meaningful ways. In the reviewed articles, resilience was positively associated with PTG, although emphasized as a separate construct and an insufficient condition for growth. Important sources of resilience were religious beliefs and practices, cultural strengths (e.g., collectivism) and worldviews, practical and emotional social support, and adequate financial resources (see Table A1, Appendix A).

In the meta-analysis of Helgeson et al. (2006), benefit finding was related to less depression and higher positive wellbeing but also more intrusive and avoidant thoughts about the stressor. Regarding growth and health, our findings indicate that growth is positively related with wellbeing, while the relationship with psychopathology is less clear (see Table A1, Appendix A). For instance, Sleijpen et al. (2016) found no significant association, while Kira et al. (2018) and Teodorescu et al. (2012) observed that PTG was associated with lower levels of psychopathology.

Summing up, the experience of and manifestations of growth across studies were characterized by perceiving oneself as a survivor, echoing Taylor et al.'s (2020) description of gratitude, acceptance, strengthened spiritual and religious beliefs, and a desire to

serve others. Resilience, wellbeing, and post-traumatic growth are intertwined and feed each other.

### 3.5. Growth and the Interplay of Time, Place, and Post-Migration Factors

In the introduction, we referred to studies showing that trauma is not an isolated, pre-migration event, but manifest throughout pre- and post-migration experiences (Copelj et al. 2017). Resettlement can involve feelings of relief and new hope but also of being overwhelmed by differences, experiences of discrimination, and a need to forget painful memories (Kim and Lee 2009). Post-migration stressors such as social isolation, poverty, and ongoing conflict in the country of origin have predicted, for example, depression. A pertinent question is how these factors, along with (waiting) time and uncertainty, might influence growth processes.

#### 3.5.1. The Passing of Time

A topic discussed in the literature is that, after trauma exposure, some amount of time might be necessary before growth can take place (Park et al. 1996; Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995; Taylor et al. (2020)). Uy and Okubo (2018) reported that participants did not actively engage in processing trauma until years after the war, when they had more resources available and their immediate needs of survival have decreased.

Teodorescu et al. (2012) found a significant negative correlation between growth and PTSD in participants exposed to trauma many years ago, suggesting that “the passage of time aids in the development of an authentic growth negatively related to psychopathology”. Similarly, findings from Kopecki (2010) indicate that time since trauma might be crucial for the development of growth. Helgeson et al.’s (2006) meta-analysis confirms that benefit finding is more likely to be related to a good outcome when a longer time has elapsed since the trauma.

However, time can also be experienced as lengthy, empty, and an obstacle to moving on. A major source of ongoing stress, frustration, and anxiety for their participants was the lengthy asylum-seeking process, which can thus hamper growth through maintaining or worsening psychological distress. Many of the participants in Gilpin-Jackson’s (2012) study described despair and re-traumatization as part of their immigration experiences, marked by endless waiting in uncertainty and the daily fear of being deported and being ‘forced’ to be dependent on the system.

#### 3.5.2. Post-Migration Factors

Resettlement can evoke feelings of relief and new hope but also more negative sentiments related to hardships in the new environment and re-occurring painful memories (Kim and Lee 2009). Importantly, those who had positive immigration integration experiences did not elaborate on the immigration part of their narratives, while the immigration narrative was integral to the growth stories of those with less positive experiences.

Tekie (2018) found that symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression were strongly related to post-migration living difficulties, e.g., worries about family, unemployment, discrimination, loneliness, isolation, and boredom. Teodorescu et al. (2012) documented that a weak social network and poor social integration were among the most important post-migration factors negatively correlated with growth. The participants interviewed by Ferriss and Forrest-Bank (2018) described how Western culture and values of individualism and busyness were experienced as major barriers to establishing support systems, community, and friendships, causing loneliness and isolation. The stress resulting from the loss of living in a collectivistic culture was negatively associated with participants’ growth. Abraham et al. (2018) emphasize that practices such as moving people between municipalities cause the destruction of social networks, which may create an obstacle to PTG through the loss of supportive, growth-promoting relationships.

As a conclusion, both pre- and post-migration stressors significantly contribute to the development and persistence of PTSD among refugees, with daily stressors representing

ongoing and often chronic threats to psychological wellbeing (Montgomery 2011; Porter and Haslam 2005). The role of post-migration factors in growth processes is underscored by the emphasis on time spent in safe and stable environments as a crucial precursor for growth (Park et al. 1996). This highlights the influence of host country conditions on facilitating or hindering growth.

#### 4. Discussion

The discussion departs from the insights of the findings, that to understand growth, one must comprehend the interplay of contexts, structures, and factors at multiple levels (Price and Martin 2018). As illustrated by Gilpin-Jackson (2012), participants' narratives of growth were influenced by various constellations of contextual factors, including war exposure, the nature of the trauma, sociodemographics, and the full scope of refugee and immigration experiences. First, we address the issue of stereotypes of refugees in media coverage. Then we discuss the question of factors that correlate with growth and, successively, the experience of adversarial growth, the role of post-flight conditions, and that of culture and spirituality. Due to the central role of Tedeschi and Calhoun's five-factor model of post-traumatic growth (PTG) in the review studies, we add a discussion about the cross-cultural applicability of the model. Finally, in Section 4.7, we address the question of research gaps and what is still poorly understood.

##### 4.1. Mediated Images of Refugees

In the introduction, we posited that the media portrayal of refugees oversimplify the complexity of refugee experiences (a.o., Esses et al. 2013). In public and political discourses, refugees are often characterized in stereotypic discourses that either overlook or 'glorify' strength and growth, minimizing suffering and the role of post-migrations factors in overcoming stress and regaining strength. One of the consequences for the refugee population, understood within the framework of the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann 1993), is that refugees fear social isolation through social media and hide their opinions, views, and preferences (Aldamen 2023).

In 2019, the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) released a statement expressing 'deep concern for the global rise of a political discourse that characterizes refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and migrants as threats to peace and security'. A more inclusive approach to post-trauma development was called for, based on the observation that most survivors of war do not show evidence of a diagnosable psychiatric disorder (Jayawickreme et al. 2019; Şimşir Gökçalp and Haktanir 2022). Academics were encouraged to take an active stance against xenophobic and anti-refugee discourses.

The findings of this and previous similar reviews offer a more holistic understanding of development after trauma capable of encompassing a broader spectrum of outcomes. In most studies, growth co-exists with distress and worry. This supports the assumption of similar underlying processes in post-traumatic growth and stress (Joseph and Linley 2005; Joseph and Linley 2006), illustrating the inaccuracy of victim, threat, or exceptional survivor stereotypes and demonstrating that it is possible to grow from adversity even without having fully healed from it (Hirad 2018). The results provide a nuanced knowledge base that better mirrors the variance of experiences of refugees and provides an evidence base for public and political debate.

##### 4.2. The Dynamic and Interactional Nature of Growth

Our primary review question was, "What is currently known about adversarial growth in refugee populations?" Part of the review question was to identify factors and circumstances that seem to correlate with growth and to supplement and update previous reviews. The overall findings reveal the dynamic and interactional nature of growth processes. Characteristics of growth at the individual level are distinctly intertwined with the relational domain, while contextual factors are challenging to isolate from individual and relational

factors. Together, the findings strongly indicate that psychological growth and healthy adjustment are not rare occurrences among refugees. They paint a more optimistic, healthy, and 'agentic' picture of post-trauma development and functioning among refugees. Simultaneously, it is crucial to recognize the severity of suffering, trauma, and the consequences of such experiences for individuals. As described by McCormack and Tapp (2019), participants' positive development "*was born of redefining human suffering that is unimaginable to many*".

To comprehend growth comprehensively, it is imperative to explore the interplay among contexts, structures, and factors at various levels (Price and Martin 2018). As exemplified by Gilpin-Jackson (2012), participants' narratives of growth are shaped by diverse constellations of contextual factors, including war exposure, the nature of trauma, sociodemographics, and experiences related to refugee status and immigration. In the introduction, we referenced studies indicating that post-migration stressors such as social isolation, poverty, and ongoing conflict in the country of origin have an impact on health, wellbeing, and the processes of growth.

The findings regarding the relationship between growth and mental health vary and the 'health benefit' of growth has been debated. Some suggest a curvilinear relationship between growth and distress (Kleim and Ehlers 2009; Shakespeare-Finch and Lurie-Beck 2014). Maercker and Zoellner (2004) proposed a Janus face model of growth, with post-traumatic growth on one side inducing positive changes and another side revealing feelings of self-deception and wishful thinking, with less desirable outcomes. Although the current findings indicate a positive relationship between growth and wellbeing, they do not provide a basis for firm conclusions.

Many of the current findings are similar to previous reviews, specifically that problem-focused coping, optimism, positive reappraisal, religiosity, religious coping, and social support are positively associated with growth. Our review findings indicate that some amount of time and stability might be necessary for growth processes to take place, suggesting the need for more studies on growth among established refugees.

Furthermore, research on post-traumatic growth has yet to integrate the nuances of refugee experiences and the role of ongoing stressors. As suggested by Chan et al. (2016), the assessment of growth may benefit from considering the ongoing traumatic circumstances in the lives of refugees. Our review indicates that post-migration stressors, particularly those related to immigration status, may play a significant role in shaping growth trajectories. Hence, the intricacies of the relationship between growth and mental health, the role of time, and the impact of post-migration stressors, to be discussed in more detail below, deserve more attention.

#### 4.3. *The Subjective Experience of Adversarial Growth*

Our sub-question was "How is adversarial growth experienced and expressed?" The inclusion of qualitative studies provided rich descriptions of the complexity of growth processes, as they allow for elaboration on topics, go into depth and breadth, and make visible how various aspects are intertwined. Thus, our review shed light on the qualitative experiences and outcomes of growth, particularly pro-social outcomes, and domains of growth. Particularly notable were the experiences and emotions of altruism, compassion, empathy, and pro-social behavior.

According to Stellar et al. (2017), self-transcendent emotions like compassion and gratitude are foundational of human sociality, being central in helping individuals form enduring commitments. Such emotions result from shifting attention from oneself towards the needs and concerns of others. Across the reviewed studies, participants reported increased altruism, compassion, empathy, and pro-social behavior following adversity. The same associations have been reported in previous studies by survivors of childhood and other trauma (Frazier et al. 2013; Greenberg et al. 2018). Observations of increased pro-social emotions and behavior in studies with Holocaust survivors gave rise to the term

'survivor mission' (Kahana et al. 1986; Lifton 1980), describing how survivors transform the meaning of their trauma by making it the basis for social action (Herman 1998).

The association between adversity and increased compassion is hypothesized to stem from adversity's links to heightened empathy (Lim and DeSteno 2016), and the idea that empathic emotion evokes altruistic motivation underlies Batson and Shaw's (1991) empathy–altruism hypothesis. Keltner et al. (2014) provide a comprehensive, multilevel framework for understanding the roots and mechanisms of pro-sociality in their sociocultural appraisals, values, and emotions framework. The Staub and Vollhardt (2008) theory about *altruism born of suffering* has a distinct focus on positive psychological changes that lead to helpful action after experiences of trauma and adversity. These theories, however, have not been systematically applied in studies with refugees.

Some studies reveal that stronger empathy and altruism is felt toward ingroup versus outgroup targets. Furthermore, they suggest that experiencing high levels of post-traumatic stress predicted less empathy and altruism (Canevello et al. 2022). The authors suggest that future research should measure both post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic growth simultaneously, and study its relation to pro-social emotions, attitudes, and behaviors in addition to empathy and altruism.

The findings of this review align well with those of Hiram et al. (2023), who depicted an overarching theme of moving forward with five specific growth themes: increased awareness of context; tolerating uncertainty; spiritual/religious attunement; consideration of others; and integrating into society. These findings shed light on the complex process of growth and adaptation in the aftermath of war and forced migration.

Linking back to the stereotypic media portrayals and the risk of silencing refugees' opinions and stories, these findings call for initiatives that bring forth to the larger audience the many pro-social outcomes and growth experiences.

The next part, the passing and experience of time and various post-migration stressors, also belongs to the subjective experience of growth.

#### 4.4. Time and Post-Migration Stressors

From the existing research, we know that waiting time in refugee camps, long asylum procedures, and the accompanying uncertainty can have significant negative and draining effects on individuals' psychological and physical health and on personal strengths and resources (e.g., Laban et al. 2004; Nutting 2019; Piguet 2020; Sleijpen et al. 2017). The effect of this, and of discrimination and marginalization, on possibilities for growth should be continuously addressed in research, considering that growths require some stability and depends on the social environment's ability to meet the individual's need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Joseph and Linley 2005; Linley and Joseph 2004).

Like Chan et al. (2016) and Sims and Pooley (2017), we suggest that more studies on how time and post-migration stressors might influence growth processes are needed.

Studies of growth among established former refugees is called for, according to Copelj et al. (2017), who call it a major limitation of previous studies "that their samples were comprised of recently arrived refugees whose level of success and adaptation to the host society was not known".

Lastly, although we chose to exclude studies of adversarial growth among IDPs, both due to group differences which might affect growth and to limit our scope, we do believe that a separate review of existing studies is needed, as IDPs make up the largest percentage of the world's refugee population.

#### 4.5. Culture, Worldviews, Spirituality, and Meaning

Psychological adjustment and subjective experience cannot be understood in isolation from social and cultural context, and assuming universal applicability of Western-centric psychological processes or concepts may be ethnocentric and biased (Al-Krenawi et al. 2011). In some studies, assessing trauma survivors' religiosity and worldviews in clinical settings was deemed important for promoting health, coping, and growth (Abraham et al. 2018).

Previous studies suggest that religion can serve as a meaning system enabling individuals to reframe their experiences and find coping resources (Park 2005). Spirituality following trauma may increase self-compassion, facilitating PTG (Khursheed and Shahnawaz 2020).

Constructions of mental distress and associated coping strategies are closely linked to cultural, religious, and political factors (Ruwanpura et al. 2006). Copping et al. (2010) emphasize the need to understand cultural conceptualizations and approaches to treating trauma for culturally competent trauma support. This review and Maier et al.'s (2022) findings highlight the significant role of religion and spirituality in mental health and the co-determination of resettlement quality and health resources by these factors.

However, in secular societies, the role of religiosity might be under-evaluated. Psychologists have historically tended to overlook or pathologize spirituality, reducing it to underlying psychological, social, and physiological functions (Snyder and Lopez 2001). Zoellner et al. (2018) provide an example of how faith-based elements, successfully integrated into therapy, contribute to growth.

The characteristics of growth are primarily related to psychological wellbeing, which includes existential aspects of life such as increased purpose, meaning, and self-acceptance (Joseph and Linley 2005). Based on this review, a valuable path to explore in more depth among refugees would be that of existential meaning making and growth. Existential meaning making involves an emphasis of the individuals' capacity to choose what they make of their circumstances and to create meaning in their lives when confronted with adversity (Evans et al. 2017). Exploring existential meaning making and growth among refugees, particularly using frameworks like the organismic valuing theory, offers a promising avenue.

In an interview-study about world assumptions among unaccompanied refugee minors, Gottschald and Sierau (2020) found all assumed aspects—benevolence, meaningfulness, and self-worth—in the participants' statements. Additionally, they detected a new sub-category of meaningfulness, namely the principle of a metaphysical plan. The researchers hypothesize that religiousness might reduce the likelihood that assumptions about meaningfulness are damaged in the confrontation with traumatic stressors. Related to this is Abraham et al.'s (2018) recommendation to investigate longitudinally which aspects of trauma might trigger or suppress core beliefs.

Basic assumptions and core beliefs are likely influenced by culture and early life experiences, shaping belief systems, values, and behavior (Al-Krenawi et al. 2011; Weiss and Berger 2010). Cultural differences in these aspects may affect growth processes, outcomes, and responses on commonly used measures of growth. Hence, we move to discuss the cultural appropriateness of the most common measure and theory of post-traumatic growth.

#### *4.6. Cross-Cultural Applicability of the Five-Factor Model of Post-traumatic Growth (PTG)?*

Growth theories often employ the same underlying processes that can result in PTSD (Linley and Joseph 2004). The growth process is initiated by a major life crisis that shatters prior goals, beliefs, assumptions, schemas, and ways of managing emotional distress. The struggle with dealing with trauma and the new reality in its aftermath, marked by ruminative activity, meaning making, and schema reconstruction, might result in positive changes. Growth characteristics are closely related to psychological wellbeing, including existential aspects such as increased purpose, meaning, and self-acceptance (Joseph and Linley 2005).

However, Tedeschi and Calhoun's five-factor model was not universally replicated. Powell et al. (2003) and Ersahin (2020) identified a three-factor model, while Kopecki (2010) and Maung (2018) identified four core categories of growth. Prag and Vogel (2013) identified a sixth theme, the ability to articulate the social narrative, emphasizing the importance of mastering and sharing the collective story of one's own people over the individual story.

Participants in qualitative studies articulated growth aspects not captured by the PTGI, emphasizing socio-cultural and behavioral components, such as increased self-awareness



and proactivity (Copelj et al. 2017). Shakespeare-Finch et al. (2014) point out that the strong endorsement of compassion and responsibility reported by their participants is not always apparent in Western research. Only one of the 21 PTGI items asks about compassion and then about accepting the compassion of others rather than becoming more compassionate.

According to Sutton et al. (2006), the role of religious beliefs in providing guidance and in meeting people's emotional needs is not well captured by the PTG model, where the focus is on the function of religious beliefs for cognitive processing and the development of meaning or comprehensibility. Ferriss and Forrest-Bank (2018) found some dissonance between the PTG construct and collectivism and Islamic beliefs and practices; 'new possibilities' was somewhat contrary to trust in God's plan, while 'personal strength' was challenging to translate because strengths lie in the family and not in the individual. Hence, challenges in translating PTG constructs to collectivist and Islamic beliefs suggest a disconnect (Ferriss and Forrest-Bank 2018). It was also difficult for the participants to distinguish between 'before and after' trauma, as they struggled with multiple, ongoing trauma over long periods.

The PTGI-X, which includes a spiritual and existential concerns factor (Tedeschi et al. 2017), warrants further investigation. The need to explore the role of religious beliefs beyond cognitive processing and meaning development, capturing guidance and emotional needs, is emphasized (Sutton et al. 2006). Regarding the PTGI, some findings indicate challenges in determining whether it measures growth or coping mechanisms and pre-existing strengths. Issues with assumptions in the PTG literature, particularly the pre-trauma context assumption, are raised (Gilpin-Jackson 2012), emphasizing the need to explore aspects triggering or suppressing core beliefs longitudinally (Abraham et al. 2018). The applicability of the PTG model across diverse cultural contexts needs further examination.

In sum, the discussion weaves together various elements, urging a holistic understanding of how refugees navigate growth and coping after adversity. It advocates for moving beyond stereotypes, acknowledging both the challenges and the resilience that contribute to growth. Based on the review, several areas remain poorly understood or understudied. The discussion points to a need for more research in several areas.

#### *4.7. Areas for Future Exploration: Unanswered Questions*

**Understudied refugee populations:** The discussion concludes by emphasizing the importance of paying attention to the experiences of people in refugee camps, dealing with long waits, uncertainty, discrimination, and marginalization. To foster growth, individuals need stability and support from their social environment. The review also highlights the necessity of studying growth among established former refugees. Finally, it suggests a separate review of existing studies on internally displaced persons (IDPs), acknowledging their significant representation within the global refugee population.

**Cultural context, religiosity, and worldviews:** Cultural beliefs significantly influence coping strategies. Understanding cultural nuances is crucial for providing effective trauma support. Our review findings indicate that further research might benefit from exploring and acknowledging culturally and religiously based strengths and coping strategies.

**Basic assumptions and core beliefs, and the PTGI:** Cultural differences in basic assumptions and core beliefs might impact growth processes differently. The conventional tool for measuring growth, the PTGI, may need reconsideration.

**Altruism, compassion, and pro-social behavior:** Growth often leads to increased altruism, compassion, and pro-social behavior. This area deserves more attention and exploration.

**Existential meaning making and growth:** Characteristics of growth are related to psychological wellbeing, including existential aspects like increased purpose, meaning, and self-acceptance. Further exploration in this domain is warranted.

Time and post-migration stressors: Existing research shows that waiting time, long asylum procedures, and uncertainty can negatively impact mental and physical health. More studies are needed, considering the role of stability and social environment on growth.

Biology and genes: Finally, and not mentioned in the previous text, Jafari et al. (2022) conclude that there is a gap of knowledge about possible relationships between resilience, post-traumatic reactions, and genetic variability. The authors call for more research in the field of genome-wide association studies (GWAS), referring to findings from a few, newly emerging studies that integrate genetic and psychosocial contributing factors to provide a deeper understanding of complex phenotypes (Maul et al. 2020). Choi et al. (2019) have suggested an integrative research framework for studying human genome-wide variation underlying the capacity, process, and outcome of psychological resilience. Hence, to pursue a truly wholistic understanding of post-traumatic growth, more research, especially through genome-wide association studies, is recommended.

## 5. Concluding Remarks and Key Practical Implications

Too much emphasis on problems and vulnerability among refugees carries the risk of ignoring people's strengths, agency, and competencies, and of enforcing stigma and stereotypes (Berger and Weiss 2003; Marshall et al. 2016). Categorizing groups of people as 'vulnerable' also risks distancing them from the wider society and reinforcing diminished expectations, while less attention might be given to societal factors that create adversity (Brown et al. 2017; Pupavac 2006). Together with Saleebey (2002) and Marshall et al. (2016), we stress the importance of continuously applying a strength-based approach committed to empowering people and acknowledging their agency, resources, and experience-based knowledge. Receiving societies have a crucial role in providing the needed tools and insights to solve problems and facilitate healing and growth.

We believe that continued research efforts into understanding and promoting growth processes can benefit both individuals and societies, and that increased focus on and knowledge about the complexity of outcomes of adversity related to forced migration has the potential to counteract and balance simplified, pathology-oriented and fear-based understanding and discourses. We also think it would be useful—in research, clinical work, and public debates—to adopt a stance of asking how we might develop and what we might learn from adversity, and from each other.

A more nuanced public discourse and a broadened research approach towards refugees and their experiences acknowledges heterogeneity and includes an understanding of 'refugees' as complex human beings with the resources, strengths, and developmental potential to handle and overcome adversity. Importantly, this does not imply that growth is merely an individual process or 'trait'; the factors and circumstances that influence growth include life events before, during, and after flight, personal characteristics and coping styles, cultural and religious beliefs, the quality of the social network, support from formal structures of society, and more. These factors play together in determining whether the potential for growth is nourished and promoted.

Recognition of the complexity in post-trauma development, and observations of the many refugees who do not develop psychopathology but adapt in healthy ways, have led to a call for a greater focus on strengths, resources and healthy development, as well as in the planning of interventions and practices (Goodman 2004; Ní Raghallaigh 2010; Omeri et al. 2004). The results from this review, especially those reflecting the subjective experience of hardships and growth, with due attention to post-flight and re-settlement issues, provide valuable insights for clinicians to facilitate more empowering post-traumatic narratives with refugee clients rooted in growth experiences. The detailed descriptions of various coping strategies provide important nuances to the common therapeutic emphasis of the talking-cure to integrate loss and trauma in one's personal narrative. Avoidance, efforts to forget and suppress, and concrete activities to rebuild life can lead to growth, especially when proper knowledge, control over the situation, and resources are available.

Further exploration of Hobfoll et al.'s (2007) 'action-focused approach' might be fruitful, considering the positive relationship between problem-focused coping and growth and the many findings describing how participants found meaning and recovery in pro-social engagement and activities. Knowledge about how growth can be facilitated through 'translating growth cognitions into actions' in order to "reassert the autonomy, sense of competence, and relations with others that are lost through trauma" (p. 349) might be useful also for intervention and policy development. Based on the strong altruistic impulses found among their participants, Taylor et al. (2020) suggest that it may be beneficial to allow asylum seekers and refugees to use this to contribute to society.

Based on the review findings, we dare to conclude that there is reason to be both optimistic and ambitious regarding the potential for growth, learning, and thriving after adversity. Before closing, we repeat Papadopoulos' (2007) timely reminder that becoming a refugee is not a psychological phenomenon, but a sociopolitical and legal one, with psychological implications.

#### *Strengths and Limitations*

A central 'prerequisite' for growth is that the traumatic events experienced are severe enough to shatter core beliefs and basic assumptions and schemas relating to self and the world. As pointed out previously, definitions of trauma, as well as such beliefs and assumptions, might differ between people who have grown up in different contexts and cultures. The degree to which this is taken into account varies between studies and methods. This must be taken into consideration when conclusions are drawn.

In most studies, including those in this review, there are no pre-trauma assessments of health, functioning, or PTG, which might make it difficult to determine whether the reported growth was trauma-induced or a result of other factors. Self-report measures, which are commonly used, also carry the risk of hindsight bias, different interpretations of questions, etc. Most of the quantitative studies were cross-sectional; thus, they cannot provide decisive information about causal mechanisms or tell us whether this is how people were, or if it is how they became. The characteristics, circumstances, and strategies of those who most clearly experience growth are difficult to strictly single out also, due to the limited literature.

A general precaution when interpreting qualitative studies is the reduced generalizability of findings due to small samples and purposive sampling. However, when a relatively high number of qualitative studies show corresponding findings, the transferability and trustworthiness of those findings is strengthened and should not be understated.

The current review's broad scope provides a comprehensive overview of the existing research literature. It must be emphasized that most of the identified studies come from the field of psychology, a natural result of the aim of balancing the adversity-focused research, using psychologically based search terms, and of both authors' background in psychology. It is possible that research on processes similar to adversarial growth among refugees, from other disciplines using other terms and definitions, went under the radar of our searches, and could have yielded further nuance to the results.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Descriptives and Key Findings From all Included Studies.

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies ( <i>n</i> = 23).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
Acquaye (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional.</li> <li>• 444 adult Liberian former refugees and IDP</li> <li>• Age range 28–65 years. 45.7% in the 31–40 age range.</li> <li>• 70.9% male.</li> <li>• Religious: 99.0% (93.2% Christian, 6.1% Muslim).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI.</li> <li>• The War Trauma Screening Index (WTSI).</li> <li>• The Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R).</li> <li>• The Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10).</li> <li>• The Post-Traumatic Stress Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI mean: females = 84.49, males = 79.56</li> <li>• Females reporting significantly more growth than males.</li> <li>• 79.1% met criteria for PTSD. No gender differences.</li> <li>• Co-existence of PTG and PTSD.</li> <li>• Findings indicate that people with dispositional optimism have a higher chance of experiencing growth after trauma than people who are pessimistic.</li> </ul>
Acquaye et al. (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional.</li> <li>• 444 adult Liberian former refugees and IDP</li> <li>• Age range 28–65 years. 45.7% age 31–40.</li> <li>• 70.9% male.</li> <li>• Religious: 99% (93.2% Christian, 6.1% Muslim).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI</li> <li>• PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5).</li> <li>• Religious Commitment Inventory–10 (RCI-10).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI mean: females = 84.49, males = 79.56 (same sample as Acquaye 2017)</li> <li>• Trauma and particularly religious commitment were statistically significant predictors of PTG.</li> <li>• The results indicated that when religious commitment is great, PTG is low, demonstrating that a moderate level of religious commitment is necessary for PTG.</li> <li>• The effect of trauma on PTG is stronger as religious commitment decreases.</li> <li>• Religion served as a coping mechanism and provided social support that aided healing.</li> </ul>
Ai et al. (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prospective study, 10-month follow up.</li> <li>• 50 Kosovar war refugees resettled in USA</li> <li>• 54% male.</li> <li>• Mean age 33 years, range 17–69.</li> <li>• Muslim: 96%.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 50-item Stress-Related Growth Scale.</li> <li>• The 17-item PTSD Symptom Scale.</li> <li>• The 27-item Multidimensional Coping Scale.</li> <li>• The 12-item Hope Scale.</li> <li>• The Communal Traumatic Events Inventory.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Score on the 50-item Stress-Related Growth Scale not reported.</li> <li>• No demographic correlates with either PTG or PTSD symptoms.</li> <li>• High average trauma severity score.</li> <li>• No significant reduction in PTS 10 months after resettlement.</li> <li>• PTG and PTS not correlated.</li> <li>• Co-existence of PTG and PTSD.</li> <li>• Hope and cognitive coping positively associated with PTG.</li> <li>• Avoidance coping negatively related with PTG.</li> <li>• Behavior coping had no direct effect on growth (despite correlation with cognitive coping).</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies ( <i>n</i> = 23).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
Canevello et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Survey experiment</li> <li>1660 refugees from the wars in Syria and Iraq residing in Turkey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI-SF</li> <li>PTSD Checklist—Civilian version (PCL-C)</li> <li>Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ)</li> <li>Study-specific questionnaire</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stronger empathy and altruism are felt toward ingroup versus outgroup targets.</li> <li>Post-traumatic growth associated with more cooperative tendencies.</li> <li>Post-traumatic stress associated with reduced altruism through lower empathy.</li> </ul>
Cengiz et al. (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>310 Syrian refugees living in refugee camps in Turkey</li> <li>Age: 38.1% between 18–29 years, 32.9% between 30–39, and 29% above 40.</li> <li>52.9% male</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI</li> <li>Impact of Events Scale–Revised (IES-R)</li> <li>Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ)</li> <li>Connor and Davidson Resilience Scale (CDRISC)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI mean non-PTSD group: 56.68</li> <li>PTGI mean PTSD-group: 62.54</li> <li>80% were classified within the PTSD group.</li> <li>PTSD group: higher trauma and PTGI scores than the non-PTSD group.</li> <li>PTSD and PTG positively correlated and co-existed.</li> <li>Wish to return to home country and income variables were risk factors for PTSD.</li> <li>Resilience had a moderate positive correlation with growth.</li> </ul>
Ersahin (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>805 Syrian refugees in Turkey</li> <li>Mean duration of Stay in Turkey: 6.17 years.</li> <li>383 females, 329 males, 93 no-response</li> <li>Age range 19 to 77.</li> <li>Religious affiliation: 83.7% Muslim, 1.4% Christian; 0.4% Jewish; 0.6% Non-religious, 0.5% Other, 13.4% Missing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI</li> <li>Impact of Events Scale–Revised (IES-R)</li> <li>Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ)</li> <li>The Brief-COPE</li> <li>Belief into Action Scale (BIAC)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI mean = 49.11</li> <li>Females scored slightly, but not significantly, higher on the PTGI than males (<i>M</i> = 54.17 vs. 51.15).</li> <li>No significant relationship between age and PTGI-scores.</li> <li>Higher levels of education corresponded to higher PTGI total scores.</li> <li>PTSD scores represented a clinical concern for 83% of the sample.</li> <li>Higher levels of PTS predicted higher levels of growth, indicating a positive linear relationship.</li> <li>Growth and PTS co-existed.</li> <li>Post-traumatic struggle predicted growth over relationships with others.</li> <li>Three-factor model of growth: Personal Strength, New Understanding and Appreciation of Life, and Relating to Others.</li> <li>Current income and perceived socioeconomic status (SES) did not correlate with PTGI scores, but perceived SES before the war negatively correlated with PTGI total scores.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies (n = 23).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
Ersahin (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>805 Syrian refugees in Turkey</li> <li>Mean duration of Stay in Turkey: 6.17 years.</li> <li>383 females, 329 males, 93 no-response</li> <li>Age range 19 to 77.</li> <li>Religious affiliation: 83.7% Muslim, 1.4% Christian; 0.4% Jewish; 0.6% Non-religious, 0.5% Other, 13.4% Missing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI</li> <li>Impact of Events Scale–Revised (IES-R)</li> <li>Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ)</li> <li>The Brief-COPE</li> <li>Belief into Action Scale (BIAC)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotion-focused coping hindered growth, while problem-focused coping promoted PTG, probably by helping individuals to be more active in rebuilding their lives and seeking social support and religious togetherness.</li> <li>Strength of religiosity strongly related to overall PTG. When used as a coping mechanism, turning to religion predicted PTG over and above strength of religiosity itself.</li> <li>The strongest predictor of PTG was problem-focused coping, followed by intrusion symptoms signifying PTSD, perceived level of SES prior to the onset of war, trauma exposure load, strength of religiosity, and hyperarousal symptoms signifying PTSD.</li> </ul>
Hussain and Bhushan (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>226 Tibetan refugees across two generations. 110 born in Tibet and later migrated to India, 116 born and brought up as refugees in India.</li> <li>50% female, 50% male.</li> <li>Mean age 43.96 years.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI.</li> <li>Refugee Trauma Experience Inventory.</li> <li>Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire.</li> <li>Impact of Events Scale.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI mean = 76.68</li> <li>Females reporting significantly more growth than males.</li> <li>Traumatic experiences significantly predicted PTS and PTG.</li> <li>PTS and PTG positively correlated.</li> <li>Generational differences in trauma, PTS, and PTG scores.</li> <li>Positive refocusing, refocus on planning, putting into perspective, and catastrophizing partially mediated the relationship between traumatic experiences and PTG.</li> </ul>
Kira et al. (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cross-sectional.</li> <li>502 Syrian IDPS and refugees (195 IDPs, 111 refugees in the Netherlands, 196 refugees in Egypt).</li> <li>67.7% male.</li> <li>Age 17–78 (M = 35.76).</li> <li>Religion: 96% Muslims, 4% Christians.</li> <li>Practicing religion: 36.4%, 63.6% not practicing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI.</li> <li>The Cumulative Trauma Scale CTS-S (short form).</li> <li>Identity Salience Scale.</li> <li>The Clinician-Administered PTSD Scale (CAPS-2).</li> <li>Post-Cumulative Trauma-related Disorders Measure (P-CTD) (Complex PTSD).</li> <li>Emotion Regulation Questionnaire.</li> <li>Negative and Positive Tertiary Appraisal.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI mean = 55.21</li> <li>No significant sex differences in age, PTG, income, PTSD.</li> <li>High rate of elevated PTSD (28.7%) and complex PTSD (41.2%).</li> <li>PTG associated with lower depression, anxiety, somatization, and PTSD.</li> <li>Identity salience enhancing mental health and PTG.</li> <li>Reappraisal and positive appraisal mediate the positive role of identity salience on mental health and PTG.</li> <li>Negative appraisal and suppression mediate the negative effects of cumulative stressors and traumas on mental health and PTG.</li> <li>Negative appraisal associated with higher PTSD.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies ( <i>n</i> = 23).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
Kopecki (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PhD-dissertation</li> <li>• 94 male and 109 female former Bosnian refugees, over the age of 18, who had resettled in Australia following the outbreak of war in Bosnia.</li> <li>• 16 years after the trauma.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI.</li> <li>• The Direct and Indirect War Experiences Scales.</li> <li>• The Post-Traumatic Stress Diagnostic Scale.</li> <li>• The Test of Self-Conscious Affect 3.</li> <li>• The World Assumptions Scale.</li> <li>• The COPE Scale.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI mean not reported.</li> <li>• Females reporting significantly more growth than males.</li> <li>• Age at the time of trauma had a strong relationship to PTG, with younger participants experiencing more PTG than older participants.</li> <li>• Almost a third experiencing high levels of distress, indicative of PTSD.</li> <li>• Severity rather than number of trauma experiences might influence development of PTSD (weak relationship between number of events and PTSD).</li> <li>• PTG and PTS co-existed in some participants.</li> <li>• Moderate negative relationship between PTG and PTSD symptom severity.</li> <li>• Positive world assumptions associated with higher PTG.</li> <li>• Results highlight the importance of active, problem-focused coping strategies in PTG.</li> <li>• Four-factor PTGI-structure. New Possibilities and Personal Strength loaded on one factor.</li> <li>• Spiritual change weakly or not correlated with all independent variables. Not surprising, as participants were from a largely secular society.</li> <li>• Time since trauma might be an important factor in the development of growth.</li> </ul>
Kroo and Nagy (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional.</li> <li>• 53 Somali refugees living in Hungarian reception centers. Settled refugee status.</li> <li>• 44 men, 9 women.</li> <li>• Age: 83% between 18–29.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI (with added open-ended item: significant life changes)</li> <li>• Separation and distance from family.</li> <li>• Type of trauma experienced.</li> <li>• The revised version of the Life Orientation Test (LOT-R).</li> <li>• The Adult Trait Hope Scale.</li> <li>• Religiosity and religious change: five-item scale.</li> <li>• The Brief Religious Coping Scale.</li> <li>• Open-ended question assessing meaning making.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI mean = 68.92.</li> <li>• Males reporting significantly more growth than females (71 vs. 58.6)</li> <li>• Trauma type (having endured forced labor but not imprisonment) was significantly related to lower PTG.</li> <li>• Satisfaction with living conditions not significantly related to PTGI score.</li> <li>• Family status and having information or contact with family not significantly related to PTG.</li> <li>• Hope, religiosity, negative religious coping, and satisfaction with perceived social support positively related to PTG.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies (n = 23).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
Kroo and Nagy (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional.</li> <li>• 53 Somali refugees living in Hungarian reception centers. Settled refugee status.</li> <li>• 44 men, 9 women.</li> <li>• Age: 83% between 18–29.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI (with added open-ended item: significant life changes)</li> <li>• Separation and distance from family.</li> <li>• Type of trauma experienced.</li> <li>• The revised version of the Life Orientation Test (LOT-R).</li> <li>• The Adult Trait Hope Scale.</li> <li>• Religiosity and religious change: five-item scale.</li> <li>• The Brief Religious Coping Scale.</li> <li>• Open-ended question assessing meaning making.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural characteristics related to personal growth: importance of family in appreciating life; emphasis of a moral approach to life; value of respect; sincere gratitude; role of religion in processing, accepting, and coping with life events.</li> <li>• Further categories of growth: Discovering and experiencing essential human values. Positive personal changes. Discovering the great contrast of present and earlier life.</li> <li>• 73.6% rated themselves as a great deal religious. Central in coping and thriving. Changes in religiosity all involved a strengthening.</li> <li>• Negative religious coping: moderate positive correlation with total PTGI score. Positive religious coping: significantly positively related to only Relating to Others. Religiosity: significantly related to total PTGI score and the Spiritual Change subscale.</li> </ul>
Maier et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 744 refugees (69.8% male) aged 18–67 years (M = 27.99)</li> <li>• diverse backgrounds resettled in Germany</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• World Health Organization Wellbeing Index (WHO-5)</li> <li>• Spiritual Needs Questionnaire (SpNQ)</li> <li>• Brief Measure of Religious Coping (Brief RCOPE)</li> <li>• Illness Interpretation Questionnaire (IIQ)</li> <li>• Bootstrapping mediation analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship of dysfunctional appraisal and wellbeing among refugees is</li> <li>• mediated by spiritual needs (i.e., existential and religious needs)</li> <li>• Negative religious coping mediates the relationship between spiritual needs and wellbeing.</li> <li>• Religion and spirituality show an important impact on integration of refugees</li> </ul>
Mwanamwambwa (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional</li> <li>• 267 Rwandan refugees living in Lusaka</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The General Health Questionnaire-28 (GHQ-28)</li> <li>• Spiritual Experience Index–Revised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The results suggest that there is a positive correlation between religion/spirituality and mental health.</li> </ul>
Ochu et al. (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional.</li> <li>• 407 adult IDP's and refugees</li> <li>• 55.8% male, 44% female.</li> <li>• Age range 18–76. M = 36.25.</li> <li>• 70.8% unemployed.</li> <li>• Religion: 91.4% Christian, 4.2% Muslim</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI.</li> <li>• Brief RCOPE.</li> <li>• Heartland Forgiveness Scale.</li> <li>• Impact of Event Scale–Revised.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI mean = 74.90</li> <li>• Males reported more growth than females. No difference in PTSD.</li> <li>• Trauma type: directly exposed survivors scored higher on PTS and lower on PTG relative to indirectly exposed survivors.</li> </ul>



Table A1. Cont.

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies ( <i>n</i> = 23).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
Ochu et al. (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional.</li> <li>• 407 adult IDP's and refugees</li> <li>• 55.8% male, 44% female.</li> <li>• Age range 18–76. M = 36.25.</li> <li>• 70.8% unemployed.</li> <li>• Religion: 91.4% Christian, 4.2% Muslim</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI.</li> <li>• Brief RCOPE.</li> <li>• Heartland Forgiveness Scale.</li> <li>• Impact of Event Scale–Revised.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High levels of religious coping. Positive religious coping positively related to PTG and PTS; negative religious coping positively related to PTS and inversely related to PTG.</li> <li>• Dispositional forgiveness positively related to both positive religious coping and PTG.</li> <li>• Two of the strongest predictors of PTG: problem-focused coping and having positive perspectives of own traumatic experiences.</li> </ul>
Powell et al. (2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bosnia and Herzegovina, two subgroups of 75 each randomly selected from two samples of 97 former refugees and 104 (former) displaced adults.</li> <li>• Age range 16 to 65. Age groups: 16–30, 31–45, 46–65.</li> <li>• 3.5 years after the war.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI.</li> <li>• The Post-Traumatic Diagnostic Scale (PDS).</li> <li>• The Checklist for War-Related Experiences (CWE).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI mean = 44.10.</li> <li>• Considerably lower PTGI scores than reported in most studies on other kinds of trauma.</li> <li>• No significant sex difference in PTGI score, or in PTS symptoms.</li> <li>• Younger people reported considerably more growth than older.</li> <li>• No connection between overall PTG and number of stressful events or PTS symptoms.</li> <li>• Former refugees reported significantly more growth than IDP, had experienced significantly fewer traumatic events. Sample membership a better predictor of growth than number of stressful events.</li> <li>• Identified a three-factor model (consisting of the three broad categories originally identified of PTG): Changes in Self/Positive Life Attitude. Philosophy of Life. Relating to Others</li> <li>• Factor 1 negatively associated with PTSD symptoms. Gives some support to earlier findings that a perceived permanent change for the worse predicts PTSD symptoms.</li> <li>• The PTGI factor “relating to others” had a weak, but significant, positive correlation with PTS symptoms.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies (n = 23).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
Rizkalla and Segal (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional.</li> <li>• 250 Syrian refugees living in Jordan</li> <li>• Age: 19+, m = 35.74.</li> <li>• 54.6% female.</li> <li>• Religion: 95.6% Muslim.</li> <li>• Religiosity: 11.3% secular, 43.3% traditional, 36.7% religious, 8.8% very religious.</li> <li>• Months in camps prior to moving: M = 2.66. Months resided in host community: M = 14.32</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI.</li> <li>• The Modified Mini Screen (NYS OASAS) for psychotic disorders.</li> <li>• The Harvard Trauma Questionnaire.</li> <li>• The War Events Questionnaire.</li> <li>• The K6 screen for affective disorders.</li> <li>• The M.I.N.I.</li> <li>• Global wellbeing rating (1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI mean = 51.36</li> <li>• 42.3% PTSD, 57.6% mental illness.</li> <li>• PTSD scores not a significant factor in either wellbeing or PTG. Economic status one of the major obstacles in coping with new life.</li> <li>• Enhanced PTG associated with (in order of importance) better income, greater use of NGO, absence of psychosis, and affective disorder.</li> </ul>
Rosner and Powell (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Same sample as Powell et al. (2003).</li> <li>• Age range 16–65, m = 36.7.</li> <li>• Religion: 85.3% Muslim.</li> <li>• 3.5 years after the war.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI.</li> <li>• The Checklist of War-Related Events (CWE).</li> <li>• The PTDS (PTSD symptoms).</li> <li>• The Beck Depression Inventory.</li> <li>• The Symptom Checklist-90–Revised (SCL-90-R).</li> <li>• The Coping Inventory of Stressful Situations (CISS).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI mean = 44.10 (same sample as Powell et al. 2003).</li> <li>• Higher income and having a secure place to live did not contribute to growth.</li> <li>• Weak dose–response relationship between exposure to traumatic events and PTG.</li> <li>• Some aspects of having been a refugee rather than an IDP contribute to growth.</li> <li>• Positive correlation between all coping styles and adversarial growth, in terms of increased value given to relationships with others.</li> <li>• Significant positive connection between the interpersonal factor of the PTGI and PTS, general distress, and depression, indicating that those suffering the most evaluate positive relationships more highly.</li> </ul>
Şimşir et al. (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional study?</li> <li>• 303 Syrian refugees living in Turkey.</li> <li>• Age: 18 to 67.</li> <li>• 65.3% female.</li> <li>• Time since trauma: 1+ year.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI.</li> <li>• Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support.</li> <li>• The Human Values Scale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI mean = 73.33 (not reported, but based on reported mean on the PTGI subscales: New possibilities = 16.87. Relationships with others = 24.04. Personal strength = 14.38. Appreciation of life = 10.51. Spiritual development = 7.53).</li> <li>• The most important independent variable affecting PTG was values. Secondly, perceived social support.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies (n = 23).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
Sleijpen et al. (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional.</li> <li>• 111 adolescent refugees and asylum seekers living in the Netherlands.</li> <li>• Age: 12–17 (M = 14.5).</li> <li>• 51% girls.</li> <li>• Religious beliefs: Christian (37%), Muslim (59%).</li> <li>• Status: Refugee (31%), asylum seeker (69%).</li> <li>• Lived on average 3.4 years in the Netherlands; 31% granted asylum during this period.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The revised Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory for children (PTGI-C-R).</li> <li>• PTEs measured by a 26-item questionnaire based on the UCLA PTSD Reaction Index DSM-IV and part I (trauma events) of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire.</li> <li>• PTSD symptoms: the Children’s Revised Impact of Event Scale (CRIES-13).</li> <li>• The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS).</li> <li>• The Life Orientation Test.</li> <li>• The Satisfaction with Life Scale.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI-C-R: scoring range 0–30. Mean score: 20.2, indicating an average response of some perceived change.</li> <li>• 46% of answers recorded in the highest PTGI response category, indicating a lot of perceived change; 14% in the lowest response category, indicating no change.</li> <li>• PTGI total score much higher than the average outcome of a representative sample of Dutch youngsters.</li> <li>• No significant sex differences in PTGI score.</li> <li>• No significant relations between sociodemographic characteristics and PTG.</li> <li>• High levels of PTSD symptoms: 50% a probable PTSD diagnosis.</li> <li>• PTG and PTSD symptoms co-existed but were not related.</li> <li>• PTSD positively related to total number of PTEs.</li> <li>• PTEs did not significantly affect PTG.</li> <li>• PTG positively related to satisfaction with life (SWL).</li> <li>• Dispositional optimism and social support positively related to SWL and positively predicted PTG.</li> <li>• Sociodemographic variables, e.g., length of stay and not having residency, had a negative relationship with SWL.</li> </ul>
Ssenyonga et al. (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional.</li> <li>• 426 Congolese refugees living in Uganda (resettlement camp).</li> <li>• 51.6% female.</li> <li>• Mean age 35 years.</li> <li>• 54.7% last displaced in 2008. 2.17 displacements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI.</li> <li>• The 25-item Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC).</li> <li>• Post-Traumatic Diagnostic Survey (PDS).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI mean: no-PTSD group: 64.96. PTSD group: 65.02.</li> <li>• Prevalence of PTSD: 61.7%.</li> <li>• Dose–effect relationship between trauma load and number of displacements, and PTSD.</li> <li>• PTSD symptom severity negatively associated with PTG.</li> <li>• PTG protected against PTSD.</li> <li>• Resilience, PTG, number of displacements, and trauma load were significant predictors of the severity of PTS symptoms.</li> <li>• No significant difference between refugees with and without PTSD in terms of resilience or PTG.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies (n = 23).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
Taher and Allan (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mixed methods</li> <li>Syrian refugees living in the UK (fleeing Syria after 2011).</li> <li>Quantitative study: 54 participants, 57.4% male. Age range 21 to 45, mean age 29.02.</li> <li>Qualitative study: interviews with 5 of the participants with highest PTGI scores.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI</li> <li>Semi-structured interviews. Five main questions, each exploring a specific area of growth, and other prompt questions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI mean for the whole sample: 70.74.</li> <li>67% of participants identified themselves as middle class, might have influenced PTGI scores positively.</li> <li>PTGI mean for the 5 participants in the qualitative study: 84.8.</li> <li>Interview findings of experiences within the five areas of growth:</li> <li>Valuing others more: more open and less judgmental, increased appreciation of others.</li> <li>Pursuing a new career path: having higher career ambitions and a more meaningful career.</li> <li>Discovering inner strength: discovering unprecedented strength, increased independence, and self-acceptance.</li> <li>Appreciation of life and detachment from it: appreciation of life, acceptance of death.</li> <li>Strengthened belief: choosing to believe, strengthened belief in the afterlife.</li> </ul>
Tekie (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PhD dissertation</li> <li>135 Eritrean refugees residing in Europe</li> <li>Age: 18 to 56 years (M = 30.14).</li> <li>Male = 95.</li> <li>Mean residence in current country = 3.6 years.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI.</li> <li>Life Events Checklist for DSM-5 (LEC-5).</li> <li>PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5).</li> <li>Post-Migration Living Difficulties Scale (PMLD).</li> <li>Hopkins Symptom Checklist-25 (HSCL-25).</li> <li>Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ).</li> <li>Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale (ISLES).</li> <li>Social Provisions Scale (SPS).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI mean not reported.</li> <li>Lower educational level associated with lower PTGI scores (m = 59.13), while higher education level associated with higher PTGI scores (m = 74.10).</li> <li>High levels of anxiety and depression (around 70%); 85% showed symptoms of PTSD.</li> <li>PTSD not significantly related to PTG and the number of traumatic life events.</li> <li>Social support was not a significant moderator between PTSD symptoms and PTG but was a unique predictor of PTG after controlling for PTSD symptoms.</li> <li>Average scores on meaning in life were significantly related with PTG scores. When levels of meaning decrease, the relationship between traumatic events and PTSD symptoms becomes positive.</li> <li>Findings strongly support the relationship between post-migration living difficulties and symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies ( <i>n</i> = 23).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
Teodorescu et al. (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectional.</li> <li>• 55 psychiatric outpatients with a refugee background, living in Norway.</li> <li>• 58% men.</li> <li>• Age range 21–61. M age men: 44, women: 39.3.</li> <li>• Mean time in Norway: 16.7 years, all permanent residence.</li> <li>• Religion: Christian 16.4%, Muslim 63.6%, Other 3.6%, no religion 16.4%.</li> <li>• Mean time since trauma: 17.7 years.</li> <li>• Main diagnostic groups: Affective (80%), anxiety (94.5%) and substance use (12.7%) disorders.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI-SF.</li> <li>• SCID-PTSD.</li> <li>• MINI.</li> <li>• IES-R.</li> <li>• HSCL-25-depression scale.</li> <li>• WHOQOL-Bref.</li> <li>• Questions about: social network, social integration measure, employment status, religious affiliation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI-SF mean = 22.6, equals 47.4 on the PTGI.</li> <li>• All reported PTG; 30.9% reported a very great degree, yet the total amount of growth was low.</li> <li>• No significant relationships between PTG and demographic variables.</li> <li>• The majority reported PTSD symptoms and depressive symptoms at clinically significant levels.</li> <li>• Quality of life well below the threshold for 'life satisfaction' standard.</li> <li>• PTG had medium to strong negative correlations with PTS and depressive symptoms. Some support that PTG is negatively associated with psychopathological symptoms.</li> <li>• PTG had the strongest association with several domains of quality of life, while PTS symptoms had the least.</li> <li>• Post-migration stressors moderately negatively correlated with PTG and quality of life, positively correlated with psychopathology.</li> <li>• Significant negative correlation between PTG and PTSD symptoms in those exposed to traumatic events many years ago, suggesting that passage of time aids in the development of growth negatively related to psychopathology.</li> </ul>
Umer and Elliot (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed methods.</li> <li>• Syrian, Palestinian, Sudanese, and Kurdish refugees in the UK</li> <li>• 6 females, 10 males</li> <li>• Age range 18–60</li> <li>• Had been in the UK for 1 year or less</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI</li> <li>• A narrative writing guide informed by Charles Snyder's Hope theory, specifically centered on Hope's five tenets, namely Goals, Pathways, Agency, Barriers, and Thoughts and Feelings, was produced for the narrative research task.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTGI total mean not reported.</li> <li>• Focused on five high-PTGI (scores 79–108) and five low-PTGI (scores 40–55) participants for further in-depth probing and comparison concerning Snyder's five tenets of hope.</li> <li>• Findings strongly endorse that PTG is associated with hope and that fostering hope can lead to higher levels of growth.</li> <li>• Low PTGI associated with short-term goals, preoccupation with pessimistic thoughts, thoughts about going back home, and living in a constant state of fear, which often curtails the pursuit of goals.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies ( <i>n</i> = 23).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
Umer and Elliot (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mixed methods.</li> <li>Syrian, Palestinian, Sudanese, and Kurdish refugees in the UK</li> <li>6 females, 10 males</li> <li>Age range 18–60</li> <li>Had been in the UK for 1 year or less</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTGI</li> <li>A narrative writing guide informed by Charles Snyder’s Hope theory, specifically centered on Hope’s five tenets, namely Goals, Pathways, Agency, Barriers, and Thoughts and Feelings, was produced for the narrative research task.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High PTGI associated with long-term goals, indulging in positive thoughts, higher willful thinking, and expanding options through actively seeking various opportunities.</li> </ul>
Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).			
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics		Key Findings
Abraham et al. (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>18 female Eritrean refugees who had lived in Norway for 1–8 years.</li> <li>All granted asylum and living in asylum reception centers.</li> <li>Age range 18–60.</li> <li>Two focus group interviews with 4 participants in each group, and 10 individual semi-structured in-depth interviews.</li> <li>Content analysis, within hermeneutic framework.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All interviewees reported a multitude of difficulties and traumatic experiences before, during, and after forced migration. Life in asylum centers experienced as stressful, and ‘endless waiting’ for news of transfer to a municipality in addition to prior trauma experiences were described as very difficult.</li> <li>Support and positive attitudes from center leaders and staff gave strength to cope. Even more important was support from fellow Eritrean refugees.</li> <li>Coping strategies: future orientation, positive thinking, social support, acceptance of psychological symptoms.</li> <li>Resilience was associated with having a dynamic and multidimensional understanding of health.</li> <li>Interpersonal relations were among the major coping strategies. However, when residents are moved, they lose their proxy ‘family’, which may produce renewed separation traumas and create an obstacle to PTG.</li> <li>Religious belief aided coping and contributed to endurance and hope for the future, helped establish social networks, and promoted a future orientation.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Key Findings
Copelj et al. (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 young adults from a refugee background (4 different countries), who had lived in Australia for 5–18 years (mean 13.16).</li> <li>• 3 men, 3 women.</li> <li>• Age range 24–34.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews.</li> <li>• Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on the findings, a model of the growth process was derived which included four key interconnected stages, all influenced by pre- and post-migration experiences: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Appreciation of life opportunities (hope, optimism, determination, ambition).</li> <li>2. Increase in self-belief (identification of personal strengths, development of positive bi-cultural identity).</li> <li>3. Strengthening of cultural and social connectedness (importance of social support, prioritizing of important life values).</li> <li>4. Proactivity (engagement with meaningful careers, acceptance).</li> </ol> </li> <li>• Successful migration experiences appeared to be based on having an openness to new opportunities, the realization of inner strengths through facing challenges, connectedness to social and family structures, and a proactive action orientation.</li> <li>• The three common domains assessed by quantitative measures were supported in the current study: enhancement of relationships (current sample: strengthening of socio-cultural support), new self-perceptions (current study: increase in self-awareness), and changes in life philosophy and purpose in life (current study: proactivity).</li> <li>• The findings highlighted additional socio-cultural and behavioral components of PTG that are not currently captured by popular quantitative measures, namely strengthening of social and cultural supports, and proactivity.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Key Findings
Copping et al. (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two samples, total of 38 participants (White-Australian sample: 27, Sudanese-Australian sample: 11).</li> <li>Narrative, episodic interview style addressing broad topics for discussion.</li> <li>Constant comparison analysis, Grounded Theory.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sudanese-Australian sample: giving and receiving social support and standing together aided resilience.</li> <li>Difference between the White-Australian and Sudanese-Australian experience of life crises: the use of religious or spiritual coping and meaning making in the latter group.</li> <li>Whereas the White-Australian sample were more likely to see themselves as being stronger because of what they experienced, the Sudanese-Australian sample cited strength, hope and determination as reasons for their survival, i.e., coping mechanisms rather than growth outcomes.</li> <li>Religious changes, Relationships with Others, Strength, Appreciation of Life, and Compassion were articulated, but as cultural values that existed prior to the escalation of suffering.</li> <li>The Sudanese-Australian sample articulated a sense of New Possibilities, with positive focus on starting a new life, and not wasting new opportunities.</li> <li>For the White-Australian sample, it appeared that PTG was a major outcome of the meaning making process, and there was a focus on the benefits that could be gained from the experience, while the Sudanese-Australian sample did not freely volunteer benefits that they had perceived, and very rarely said that they had changed something about themselves.</li> <li>Possible that what we see as PTG in the west is normal for these participants; not discovered post crisis.</li> <li>The notion of survival despite suffering described (by authors) as ingrained in Sudanese culture.</li> </ul>



Table A1. Cont.

Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Key Findings
Ferriss and Forrest-Bank (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 Somali refugees resettled in USA</li> <li>• Focus group interviews, two gender-specific groups with 6 participants each.</li> <li>• Interviews guided by six overarching questions addressing the domains of PTG.</li> <li>• Thematic analysis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sources of strength: perseverance in staying hopeful about the future, and a foundational belief in God, which helped participants make sense of the past and stay hopeful about the future.</li> <li>• Sources of hardship: social isolation and stress generated by the loss of living in a collectivistic culture. Western culture and values of individualism a major barrier in establishing community, support systems, and friendships.</li> <li>• PTG and its five domains congruent with participants' perceptions of growth. Also differences due to dissonance between the PTG construct and Somali culture, rooted in collectivism and Islamic beliefs and practices. E.g. "New possibilities" somewhat contradictory to belief in destiny, and "Personal strength" challenging to translate because strength lies in the family, and not in the individual.</li> <li>• Incongruent factors largely related to differences between Somali culture and the Western culture within which the PTG theory was developed.</li> <li>• Hard to distinguish between before and after trauma, as many had endured multiple and ongoing trauma.</li> <li>• Religion did not emerge as an area of growth or change but was a constant source of strength and hope.</li> <li>• Results indicate tenacity for life rooted in strong cultural values.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Key Findings
Gilpin-Jackson (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>PhD dissertation.</b></li> <li>• 12 war survivors from six African countries, now living in Canada.</li> <li>• 6 men and 6 women.</li> <li>• Age range 25–62 years.</li> <li>• Individual life story/narrative interviews; 6 published autobiographical texts of survivors living in Canada, US, and England.</li> <li>• Narrative analysis, thematic analysis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data analysis identified six themes of transformation: resonance as transformative learning moment; realizing purpose in the postwar narrative; social consciousness as an outcome of postwar learning; determination as the will to achieve postwar goals; spiritual and moral development; value of life.</li> <li>• The study provides evidence to support the following: cross-cultural application of the PTG model in African contexts; the role of spiritual development in the process and as an outcome of PTG; preparedness as a psychological outcome of PTG; resilience as a necessary but insufficient condition for growth.</li> <li>• Participants were actively seeking, finding, reminding, and constructing personal and collective benefits from their experiences and situation. Meaning making was signified by giving a philosophical orientation to the trauma and awareness of the relative advantage they have compared to others. Future focus important, as well as social relationships, as trauma disclosure required trust and connection.</li> <li>• Findings included examples in accordance with all five PTGI factors. In addition to the traditional PTG changes in relationships and in self, participants described a connection to humanity and increased awareness of issues of social justice, and increased adaptability, tolerance, and a desire to live at peace with all. Growth was signified by engagement in social action to help others.</li> <li>• Contextual influences (both pre- and post-flight) impacted participants' ability to grow. Those who had positive immigration integration experiences did not elaborate on its impact in their narratives. For those who had less positive experiences, the immigration narrative was integral to their growth stories.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Key Findings
Hirad et al. (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 7 couples and 16 individuals from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Syria</li> <li>• aged 25–67 years,.</li> <li>• Qualitative interview study</li> <li>• Grounded theory analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Five specific growth themes: increased awareness of context; tolerating uncertainty; spiritual/religious attunement; consideration of others; and integrating into society</li> </ul>
Hirad (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>PhD dissertation.</b></li> <li>• Refugees from Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq, resettled in the US.</li> <li>• 13 participants had lived in the US for less than 1 year, 17 for one year or more.</li> <li>• Age range 25–67.</li> <li>• 13 females, 17 males.</li> <li>• 23 qualitative interviews with 7 couples and 16 individuals.</li> <li>• Constructionist grounded theory.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The data analysis identified one overarching theme, forward movement, as participants described their thoughts and behavior in alignment with a desire to move forward from their traumatic experiences. They did so through what were identified as five growth themes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Context awareness: awareness of broader and local contexts, comparing previous circumstances with present and better circumstances, acknowledging life's ups and downs. Helped gain perspective and appreciation. Engaged in meaning making processes, which expanded perspective, gave purpose, and aided growth.</li> <li>2. Tolerating uncertainty: taking risks, managing loss. Experienced growth despite the pain and void from loss, and in addition to ongoing distress and trauma. Having to start from zero—realizing own strengths, learning new skills, fostering growth.</li> <li>3. Spiritual/religious attunement: relying on faith, prayer, and God's will to overcome challenges.</li> <li>4. Relationship to others: relying on community and each other, prioritizing the benefit of others (in new country and country of origin) over the self—collectivistic cultural value. Focusing on others, sacrificing themselves, and/or living for the benefit of others contributed to personal growth. Equally valuable to give to others, as to receive from others.</li> </ol> </li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Key Findings
Hirad (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>PhD dissertation.</b></li> <li>• Refugees from Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq, resettled in the US.</li> <li>• 13 participants had lived in the US for less than 1 year, 17 for one year or more.</li> <li>• Age range 25–67.</li> <li>• 13 females, 17 males.</li> <li>• 23 qualitative interviews with 7 couples and 16 individuals.</li> <li>• Constructionist grounded theory.</li> </ul>	<p>5. Integrating into society: strong work ethic, learning new skills, awareness of gains (both outcomes and contributors to growth). A strong desire to integrate into new society. Appreciation of life.</p>
Dilwar Hussain and Bhushan (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 Tibetan refugees living in India. 5 born and raised in exile, 7 born in Tibet and brought to India during childhood.</li> <li>• Age range 25–46, mean = 35 years.</li> <li>• 8 male, 4 female.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews.</li> <li>• Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-occurrence of distress and growth commonly reported. Those who thrived had a clear idea about themselves and their life purpose. A constant search for meaning in life directed many to restore their life and self in positive ways, and a more meaningful life was experienced by those concerned with (supporting) others in need.</li> <li>• Three major PTG themes: changes in outlook (acceptance, responsibility, compassion, optimism), personal strength (self-reliance, perception of self as survivor, experience of success and achievement), and more intimate and meaningful relationships (family, community).</li> <li>• Findings show that Tibetan cultural and religious factors provide necessary resources for coping and thrust for PTG. Worldviews mostly shaped by Buddhism, where PTG and resilience exist, as suffering in life is considered a rule rather than an exception. Compassion, acceptance of life events based on the law of karma, and perceiving self as survivor were clearly outcomes of Buddhist upbringing.</li> <li>• Personal suffering provided new insights and spiritual maturity, sensitized many to broaden their consciousness, and made them more inclusive in their empathy and compassion.</li> <li>• Personal strength gave courage to navigate through life and increased trauma tolerance.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Key Findings
Kim and Lee (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 North Korean refugees living in South Korea for 6 months to 6 years.</li> <li>• Age range 20–39.</li> <li>• 5–10 individual in-depth interviews with each participant, and various personal records from the participants: travel diaries, books, e-mails, family interviews.</li> <li>• Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All participants made comments suggesting that they experienced PTG through positive coping resources, even after suffering considerable psychological trauma and post-migration distress.</li> <li>• Recovery factors: connection with locals an important recovery factor for psychological trauma. Participants reached out to locals for help, opened their hearts to them, and tried to make a strong network. Also sought to repair disintegrated family relationships.</li> <li>• One strategy used during the early stages of post-migration was a conscious effort to detach from being a North Korean, which could be seen as defense against being reminded of painful experiences.</li> </ul>
Maung (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>PhD dissertation.</b></li> <li>• 11 female Burmese refugees resettled in the US.</li> <li>• Age range 22–57, mean 35 years</li> <li>• Length of stay from 3 to 11 years, mean 7.72 years.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews</li> <li>• Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Four PTG categories:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Greater appreciation of life and changes in life's priorities (acceptance of events beyond one's control, including life's challenges and hardships).</li> <li>2. Sense of strength and personal limitations (perceptions of self as survivors, deepened self-confidence gave courage to take risks and actively shape their future in meaningful ways).</li> <li>3. Spiritual and religious development (continued or deepened faith).</li> <li>4. Interpersonal development (growth in compassion, empathy, and desire to help others. Deepened sense of personal agency to help and empower others. Personal narratives indicated that those who already engaged in volunteer and advocacy work to assist others in their community experienced a deepened sense of personal fulfillment).</li> </ol> </li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Key Findings
Maung (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>PhD dissertation.</b></li> <li>• 11 female Burmese refugees resettled in the US.</li> <li>• Age range 22–57, mean 35 years</li> <li>• Length of stay from 3 to 11 years, mean 7.72 years.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews</li> <li>• Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narratives of PTG and change co-existed with memories and experiences of trauma and suffering.</li> <li>• Coping strategies: social support, hopefulness and aspirations for the future, personal self-care, religious and spiritual coping, and cognitive coping (attended to the positive parts of their narratives rather than to feelings or thoughts associated with negative stressors. By normalizing their experiences, participants learned to accept the reality of their present circumstances)</li> </ul>
McCormack and Tapp (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 adults (1 male, 3 females) who all experienced refugee status as children and now have attained citizenship in a Western country.</li> <li>• Age range 25–46</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews</li> <li>• Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traumatic experiences provided a catalyst for newly defined character traits of resourcefulness, gratitude, reciprocity, empathy, a future-oriented vision, and a philosophy of giving forward. However, it was born of redefining human suffering that is unimaginable to many.</li> <li>• Commonly reported psychological and interpersonal difficulties resulting from trauma were not reported.</li> <li>• Analysis of the interview material identified one superordinate theme, violation and hope, and three subordinate themes: violent detachment, refugee identity, and resourcefulness and reciprocity. One divergent: clashing identities.</li> <li>• Participants rejected a ‘refugee victim’ identity, which allowed a passion for directing their lives forward, promoting hope and optimism.</li> <li>• Avoidant coping was a positive long-term tool, crucial in defining a future-oriented life philosophy.</li> <li>• Trust in own problem-solving capabilities and survival competencies became an existential view advocating autonomy, choice, and the rejection of an external locus of control.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Key Findings
McCormack and Tapp (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 adults (1 male, 3 females) who all experienced refugee status as children and now have attained citizenship in a Western country.</li> <li>Age range 25–46</li> <li>Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews</li> <li>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants continued to contribute to society, supporting a policy of multiculturalism as one that accepts refugees and is beneficial for the betterment of all society.</li> <li>Implications: validating the self-valuing domains of resourcefulness, hope, giving forward, and gratitude as juxtaposed with PTG may facilitate ongoing psychological wellbeing.</li> </ul>
Prag and Vogel (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9 adolescent Shan migrants living in Thailand (forced migration at the age 4–12).</li> <li>4 men, 5 women.</li> <li>Age range 16–19.</li> <li>Photography workshops with discussions, for 5 weeks, 1 day per week.</li> <li>Follow-up after 1 year of 6 of the 9 participants. Informal interviews and questionnaires.</li> <li>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Six themes highlighting healthy coping and adjustment. The first five themes mirrored the common PTG domains, while noteworthy cultural difference was reflected in the sixth theme: The Ability to Articulate the Social Narrative. PTG was observed in the desire for mastery of the story of own people. Not one mention of a personal narrative, all stories were in the context of the larger plight.</li> <li>Participants moving from identifying as ‘victims’ to ‘advocates’ for their community.</li> <li>Participants appeared to perceive the inclusion of cultural identity as just as important, if not slightly more important, than individual identity traits.</li> <li>Findings regarding eastern cultural identification with the community, rather than the individual, shows the importance of a collective identity in the healing process.</li> </ul>
Sesay (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>PhD dissertation.</b></li> <li>6 Sierra Leonean refugee women living and working in the U.K.</li> <li>Age range 25–60.</li> <li>Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, participants’ observation.</li> <li>Narrative analysis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Among the most important factors contributing to resilience and Adversity-Activated Development (AAD) was the assumption of new roles; e.g., community leaders, religious leaders, negotiators.</li> <li>Participants gained personal confidence from new opportunities and valued own ability to help others.</li> </ul>

Table A1. Cont.

Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Key Findings
Sesay (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>PhD dissertation.</b></li> <li>• 6 Sierra Leonean refugee women living and working in the U.K.</li> <li>• Age range 25–60.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, participants' observation.</li> <li>• Narrative analysis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants were clearly shaken by their experiences, but realized that their losses and trauma did not prevent them from accessing previous strengths. Also became aware of own strengths and skills because of what they went through and from re-inventing themselves.</li> <li>• Religion an important factor that provided continuous motivation and positive structure, and helped participants turn the negative into positive. Provided religious guidance, was a source of comfort, relief and continuity, provided a sense of belonging, and aided social community and support.</li> </ul>
Shakespeare-Finch et al. (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 25 refugees from Burma who had lived up to 1 year in Australia.</li> <li>• 12 men, 13 women.</li> <li>• Age range 20–58.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interview protocol adapted from the Refugee Distress and Coping Interview Protocol (open-ended questions about life before, during, after flight).</li> <li>• Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTG themes: Appreciation of life. Personal strength. Changed priorities. Religious and spiritual change. Compassion for others.</li> <li>• Dimensions of growth mainly about changes in important priorities and a heightened appreciation for all aspects of life.</li> <li>• Newfound personal strength—learning and developing as a human being—and the relativity of challenges compared to those endured before fleeing.</li> <li>• A strong thread of religious beliefs acting as a support and source of strength across time.</li> <li>• Family and friends as source of purpose and hope and as social support. Participants derived a sense of meaning and purpose from their family and through involvement in their community.</li> <li>• Survival enhanced compassion and concern for the welfare of others, and a sense of responsibility, capacity, and agency to use own experiences to help others.</li> <li>• The strong endorsement of compassion and responsibility is not always apparent in Western research; only one of the 21 PTGI items asks about compassion and that item speaks of accepting the compassion of others rather than being compassionate to others.</li> </ul>



Table A1. Cont.

Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
Author (Year)	Study and Sample Characteristics	Key Findings
Şimşir et al. (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 15 adult Syrian refugees living in Turkey</li> <li>• 10 women, 5 men.</li> <li>• Arrived Turkey between the age of 18–40.</li> <li>• Time since last war experience: 1–4 years.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews.</li> <li>• Phenomenological study, content analysis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Seven themes related to PTG themes contributing to growth:</b> Coping strategies (reading/studying, religious coping, patience, self-consolation, hope for future, adaptation). Social support (from family, friends, locals).</li> <li>• <b>Themes describing growth outcomes:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Learned pain experiences (stronger, importance of homeland and freedom, patience, responsibility).</li> <li>2. Relating to others (increased commitment, tolerance, toughness, and compassion).</li> <li>3. New possibilities (education, language learning, living in a safe and peaceful environment, meeting new people and cultures).</li> <li>4. Religious/spiritual change (increased closeness to God, increased worship, stronger religious faith).</li> <li>5. Changed priorities (building a homeland, education, language learning, peace and security, spirituality).</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
Sutton et al. (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 unaccompanied refugee minors living in the UK 1+ year before interview.</li> <li>• 1 male, 7 female.</li> <li>• Age range 16–20.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews.</li> <li>• Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Four superordinate growth themes with sub-themes:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Impact of trauma: A search for meaning. Dislocation and loss.</li> <li>2. Variables influencing the process of positive change: Social support. Activity. Religion.</li> <li>3. Positive outcomes: Positive changes in self-perception. Personal strength. Desire to live a purposive life.</li> <li>4. Dissonance: Co-existence of ongoing distress and positive changes.</li> </ol> </li> <li>• Putting the trauma into words helped participants to process what had happened. The availability of someone to confide worries to and who could offer comfort was important.</li> </ul>

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Qualitative Studies ( <i>n</i> = 20).		
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Sutton et al. (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 unaccompanied refugee minors living in the UK 1+ year before interview.</li> <li>• 1 male, 7 female.</li> <li>• Age range 16–20.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews.</li> <li>• Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants described a desire to live a purposive life, including altruistic goals of wanting to help others. Engaging in activities where they could be of use to others also fostered self-esteem and self-efficacy.</li> <li>• Religious beliefs served as a guide for how to lead one's life, served to meet emotional needs, and facilitated development of meaning and comprehension in coming to terms with trauma.</li> <li>• In sum, the findings highlight the important role social support, activity, and religious beliefs play in facilitating PTG. The role of religious beliefs in providing guidance and in meeting emotional needs is not well documented in Tedeschi and Calhoun's model, where emphasis is on the function of religious beliefs in influencing cognitive processing and the development of meaning and comprehensibility.</li> </ul>
Taylor et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Twelve asylum seekers and refugees from 7 countries, based in the United Kingdom (UK).</li> <li>• Nine women, three men.</li> <li>• Age range 28–61.</li> <li>• Length of stay in the UK: 5 to 21 years.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews. Two-stage interview process</li> <li>• Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Characteristics relating to resilience and PTG: gratitude, religious or spiritual beliefs, helping and being of service to others, acceptance, and awareness of personal change and growth (resilient, confident).</li> <li>• Religion a significant source of psychological support, promoted coping and resilience.</li> <li>• The importance of acceptance, particularly toward situations that were not controllable, in personal growth and processing painful experiences was a significant finding.</li> <li>• A common coping strategy was being of service to others, and findings implicate that it may be beneficial to harness these strong altruistic impulses by allowing asylum seekers and refugees to contribute to society, rather than being excluded and stigmatized.</li> </ul>

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Uy and Okubo (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 Cambodian community leaders who survived the Khmer Rouge genocide, now living in the US</li> <li>• 8 men, 4 women</li> <li>• Age range 33 to 81.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews.</li> <li>• Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The process of PTG:</b> 1. Separation, loss, enslavement, other dehumanizing experiences. 2. Distress and psychological responses to trauma. 3. Coping (acceptance; passive and active avoidance; spirituality, faith, and religion; and hope, positive thinking, optimism, will to live). 4. Healing and meaning making (resources, education, strong support; exposure and identification with other trauma survivors; trauma disclosure and narrative reconstruction).</li> <li>• <b>The outcome of PTG:</b> 1. Gratitude and greater appreciation of life. 2. New priorities and goals. 3. Importance of family and interpersonal relationships. 4. Increased personal strength. 5. Effective leadership.</li> <li>• Sharing traumatic experiences with others provided an opportunity to connect and form a support network.</li> <li>• Hard work, hope and optimism, and education as foundations for recovery and growth, along with community activism.</li> </ul>

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Wehrle et al. (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 31 refugees from 6 countries, now living in Germany on average for 2 years and 4 months (entry dates varying from 2005–2016).</li> <li>• 24 men, 7 women</li> <li>• Average age 28 years</li> <li>• All held a work permit and tried to integrate into the German labor market, working in full- or part-time jobs.</li> <li>• Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews.</li> <li>• Thematic Analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resourcing strategies related to growth: proactively created opportunities, turned chance social encounters into social resources, and circumvented barriers hindering integration.</li> <li>• Action- rather than only cognition-oriented coping responses. Taking action and actively addressing the negative may advance growth.</li> <li>• Participants actively sought to build better relationships with their in- and outgroups to gain acceptance for and protect their identities.</li> <li>• Needing to depend on oneself and own abilities to overcome challenges can foster personal growth.</li> <li>• Personal growth: more confident, mentally stronger, self-efficient, more resilient, and aware of resiliency.</li> <li>• Career-related growth: gaining confidence in one's skills, growing internally motivated.</li> </ul>

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## Article

# Fragile Solace: Navigating toward Wellbeing in ISIS-Occupied Mosul in 2014–2017

Esko Nummenmaa <sup>1,\*</sup> and Thaer Allaw <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, Kalevantie 4, 33100 Tampere, Finland<sup>2</sup> Center for Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation, Rte de Ferney 106, 1202 Genève, Switzerland; mallaw@frontline-negotiations.org

\* Correspondence: esko.nummenmaa@tuni.fi

**Abstract:** Populations in conflict contexts often live for extended periods of time in displacement or under occupation. Both have profound consequences for navigating daily wellbeing. Drawing on narrative interviews (n = 8) with participants who lived through the ISIS (Islamic State) occupation of Mosul in 2014–2017, we seek to highlight narratives of wellbeing- and illbeing-emerging from their experiences. Our case study suggests that multiple persistent threats forced a renegotiation of ways to sustain key elements of wellbeing. Our findings suggest that intentionally propagated distrust led to reduced interaction, while insecurity and fear diminished personal freedoms, causing recurring shocks requiring constant adaptation. Decreasing the size of the core social unit helped families manage risks and resources when facing existential threats, while the diversification of interpersonal and communal relations created space for moments of normalcy. Choices made in order to stay safe and sane under such exceptional circumstances include complex relational choices, such as breaking familial ties with loved ones. Our research expands on the positive and negative impacts of relations on wellbeing and deepens our understanding of how wellbeing is navigated in contexts of forced departure—environments from which people often flee to seek refuge elsewhere.

**Keywords:** relational wellbeing; displacement; conflict; trust; ISIS; Mosul

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## 1. Introduction

“You are looking at it as a big deal, but when it is a daily thing, it becomes normal. I discovered that with ISIS. . . Normal, but not really normal.” —Fatima

In 2014, the fall of the Iraqi city of Mosul to ISIS (Islamic State group) operatives, and the subsequent retreat of the Iraqi military from the second-largest city in Iraq, shocked the international community. The far greater and more immediate shock, however, was inflicted on the inhabitants of Mosul city who found themselves under hostile occupation. Some fled, fearing discriminatory violence; most were forced to adapt to a new normal.

Three years later, the Battle for Mosul was fought and the city recaptured. East Mosul was taken swiftly; West Mosul, separated from its eastern half by a river that formed a strong defensive barrier, was held longer by ISIS, facing heavy air strikes and extensive urban warfare. During the several months of intense fighting over one million people fled Mosul city to safety—or, rather, the absence of open conflict.

The effects of displacement and war have been documented extensively. Displaced families face limited access to basic services, feelings of physical and financial insecurity, high levels of emotional stress, and absence of support networks, which collectively lead to a profoundly compromised sense of stability and personal safety (Ajdukovic and Dean 1998; Kett 2005; Reed et al. 2012). Warfare often entails systematic violence against civilian populations, including torture, executions, sexual abuse, arbitrary detention, and cultural repression (Pedersen 2002). ISIS engaged extensively in all of these. Whether experienced

first-hand or vicariously, exposure carries severely heightened risk of harm to mental health and disruptions to wellbeing (Miller and Rasmussen 2010).

Previous research on the Mosul case has predominantly focused on the impact of the ISIS occupation on the economy, security, health, politics, and infrastructure (cf. Saeed et al. 2022; Michlig et al. 2019; Jäger et al. 2019). In contrast, we seek to understand the lived experience of everyday life and wellbeing. In particular, we ask how relations—and their restrictions—were associated with wellbeing under extraordinarily hostile conditions, and how the nature of relationships, both positive and negative, shaped this lived reality. In our study, we explore the journeys of people who lived in Mosul under ISIS occupation by means of a qualitative case study (Flyvbjerg 2006), utilizing semi-structured interviews analyzed with narrative techniques (Sunday et al. 2020). Our participants were male and female Iraqi citizens. Most were originally from Mosul city, and all had previously worked with international organizations providing post-ISIS humanitarian assistance.

Experience shapes narratives; narratives shape realities. In seeking to understand others' experiences we can learn to appreciate, and empathize with, realities that differ from ours. The narratives in this article are analyzed against the backdrop of *relational wellbeing*: conceptions of wellbeing as relational processes that are realized in the interplay of different material, subjective, and relational dimensions in people's lives (White 2017). While broad consensus exists regarding the integral role of relations to wellbeing, the specifics of *how* they might be related remains debated (White and Pettit 2007). Similarly, and to the best of our knowledge, there is very limited research into how elements of wellbeing interact under extreme duress, especially in contexts of displacement. Our research contributes to bridging this gap by answering the questions: what narratives of wellbeing and illbeing emerge from the experiences of people who lived in ISIS-occupied Mosul, and what is the role of relationships in these narratives?

## 2. Contextualization

### 2.1. Mosul under Siege

Several social and societal aspects of contemporary politics in Iraq and the occupation of Mosul are inextricably linked to the lived experience of Mosul inhabitants. What Tripp (2010) calls *ethno-religious dynamics* of the preceding decades, alongside strict *normative rules* ISIS imposed through Islamic pretext, carry substantial relevance for this study.

Iraqi socio-political dynamics are, to a significant extent, deeply entwined with ethnic and religious affiliation. Tripp (2010) notes the centuries of tensions between the Islamic Sunni and Shia factions. However, under Saddam Hussein's rule, the perception was that a Sunni minority ruled the Shia majority and other factions. This created an unspoken alliance between the mostly Sunni Kurds and the Shia, indicating that the divide was not religious but in fact political, continuing a long trend of such alliances (Al-Sahlawi and Noreng 2013). Makiya (1998) expands on these trends, highlighting the radicalizing effect of systematic policies of discrimination combined with the absolute control of the regime. The 2003 US invasion led to further social and political destabilization with a devastating impact on ethnic dynamics. Discriminatory policies, social marginalization, strengthening of militia rule, and intense political violence—largely against Sunni Arabs—exacerbated ethno-religious and sectarian divides across Iraqi society. This had critical reverberations in ISIS-controlled Mosul. Owing to a Sunni majority and the presence of disenfranchised ex-Saddamist Ba'ath military officers, a number of people joined insurgencies, including ISIS (Abdulrazaq and Stansfield 2016). This amplified distrust and perpetuated a cycle of marginalization, damaging familial, community, and cross-religious relations.

As part of their occupation, ISIS attempted to redefine social norms governing daily life. ISIS' key strategic objective was control of territory and resources, which included the acknowledgment of their right of governance. In practice, this entailed strict social rules based on extremist interpretations of the Qur'an (Michlig et al. 2019—see Table 1 below). These included movement restrictions, such as armed checkpoints and forced curfews. Electronic communications and entertainment items were confiscated. Dress codes were

enforced, women were required to wear concealing clothing, and grooming was expected for men. Unfailing adherence to daily prayer calls and visits to mosques were mandatory. Fear became a defining feature of life, and it deepened social, ethnic, and other divides.

**Table 1.** Infractions and punishments under ISIS in Mosul (Michlig et al. 2019).

Infraction	Punishment
Inappropriate clothing	ID seizure, fine, torture
Consuming smuggled goods	Fine, torture, flogging
Smuggling	Execution
Possession of SIM card	Torture, imprisonment, execution
Disputing ISIS law or policy	Flogging, removal of credentials, ID seizure
Unaccompanied woman	ID seizure
Male and female co-workers alone	Flogging, execution, forced marriage
Military experience/career	Imprisonment, execution
Leaving Mosul	Forcible return, fine, ID seizure, execution

There is limited research into how these historical processes impacted on people's wellbeing. However, as Shoeb et al. (2007) note in their research on trauma in Iraq between 1979 and 2005, during and immediately after Saddam's regime: the suffering experienced by the Iraqi was personal—experienced by individuals—and communal, diffused between groups of people. People did not feel alone in crises. However, Iraq's socio-political landscape underwent significant changes in the post-Saddam era. After 2003, interactions were often limited not by external rules, but by social issues such as trust and ethnic or religious affiliation. This manifested as interactive soft boundaries based on who was seen as safe. During their rule, ISIS then introduced non-negotiable punitive hard limits on interaction. ISIS norms of acceptable conduct were narrow and included harsh sanctions for non-compliance, which limited ways for people to engage in and nurture relations. The effect of both types of social fragmentation on wellbeing was profound, as noted in later sections.

## 2.2. Wellbeing under Duress

The hostility and complexity of circumstances raise difficult questions on how to best approach feeling well. In our prior discussions with research participants, as well as with other residents of Mosul, the issue of relationships was clearly raised as one of the most powerful impacts of the ISIS occupation. Further, there is a large subfield of Islamic studies in the Middle East and North Africa suggesting that regional Islam, in its cultural form, is a communal concept (al Faruqi 2005; Zubaida 1988). Islam and its communal roots are closely linked to the idea of the *Umma* (nation) in governance, an approach used by ISIS to gain acceptance in Mosul. Relations were thus a natural starting point for inquiry into wellbeing in Mosul, both from individual and broader political/communal perspectives.

The attributes of wellbeing are as debated and in flux as the concept itself. Atkinson (2013, p. 142) emphasizes a need to shift discourse toward 'social, material and spatially situated relationships' in re-centering of focus on relationality, with relationships having contextual and absolute, instead of primarily instrumental, value. Scholars including Gergen (2009) and White (2017) have similarly called for approaches to relationships that transcend individualism and collectivism, and instead enter a *relational* sphere premised on relationships preceding individuals. We draw from these notions in our research.

Parallel to the role of relations, we acknowledge the pivotal role of environment and circumstance in the processes of individual and collective wellbeing, which we see as core emergent attributes in the interplay of personal, societal, and environmental processes. In particular, the sense of community is seen as a central form of relational expression (White 2015). White (2017) as well as Atkinson et al. (2020) both perceive community as an inter-subjective shared experience; a collective form of social reciprocity that forms the very core of relationality. Studies across geographies and demographics (e.g., Elliott et al.

2014; Lai et al. 2021) indicate a positive correlation between the sense of community and wellbeing. Conversely, studies (cf. Lorenc et al. 2012; Pearson and Breetzke 2014) link fear of crime—regardless of actual risk or incidence rates—with substantial decreases in social interaction and quality of life, and with loneliness as well as diminished capacity to cope with stress (Baranyi et al. 2021). Social, physical, and political environments play distinct roles in shaping opportunities for wellbeing to emerge, especially in situations where they constitute significant limitations for such opportunities.

This impact of environmental factors on the sense of community helps illuminate why the previously noted socio-historical factors carried such an impact on wellbeing in Mosul. In exploring the effects of war Pedersen (2002, p. 181) observes that a key consequence of war is the ‘devastation of the social and cultural fabric—the people’s history and life trajectories, their identity and value systems’. Communities and relations often suffer irrevocable damage from families and communities being torn apart by displacement, ethno-religious tensions, and loss of life. Cheung et al. (2020) report that, with the Syrian war, damage done to social relations may have been so extensive as to practically nullify their role in supporting wellbeing. The compromise of such central aspects of life is debilitating, especially where the foundations of trust are fundamentally damaged.

The fragmentation of the social fabric noted by Pedersen (2002) is critical to wellbeing under duress. Gergen (2009) rhetorically asks whether religions could bridge divides and nourish the sense of community with ethnically and culturally diverse groups. Indeed, in the conflict contexts where we have worked, religion has nurtured a sense of community and comfort among diverse populations in distress. Conversely, ISIS’ extremist *modus operandi* entails the opposite with the targeted destruction of Iraqi cultural capital and the widespread, systematic disintegration of different feelings of community (Cunliffe and Curini 2018). In ISIS-occupied parts of Iraq, the fear of violent retribution was key in the diminishment of social circles and the breakdown of community cohesion. ISIS policies of targeted sectarian violence had a strong, lasting effect on both intra- and intercommunity cohesion which deteriorated under the strain of fear, suspicion, and distrust (Jäger et al. 2019). However, as our findings below indicate, even ISIS’ existential threats to familial and communal integrity in Iraq could not eradicate the centrality of relations to wellbeing.

### 3. Research Design

This paper draws on a case study (Flyvbjerg 2006; Ruddin 2006) conducted in Iraq in 2022. In line with the case study design, our aim was to understand the concrete, context-dependent experiences of selected participants via continued proximity to their studied reality and through continuous feedback over time (Flyvbjerg 2006). This meant that, aside from our research interviews, we engaged in frequent informal discussions with participants and other people in Mosul. The participants ( $n = 8$ ; five males, three females), aged 30–65, with most in their thirties, were Iraqi citizens and former colleagues who lived in Mosul from 2014–2018. They were selected based on comfort levels in discussing ISIS.

The case study participant setup was atypical, primarily due to the sensitive nature of the topic. We interviewed former colleagues without recording devices. This was the only possible setup given sensitivities around ISIS and the required foundation of trust. In an Iraq where ISIS no longer controls territory but remains a constant threat, even perceived affiliation with ISIS carries harsh social, legal, and extrajudicial consequences; trust and confidentiality between researchers and participants was a paramount consideration.

Mosul was a familiar environment for both of us: we had both worked in Mosul and its surrounding areas between 2019–2022, Allaw as a program officer for the International Organization for Migration and Nummenmaa as a humanitarian project manager for the Norwegian Refugee Council. Our positionalities within this research field were shaped by familiarity with the environment, varying degrees of status as outsiders, and trust built through working with participants (Pustulka et al. 2019). Relations between researchers and participants are, as White (2017) observes, fundamentally constitutive of subjectivity

within relational ontology; they contain unique and mutable emergent properties, which Ellis (2007) sees as processes where researcher and friendship roles weave, expand and deepen together. Participants' trust, as well as their experience and contextual knowledge of Mosul, were considered a research value-add.

Our semi-structured interviews (Galletta 2013) consisted of six open-ended questions on experiences of changes in interactions, feelings of safety and comfort, and sources of wellbeing. These took place in person or on video calls. Half of the participants were interviewed individually and half in pairs per their preference. The first two interviews were piloted in Arabic, spoken fluently by the second author. These interviews provided critical information on language and framing. Later, interviews were held in English. Participants either spoke English fluently or had access to live translation via another participant. The possibility of meanings lost in translation is acknowledged as a limitation.

The interviews were analyzed using methods of narrative analysis (cf. Heikkinen et al. 2012; Riessman 1993; Sonday et al. 2020). Preliminary codes were assigned to the texts, and these were structured into initial themes as a first means of organizing data and thoughts. The analysis then focused on identifying *storylines*, or segments of interviews forming cohesive units, in parallel with participant consultation on themes and stories carrying personal meaning. This phase focused on connecting themes with storylines, identifying a 'plurality of small narratives, local and personal in nature' (Huttunen et al. 2002), drawing not only on single interviews but the combination of many, complemented by our knowledge drawn from several years of working together in Iraqi communities. Three broader narratives emerged from the storylines and themes.

Our research design had three main limitations. The first entailed interviewing participants with existing relationships with the researchers. Taylor (2011) views 'insider' friendships as partly problematic due to presumed privileges of 'insider knowledge' and epistemological issues with knowledge distortion. However, transparency vis-à-vis both participants and communication on sources of knowledge helps mitigate such challenges (Sonday et al. 2020). The second limitation was with language. All participants spoke Arabic natively. We observed in pilot interviews, for instance, that the Arabic concept of 'wellbeing' carries materialistic connotations, roughly equivalent to 'luxury' in English. Based on pilot interview outcomes, we reviewed the language used and clarified the concept of wellbeing. The third, perhaps most significant limitation of this study was the absence of recorded media and transcripts. With one exception, all research participants requested that no audio or video recordings, or automated transcripts, be produced. Non-consent to recording is common when exploring sensitive subjects, and in working with participants in vulnerable situations, even when they want their voices heard (Cheah et al. 2019; Rutakumwa et al. 2020). As media recordings were not an option, verbatim notes were taken during interviews with an average of seven pages—approximately 6000 words—of text produced per interview.

#### 4. Research Findings

Our research question pertained to narratives of wellbeing and illbeing, and the roles of relationships in these narratives. In light of the extraordinary circumstances, the thematic dominance of exceptional crisis and fear was not unexpected; these themes were not part of our questions but were issues participants clearly wanted to cover. However, participants also identified meaningful elements of wellbeing in moments of connectedness and communal solidarity, touching on several motifs of relationality in the process.

Three central, connected narratives emerged from our analysis process. In resonance with Pedersen's (2002) notions on the intentional, systematic unraveling of the social fabric, narratives of *fear in acute crises* were felt to define the boundaries of social life. These crises contributed to the *shattering of the normal*, a narrative of a recurring cycle of shocks and adaptations. Both of the above narratives fed into a final narrative of *relational integrity*, with reflections on threats and hope vis-à-vis family and community.

At the beginning of each sub-section below, we use composite narratives constructed from multiple interviews to highlight stories important to participants. Italicized quotes denote material quoted directly from our interviews. All instances of indirect references to participants' thoughts, as expressed in interviews, are specifically noted in each case.

#### 4.1. Fear in Acute Crises

The first narrative revolves around the damage triggered by fear and social distrust after the US invasion in 2003 and, in particular, during the rise of ISIS influence in Iraq. The previously largely economic issues under Saddam, felt by participants to be complex but manageable, gave way to a new 'normal' after 2003—and especially after 2014. Fear, especially during acute crises, undermined access to sources of wellbeing via 1. *erosion of trust*, 2. *loss of safety*, and 3. *restricted interactions*, illustrated below as a composite narrative.

'With the US invasion, there was this anti-US insurgence. **The Iraqi military saw all of us Moslawi [people from Mosul] as threats. Insurgents always melt into community** so military forces do massive search campaigns. Troops come into houses, kicking doors, screaming. Before ISIS came, people were frustrated with the military's violations. People felt they don't have a government and **they are ruled by these, let's say, beasts**. Stories of people killed or kidnapped were part of our conversations. The difficult years were 2008 to 2017; **we lived in fear**. Many kidnappings, car bombs, street fights. Fear of the unknown was very stressful. Safety was a critical thing and the **only safe place was family**.

During ISIS, the main things that started to change were principles, traditions, and customs. **We started to lose trust in each other**. People were reporting each other to ISIS; that included people's assets as they attracted ISIS. Muslim families were forced to report minorities to ISIS out of fear; it created mistrust. **Interactions were cautious**. Sometimes the threat is a 'source', sometimes a big mouth. **You keep things secret**. You don't talk around the neighborhood. People closed in, not interacting outside of their circle of trust.

In 2015, we tried to go out of Mosul but were stopped at the first checkpoint of ISIS. I feel now everyone would say, 'I would leave'. **I wanted to protect myself and my family**. Yeah, because the stress we have is, like, not bearable. The fear of what will happen. . . you have zero control. Just waiting for your destination. **I spent months without going outside**, only for urgent issues. If women's eyes were visible, they were whipped. I forgot my friends' faces. They were beheading people if they found songs on phones. People coped by dropping forbidden habits: shisha, cards, cigarettes. **That negatively affected interactions**. You'd discharge your anger by swearing at ISIS [laughs] amongst family.'

The storyline of *erosion of trust* touches upon how the inability to trust one another eroded the very foundation of wellbeing. Participants described this as elements of suspicion and wariness feeding into a narrative of fear: trust no-one, and never volunteer information. The stakes of errors of judgment increased drastically as minor penalties gave way to public beatings and summary executions. The 'circle of trust' noted above dwindled, and even members of families and tribes faced suspicion as potential 'sources', or covert informants. Relations between religious and ethnic communities deteriorated to outright hostilities, leading to sectarian violence—trauma already experienced by other parts of Iraqi society during earlier historical periods of repression (Shoeb et al. 2007). "We have friends in Sinjar, but during the period of ISIS presence in Ninewa, these people started to hate people living in Mosul", commented Fatima, highlighting the lasting harm to Sunni-Yezidi relationships caused by ISIS' ideological genocide of the Yezidi religious minority.

The second storyline describes how the *loss of safety* detracted from a sense of wellbeing. Personal insecurity augmented the narrative of fear with the threat of mortal peril; it injected into the narrative an abject realism of life that could end at any given moment for a number of arbitrary reasons. "The thing is, you try to learn but the stress just prevents you. Sometimes I

*tried to learn [European language], but what I learned is that we're all going to die"*, Fatima noted and laughed, recalling her inability to focus on things that she knew would improve her wellbeing. Crises of personal safety dominated Moslawi discourse, obscured visions of the future, and impaired daily function. In contrast, many of the participants' moments of feeling well were shared in tones laced with humor and self-irony. Further to mere personal delight in comedy, humor has been found to be a common tool for grief management, development of bonds in post-traumatic situations, and shielding feelings that might lead to challenging emotions (Lefcourt 2001; Tedeschi et al. 2018).

The third, *restricted interactions* storyline features accounts of a subjugated Moslawi people, and how these restrictions limited access to sources of wellbeing. All participants shared stories of dealing with military raids, mass detention, movement restrictions, and extortion—before ISIS ever occupied Mosul. By the end of 2014, participants noted that all previous restrictions had been tightened and wholly new types of limitations introduced, including intentional control over fashion, arts, communication, social habits, and religion. Multiple crises of fear coalesce in these stories: fears of personal danger, misplaced trust, harm to loved ones, and loss of stability. However, within the storyline, there also runs a commanding counter-narrative of survival and resistance, often in creative forms: *"I once hid my SIM card in a tomato so they could not find it"*, Maryam recalls. Personal risks were taken in pursuit of moments of normalcy, such as smoking cigarettes or playing cards. When asked how these items were accessed, Ali smiles: *"People would take out the car airbag . . . that way they managed to smuggle things."*

Participants commented on ISIS' ruthlessness in its efforts to break down resistance. This has also been noted in previous research (Cunliffe and Curini 2018) with implications for trust, an instrumental resource for a sense of belonging and feeling well (Atkinson et al. 2020). Threads of distrust were woven into all narratives, highlighting the shock of loss of trust and connection in family and community. However, beside this distrust flowed strands of trust and hope: relationships that were considered to be 'safe' were cherished and mutually nurtured, regardless of familial affiliation. As Ali recalled: *"If we have a small shop you can work with us, if you need money we can loan money for you. This is part of what I remember about how families and friends stayed together to be somehow away from ISIS."* Where crises of distrust fed into the fear, a sense of community provided rare sanctuary from the outside fragility and offered momentary solace from violence in feelings of connectedness.

#### 4.2. The Shattering of the Normal

The second of the central narratives is characterized by recurring cyclical interplay between the constitution of normalcy, exceptional personal shocks, and forced adaptation. Three distinct storylines related to a decline in the resources needed to maintain wellbeing were identified: 1. *nostalgia*, 2. *shocks and adaptation*, and 3. *ISIS as a unique phenomenon*.

*'Life before 2003 was stable with tough but respectable living conditions. The society was not conservative, there was no sectarianism; it was a normal life. Before 2003, safety was the main reason for happiness and wellbeing. We were only thinking of house needs and how to feed families. Many people say Saddam times were better. I remember my father having to pay this much money [spreads hands] just to buy flour [laughs]. After 2003 we gained many things but lost safety. Social visits nearly stopped, religious ceremonies stopped. Death news used to be strange, but after that, it was normal news. Death was easier than PMF [armed militia] and ISIS detention or torture.*

*There is nothing normal in Iraq. Iraqi people have the skills to adapt to any situation, from 1980 to today. With ISIS there were a lot of shocks. We tried to adapt, but there were always more shocks. The first was that Mosul has fallen to ISIS. You wake up in the morning, you see people hiding their faces in scarves, they have guns, and they are controlling the city. Moslawi people adapted to the situation; there was no other option. Our life stopped in 2014 and resumed in*



2017. These were a long three years. . . not knowing if we'd pass the time of war or not, if we'd be dead or not. You look at it as a big deal, but **when it's a daily thing, it becomes normal**. I discovered that with ISIS.

In the first days, the best days of ISIS, **people felt comfort as ISIS showed support for Sunni people who were suffering**. ISIS showed their smartness because they broke all the rules of the security forces. Then ISIS started forcing people to follow their rules. At that time people started thinking about leaving Mosul, some were considering leaving Iraq. Many thought they understood the situation: **'we know these people [ISIS], we know what they're capable of, we can negotiate'**. I think this also applied to people who saw ISIS as similar to others and chose to stay. **But ISIS was a bit different. In fact, it was totally different**. It never happened before. ISIS showed they have zero negotiation.'

The storyline of *nostalgia* emerges from the turbulent socio-political history of Iraq. An Iraqi citizen born in the mid-1980s has experienced approximately twelve different violent time periods to date, from the Iraq–Iran war to the recent conflicts with ISIS. Within this tumultuous time period, two turning points connecting all experiences could be identified: the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the ISIS military occupation of Mosul in 2014. The narrative of normalcy surfaces regularly in stories about life and wellbeing in Mosul, and often pertains to the time period before the US invasion in 2003. Saddam Hussein's reign was undeniably characterized by discriminatory violence, economic challenges, and corruption (Tripp 2010). However, with a chaotic post-US invasion of Iraq and life under ISIS as points of comparison, participants voiced appreciation for pre-2003 stability. Life under Saddam's rule was often perceived as if balanced on a scale: corrupt but safe; oppressive but stable; restrictive but free. Conversely, after the invasion, this normalcy was felt to have been shattered and replaced by a new normal of 'non-normalcy'. This longing for authoritarian stability follows global trends (Chang et al. 2007; Sanghoon 2022) with nostalgia seen as a buffer resource for wellbeing in times of uncertainty (Hepper et al. 2021). The past, with all its issues, represents a time when wellbeing felt anchored to a sense of normalcy. With this anchor gone, the foundations of wellbeing had to shift.

In striking contrast to earlier reflections of normalcy as stability, the second storyline of *shocks and adaptation* highlights the fleeting and vulnerable nature of the normal in Iraq. Crises faced by the Iraqi people caused systemic shocks, forcing continuous adaptation. Rutter's (1987) seminal work encourages viewing resilience as a 'process of negotiation'—ways of adapting to difficult events not only within the external world, but also ourselves. The storyline colors the broader narrative with nuances of resilience and lack of agency: the Moslawi, a strong people, forced to adapt to extreme external shocks. This paradoxical duality of strength and powerlessness cuts across narratives, and as with the first storyline of normalcy, it emphasizes sensations of time as part of wellbeing: if time feels suspended, or when the sole function of time is to move toward any resolution, seeking experiences of wellbeing feels immensely complicated on all fronts. Participants' accounts support recent decades' research findings on the physiological changes impacted by trauma often inducing a permanent state of hyper-alertness, interfering with the sense of time and the ability to feel well—or, in many cases, to feel anything (Van der Kolk 2006). It is worth noting that we opted not to delve into the oft-instrumentalized relationship between resilience and wellbeing, which is explored by, for instance, Krause and Sharples (2020); rather, we focus specifically on the experiential nature of relational wellbeing.

The final strand of the narrative of normalcy is perhaps a surprising one: the *unique nature of the ISIS threat*. For a people who had faced a dozen conflicts in only three decades, what novelty could yet another militant faction possibly introduce? Yet against the odds ISIS was, in fact, perceived as different, and also an escalation to previous threats. "ISIS is like a new level [laughs]. If you know what was reached before and thought that was a tough level, then you find another level that made this look like a piece of cake", laughed Abdullah. Ali shared further on their unusual cruelty: "It's not a normal culling, a bullet in the head and that's

*it. They are artists in the way of violence. There were people on the radio before communications were cut: 'ISIS is dirty, and when the day comes when Mosul is freed, we will clean the streets with shampoo'. They managed to capture the person and drowned him in shampoo."*

The narrative of non-normalcy is, at heart, one of incomprehension of ISIS' lack of empathy and the general population's inability to connect with ISIS. The breaking of social norms related to perceived rules of violence contributed to the feeling of unprecedented disruption of normalcy, and made this particular shock all the more difficult to adapt to. Importantly, ISIS' perceived inhumanity also produced a strong countercurrent of empathy and caring, and led to a diversification of social circles usually afforded familial protection—although only after initial contraction, as noted in the final sub-section.

#### 4.3. Relational Integrity

Where the first two narratives framed boundaries and limitations of social interaction in occupied Mosul, and the resulting restrictions in accessing wellbeing-related resources, the final narrative of connectedness portrays ways in which the integrity of relationships becomes a source of hope, safety, and comfort. The narrative encompasses the storylines of 1. *the cusp of crisis*, 2. *narrowed social core*, and 3. *communities in change*.

'Between 2008 and 2014, many armed groups tried to convince us to stay. **They said they could protect us. That was all lies.** After the beginning, no one was allowed to leave. My friends had a chance to leave, but family convinced them to stay, and some died. That really affected me. It reminded me of my plans to leave Mosul, but we thought, 'mm, nothing will happen'. First thing, **we did a family gathering and tried to decide what the right thing to do is.** Many families fled to Syria and other areas. We all stayed. For a lot of people, including my father, no-one will stay if any other crisis happens. I wish we'd left.

For many people who are like me, family is your life. You are safe, OK, **but I don't want to be safe if my family gets hurt.** That's the bond I told you about. The priority was for ourselves and family, supporting them with any resources to make sure they continue. **Interaction was hugely impacted and remained only within core family. Family was the only source of happiness.** ISIS revealed the strength within families. We did our best to somehow try to keep the family as one. **If it's a high-strength link between family members, they managed to stay together.** Many ended up having no control of their children; those children ended up ISIS members.

People started having higher interaction with communities. Community is mainly family, close neighbors, people you know well—friends. We didn't have big networks of friends. They were in the same neighborhoods, same schools. **The social structures are very strong** even though wars and curfews eroded these bonds. Especially **neighborhood relations became much stronger.** The girls in Mosul had ambitions to learn new things to prove they are strong, and that they can help the community. **I discovered that there are three or four girls in the same street where I live. We started meeting every week or two weeks, talking about any things that we made, sharing ideas for handicrafts, what new skills we should develop, exchanging novels between us.'**

*The cusp of crisis* is an exceptional storyline in that it describes a single all-important moment in time: the transitional instant when families recognized the gravity of the ISIS threat, and had to make a collective decision to stay or leave. Recollections of this storyline were laden with unusual solemnity and melancholy undercurrents of speculative thought—how would our life have been if we had, in fact, left? Ali shared a passing thought: "[Thinking about a colleague's family and their decision] reminds me about how they suffered, and about my family situations when we had the chance also to leave the city, but at the last moment we decided to stay. . . . At that time, it was understood by people as the best option [. . .] that's why somehow I was touched." This moment bears strong significance beyond its function as

an evacuation decision gate. The shared experience created a community of people who intimately understood the conflicting rationales behind others' decisions. In a tangible way, the moment remains a source of collective empathy for Moslawi communities. Empathy is considered a significant predictor of helping behavior and reconciliatory attitudes (Klimecki 2019). Strengthening such attitudes has implications for the long-term process of healing from ISIS trauma and building communal wellbeing together.

Protectiveness features heavily in most storylines, and it is the defining feature of the *narrowed social core* storyline. With the deepening of many simultaneous crises—such as issues with income, availability of medicines, lack of education, and personal safety—the protection of existing social units began to feel increasingly complex. Resources grew thin and trust eroded as the occupation persisted. As a novel phenomenon, in addition to family safety, the integrity of the social unit was now also threatened in unforeseen ways. Rather than risk complete failure, families opted to reduce the size of the core social unit to control the level of risk as well as to conserve emotional and material resources. While the phenomenon of ISIS was new and the type of threat unanticipated, Iraqi families had utilized this approach to risk management before: in the 1970s, the brutality of the regime forced a similar contraction of familial relations and the social core (Makiya 1998).

Under the emotional shadows of ISIS' occupation, the *communities in change* storyline offers a rare moment of respite; a proverbial light within an apparently unending tunnel silhouetted with violence. Indeed, it was specifically the existential threat to relationships, and the subsequent contracting of the social core, that forced a reorganization of protected social constellations. Participants described a smaller but more diverse range of relations now protected. Circumstantial limitations of fear drove the strengthening of non-familial ties with trusted neighbors and friends. This was particularly true for women, whose lives were confined by the need for proximity, and whose communities were heavily re-shaped by virtue of necessity. Due to traditions of wanting to keep women safe, families applied additional internal limitations to female members. In the short term, this caused stress and anxiety; in the long term, women feared these discriminatory practices might isolate them further via a denial of rights and legitimacy of participation (cf. Parry and Aymerich 2019).

One striking aspect of narratives of community in this study is that they contain some of the only notions of hope expressed by participants. *“One of the ways to keep hope alive was other family members and friends who were out of Mosul and somehow kept communications up. They kept asking: ‘tell us about your life’. The hope is still there, with someone who cares about you, out of these borders”*, Ali reflected quietly. Feelings of connectedness and caring helped create a momentary sense of normalcy, in part by offering a warm and empathetic contrast to ISIS' cold cruelty and perceived inhumanity. They also effectively combated the venom of distrust, slowing its course through the veins of Moslawi society.

## 5. Discussion

In our research, we approached wellbeing as a state of comfort and safety grounded in a nexus of connectedness, inter-relational identities, and collective interests. We sought to uncover narratives of wellbeing and illbeing as well as the role played by relationships in these narratives. Our study suggests that multiple persistent threats forced a renegotiation of ways to sustain key elements of wellbeing. The findings indicate that intentionally propagated distrust led to reduced interaction, while insecurity and fear diminished personal freedoms, causing recurring shocks requiring constant adaptation. Decreasing the size of the core social unit—family, relatives, and friends—helped families manage risks and resources, when faced with existential threats, while the diversification of interpersonal and communal relations as well as compassion for others' experiences, were noted as vital resources. Rare moments of hope were often derived from connectedness, which was felt to be integral to both individual and collective survival. In ISIS-occupied Mosul, relationships played a pivotal role in both the breakdown and buildup of wellbeing.

Participants frequently noted that the importance of family in Iraq is paramount, and the safety it provides is unparalleled. Tripp (2010, p. 19) refers to these structures as “crucial instruments of power.” The impact of externally insecure circumstances on wellbeing was amplified by the assault on familiar and tribal means of providing this safety. ISIS coerced, threatened, bribed, and integrated tribal influences into their own hierarchies (Hassan 2014). ISIS’ insulation from traditional social structures allowed it to render ineffective such powerful customary protective mechanisms as tribal affiliations, leading to the loss of one of the most fundamental sources of safety in the Middle East. Participants observed that their inability to assess threats and to exploit extenuating negotiation tactics forged a fear of the unknown, contributed to loss of feelings of control and the inability to adapt to shocks, and resulted in wide non-access to mechanisms of protecting wellbeing.

The storylines illustrate participants’ feelings of ISIS as a unique threat due to their moral absolutism, unusual cruelty, unpredictability, and the façade of rigid Islamic purity. ISIS was unreadable, non-negotiable, and seemingly heartless. The result of being faced with a lethal unknown was a set of perplexing and, at times, contradictory juxtapositions. Previous violence had been widespread but chiefly impersonal, while now, ISIS’ presence in Mosul offered human faces for violence—but ones that appeared to be oddly inhumane. The consequent inability to empathize with ISIS, or to understand loved ones who decided to join them, helps explain dissolved relationships and their impact on wellbeing.

The importance of relationality is paramount to wellbeing across all narratives. Many ISIS-related phenomena are seen as a consequence of the absence of connection between people as well as communities. Conversely, relationships—whether family or close friends—were felt to be sources of hope and peace of mind in times of extreme stress and fear. Participants associated this sense of connectedness with being able to keep each other and themselves safe through different crises of fear, shield and support each other in adapting to the shatterings of normalcy, and maintain resilience of community spirit when faced with existential threats to family integrity. Feeling connected with friends and family, and occasionally swearing at ISIS, represented rare moments of happiness and togetherness.

Amid life in occupied Mosul, relationships were an important part of the process of generating meaning in a time of hardship (Gergen 2009). Part of this meaning was felt to come from a sense of belonging, life built around the physical space of the home. Meaning manifested both in terms of material belongings and the relationship people developed with their homes. In both practical and theoretical terms, the home embodies a sense of stability and routine (Cloutier et al. 2019) and helps establish private, inviolable-feeling spaces (Atkinson 2013) that anchor wellbeing in everyday life. Indeed, viewing spaces and routines as integral parts of not only material, but also subjective wellbeing, sheds light on the importance of social habits and customs in Mosul. White and Jha (2020) note, in their example of a Zambian man and the import he places on economic security, that ‘having enough’ often carries deeper intentions than simply material wealth: it entails conceptions and intent of having enough to care, and to share. It was in shared moments of smoking shisha, playing cards, knitting, exchanging novels, and talking with friends and family in safe spaces that they felt they could both offer and receive affection and care. Such experiences were intimately connected to material and emotional sharing (White 2015), echoing notions of wellbeing arising from the shared enterprise of communal living (Atkinson et al. 2020). These fragile moments of solace were rare and precious.

As a small-scale qualitative study, this research is not generalizable, nor does it reflect the experiences of all social groups. Further research is needed, for instance, on the impact of occupation on women’s wellbeing. Curiously, despite deep-set social inequalities, it is likely that women were able to more effectively capitalize on support networks under ISIS. Kawachi (2001) notes that women are better able to maintain, mobilize, and mutually engage emotionally intimate relationships and social support in distress, while Dietrich and Carter (2017) observe an increase in women’s decision-making power in families with displacement and death. Similarly, this study had limited scope to explore the effects of

normalization of violence on children's relationships and wellbeing. Given children's status as a particularly vulnerable group in conflicts, it would be good to better understand how they navigate positive and negative aspects of relations and wellbeing amid violence.

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## Article

# After Being Granted or Refused Asylum in Norway: Relational Migration Journeys among Afghan Unaccompanied Young Men

Moa Nyamwathi Lønning <sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Work and Guidance, Faculty of Social and Health Sciences, INN University—Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, 2406 Elverum, Norway; moa.lønning@inn.no

<sup>2</sup> Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences, NTNU—Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 7491 Trondheim, Norway

**Abstract:** This article considers experiences of moving and dwelling in Europe among Afghan unaccompanied young men in the context of stringent migration, asylum, and settlement processes. The young men embarked as minors and arrived unaccompanied in Norway. There, their claims for asylum had radically different outcomes: some were granted international protection and others were refused asylum. The article sheds light on forms of relationality on migration journeys by focusing on relational selves and subjectivities regarding trajectories, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and family. Participants shared numerous challenges and struggles arising from their journeys, but also possibilities and transformations taking place alongside developmental changes and life transitions. While some attached meaning to experienced hardships and drew on a sense of direction, others spoke of exhaustion or inoculated themselves from an inability to pursue a direction they desired and saw as necessary for their lives. They made sense of their experiences relationally, relating to hopes and fears, idealised and longed for kinship ties and care, and the ongoing processes and positionings involved in shaping their present situations and imaginings of the future.

**Keywords:** migration journey; refused asylum seeker; relationality; unaccompanied minor; Afghan migration; young men

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## 1. Introduction

News broadcasting, documentaries, and stories on social media made some of the human consequences of journeys in search of protection and refuge particularly visible during the so-called European ‘migration crisis’. During its peak in 2015, more than one million people crossed the Mediterranean, mainly to Greece and Italy, and over 1.39 million people sought asylum in the EU+ that year (EASO 2016). Among them, almost 96,000 claims were made by unaccompanied and separated children, over half of whom were from Afghanistan. In fact, Afghans have made up the largest group of unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors since EU data collection began in 2008 (Eurostat 2021).<sup>1</sup> Whilst public attention on migration journeys increased with the ‘migration crisis,’ trajectories by unaccompanied Afghan minors seem to already have held a particular place in Western audiences’ imaginaries. It has been the topic of memoirs and semi-fictional narratives at least since the early 2000s (e.g., Geda 2011; Passarlay and Ghouri 2015; Winterbottom 2002), photographic investigation (e.g., Fazzina n.d.), reports (e.g., Boland 2010; Echavez et al. 2014; UNHCR 2010), and academic research (e.g., Lønning 2020; Nardone and Correa-Velez 2016).

Conceptual and methodological questions pertaining to the study of migration journeys are increasingly addressed in the academe (BenEzer and Zetter 2015). Scholars emphasise the significance of journeys, individually and collectively (BenEzer 2002), and trajectories across space and time as people make multiple journeys, and the difficulties therefore of distinguishing pre- and post-migration mobility (Schapendonk et al. 2021).



Scholars also draw attention to the significance of immobility in journeys (Kaytaz 2016), and the multiple meanings of movement and stillness in people's migration processes and broader life stories (Khan 2020). Furthermore, in considering migration journeys, it can be crucial to go beyond a physical or temporal event, as raised by Zetter (2004, p. 303), given 'the metaphorical sense of the journey as a process of personal and social transformation'. A journey may be approached 'as lived experience, metaphor, concept or construct' with meaning created considering the past, present, and imagined future (BenEzer and Zetter 2015, p. 301). In her ethnography about Afghan taxi drivers in England, Khan (2020) takes the whole process of migration and settlement as the arc of a temporal and ontological movement through life. She provides deep, intimate insights into everyday life and lifeworlds, experiences of freedom and suffering, and unrealised trajectories of upward mobility and progress. These are set against the force of past events, familial obligation, Afghanistan as a devastated homeland, and 'political and economic insecurity, marginality, [and] everyday racism' in countries of exile (ibid., p. 97). 'This juxtaposition [...] characterizes a historical problematic that [...] permeates continuity into the future, in ambivalences and tensions between holding on and moving forward' (ibid., p. 134).

This article seeks to build upon such insights. It considers forms of relationality on migration journeys by focusing on relational selves and subjectivities regarding trajectories, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and family. I draw on reflections by young Afghan men who embarked as minors and arrived unaccompanied in Norway. There, Afghan boys and young men have also been the largest group of unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors. Over half of the 16,514 unaccompanied and separated children registered between 2007 and 2022 were Afghan.<sup>2</sup> They also made up the largest group of unaccompanied minors settled by the end of 2020: 4377 young people or 46 percent, which is around 26 percent of all Afghan refugees (Kirkeberg et al. 2022, p. 19). In what follows, I give an overview of the study's background and methods. Then, I briefly introduce the lens with which I approach relational experiences of moving and dwelling in Europe in the context of stringent migration, asylum, and settlement processes.

## 2. Background and Methods

I first began focusing on refugee journeys as part of my master's research. Half of the young Afghans who took part in that study had been granted permission to settle in Norway, while the other half risked forced removal (Lønning 2012). I built upon this when I embarked on my doctorate not long thereafter. For this study, I actively recruited unaccompanied young people of Afghan origin with different legal statuses. I interviewed 28 young men in Norway between 2012 and 2014. My inability to include women is influenced by the fact that very few Afghan girls and young women have arrived as unaccompanied minors.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I draw on the experiences of 11 young people: seven supported in their settlement in Norway and four with a decision on their removal to Afghanistan. They have all been given pseudonyms. In conclusion, I also share some reflections from my ongoing postdoctoral research and follow-up with some of the young men (since 2022).

This article draws on narratives emanating from life history and semi-structured interviews. Narratives enable events to be organised into orderly sequences, allowing for continuity in experiences that may otherwise have been disruptive (Eastmond 2007). Stories can make experiences bearable and 'aid and abet our need to believe that *we* may discern and determine the meaning of *our* journey through life' (Jackson 2013, p. 36). The narrator can story themselves, reaffirm who they are at present, and their relational positioning. However, particularly painful memories may also resist narration, challenge the sense of self, and disrupt what can be conveyed with or without words (Eastmond 2007).

I approached my interlocutors with a broad starting point, asking them to tell me about their migration journeys to Europe. Their narratives evoked how insights and sense-making were woven into their stories. This encouraged me to introduce an additional key question: Has the journey taught you anything? Participants shared their experiences

in Norwegian and English in meeting rooms provided by their schools, the authorities responsible for their care or reception, and my university, as well as in their homes. With permission, most interviews were recorded and, later, transcribed verbatim. I read and coded interviews one-by-one in NVivo according to themes. In subsequent readings, this iterative analysis led to the development and probing of additional analytical categories. As such, the narratives have been analysed horizontally by themes that span personal stories in line with an emerging and inductive approach.

Participants had travelled through up to 12 countries before arriving in Norway. The time it took them varied greatly. It had taken most about a year and had entailed numerous hardships, dangers, and life-threatening situations. They arrived unaccompanied between 2008 and 2014 and applied for asylum, all but one as minors.<sup>4</sup> Reception and care are divided by age in Norway, with differences between unaccompanied minors aged under and over 15. On the one hand, the younger ones are placed in stately or privately run care centres regulated by the Child Welfare Act. Upon settlement, group homes with 24 h care, foster or kinship care, and placement at a child welfare institution are used options. On the other hand, the older ones are offered a place at a transit centre, and then a reception centre regulated by circulars and directives. Their running is delegated by the Directorate of Immigration (UDI) to municipalities, organisations, and private companies. Upon settlement, semi-independent living arrangements, such as shared and supported accommodation, or independent living with visiting support or another follow-up are common options.

At the time of the interviews, my interlocutors were aged 15–24 and had lived in Norway for around one to six years. Norwegian authorities practice a policy of dispersal, and they lived in different parts of the country. None were living with a partner, were married, or had children. They self-identified with at least six ethnic groups, although most were Hazara, Pashtun, and Tajik. The young men had different legal statuses. Those granted international protection had a permanent or renewable residence permit, and a few were Norwegian citizens. For them, care was regulated until the age of 18, 20, or, at the oldest, 23 (extended to 25 in 2021). They lived in group homes, shared accommodation, supported accommodation, and alone. Except for one in full-time employment, they were pursuing an education at lower or upper secondary school. Several also worked part-time.

Participants who had been refused asylum had been given a negative decision on their asylum claim or had exhausted their time-limited status by turning 18. This latter is a non-renewable permit that, since 2009, can be granted to an unaccompanied minor aged 16–17 (§8-8 of the Immigration Regulation).<sup>5</sup> It concerns a ‘deferred deportation’ (Schultz 2022). The use of it increased drastically in 2016 when an amendment to the Immigration Act (§28 para. 5) removed the ‘reasonableness’ criterion for the application of the internal protection alternative (IPA) and UDI changed its security assessment of Afghanistan (Schultz 2022). The young men refused asylum had remained at reception centres from 18 to 36 months. Their experiences include going from being ‘looked-after children’ to becoming ‘deportable adults’. In line with their status, their allowance for food, clothes, toiletries, healthcare, transport, recreation, etc., was at the time decreased to as little as 1780 NOK per month.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, they were not allowed to work and all, but one, had lost access to school.

### 3. Migration Journeys and Relationality

Migration journeys unfold across a range of physical, political, legal, and social environments. These relate and intertwine, leading to various forms of mobilities and immobilities. This also extends beyond the individual to the mobility and immobility of others, which emplaces an understanding of people’s lives from the singular to the social and contextual (Schapendonk et al. 2021). Moreover, journeys in search of protection and refuge are often fraught with great risks and entail a search for practical, legal, and psychological safety (Kohli 2011). They are rife with stringent and violent border and migration regimes. Borders are not just territorial lines to be crossed and that can be escaped. Rather, they are full of ‘permeabilities, invasions, contaminations, fissures, [and]

penetrations to which [certain bodies have. . .] no ready exit and [. . .] cannot be immune' (Stoler 2022, p. 30). Building on Étienne Balibar's work on Europe and borders for more than 30 years, Stoler (2022) expands on the concept of 'interior frontiers', which collapse the divide between interiority and exteriority of nation and self, discerning violent processes of distinction along multiple axes of power among people seen to belong and those not. Borders are thus omnipresent and profoundly infiltrate the bodies and minds of subjects who are racialised and othered, citizens and non-citizens. Such aspects make journeys, and the borders, movements, and immobilities they entail, into profound relational processes.

In this article, I seek to explore forms of relationality on migration journeys. In doing so, I follow 'a relational ontology, which views people as relational subjects, navigating their own lives while being essentially intertwined with others' (White and Jha 2023, p. 13). It speaks to the self as embedded, connected, and existing with and in a multitude of relationships (Roseneil and Ketokivi 2016). I privilege a focus on relational selves and subjectivities regarding trajectories, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and family. In what follows, I explore reflections on growing up while on the move, sense of direction and implications of legal status, and idealised and longed for kinship ties and care.

### 3.1. *Growing Up While 'on the Move'*

I met Noor Mohammad when he was 19, around three years after he arrived in Norway. He described his journey as a constant balancing act between life and death.

It was a very difficult journey through many countries. Maybe you'll die or you'll arrive here, in Norway, you arrive in a peaceful country. Another possibility, the police take you, you are imprisoned and. . . Or maybe you manage to get through the difficult way. [. . .] During that whole journey, I saw it as a struggle between life and death. If you take that chance and manage, you live. If you don't, you die. It was a fine line between life and death.

Noor Mohammad draws attention to the journey's unpredictable outcome. Like the other young men, he spoke to its many dangers. They also spoke of being detained as irregular migrants more often than protected as unaccompanied children (Lønning 2020). This relates to the politics of borders and how bodies are read and positioned. Being defined as an 'adult' or 'unaccompanied child' led to different opportunities for mobility and immobility, but also asylum and care, intimately structuring trajectories along the way, (temporary) protection in Norway, and how time was counted to qualify for citizenship. As such, the temporal border of legal adulthood, and the multiple ways bodies were assessed, profoundly affected their positionings.

Responding to the myriad situations presented by the migration journeys demanded skills and maturity. My question of whether the journey had taught them anything elicited reflections regarding this. For Rozbeh, the difficulties acted as a reminder to not take anything for granted: 'For me it's like I mustn't forget the old days, how it was, the days when I didn't have food'. Rozbeh's material needs were met in his present situation as a school-going teenager living with other unaccompanied minors. Still, the destitution experienced during the journey influenced how he reasoned around his present material situation:

Now, I've food and, sometimes, I need to throw some food away. I must think of those days when I didn't have anything, when I ate food that had been thrown out. I must know that life is like this. . . One day you're rich, one day you're poor. One day you have a lot of money, one day you have nothing. Maybe one day, 1 NOK is nothing for you. Maybe you'll throw it away because you think you can't buy anything, but some days 1 NOK means one million to you. I've seen that too.

Others similarly raised how their experiences provided perspectives that made them better able to respond to new situations. Ebadullah explained that the journey had taught him about life and people.

When we travelled from Afghanistan to Norway, we learnt very much about life, how life is. You get to know many different people. You learn that life is very

difficult. There are very bad people and there are very kind people. You gain experience, a lot of experience during such a journey.

Like Rozbeh, Ebadullah drew on these experiences in the present: 'I know how to plan for my future now, what people to associate with and what people not to associate with. You mature a lot through such a journey'. While making good plans and knowing who to associate with may not be straightforward, Ebadullah largely attributed how he had come to this to being unaccompanied: 'You were on your own, so you need to learn everything'. The fact of being on your own requires self-reliance and, as such, Ebadullah explains the maturity process as necessitated. In line with this, Kohli (2014) conceptualises the journeys of unaccompanied minors along three parallel dimensions: physical, temporal, and psychological. In other words, the journey spans across a vast geographical expanse, and as the young person moves, they also grow older, mature, and position themselves.

Literature on young men on the move points to how migration is also part of narratives of emancipation, autonomy, and individualization. Journeys may encourage growth and bravery by calling on a performativity of masculinity and can become a rite of passage (Monsutti 2005; Nardone and Correa-Velez 2016). Overcoming hardships affects social position and positioning. However, neither success nor manhood are guaranteed. Young people arriving unaccompanied in Europe also find themselves in circumstances where they 'have lost their childhood being away from their families, have had no adolescence comparable to the European youth they see around them, and [. . .] prevented to become full adults too' (Abbasi and Monsutti 2023, p. 39). This is intimately connected to whether they reach a destination where they envision the potentiality of a sustainable future and are allowed to build a life there. It thus connects to practical, legal, and psychological safety as interrelated but unequally distributed (Kohli 2011). When safety is not found, a sense of failure may be taken as a sign of weakness, playing into ideas of normative masculinity. Accordingly, '[o]bstacles and difficulties encountered during the journey are considered too private—even shameful—to be shared' (Abbasi and Monsutti 2023, p. 40). Such reading obscures vulnerabilities among young men on the move.

Ebadullah, who was in his early twenties when we met, had left Afghanistan more than seven years prior. He had spent time working in Iran before migrating to Europe. While such circumstances were not unique to him, others had left their families more recently. For Mirwais it had been three years. He raised some of the practical and emotional challenges he linked to unaccompanied status and social adulthood, which he felt unprepared for:

It's very difficult when you become an adult and you're under 18 and you need to watch out for yourself because you don't have family. You don't have parents who watch out for you, who tell you what's good and what's not. You need to do this; you mustn't do that. You must think because it's difficult to live alone.

Mirwais had not yet turned 18. Although he lived with peers and received on-going support as an unaccompanied minor, Mirwais emphasised a need to rely on his own reasoning for guidance: 'I don't have family in Norway, I've problems in Afghanistan, I watch the news and the Internet, and I think I need to study. I need to learn Norwegian. I need to go to school and such for the future'. Unaccompanied young people can face challenges in having to make plans and decisions alone. This can be exacerbated by the presence of individual desires and collective commitments, having to 'reconcile different moral frameworks', and multiple or contradictory norms and expectations felt at a proximity or geographical distance, including from family, immigration authorities, and welfare regimes (Meloni 2020, p. 433; Engebrigtsen 2011). Experiences of ambivalence, trust, and distrust affect unaccompanied minors' transitions to adulthood as they position themselves, renegotiate, and reassess relations with family, state agents, and peers (Eide et al. 2018).

Journeys in search of protection and refuge may also be followed by other journeys. Three of my interlocutors had travelled to Afghanistan's neighbouring countries following their settlement in Norway. These visits revealed the impact of their journeys, sometimes in subtle ways, such as becoming unaccustomed to everyday routines, like sitting and sleeping on carpets on the floor or crossing through traffic that now appeared overwhelmingly

chaotic. The need to not be perceived as too changed by life in the West also became apparent, as shared by Roohullah: 'Life here [in Norway] is modern. There, it's not. There are many things you must watch out for to not cross a line. When you travel to Iran, people look at you, how you behave'. This may problematize belongingness and simultaneously reveal a multiplicity of longings. As such, the young people also spoke about the formation of personhood and subjectivity amidst new lifestyles, sensibilities, and values. In addition, such visits exposed biological time through how others had aged and their return as men, made visible by physical markers such as increased height and facial hair. It thus also spoke to how time influenced and manifested their experiences in multiple ways, including by becoming persons internationally protected or European passport-holders. This repositioned them within countries they had previously passed through or lived in with a marginal and insecure status, escaped by them but not necessarily by their families (see also Khan 2020). However, some of the young men continued a marginal and insecure existence in Norway. As discussed next, meaning drawn from the journey was also affected by the implications of legal status.

### 3.2. *Meaning, Sense of Direction, and Legal Status*

Several of my interlocutors raised the ability to endure and persevere as one impact of the journey. They considered this an important life skill. For Timur, not giving up served as a reminder of hope. He also spoke of having attained specific characteristics and learning how to survive in difficult circumstances:

The journey taught me that it's not easy to live. You need to do something to get something. It perhaps made me tougher and braver. Maybe I'll know better what to do if something happens to me again. I learnt to survive and how to survive.

Timur also made a parallel to life. Both entail ups and downs, good and bad experiences, and achievements and failures.

It also taught me that life is like a rollercoaster. Life and the journey are the same. Sometimes, during the journey, I felt like I was at the top. And then, at other times, [ . . . ] I was all the way at the bottom. It was very difficult, but you mustn't give up. You mustn't give up no matter what happens. That's important. I didn't give up on the way and therefore I'm here. And I will not give up now either at school and with my dreams and hopes for the future.

Rozbeh similarly made a parallel between the journey and hard work, drawing a difference between wanting something and striving to achieve it. He emphasised patience and self-belief.

We learnt that life isn't easy, it's very difficult. You need to work for what you get. You'll never achieve anything by just sitting and thinking. For example, I want a car and suddenly a car will appear in my driveway. You need to work for it. If you want, you can work for what you want, and you'll attain everything. Everything's possible but it takes time.

Rozbeh's statement, 'We learnt that life isn't easy, it's very difficult', and Timur's statement above, 'The journey taught me that it's not easy to live', was echoed by Ebadullah: the journey taught me 'that life is very difficult'. This points to a common essence, but also the journey as a metaphor for life in condensed time.

Research shows that journeys can be transformative processes through which identities are restructured (Zetter 2004; BenEzer 2002). Kaytaz (2016) found, in her study on perilous journeys to Turkey among Afghans, that a journey's transformative potential and meaning given to difficult experiences may be seen in terms of its impact on migration decisions, and in succeeding or failing to acquire skills and demonstrate autonomy. As seen above, several of my interlocutors stressed that nothing is impossible. However, while arrival in Norway signified physical survival, it did not guarantee legal safety. In speaking about the present and imagined future, these young people did not account for immigration status. The fact that they had been allowed to settle in Norway may explain this. It can thus be

argued that drawing meaning from hardship experienced during the journey intertwined with legal status, as these reflections were clearly tied to an envisioned future that hinged on such. Considering this, their narratives emphasised their trajectories as dependent on their abilities to endure and persevere, rather than on the structural factors that they too had to overcome. These structural factors have also become less predictable in line with the increasing turn towards the temporariness of protection and return (Schultz 2022).

Smith (2006) considers the role of imagination, will, and desire in making sense of migration journeys. Writing on migration from Nigeria to Scotland, he finds that complicated migration histories are often simplistically represented where people perceive themselves as almost destined to succeed, while such success may be better understood as obtained against all odds. This arguably follows from an 'aura of inevitability that accrues, *retrospectively*, to journeys that are absolutely uninevitable in sociological terms' (ibid., p. 48). Destinations may accordingly be seen as 'pre-destinations', though a reserve of the successful (ibid., p. 50). My interlocutors did not see Norway as a pre-destination or arrival as inevitable. They spoke about journeys ruffled with obstacles, pointing to their own fragility and efforts to achieve onward mobility, as well as the possibility of non-arrival, deportation, and death. However, the emphasis placed on endurance and perseverance in realising their goals and a stated belief that 'everything' is possible meant that they too did not emphasise complicated structural processes. In being granted permission to stay in Norway, they can be conceptualised as successful. While their efforts to overcome obstacles posed by stringent and violent border and migration regimes speak of an ability to endure extreme situations, the granting of asylum is at the discretion of the receiving authorities. In contrast, narratives by participants who had been refused asylum drew attention to complicated structural processes. They also complicated notions of endurance and perseverance and revealed how experiences of exhaustion and despair profoundly affect the relationality of the self and others. In this sense, endurance and exhaustion can be understood as relational forms of everyday striving and potentiality amid conflictual presents and uncertain futures.

Several of the young men facing removal to Afghanistan spoke about the outcomes of their journeys as a personal failure. Zaki, for instance, said: 'I was mistaken to come to Norway, seriously, because I would've been allowed to stay if I had gone to another country. I was truly mistaken'. Such felt mistakes could also be relationally located: 'When in Greece, my friends said that Norway is a good country with kind people, and I came to Norway'. Still, they blamed themselves: 'I could've gone to Sweden, Denmark, France, Germany. I really made a mistake by coming to Norway'. Zaki hints at the idea that if only he had done things in a different way, things would have turned out differently. The sense of failure some expressed can also be read as a sense of guilt, even shame. It can be seen in relation to others on the move whose trajectories had a different outcome, familial obligation, and expectations of and sense of self.

While the Norwegian authorities ordered these young men's departure to Afghanistan, some saw continued mobility as the only means available to encourage a change that might favour the direction they desired and saw as necessary for their lives. At the same time, they felt trapped by their biometric data. Zaki explained: 'Now it's very difficult to go to another country. I got finger[prints], so I must just be here. They would just send me back [to Norway, as stipulated by the Dublin Regulation]. I don't know what to do'. These young men's experiences evoked ways the insecurity that pervaded their situations constituted a threat to how they saw themselves and their capacities. They were living within the 'deportation corridor', referring to the process of removal which extends long before possible detention and physical removal (Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2015). A journey may, therefore, start before departure and end after physical arrival. As Coutin (2003, p. 180) observes, flight from persecution can be envisioned as an 'attempt to make oneself *not* exist in one's country of origin'. At times, there may also be a pressing and contradictory need to simultaneously exist and not exist in the country of arrival, but no idea of how to achieve it.

My interlocutors who had been refused asylum spoke about being trapped in a standstill between their dreams and their legal reality. Qais maintained that having goals in such a situation is meaningless, as irregularised status in a sense ‘freezes’ you: ‘I don’t have any goals now because I don’t have permission to stay in Norway. Without that you can’t have goals, because if you’re “illegal” you can’t do anything’. Qais speaks to a ‘space of nonexistence’ and an experience of being both within and outside the state and its borders (Coutin 2003), of borders that had seeped into the interior (Stoler 2022) rendering his goals ineffective and their evoked absence uneasy. Despite this, Qais continued to attend school, having been temporarily and discretionally allowed to do so, and worked hard to excel. Others spoke about having lost access to meaningful activities and grieved this. Sadeq expressed how his longings did not stand a chance against his current situation: ‘I’ll try to make a good life but how, if I don’t have [legal] status? My hope is nothing, it’s broken’. As such, Sadeq spoke to a condition of despair. This can be understood as ‘a radical loss of self [. . . but also as] the consciousness of injustice and suffering’ (Pandolfo 2007, p. 350). He spoke about a withdrawal, but also of an alertness that deprived him of rest: ‘I can’t sleep. I become really scared at night’. Sadeq’s journey to Norway had taken four years. His experiences point to some of the embodied effects of his legal situation.

However, Meraj continued to point to movement as a fundamental and deeply human urge: ‘You can’t stop while you’re alive. When you’re dead, you stop’. In contrast to the other young men who were refused asylum, Meraj expressed a belief that his actions could, and needed to, lead somewhere. Hage (2005, p. 470) relates the significance of movement in people’s lives to existential movement: ‘We move physically so we can feel that we are existentially on the move again or at least moving better’. Journeys, thus, take on significance as a means of ‘going somewhere’ (ibid., p. 471). Existential mobility does not warrant physical mobility but may call on it. Physical mobility does not, however, guarantee existential mobility.

Meraj’s narrative also engages with Smith’s (2006) discussion on agency, imagination, will, and desire in retrospectively explaining migration trajectories. Meraj seemed confident that his need for protection and refuge would outweigh the structural factors that had already once denied his claim for asylum in Europe. He explained: ‘I was very confident that I would get asylum in Norway because I really need it’. Such conviction may represent a coping mechanism as a sort of protective denial. It is possible that Meraj had not accepted a reality where Norwegian authorities were set on deporting him, rather than being convinced that they would allow him to stay. Engebriksen (2011, p. 309) contends, regarding what is perceived as unrealistic career aspirations by social workers but dreamed about by young Somali refugees, that ‘[i]maginary space may be seen as an expression of powerlessness and irrationality but also as a strong motivation for enduring the difficulties that reality presents’. Hope lives in such imaginary spaces and can be seen as ‘a state of fantasy or unreality, sometimes a totally unrealizable condition of clinging to, and coping with, the impossible’ or immovable (Khan 2020, p. 138). Meraj might be trying to bridge divides and ‘regain some sense of balance between the world within and the world without’ (Jackson 2013, p. 91). At the same time, he maintained that if deported, he would embark on the journey for a third time, and that he ‘refuses to go down’. While I do not know if Meraj made the journey again, deportation is not an automatic deterrence (Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2015; Schuster and Majidi 2014). Quite contrary, it can lead to additional reasons for migration, including debt, familial obligation, and stigma associated with perceived failure and Westernization (Schuster and Majidi 2014). Meraj also speaks to mobility as a moral protest, as a refusal to be excluded (Monsutti 2018). This, in turn, affected his relational self and positioning, and how he made sense of the consequences of his legal insecurity and particular categorisation by stringent border and migration regimes.

Perilous journeys may also incite dreams of other ways of travelling. Some of my interlocutors spoke about wanting to travel as tourists to places they had passed along the way. Timur was imagining his future travels: ‘I want to travel again but not in the same way. I really want to. I’ve travelled through 13 countries, but I would like to see the

world in a different way than what I've done'. Similarly, Rozbeh envisioned travelling without fear: 'I want to experience Iran again and this time, not be afraid. With all my papers sorted. If the police come, yes, please, come! I want to travel around like a tourist and then, come back, and not be afraid'. Rozbeh had yet to fulfil his desire to visit Iran but had completed a trip to a European city he previously travelled through as an irregularised person. About this, he said: 'Seeing it as a tourist, it was good for me. It was a completely different experience!' As such, it was like they were also seeking to confront their past selves and absences evoked by their experiences and legal reality, people met and left along the way, and absent kin. In the next section, I explore ways family was part of some of the young people's narratives and reflections about the impact and aftermath of their journeys to Norway.

### 3.3. Idealised and Longed for Family and Care

In describing what his journey had taught him, Ramin emphasised wellbeing as tied to everyday family life and relations: 'A good place isn't where you have everything, food and. . . A good place is where you feel happy. I think it [the journey] taught me that'. Ramin had lived around five years in Norway. He contrasted the legal security and adhering rights he had attained there, with the precarity and insecurity he had experienced as undocumented in Iran. However, in his current situation and legal positioning vis à vis the authorities, Ramin also described a profound loss:

I sometimes think that if I was with my family, I don't have a residence permit, I don't have anything, but we would eat together, we would sit together. Not alone like here [in a flat by myself]. Not sit and look in the wall or the mirror and eat. How long will I live? How long shall I endure this? How many years shall I not see my family?

Ramin had previously lived with peers and live-in staff, but now lived by himself. He linked the challenges of exile to his belonging to the 'burnt generation': 'We say *nasl-e sukhte* [burnt generation]. I became part of the "burnt generation"'. As Olszewska (2015, p. 88) points out, '[i]n Afghan Persian, the verb *sukhtan* (to burn) [. . .] bears connotation of quietly putting up with or tolerating something at one's own expense'. Kamal (2010, p. 163) uses the idiom in her study on young Afghan returnees from Iran to capture experiences of non-belonging and 'the loss of a generation' confined by narrow choices. Ramin explained further:

You're 'burnt'. It's an expression that you're 'burnt'. I'll be 'burnt'. . . Those after me will have it better. They'll grow up here and know the language automatically and how to initiate contact with people. And it's like me, it's kind of a sacrifice. . . [. . .] I feel like, well everyone. . . all the people who come to Norway, they have problems with the language, a different culture, it's very difficult to initiate contact with people and those things, find a job. . . They become [feel] very old, and so they can't enjoy their time a great deal, so long as they have so many things that they need to do [accomplish]. . .

There may be a dream of family life and homeland that assuages the pain and strangeness of exile, but when relations with kin or the impossibility of past or new homes translate into experiences of non- or partial belonging, it can lead to 'a double feeling of estrangement' (Abbasi and Monsutti 2023, p. 27) and homelessness (Khosravi 2010).

Family was not a focus per se in my research but, as for Ramin, was part of some participants' narratives about social relations and the journey to Europe. The point I want to raise here is that young people physically separated from kin and defined as unaccompanied in policy terms are not automatically devoid of kinship relations. These interlocutors also made it apparent that, on a more existential level, material, legal, and psychological safety attained in Norway could be experienced as incomplete when unable to extend it to loved ones. Wellbeing is thus relationally dependent (White and Jha 2023). Nevertheless, these young men explicitly or implicitly conveyed that their parents could not



join them. As Kirkeberg et al. (2022, p. 27) show, family reunification for unaccompanied Afghan minors in Norway has been very low. It only concerned 13 percent of those settled by the end of 2020 (accounting for 0.21 people per every young person). Kirkeberg et al. (ibid.) relate this to how many were granted permits on humanitarian grounds (§38 of the Immigration Act)<sup>7</sup> that do not include the right to family reunification, rather than refugee status (see §43).

Distance from kin and life in the new country can lead to new freedoms and aspirations, but there can also be a wish and an expectation to remit (Abbasi and Monsutti 2023; Meloni 2020) and reciprocate what has been received (Eide et al. 2018). As such, a lack of family reunification does not preclude support. Ramin drew attention to how his family might need support and his wish to look after and protect them: 'Maybe my [family] also need me. Maybe someone comes and bothers [them], and I need to be there to defend and protect [them]'. Similarly, Ebadullah's plan for the near future was to complete his education, find a full-time job, and increase the remittances he sent. And Roohullah dreamt about buying his parents a house. Others also spoke about supporting family as integral to their life projects, wellbeing, and as a source of strength. However, those responsible for unaccompanied minors' care may be reluctant to acknowledge or allow for developmental projects that include such support (Omland and Andenas 2018). This can encourage distance to professional caregivers and enfold family relations in deliberate and needed silences.

Writing about Afghan Hazaras, Monsutti (2005) shows how migration is an important livelihood strategy and a way to diversify risks where families are spread across Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. These transnational networks are rooted in principles of cooperation and reciprocity and the reproduction and strengthening of social bonds and ties across borders. Moreover, writing about Afghan Pashtun taxi drivers in England, Khan (2020, p. 65) points to a 'kinship-ordered transnational mode of production' of remitting sons. Being younger, at a different stage in the life course, and elsewhere than Khan's (ibid.) and Monsutti's (2005) interlocutors, those of my participants allowed to settle in Norway were pursuing an education, except for one who had recently quit school to take up full-time employment. Several had, however, worked prior to migrating to Europe. Accordingly, positionings may also be temporally determined, influenced by life transitions, dominant structures, and available pathways and opportunities.

Some of the young men also raised support received from family as invaluable for negotiating life in Norway. Roohullah shared that his father had instructed him to make the most of his opportunity to build a good life: 'My father doesn't know how to read or write, and he said to me that when I go to Europe, you just need to study and get a job. Just do it for yourself, make your own life better'. Rozbeh shared a similar situation:

The day I was certain I had gotten my decision [international protection], I told them [parents]. They said: 'It's good. You'll have a good life now. Study, don't think about other things'. I said: 'No, if something happens, you must tell me. I'll do something'. But they said: 'No, you must finish your schooling. You didn't have this chance before'.

From this brief recollection of Rozbeh's conversation with his parents, it is possible to discern a need to relationally calibrate closeness and distance in dealing with separation and support. Rozbeh did not share the insecurity of the asylum process. Instead, he waited until he was certain about its outcome being positive. He also pleaded with his parents to share their difficulties. They, on their part, urged Rozbeh to not 'think about other things'. Both can be interpreted as an effort to protect each other in a relationally responsible way by allowing geographical distance to also act as a possible filter for additional worry and pain. In other words, secrecy can serve as a form of 'protection or love' and make life more bearable (Khan 2020, p. 80). At the same time, it leads to silences and absences.

Roohullah also said he did not elaborate on his wellbeing when speaking with family. He worried that they did the same: 'It's even heavier, more difficult when you're here and some problems happen there. Maybe they aren't telling you the truth'. Being both 'here'

and ‘there’ can be a permanent, straining condition of everyday life. Roohullah, moreover, shared his anxieties about worldly separation: ‘It’s hard to think about it, that you lose your parents one day. It’s hard. You live here and it’s very difficult to live so far away from them’. Life and death can also be seen in reference to the concept of a journey. As Pandolfo (2007, p. 337) notes, ‘[b]oth senses of worldly travel are intimately connected to a theological and moral dimension of departing: the fact of severing familial ties, exiting, choosing exile, or crossing to another world’. Suffering is endured in the transnational family and may be infused with idealised norms of tough masculinity, honour, and self-sacrifice which can ‘prohibit [...] working through hurts and blame’ (Khan 2020, p. 134). Distance, memory, and remembering can also make depictions of family more idealised, but relations can likewise ‘fracture irrevocably in the long-term difficulties faced by separated families and individual migrants’ (ibid., p. 77). Migration can also lead to fictive kinship and alternative forms of family life, as Nielsen and Rytter (2022) found among unaccompanied minors and volunteer guardians in Denmark.

#### 4. Conclusions

This article has explored experiences of moving and dwelling in Europe in the context of stringent migration, asylum, and settlement processes. I have drawn on the narrative of young Afghan men who embarked as minors and arrived unaccompanied in Norway. There, some were granted international protection and others were refused asylum. I have sought to shed light on forms of relationality on migration journeys by focusing on relational selves and subjectivities regarding trajectories, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and family. In the relational encounters of the interviews, the young men shared numerous challenges and struggles arising from their journeys, but also possibilities and transformations taking place alongside developmental changes and life transitions. Their migration journeys had led to much physical strain, legal insecurity, and emotional pain but also revealed important insights about life. This helped some make sense of the difficulties they had lived through and, beyond this, was seen as useful in efforts to build a sustainable future and pursue their dreams. For others facing removal to Afghanistan, being able to hold on to a meaning, or finding themselves unable to do so, deeply affected their outlook. As such, some of the young men attached meaning to experienced hardships and drew on a sense of direction, including by contesting migration regimes and finding respite in imaginary spaces and hope. Others spoke of exhaustion or despair and saw no way to pursue a direction they desired and saw as necessary for their lives. Combined, their narratives point to how they made sense of their experiences relationally, relating to hopes and fears, idealised and longed for kinship ties and care, and the ongoing processes and positionings involved in shaping their present situations and imaginings of the future. Their experiences also point to multiple intertwining relations of borders, movements, and immobilities.

Inevitably, there are many other forms of relationality that could have been considered in this article. For instance, I have not addressed experiences of environments moved and dwelled in, and ties formed along the way and with others who settled in Norway or elsewhere, or who did not make it. Likewise, the state *in loco parentis*, fictive kinship, and other forms of family life deserve further attention.

The interviews drawn on in this article were conducted between 2012 and 2014. A lot of life has been lived since then. In my ongoing research, I seek to engage with this open-endedness. Through the original gatekeepers, some of the young men, now in their mid-twenties to early thirties, have agreed to speak with me again. We have spoken about their migration journeys and trajectories from their present vantage points. Most of those granted international protection are still in Norway. I have also met up with and video-called others settled elsewhere. Some have married, and a few are fathers. They have worked extremely hard to be self-sufficient and meet the increasing requirements of settlement processes and family reunification policies, made possible not with parents but for some, with a wife. Many continue to balance needs ‘here’ and support kin ‘there’

amid a new situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in August 2021 and for Afghans in Iran and Pakistan. Nearly all are Norwegian citizens, but questions about European citizenship are still uncertain for a few. Some continue to travel to places passed on the journey and struggle to fathom how they made it. Others still dream of returning as tourists. Some have seen siblings make similar perilous migrations, horrified that they should experience such dangers, or have re-migrated themselves. Our conversations have anew turned to borders, more often than those crossed on the way to Norway, to demarcations and processes of inclusion and exclusion among different groups of citizens and non-citizens, of living up to their own and others' expectations, and the turn toward temporariness and return which can potentially affect anyone. Amid this, some have seen their fears exhausted, revealing a defiance. Others keep moving to exhaust the body and trick the mind into trying to keep stress and anxiety at bay. And while some of the young men continue to see dreams deferred, others express a sense of peace and contentment as they strive towards their aspirations and respond to changing life circumstances and the everyday potentiality of the future.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Data from the projects is not available due to privacy and ethical considerations.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A continuing trend as of 2022. See: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:T4N3\\_Top\\_20\\_citizenships\\_of\\_unaccompanied\\_minors\\_over\\_the\\_2012-2022\\_period\\_and\\_in\\_2022\\_\(number\\_and\\_the\\_share\\_in\\_total\).png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:T4N3_Top_20_citizenships_of_unaccompanied_minors_over_the_2012-2022_period_and_in_2022_(number_and_the_share_in_total).png) (accessed on 1 August 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.udi.no/statistikk-og-analyse/statistikk/> (accessed on 1 August 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> 74 Afghan girls and young women were settled in Norway as unaccompanied minors between 1996 and 2020 (Kirkeberg et al. 2022, p. 104).
- <sup>4</sup> Asylum claims by unaccompanied minors who turn 18 during the asylum process are assessed as for adults.
- <sup>5</sup> See: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2009-10-15-1286> (accessed on 10 August 2023).
- <sup>6</sup> Minimum support increased in 2023. See: [https://www.udiregelverk.no/rettskilder/udi-retningslinjer/udi-2008-035/udi-2008-035v1/#3.3.2.3.\\_Beboere\\_med\\_oversittet\\_ut](https://www.udiregelverk.no/rettskilder/udi-retningslinjer/udi-2008-035/udi-2008-035v1/#3.3.2.3._Beboere_med_oversittet_ut) (accessed on 10 August 2023).
- <sup>7</sup> See: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2008-05-15-35> (accessed on 10 August 2023).

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Article

# Racial Othering and Relational Wellbeing: African Refugee Youth in Australia

Tebeje Molla

School of Education, Deakin University, Melbourne, VIC 3025, Australia; t.mekonnen@deakin.edu.au

**Abstract:** Racialised and culturally distinct refugee groups increasingly face hostilities and negative representations in countries of resettlement. The experience of African refugee youth in Australia illustrates this general trend. This paper explores how racial Othering discourse seriously undermines the group's wellbeing. The article concentrates in particular on two aspects of relational wellbeing, the capacity to move in public without fear or shame and the ability to feel a sense of belonging to the place where one lives in. Theoretically, the paper draws together work on wellbeing from a capability approach and relational perspective with interdisciplinary literature on racial Othering. Empirically, the paper demonstrates the pervasive culture of racial Othering through media identifications of African youth with criminality and gang violence and illustrates impacts on young people's wellbeing through data from interviews with African refugee youth. The youth's accounts show how it feels to be a problem and what it means not to belong.

**Keywords:** African refugee youth; Australia; racial Othering; wellbeing; refugee integration; the capability approach

## 1. Introduction

*Being a Black young person is challenging. Right now, they identify us with criminal activities. Your skin colour makes you a target. . . . But what can you do?*

(Congolese-background male university student)

In refugee destination societies, the arrival of people perceived as 'Other' at national borders and neighbourhoods has activated xenophobic reactions, reinforcing populist political movements. In many historically liberal democratic societies, the rise of *excessive nationalism* is defined with political ruptures and racial tensions (Castells 2018). With the electoral successes of populist politicians, refugees face a more hostile environment. People with visibly different cultural backgrounds (e.g., Muslims) and ethnic identities (e.g., Oromo, Akan or Somali) particularly become the primary objects of suspicion and antipathy. They are often wrongly seen as threatening to the cultures they come into contact with. This paper focuses on African heritage youth's opportunities for relational wellbeing—that is, their ability to be what they reflectively value and do valuable things with others in destination societies.

Australia is one of the top ten destinations of international (economic and humanitarian) migration (OECD 2020): it has one of the highest shares of the foreign-born population as a portion of the total population, that is, 30% (ABS 2020), and over 60% of the population growth in Australia is attributed to immigration, including the arrival of around 12,000 refugees annually since the end of the Second World War (Simon-Davies 2018). Following the end of the so-called White Australia policy (that restricted non-European immigration) in the early 1970s, Australia's migration program reached a global scale—the resettlement of African refugees in Australia began in the mid-1980s. In the late 1970s, Australia adopted multiculturalism as a national policy to manage ethnocultural diversity. The policy recognises cultural differences and encourages newcomers to adapt to shared

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norms and expectations. Its intention is to support the effective integration of ethnoculturally diverse humanitarian and economic immigrants. However, in Australia, integration outcomes of refugees are often conceived in terms of labour market participation. Refugee resettlement and integration programs and services focus on the newcomers' ability to speak English and secure jobs (Molla 2021a; Australian Government 2019; Shergold et al. 2019). This narrow framing does not recognise social interactions and political discourses that promote or undermine refugees' wellbeing.

In this paper, I argue that, by perpetuating negative stereotypes about visibly different minorities, racially stigmatising public discourses in the destination society undermine refugees' wellbeing—in particular, their sense of safety and belonging. For example, as shown in the analysis below, conservative politicians and media outlets have routinely racialised youth violence in recent years, labelling Black African youth as inherently dangerous and prone to crime. By racialising violence and stigmatising the 'different' as dangerous, conservative politicians and media commentators transfer differences into Otherness and trigger xenophobic fears in the broader public. The negative racial discourse not only makes the African heritage youth unsafe but also sows fear and distrust in the community, further undermining societal wellbeing and cohesion. This paper aims to understand how the politics of racial Othering have affected African youth's substantive opportunities for wellbeing. The following research question guides the paper:

*How has the racialisation of violence affected the opportunity for African refugee youth to achieve relational wellbeing?*

The remainder of the paper is organised into two main sections. The first section briefly discusses the analytical framework, method and data. It outlines the ideas of Othering and wellbeing. The second and main section of the paper briefly describes the racialisation of violence in Australia and shows how it undermines African heritage youth's opportunities for relational wellbeing. The paper closes with concluding remarks.

## **2. Analytical Framework, Method and Data**

### *2.1. Othering and Wellbeing*

The idea of wellbeing is analysed from different disciplinary perspectives. In psychological research, the emphasis is on subjective states of mind (Cahill 2015). Sociologists tend to focus on how social processes and structures mediate the individual's sense of wellbeing. In welfare economics, the informational basis of wellbeing assessment foregrounds the availability of resources (Dworkin 2002) or utility and preference satisfaction (Goodwin 1995). Some scholars in international development (e.g., Gough et al. 2007; White 2015, 2017) and youth studies (e.g., Harris et al. 2021; Wyn 2009) emphasise the relational dimension of human wellbeing. They argue that beyond physical health and adequate material resource safety, wellbeing rests on meaningful social relations and connections.

Amartya Sen has developed the capability approach as an alternative framework in response to the limitations of resources and utility-based accounts of human wellbeing in the welfare economics literature. Sen (1987, 2009, 2017) maintains that (a) resources are valuable to the extent they can be converted into achievable options and outcomes, and (b) the utilitarian metrics of subjective perception as a measure of individual wellbeing are problematic mainly because they overlook the link between disadvantaged social position and conditioned preferences. As an alternative evaluative framework, the capability approach underscores the importance of assessing wellbeing from two distinctive perspectives: the availability of opportunities for people to be and do well (capabilities) and their actual achievement of wellbeing (functionings). For Sen (2003), "If life is seen as a set of 'doings and beings' that are valuable, the exercise of assessing the quality of life takes the form of evaluating these functionings and the capability to function" (p. 4). The capability approach asks whether people have genuine options to do and be what they reflectively value rather than the resources they have access to or the level of satisfaction that they can attain. In assessing a person's wellbeing opportunities, the emphasis is on the availability of social arrangements that enable them to live well and be well.

For Sen (2000, 2009), differences in wellbeing outcomes can be a function of social climate variations that perpetuate hierarchical relationships. The fear of being unfavourably noticed by others can result in diminished ‘general social functionings’. Even in the presence of preferential social arrangements (e.g., equity-oriented public policies and programs), the inability to ‘appear in public without shame’ (Sen 2009) can be a negative conversion factor that diminishes one’s capability to be and live well. For example, racial stigma and abuse victims live with a sense of indignity and shame. For racialised youth, not being able to appear in public without fear or shame is a critical impediment to their quality of life. As a basic capability, the ability to ‘appear in public without shame’ underscores the importance of freedom from stigma and negative public representation. For those on the margin of society, being routinely shunned and excessively profiled can result in fear and shame. In essence, as De Herdt (2008, p. 468) stresses, the ability to appear in public “without having good reasons for feeling humiliated” is a precondition of human agency. This is mainly because those who face (e.g., because of their racialised identity) public humiliation on a daily basis can develop distorted views about what they can do and be (Clark 1989; Deaux 2006; Steele 2010). Put differently, durable exposure to racial violence, discrimination and disrespect can assault self-worth; experiences of being ignored and underestimated can undermine self-efficacy. Hence, in assessing wellbeing, we should consider people’s opportunities for dignified representation as an important informational basis of judgement. We cannot expect young people who are unable to go about without fear and shame to be well, engaged and productive citizens.

However, the capability approach provides only a partial view of the interplay between social arrangements and wellbeing. In an effort to expand the capability-based evaluative framework, I turn to the relational wellbeing literature (e.g., White 2015, 2017; White and Jha 2023; White and Ramirez 2015). Viewed from a relational perspective, wellbeing is more than just being well or having a sustainable income—it is more than the absence of harm and hardship. Wellbeing has material, relational and subjective dimensions, and it is emergent, happening through “the dynamic interplay of personal, societal and environmental structures and processes, interacting at a range of scales, in ways that are both reinforcing and in tension” (White 2017, p. 133). The argument is that our physical and emotional wellness depends partly on our relations with, and the actions and inactions of, others. For instance, in societies where anti-immigration politics and xenophobic labelling are rife, visibly distinct refugee groups are likely to have limited positive interactions with local communities.

Wellbeing is often approached as an individual construct—how individuals think and feel about their lives. The relational dimension of wellbeing emphasises instead the importance of social context, and how this promotes or undermines people’s scope to experience wellbeing. Seen from this perspective, wellbeing is grounded in the quality of social relations. Wellbeing is relational in that specific social and cultural contexts mediate the material and symbolic resources that affect people’s quality of life. In this respect, investigating relational wellbeing entails documenting “how people are doing materially and the terms on which they are able to interact with others” (White and Jha 2023, p. 6). The idea of a relational approach to wellbeing puts the emphasis on social contexts, connections (and the terms of connection) and the importance of everyday interaction.

In the context of refugee resettling countries, stigmatised social position diminishes the newcomers’ sense of belonging. This makes assessing wellbeing in relational spaces timely and critical. As White (2017) argues,

*At a time of resurgent nationalism, where suspicion of those perceived as ‘other’ is becoming a dominant ethic and intensified border controls and gated communities embody the defence of privilege against ‘outsider’ threat, it is vital that narratives of wellbeing generate an expanded and socially inclusive vision and practice. (p. 129)*

Othering entails ascribing negativity and stigma towards minoritised out-groups. It is a double act: portraying the Other as ‘essentially different’ and translating difference into stigma (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 2012). Othering is a discursive instrument of power;



it creates, essentialises and targets collective identities. As Staszak (2020) notes, whereas difference “belongs to the realm of fact”, Othering belongs to the realms of discourse and practice (p. 2). Othering makes some differences matter and degrades others into irrelevance. The categorisation of individuals or groups based on perceived distinctions is not a neutral process. As sociologists Norbert Elias (2000) and Georg Simmel (1971) noted a long time ago, social differentiation (e.g., racial categorisation) is intertwined with and indicative of prevailing power dynamics. Racial Othering emphasises the act of negatively representing and depriving equal respect and worth. Misguided by disdain and fear of the Other, ‘paranoid nationalism’ marks the boundary between those who belong to the nation and those who do not along the colour lines (Hage 2004). Politicians perform Othering by linking racial minority groups to concerns of national security, cultural homogeneity and economic burden. The narratives frame members of minority groups as a threat to society. Kagedan (2020) argues,

*The politics of othering involves a clever weaving of fact (often paltry but exaggerated) and fiction intended to demean a group—or even to demonise it—in advance of politicians using fear and dislike of the group to create policies and laws against them. (p. 125)*

Relatedly, racialisation refers to the process of assigning racial meanings to specific social problems, the practice of centring race as a key factor in defining and explaining violence and other social ills (Murji and Solomos 2005). Racialisation is underpinned by systemic racism and racial prejudice—when people’s actions and behaviour are guided by racial prejudice, all they see is not the person in front of them but the cast of their prejudice. People racialise violence when they frame causes and perpetrators of criminal activities along racial lines, thereby Othering members of a specific racial group and prompting xenophobic fears in the broader public. Othering draws a line of differentiation between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Commenting on the experiences of migrants in France, Fassin (2001) argues that Othering emphasises the racialised body and “introduces internal frontiers founded on difference” (p. 7). Othering also expresses asymmetries of power and regard associated with one group’s dominance over the other (Spivak 1985). Through Othering, politicians and the media do not just define and label ethnoculturally minoritised groups as ‘unfit’ to be a member of society. They also at the same time devalue them as less worthy of equal respect and dignity. Othering rests on the act of negating shared attributes. Specific instruments of racial Othering include labels and stereotypes. It necessarily entails stigmatising a difference to put people in a hierarchical order. In Australia, by framing youth violence as an ethnocultural problem, those who propagate Afrophobia represent Africans as inherently violent and dangerous (Molla 2021a, 2021c, 2023). They create an ‘interior frontier’ that divides what they see as desirables and undesirables. Put differently, racial Othering represents an invisible wall of exclusion, undermines self-worth and diminishes social standing.

In this paper, I conceive the racialisation of youth violence as a form of racism that enforces differential access to dignity, resources and safety. Focusing on the racialisation of violence makes it easier to show concretely multifaceted aspects of racism and its impact on African heritage youth. I ask whether African-heritage Australian youth from refugee backgrounds have substantive opportunities for positive representation, and nurturing relationships and connections that foster their wellness. I specifically assess the wellbeing of the group in two spaces: (a) the ability to appear in public without fear and shame (**dignity**) and (b) the freedom to participate in one’s community (**belonging**). The argument is that people achieve these dimensions of wellbeing when they have genuine options to build social connections, participate in their society and have equal rights to dignifying representation and self-worth. The first space of assessment focuses on African heritage youth’s rights to dignified representation and respect in the public sphere. The second space of assessment concerns the group’s substantive freedom for affiliation and participation in the life of their community.

## 2.2. Method and Data

The study from which this paper is derived examined the educational experiences and attainment of African heritage youth from refugee backgrounds in Australia. The project generated qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with 44 African-heritage participants (aged between 18 and 30) who arrived in Australia on a permanent humanitarian visa from the eight main countries of origin of African refugees (namely, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Ghana, Liberia, Somalia and Sierra Leone). Before they signed the consent forms, the participants were given plain-language statements and were fully informed about the purpose of the study. The interview protocol covered a range of questions about the participants' educational opportunities and experiences as well as their sense of safety and belonging.

For this paper, I chose accounts of five participants to explicate the impact of racial Othering on the relational wellbeing of the refugee youth. The key selection criterion was the relevance of the accounts to the theme in question. My positionality—as defined with my intercultural competence (acquired through lifelong learning and daily interactions with people of different ethnocultural backgrounds), racially marked body and active engagement in the community—was a critical factor in the research. It enabled me to capture the nuance and details of the participants' accounts of their lived experiences. Even so, I recognised that my outsider status, defined with my non-refugee background and academic position, could create unequal power relations that might have affected the interview processes and outcomes.

In this paper, I use the notion of the racialisation of youth violence as a marker of racial Othering. Following street violence and unrest at the 2016 Moomba festival in Melbourne (commonly referred to in the media as the Moomba 'riot'), the racialisation of youth violence reached its peak. Conservative media outlets and top government officials framed youth violence in Victoria as a racial problem. I located these statements and media headlines using the university newspaper database and Google searches. The key search terms were 'African gangs', 'African crime gangs', and 'African youth violence'. Under the *Racialising Violence as a Marker of Othering* section, I present excerpts of quotes from Coalition Government members and media headlines representing African-heritage youth as violent and dangerous. The quotes are preceded with a brief conceptual exposition, connecting the racialisation of youth violence with racial Othering.

In making sense of the qualitative data (accounts of African heritage youth), I applied an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021). After data familiarisation and in light of the analytical framework, I read the transcribed data and coded the text line by line. Then I identified segments of key statements and mapped out emerging patterns to form the following two themes: *the ability to appear in public without fear and opportunities for participation and belonging*. The two themes form subheadings of the analysis section (*Racialisation of Violence Undermines Wellbeing Outcomes*). The analysis section combines empirical accounts (i.e., politicians' verbatim, media headlines and stories of young people) and theoretical redescription (i.e., invoking concepts from sociology, development studies, youth studies, social psychology, social welfare and cultural studies to explicate the themes). Here, theoretical redescription entails placing the empirical data in new contexts of ideas and concepts. Applying theory to empirical data enables a social researcher to detect "meanings and connections that are not given in our habitual way of perceiving the world" (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 94). The racialisation of youth violence is used as a marker of racial Othering.

## 3. Racialisation of Violence and Implications for Wellbeing

### 3.1. Racialising Violence

In this paper, racialising violence is seen as a marker of Othering. Starting from the mid-2000s, with the arrival of a significant number of African refugees, there has been increased antipathy against the group. Especially in the wake of the 2016 violent unrest at the Moomba festival in Melbourne (commonly referred to in the media as the Moomba

'riot') and other subsequent offences of robbery and theft blamed on 'gangs involving African youth' in the State of Victoria, conservative media personalities raised spectres of 'African gangs'. Conservative tabloid personalities such as Herald Sun's Andrew Bolt and 'shock jocks' radio hosts such as Alan Jones echo the racist gang politics. Below are media headlines that typify the framing of African youth since the mid-2010s:

Herald Sun:

- Who let them [African refugees] in? To **terrify** checkout staff? (7 October 2016)
- Blind eye to report on growing **African gang** crime (2 January 2018)
- African chaos in Taylors Hill. Residents too **scared to go out** to restaurants (8 August 2018)
- **Virus** thrives in multiculturalism (13 July 2020)

Sky News:

- **African gangs** scaring Melburnians: Dutton (3 January 2018)
- Deradicalisation programs to combat **African street gang** violence in Victoria (15 January 2018)
- We cannot turn a blind eye to **African youth crime** (13 November 2018)

Channel 7:

- **African gang** terrifies train passengers (4 October 2018)
- Dandenong residents say they're fed up, claiming **gang warfare** is out of control, with shopkeepers and students too scared to walk the streets at night (15 July 2019)

Daily Mail (Australia):

- Melbourne's **African gang crime** hot spots are revealed—so is your suburb safe? (20 November 2018)
- Gang of 20 **African youths terrorise** customers in a Melbourne Coles (23 January 2019)
- **African youth gangs** running riot in Sydney carry out six 'blitz-style' robberies of phone shops (10 June 2019)

Note the framing of the issue: African youth are represented as violent gangs who 'terrify' and 'terrorise' peaceful residents. Underpinning those representations is the politics of racial Othering that combines traditional overt racism based on pseudo-biological notions of racial superiority and covert cultural racism based on the notion of cultural incompatibility of the Other (Siebers 2017). As Finn (2020) notes, racism persists when a dominant group in society establishes a system of advantage and oppression based on perceived racial categories and has the "power to carry out *systematic discrimination* through the institutional policies and practices of the society and [shape] the *cultural beliefs and values* that support those racist policies and practices" (p. 32, emphasis added). In this respect, negative media discourses reinforce racial stereotypes in society.

It is imperative to note that the racialisation of violence and the act of racist dog-whistling are not limited to media coverage. Below are snapshots of the representation of African youth by Australia's top officials of the Coalition Government:

Tony Abbott (former Prime Minister of Australia, speaking on 2GB Radio):

*So, there is a problem; it's an **African gang problem**, and the Victorian socialist government should get real and own up to the fact that there is an **African gang problem** in Melbourne.* (25 July 2018)<sup>1</sup>

Malcolm Turnbull (then Prime Minister of Australia, speaking on 3AW Radio):

*There is certainly concern about street crime in Melbourne. There is real concern about **Sudanese gang**.* (17 July 2018)

Peter Dutton (Federal Home Affairs Minister, speaking on 2GB Radio):

*The reality is people [in Melbourne] are scared to go out at restaurants of a night time because they're followed home by these gangs, home invasions and cars are stolen, [...] call it for what it is—of course, it's African gang violence.* (3 January 2018)

Jason Wood (then Assistant Federal Minister for Multicultural Affairs, quoted in The Sydney Morning Herald):

*African youth gangs are out of control. [...] I've secured legislation to deport foreign-born thugs, [...] I've arranged with Minister for Home Affairs Mr Dutton to have the AFP as part of a National Anti-Gangs Squad to target violent youth gangs in the South East and Western suburbs.* (29 May 2019)

The political and media sensationalism distorts public perceptions of people of African origin. It engenders stigma and *Afrophobia* in society. The European Network Against Racism (Michael 2015; Nwabuzo 2015) uses the term *Afrophobia* to describe 'the hostility, antipathy, contempt and aversion' directed at Black Africans in dominantly White societies. It includes racial bigotry, prejudice, violence and marginalisation directed at people from Sub-Saharan Africa. Frames such as 'African gangs' and 'crime thugs' are not just words. Those are rather ideological scripts of Othering that distort people's perceptions toward individuals of African origin. By representing Black African youth as violent and dangerous, the politics of Othering nurtures negative views about the group. The negative frames made the phrase 'of African appearance' synonymous with criminality. As Kagedan (2020) argues, 'The politics of othering emboldens, curates, and marshals people who are uneasy about myriad issues to demand that something must be done about "those people"' (p. 149). Even worse, blowing a political dog whistle and stoking racism through insidious stereotyping and dangerous framing often goes unchallenged.

In the context of Australia, the representation of Black African youth as violent is *political* for two reasons. First, negative racial frames and labels are mobilised primarily by politicians and media personalities. Second, the negative representation of African youth usually emerges during election seasons at state and federal levels. The fact that top government officials and conservative media personalities resorted to the same 'African crime gangs' narrative suggests the shared interest to use racial Othering as an instrument of governance.

### 3.2. Implications for Wellbeing

Racial Othering is a social act. Resulting from both structural arrangements and individual prejudices, racial Othering manifests itself in relational dynamics, influencing the ebb and flow of inclusion and exclusion. As such, racism erodes the social base of dignity and respectful relationships. The theoretical and empirical literature in sociology, cultural studies, criminology and social psychology (e.g., Brubaker 2015; Fassin 2001; Lilly et al. 2019; Lorry 2021; Murji and Solomos 2005; Steele 2010) shows that sustained exposure to racial discrimination and stigma undermines people's ability to engage in economic, social, cultural and political domains of lives of society. Whether it stems from 'the myth of racial inequality' or the misbelief of cultural antagonism (Balibar 2020), racism puts ethnocultural minorities in a state of collective vulnerability that diminishes their dignity and belonging. In what follows, I discuss how the racialisation of violence undermines African-heritage Australian youth's opportunities for wellbeing.

With the politics of racial Othering outlined above as a backdrop, this section focuses on how racial Othering undermines African heritage youth's opportunities for wellbeing, with special attention to their freedom to appear in public without fear and participate in society with purpose and mutual respect. These two points are discussed in turn.

#### 3.2.1. Inability to Appear in Public without Fear or Shame

One of the key measures of people's wellbeing opportunity is the ability to appear in public without fear and shame (Sen 2009). The politics of racial Othering undermine this fundamental human capability. Racial Othering injures dignity. As Du Bois ([1903] 2015)

noted over a century ago, “being a problem is a strange experience” (p. 6). Those who are framed as dangerous and viewed with suspicion are destined to live with self-doubt and insecurity.

African-heritage youth in my study report that, at every step of their move in the public sphere, they know that their actions and behaviours would be interpreted in relation to demeaning stereotypes people hold about them as a group. For those young Africans, the burden of presumptive guilt is emotionally taxing. They recounted how they felt when they encountered incidents of racial microaggressions:

*Being a Black young person is challenging. Right now they identify us with criminal activities. Your skin colour makes you a target. [...] Even when you go to shopping, someone is always following you. They think you would steal, you don't have money. That happened to me and my friend at Coles. When you know that someone is following you while you're shopping, you feel embarrassed. But what can you do? (Abola, Congolese background, male, university student)*

*It is not that Australians are disrespectful but I just feel some people don't respect others, they don't appreciate that we are all human beings regardless of where we came from or what skin colour we have. [...] yeah, sometimes I feel disappointed. (Shimbra, South Sudanese background, female, university student)*

*One day, on my way to school, I was sitting on the train. Nobody sat next to me. Everybody walked away. That really made me feel embarrassed. (Serdo, South Sudanese background, male, high school graduate)*

*Being a young African person, I have always been judged by the character of someone else, not mine. I can catch the train or walk into any shopping centre, people will be staring at me, looking at me as being part of what they call African gangs. People don't think I'm a responsible person. I don't like it when I'm not treated according to my character. (Jigurte, South Sudanese background, male, recent university graduate)*

*As a Black person, people see you with suspicion; this is mainly because the media labelled African communities as criminals. That blocks our opportunities in terms of finding jobs so and so on. (Ferensay, Sudanese background, female, high school graduate)*

As the quotes above suggest, those subjected to racial Othering live a life of alienation and stigma consciousness. It is exhausting to be an unwelcome guest. Experiences of derogatory labelling and racial stereotypes constitute capability deprivation and are indicators of injustice. In this regard, racial stigma devalues people, inflicts a grievous wound on self-esteem and undermines self-efficacy and aspiration for a better future, contributing to low integration outcomes. Nonrecognition, disrespect and racial vilification are particularly injurious because those impair the positive understanding of self (Honneth 2003). The above accounts suggest that consistent exposure to causes of humiliation and shame may result in the internalisation of low self-efficacy that limits action even when the original threat is removed. When you receive perpetual messages that attack your sense of ease with who you are, and you know your body is negatively raced, your sense of self-worth is undermined, and your aspirations are tamed. The resultant effect is emotional ill-being. In his classic work on social power, renowned psychologist and civil rights activist Kenneth Clark observed that people “whose daily experience tells them that almost nowhere in society are they respected and granted the ordinary dignity and courtesy accorded to others will, as a matter of course, begin to doubt their own worth” (Clark 1989, p. 64). The negative meanings associated with people of African descent operate to obscure their actual identity and deprive them of cultural citizenship, or full societal belonging. The next section expands on this point.

In expressing the emotional cost of negative racial stereotypes, the interview participants used terms such as ‘feel embarrassed’ (Abola and Serdo) and ‘feel disappointed’ (Shimbra). Exposure to disrespect generates feelings of anger, low self-worth and self-exclusion from opportunities. African youth who participated in this research used terms

such as misunderstood, humiliated, disrespected, ashamed, stereotyped, etc., to describe their feelings. For those young Africans, the burden of presumptive guilt is emotionally taxing. Reflecting on accounts of South-Sudanese-background refugees, Losoncz (2019) argues that the experience of disrespect is “psychologically injurious as it impairs the person’s positive understanding of self—an understanding acquired through mutual recognition and approval” (p. 64). Racial stigma is depreciative. When racialised youth feel estranged from the host society, they develop *affective dissonance* that destabilises their sense of self-worth and security (Ogbu 1995). Racist verbal assaults and public stigmatisation can subject victims to severe psychological trauma. Words can serve as weapons to terrorise, humiliate and wound the racialised Other (Delgado 1993). It is worth noting that those who are found guilty of participating in violent activities should receive a proportional penalty. But it is unacceptable to use their involvement to criminalise entire communities of African heritage. Further, penalising those involved in illegal activities should not overshadow the importance of addressing socioeconomic and cultural issues underlying youth disengagement and increased contact with the justice system among refugee youth.

### 3.2.2. Barriers to Belonging and Participation

Racial Othering also diminishes genuine options for belonging and participation. As social beings, people live linked lives. Our sense of self and security necessarily rests on our relationships with others. As a key element of human capabilities, belonging presupposes one’s ability to engage in meaningful social interactions. A sense of belonging provides energy for aspirations, agency and self-expression (White 2015). Regardless of our ethnic identities or cultural roots, we all yearn for belonging; we value our freedom to live the way we see fit and want to be valued and accepted by others. Affiliation—the ability to have the social base of dignity and self-respect and engage in meaningful social interactions—constitutes core human capabilities (Nussbaum 2019). Relationships are central to our identity and sense of belonging. For people forcibly displaced from their familial homes and social roots, affiliating with destination societies is very important. However, for African-heritage youth in Australia, this fundamental human aspiration has been overshadowed by pervasive racial Othering that creates a ‘hierarchy of belonging’ whereby their identities are (re)constructed as having lesser rights to belong and to dignified representations. Social participation plays a critical role in creating or expanding social capital that can, in turn, contribute to wellbeing outcomes of refugee youth. In this respect, racial Othering diminishes social participation, undermining refugee youth’s wellbeing. Accounts of the refugee youth suggest that the politics of racial Othering contribute to the permanence of Otherness of Black youth in predominantly White societies (Molla 2021b). Participants in my study complained that

*Growing up as an African here, everybody sees you as a refugee. You can be here for 25 or 35 years as an Australian citizen, you are seen as a refugee, this sometimes holds you back.* (Kotebe, South Sudanese background, female, recent university graduate)

*Although we grew up here, went to university here, got a job and integrated with society, we are still labelled as refugees who arrived yesterday.* (Tekeste, Sudanese background, male, university student)

*It’s hard to be a Black person here. People call you names. You don’t feel you belong to society. You don’t feel like being invited.* (Jarra, South Sudanese background, male, university student)

*I felt like the teachers just—they thought we [Africans] were all bad kids. Most of the time White people judge us on our skin. As soon as they see a Black person, they automatically think that the person is a criminal, steals things, is bad and all that. [. . .] I know back in high school, there were some naughty Black kids, but there were also some naughty White kids as well. But teachers pretended not to see the White kids that caused trouble; they mostly focused on the Black kids. So, whenever you go to class, when you’re a Black person, teachers just pick on you. I just felt like it’s just heartbreaking. [. . .] It makes*

*you not want to be around them.* (Selam, Congolese background, female, university student)

Accounts of Kotebe, Tekeste and Jarra show how the permanence of Otherness diminishes people's sense of belonging and affiliation. No matter how long they have lived here as citizens, they are always viewed as refugees. The story of Selam adds another layer to the impact of racial stigma: it illustrates how the racial microaggression of teachers negatively affects African youth's ability to relate and learn. Take note of the last statement of Selam. Not being around teachers entails and may result in academic disengagement. The message is that exposure to pervasive racial stigma undermines the educational attainment of African refugees.

Further, aspirations are inherently social in that people form their desires for the future in light of shared norms and expectations. How individuals see themselves and what they aspire for partly reflect how they relate with others. Furthermore, people's capacity to translate their aspirations into choices and valued outcomes depends on structural enablers and constraints (Ray 2016; Sen 2009; Appadurai 2013). Experiences of racism affect the way young people perceive themselves and socialise with others. Social psychologist Claude Steele noted that stereotypes could "set up threats in the air that are capable of interfering with actions" (Steele 2010, p. 43). This alertness to negative views of others toward them, in turn, results in *stigma consciousness*, which refers to "the awareness that one's group is negatively valued and that one will, as a result, be likely to experience negative consequences when others recognise that group membership" (Deaux 2006, p. 85). This alertness to negative views of others toward them may lead to self-isolation and disengagement with institutions and society more broadly. The fear of confirming the negative societal view about their racial group can also inhibit Black youth from actively seeking connections and navigating opportunities.

At the core of belonging is 'feeling at home' (Yuval-Davis 2011). Beyond formal membership in society, identifications and emotional attachments matter. Feeling unseen or facing negative representations affects racialised people's ability to form a positive sense of self. Finally, persistent exposure to racial discrimination can also make African youth feel hopeless and resentful. The dissonance between the way one expects to be treated and the actual treatment (e.g., discriminatory treatment) generates negative emotions, including oppositional attitudes towards mainstream culture and society, which might partly explain the disproportionately high imprisonment rates among African youth from refugee backgrounds. Subjects of pervasive marginalisation may not demand inclusion mainly because, as McNay (2014) notes, "Chronic experiences of marginalisation and dispossession can engender in individuals a deep sense of disempowerment, a feeling that their suffering is inevitable or unavoidable and that very little can be done to change it" (p. 37). Hence, in assessing the wellbeing implications of racial Othering, we need to be mindful of the impact of adaptation. Racially vilified minority groups can mentally prepare to tolerate racism. The problem of marginalisation is also cyclical. Negative racial representation pushes young people to the fringe of society. Living in marginal positions of poverty and disadvantage, young people tend to withdraw from education, work and civic engagement.

In Australia, racial discrimination is prohibited by both national laws, such as the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, and state laws, including Victoria's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001. Despite these legal safeguards, racism persists as a pervasive issue impacting numerous ethnocultural minority groups, including individuals of Black African descent.

#### 4. Conclusions

The paper sought to understand the impact of racial Othering on the wellbeing outcomes of refugees. Theoretically, relational dimensions of wellbeing and the capability approach guided the analysis. The empirical focus was on the racialisation of youth violence in Australia and its impact on refugee-background African-heritage youth. The findings

showed that the racialisation of youth violence undermined important aspects of African youth's wellbeing: dignity (freedom to interact with others without fear) and belonging (opportunities to participate in their communities).

To reiterate the core argument of the paper, young people have diminished wellbeing opportunities when they lack equal worth and respect, and face difficulties in establishing meaningful relationships with others—when they are not free from alienation, deprivation and domination. For members of minoritised groups, recognition means being accepted for who they are as they name themselves and becoming worthy members of society. In this respect, negative interactions with the host society and few opportunities to pursue valuable goals mean refugee youth may remain on the fringe of society, with little or no substantive resources for a quality experience of life. In my own observation, perhaps because of the pervasiveness of the racialisation of violence and deeply rooted historical legacies of racism, the presence of Black bodies in the public sphere continues to trigger abundant *feelings of inconvenience* and thereby diminish Black people's *sense of emplacement* (Marques et al. 2020). Without sensible political projects that tackle anti-Black discriminatory views and narratives, African heritage youth might continue longing to belong. Racial Othering is more likely to keep African communities down in the social hierarchy, where many societal ills are incubated.

Drawing on the insights of this paper, I would like to emphasise a couple of points. To begin with, racial boundaries are our own making; we can form, reform or transform them. Political actors might want to use racial Othering as an instrument of 'bordering' (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). Many in the position of power may also know the disrespect, discrimination and domination that Black youth face due to the prevalence of the racialisation of violence. But they may look away and take no action to stop the dangerous rhetoric. Hannah Jones describes this act of 'turning away from painful knowledge' as 'violent ignorance' (Jones 2021). As fair and informed citizens, we cannot afford to ignore racially infused causal misattributions. Ignoring troubling knowledge only perpetuates injustice and imperils social cohesion. We should commit to challenging 'violent ignorance' and making small changes. As African American novelist James Baldwin (in Romano 1979) put it: "The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you can alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change the world" (para. 38).

Relatedly, in a society where racial stigma is propagated at a higher level of public office, respectability, opportunity and outcomes are more likely to be distributed along the colour line. Even more worrisomely, in a society where racial Othering goes unchallenged, children would grow to see racism as a natural response to difference. No one benefits from racial hate, fear and stigmatisation, not even those perpetuating it. Racism sows unfounded fear and suspicion; it propagates animosity and disdain. In so doing, racism does not just dehumanise members of the target groups; it also undermines cooperation and respectful relationships, thereby affecting the wellbeing, cohesion and prosperity of society as a whole.

Finally, relationships are fundamental to who we are as human beings. We are hard-wired for connections. We long for belonging. The quality of our life experience partially reflects the structure and strength of our social relationships. Hence, refugee resettlement and integration policies and programs should be evaluated in terms of the substantive opportunities the newcomers have to relate with others and be recognised for who they are as they name themselves.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Victoria is one of the six (and most progressive) states in Australia; Victoria is also one of the strongholds of the Australian Labor Party (ALP).

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## Article

# Nature and Belonging in the Lives of Young Refugees: A Relational Wellbeing Perspective

Nick Haswell

Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, 33100 Tampere, Finland; nicholas.haswell@tuni.fi

**Abstract:** This paper explores the relationship between nature contact, wellbeing and belonging in the resettlement experiences of young refugees in Finland. Drawing on qualitative data, including participant-made artworks and semi-structured interviews, it explores the different ways refugees encounter nature in their past, present and (imagined) future. Using a relational wellbeing approach, the paper considers how subjective, material and relational dimensions of wellbeing arise and interrelate within refugees' encounters with nature and how these encounters link with refugees' developing sense of belonging to people and places in Finland. The paper describes how, in the context of refugee resettlement, nature encounters can foster a sense of belonging in three ways: through restoration and attachment in the present, through maintaining links with the past, and through shaping desires about a future in which to thrive. Considering refugees' sense of belonging in Finland as part of the relational wellbeing generated, in part, from their encounters with nature, these three aspects of belonging represent particular interrelations between subjective, material and relational dimensions of refugees' wellbeing.

**Keywords:** refugee resettlement; relational wellbeing; therapeutic nature; belonging; Finland

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## 1. Introduction

Due to their forced migration, refugees encounter many different natural environments that shape their wellbeing in both negative and positive ways (Gladkikh et al. 2019). The environment in their home country may be the cause of their migration if it is unsafe or if they no longer have the resources needed for living (e.g., Berchin et al. 2017). However, nature in refugees' home countries can also be a source of comforting memories, a sense of belonging and wellbeing. While their physical bonds to their home country are forcibly broken by displacement, refugees may maintain and carry with them emotional, spiritual, cultural and social bonds with those places through memories and sustained practices. The natural environments through which refugees travel and in which they resettle may also be dangerous. However, nature places in receiving countries can also be sources of peace, safety and restoration that play important roles in refugee resettlement.

A growing number of studies have investigated the ways in which refugees encounter natural environments in their receiving countries and how this nature contact can inform their wellbeing during resettlement there. Echoing the substantial body of broader research highlighting the positive links between nature and wellbeing (e.g., Atkinson et al. 2016; Bay 2013; Russell et al. 2013), studies have found an array of material and non-material benefits that refugees can gain from nature contact in their new environments. Material benefits include opportunities for recreational activities (Rishbeth and Finney 2006) and the provision of food (Coughlan and Hermes 2016), while non-material benefits include better mental health and stronger social relations (Gladkikh et al. 2019), as well as place attachment (Sampson and Gifford 2010).

This paper focuses on the less studied links between the wellbeing refugees derive from nature contact, and their sense of belonging to their new physical, social and cultural environments. Some studies have explored how places such as urban parks and community

gardens foster a sense of belonging by providing respite, social interaction and connection to something beyond community (Rishbeth et al. 2019; Sampson and Gifford 2010). Others note the importance of historical connections to places, the environmental similarity or disparity between the past and present places and the types of social relations associated with the places (Brun 2001; Coughlan and Hermes 2016).

While the interrelatedness of different dimensions of wellbeing is widely recognised, a gap remains in our knowledge about how the various subjective, physical and social dimensions of refugees' wellbeing interrelate in the process of coming to belong in their new places (Dinnie et al. 2013; Keniger et al. 2013). As embodied subjects, people interact with natural environments in simultaneously physical, mental, emotional and social ways (e.g., Biglin 2020). The wellbeing generated from those encounters should, therefore, also be understood in a holistic way as an interplay between simultaneously experienced subjective, material and relational dimensions.

Building on the work of scholars such as Atkinson (2013) and Gergen (2009), Sarah White (2015, 2017), along with her colleague Shreya Jha (White and Jha 2020, 2023), has developed a conceptual approach to wellbeing that draws attention to its material, subjective and relational dimensions as well as to the interconnections between them. The material dimension of wellbeing refers to how the physical characteristics of a person's surroundings—the type of environment and availability of resources, for example, shape the conditions enabling people to live well. The subjective dimension encompasses the ways people think and feel within and about their life situations. The relational dimension refers to how people connect with other people, places and objects physically, emotionally and morally. Wellbeing is thus conceived of as a holistic matrix of materially having enough, subjectively feeling good, and relationally being connected. These interrelated dimensions are furthermore seen as enabled or constrained by the specific personal, societal and environmental contexts in which a person is situated (White and Jha 2020: this volume). This relational approach provides a useful perspective to explore the multiple dimensions of refugees' nature contact in relation to their broader experiences of resettlement and the interrelations between them.

This article employs White and Jha's relational approach to explore the significance of nature contact in the wellbeing and belonging of young refugees who, after arriving in Finland as unaccompanied minors, have begun to build new lives there. Drawing on participant-made artworks and art-informed interviews, it seeks to understand the subjective, material and relational dimensions of the wellbeing generated through young refugees' interactions with nature and how those wellbeing dimensions inform young refugees' sense of belonging in Finland. The aim is to shed light on the complex and multifaceted ways that young refugees encounter and experience nature as they build new lives in Finland. This knowledge is important and timely in terms of both resettlement policy and social work, given the continuing high levels of forced migration to Finland and elsewhere (including those recently arrived from Ukraine) and the continuing need for states to provide conditions to foster their wellbeing (Finnish Immigration Service 2023; UNHCR 2023). The study links to the international Drawing Together project, which is the first major study to explore young refugees' wellbeing through this particular relational approach.

I begin with a short overview of how previous studies have approached the nature—wellbeing nexus and the concept of belonging in refugee resettlement. I then present the relational wellbeing approach and the broader Drawing Together project from which this paper arises. Drawing on visual and textual data from the Drawing Together project, I then explore the significance of nature encounters in refugees' relational wellbeing and belonging, concluding with a discussion on the implications of this study for refugee research, policy and social work.

## 2. Nature, Wellbeing and Belonging in Refugee Resettlement

Previous research has shown that nature contact has therapeutic benefits for people's subjective, personal and emotional wellbeing (e.g., Atkinson et al. 2016; McMahan and Estes

2015; Reining et al. 2021). Exposure to nature also has other positive psycho-physiological effects, including reduced risk of disease (e.g., Lemieux et al. 2012; see also Kaplan and Kaplan 1989) and reduced anxiety and depression (Bodin and Hartig 2003). More broadly, nature contact has been linked to increased life satisfaction (Hartig et al. 2014) and vitality—the state of having “positive energy available for oneself” (Pasanen et al. 2018).

In the context of refugee resettlement, nature contact is recognised as having additional benefits, such as improved social relations, access to recreational activities, aesthetic and spiritual experiences, as well as facilitating positive attachments to the new places in which refugees settle (Gladkikh et al. 2019). Sampson and Gifford (2010) draw attention to the therapeutic qualities of nature places such as urban parks to argue that the beauty, peace, safety and sociality of nature may contribute to the healing and restoration of refugees and contribute to their sense of belonging. As Dinnie et al. (2013) point out, however, nature contact is not always positive. Depending on the circumstances of the encounter, the experience can also generate negative feelings, such as anger and frustration. Marginalisation can also occur if unequal power relations exist in the social relations connected to the encounter. Additionally, other scholars note how people’s nature preferences and ways of engagement with nature places may be informed by their cultural backgrounds (Askins 2009; Buijs et al. 2009).

The significance of place in people’s sense of belonging is well recognised within broader scholarship. As Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) note, belonging is seen as not only “a social relationship between people or people and abstract territories” but is “constituted as an intimate interaction with nature, a material relation to the physical environment and biosphere” (p. 238). In refugee studies, encounters with and in nature places, such as parks and community gardens, have been linked to the positive development of belonging (e.g., Chen and Schweitzer 2019; Nunn 2022; Van Liempt and Staring 2021). Within these encounters, refugees create a sense that they belong to their new physical environment or to their new social and cultural environment through nature encounters. Refugees’ sense of belonging has also been shown to have significant temporal dimensions, informed by nostalgia for past nature connections and desire for future nature contact (e.g., Chen and Schweitzer 2019; Nunn 2022).

The spatial dimensions of belonging have important implications for refugee well-being, yet the connections between nature encounters, wellbeing and belonging remain understudied in the context of refugee resettlement. In exploring these connections, I conceptualise belonging in the following way. People can have and develop a sense of belonging to particular nature places, as well as to people, communities and cultures within and through encounters with nature places. People’s sense of belonging emerges from the holistic, simultaneously experienced, physical, affective, cognitive and social dimensions of encountering people, objects and places. The strength of people’s sense of belonging (or not belonging) depends on the extent to which those dimensions generate circumstances of feeling good, having enough and being connected. In other words, I see belonging as not external to, but an aspect of, a person’s relational wellbeing.

### 3. Relational Wellbeing

White and Jha (this volume, also White and Jha 2020) conceptualise wellbeing as a holism of subjective, material and relational dimensions which together manifest in, and are enabled and constrained by, the personal, environmental and societal context of the subject. It is through the interrelations between these dimensions that wellbeing can be understood to be generated relationally; that is, within the relationships between people, things and places rather than within individuals (see also Atkinson 2013).

White and Jha’s approach to wellbeing builds on Kenneth Gergen’s (2009) conceptualisation of people as relational beings, meaning that, like wellbeing, their identities, thoughts and emotions are formed from and exist within social and environmental relations. There are two aspects of relating at work here. One aspect reflects the notion that people are always and inescapably situated within a place. Within this place, people are constantly exposed

to, interacting with and dependent upon the physical environment and the objects located within it (e.g., Macnaghten and Urry 2000; Plessner 2019). At the same time, a person is always and inescapably part of and dependent upon familial, social, and cultural ties that mediate the ways in which they engage with and make sense of the world (Haswell et al. 2023). The other aspect of relating concerns the changes that occur in the qualities and objects of a person's relations. While a person is always embedded in social and environmental relations, the relationships that they share with particular people, places and objects can be made, unmade and transformed throughout the shifting circumstances of their life.

These dual aspects of relational wellbeing are well reflected in the resettlement experiences of refugees. Wellbeing, as a multidimensional process of feeling good, having enough and being connected, can be conceived as both emergent from social, cultural and environmental relationships and also dependent on (and sensitive to) the qualities of these relationships. Understanding how nature contact informs refugees' wellbeing thus requires an understanding of the way that nature fits into and interrelates with the broader web of environmental, social and cultural relations that define them.

Another important quality of White and Jha's relational approach is its focus on the particular characteristics of the environment being encountered, as well as the subjects' personal histories and experiences and the broader cultural and societal context in which they live. By emphasising the situatedness of natural environments and the subjects encountering them, the approach draws the focus of inquiry to how particular people in particular circumstances experience and understand wellbeing (White 2015) and how those experiences and understandings tie into and are informed by the broader contexts mentioned above. While this embracing of complexity makes generalisation difficult (if not impossible), its benefit lies in the increased understanding of young refugees as socially and morally responsible people with unique and multifaceted backgrounds finding their way towards living well in equally unique and multifaceted environments (Haswell et al. 2023). Through understanding the way that subjective, material and relational dimensions of wellbeing interrelate within young refugees' nature experiences, more insight can be gained into their broader resettlement experiences and how they actively and purposefully care for themselves and the people and places important to them.

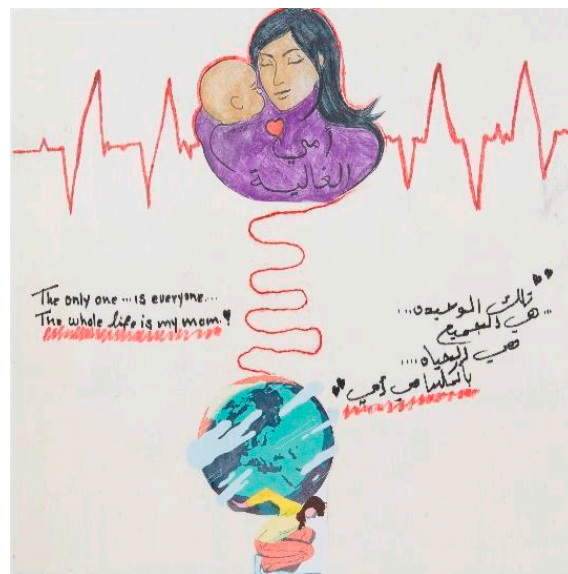
Relational approaches to wellbeing are particularly useful in understanding the significance of nature in young refugees' wellbeing and belonging within the broader multifaceted contexts of their resettlement. While its emphasis on the multidimensionality of refugee resettlement resonates with other frameworks of belonging (e.g., Peters et al. 2016), it centres the focus of inquiry on refugee wellbeing itself, allowing its qualities and the interconnections of its dimensions to be clarified.

#### **4. The Drawing Together Project**

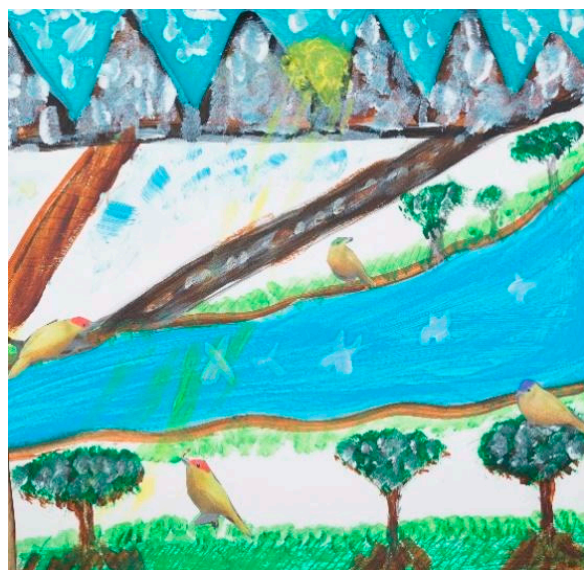
This article's focus on nature contact and relational wellbeing derives from an unforeseen finding from the broader Drawing Together project<sup>1</sup>. The participants in the project were a mix of male and female 18–30-year-old former unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors who have received permission to remain in their respective receiving countries of Finland, Norway and Scotland (UK). During a series of three art workshops<sup>2</sup>, participants were invited to create artworks expressing wellbeing in their lives, focusing on important social, familial and professional relationships. In the first workshop, we encouraged participants to express what made them feel well in the present. In the second workshop, we focused on what they imagined would make them feel well in the future, and in the third workshop, we focused on what made them feel well in the past. At the end of each workshop, participants gave a short verbal explanation of their artworks. Following the workshops, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. In these interviews, each approximately 1 h long, participants discussed in more detail their artworks as well as other themes related to the broader research objectives of the project. The interviews focused on important relationships participants had with family, friends, community groups and professionals. In particular, participants were asked to talk about the

reciprocity of these relationships, about what these important people meant to participants, and what participants meant to them.

As expected, most of the participants' artworks displayed references to connections between people as well as to other objects and symbols signifying relationships (see Figure 1)<sup>3</sup>. Unexpectedly, and despite minimal instruction and guidance beyond the focus on relationships, approximately half of the resulting artworks also contained prominent environmental themes. Many of these contained individual nature-related objects, such as a flower, a tree or the sun, while others displayed an entire landscape either as the artwork's main focus or as a visual frame for other social or material elements (see Figure 2). Others contained fusions of both natural and built/cultural environments.



**Figure 1.** A DTP artwork displaying familial relationship themes. In the artwork the same text is written in English and Arabic.



**Figure 2.** Samir's Workshop 1 artwork displaying nature-related themes.

The emphasis on nature elements and landscapes was apparent in the artworks of participants in all three countries involved in the Drawing Together project. This suggests that the natural environment is in some ways significant in participants' wellbeing, or



at least significant to the ways they wanted to express their wellbeing to us. Created in the context of expressing important relationships with other people, these artworks also suggest that, to these participants, the natural environment is somehow significant to the manner and meaning of their relationships with others.

In the current study, I focused on the group of 17 Drawing Together project participants resettling in Finland to clarify the ways in which they visually and verbally conceived nature as significant to their wellbeing, and how nature contact, and the wellbeing derived from it, linked to their sense of belonging in Finland. Participant details are listed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Participant details.

Number of participants in Finland	17
Age range	18–30
Gender	Female (8), Male (9)
Country of origin	Afghanistan (7), Somalia (6), Iran (2), Pakistan (1), Congo (1)
Year of arrival in Finland	2014–2016 (11), 2008–2011 (4), 2003 (1), 2018 (1)

## 5. Data and Methods

The data used for this article consists of:

1. The participants' artworks (N = 43);
2. The participants' transcribed explanations of their artwork;
3. The transcribed, semi-structured interviews in which the artwork was used as a visual prompt.

My role in the workshops was to assist in the artmaking process, drawing on my professional background as a visual artist and art educator, as well as a researcher. Participants spent several hours in each workshop creating their artwork. In their explanations of the artworks, participants gave concise summaries of the creative deliberation and reflection that went into their creation. Using the artworks as a visual prompt in the interviews (Liebenberg 2009) elicited deeper and more detailed discussion about significant themes that arose both visually in the artworks and verbally in the explanations. All participants were at least partially fluent in Finnish and/or English, and we conducted the interviews in Finnish (28) or English (15), depending on which they felt most comfortable using. Being fluent in both English and Finnish, I translated the relevant Finnish transcript data into English and had them checked with a native Finnish Drawing Together project colleague.

To sample the data (see Figure 3), I first selected the artworks which contained visually explicit nature elements. Drawing on Russell et al. (2013) conception of nature as encompassing living and non-living elements of ecosystems that exist outside of, yet sometimes within and as part of, human-modified environments, I included artworks that depicted environments and elements ranging from what I termed "wild" (without any visual traces of human-modification) to "semi-modified"<sup>4</sup>. Figure 2 shows a selected artwork that I located within this range, showing a variety of ecosystem elements with some visually explicit human-modified elements (the roads between the river and mountains). In the sample, I also included artworks that contained isolated elements of the natural environment, such as trees, flowers, birds or the sun, such as in Figure 4 below.

In the second analysis stage, I conducted a two-step thematic analysis of the transcript data that corresponded to each of these artworks. To understand and categorize the ways in which participants spoke of relating with nature and also to screen out metaphorical references to nature<sup>5</sup>, I used Russell et al.'s (2013) conceptualization of "four channels of human interactions with ecosystems". These are:

- (a) *Knowing*: thinking about an ecosystem or just the concept of an ideal ecosystem;
- (b) *Perceiving*: remote interactions with ecosystem components;
- (c) *Interacting*: physical, active, direct multisensory interactions with ecosystem components;



(d) *Living within*: everyday interactions with the ecosystem in which we live.  
 (Russell et al. 2013, p. 477)

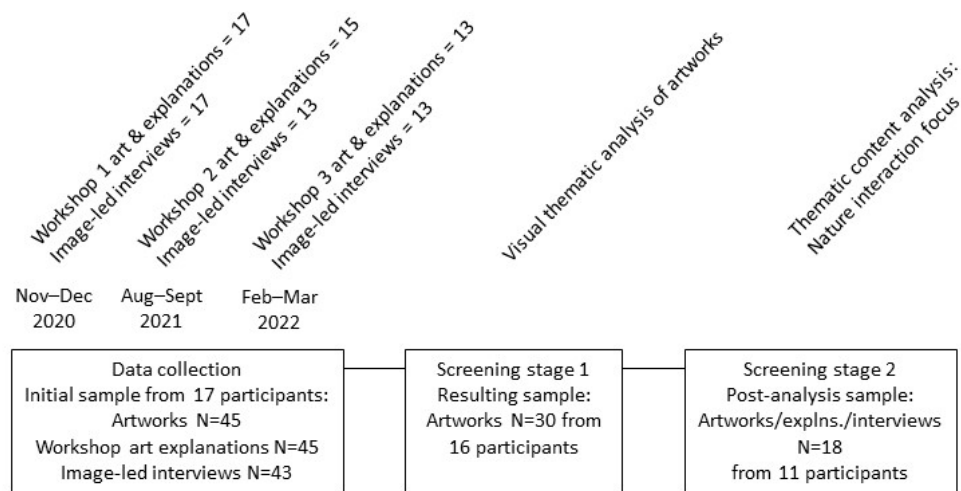


Figure 3. The process of data collection and sampling.



Figure 4. Malay’s Workshop 2 artwork. In the artwork the same text is written in Persian, English and Finnish.

After screening the transcripts for discussions relating to one or more of the interaction channels<sup>6</sup>, I conducted a more detailed thematic analysis guided by White and Jha’s Relational Wellbeing model. Moving iteratively between the data and theory (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009), I analysed participants’ references to nature interaction in terms of how these experiences linked to their sense of belonging in Finland and considered how the subjective, material and relational dimensions of participants’ wellbeing emerged from and interrelated within those experiences.

### 6. Findings: Linking the Past, Present and Future through Nature Encounters

In their artworks and explanations about wellbeing in the past, present and future, participants<sup>7</sup> referred to a variety of nature encounters occurring as children in their homelands, as youths and young adults resettling in Finland, and as adults in imagined futures. These interactions included all four channels of human interactions with ecosystems. Participants referred to *thinking about* nature in general ways related to their memories of home

environments and desired destinations for future travel. They also referred to *perceiving* nature remotely, in cases such as watching sunsets and mountains, as well as to *interacting* with nature through their physical visits to nature places. Finally, they referred to *living within* nature in cases such as remembering childhood homes in nature and bringing nature elements into present homes.

Due to the participants' experience of forced migration, the nature encounters they discussed were connected to many geographical locations and were temporally dispersed. However, in one way or another, they all related to their broader process of resettlement in Finland. Three main themes emerged from the data regarding the temporal dimension of wellbeing, as well as participants' developing sense of place and belonging: *restoration and attachment, maintaining links with the past, and imagining a future in which to thrive.*

### 6.1. Restoration and Attachment

In discussing their encounters with nature in Finland, four participants spoke of visiting particular places for therapeutic and restorative purposes. These were intentional and regular visits made, at least in part, to process feelings of sadness or negativity. Malalay, for example, living in a Finnish coastal city, described nature as a peaceful place in which she felt able to manage emotions. *"If I'm sad or angry, feeling bad about something, I go to the seashore to sit, and there I listen to some music and sometimes cry, but it feels good"* (see Figure 4). Masoud, who lived in an inland Finnish city, interacted with nature through exercise: *"[W]hen I was a little bit sad, like when I had some kind of problem, I just went jogging in the forest or [some] good nature"*. Within these descriptions, nature is seen as a safe space in which participants feel able to both distance themselves from stresses or problems and also to process emotions. These examples show a link between participants' thoughts and emotions and the physical characteristics of the particular natural environment with which they interact. As Masoud explained, these therapeutic encounters in Finnish nature places led to him feeling that *"nature came so much closer to me, and I think therefore that I love it"*. This suggests a connection between Masoud's therapeutic natural encounters and his broader feeling of connection to Finnish nature.

The characteristics of peace and solitude make these nature sites *"kind of a meditation place"* (Masoud) for the participants. Their artworks show these places to be relatively wild and *"beautiful nature country"* (Masoud) with little or no visually explicit human mediation (see Figure 5). There is an emphasis on mountains, trees and bodies of water, such as lakes and rivers, as well as blue skies and sunshine. Birds are by far the most common animals included in the images. These artworks suggest that, for these participants, beauty and wilderness are also significant characteristics of nature sites. For example, Sara, describing a vivid sunset painted into the background of her artwork, noted that sunsets *"make me feel good straight away when I see them"*, adding that *"nature is important to me"*.

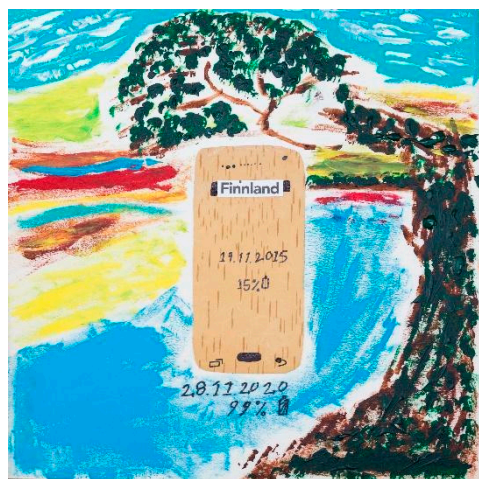


Figure 5. Masoud's Workshop 1 artwork.

In their artworks and explanations, some participants also described positive childhood associations with peaceful and wild places, such as mountains, lakes and forests. Samir, for example, described the peacefulness of the lake he used to go fishing in as a child, with its *“sounds of . . . birds and water”* (see Figure 2). For Samir, it was a good place to *“sit alone and think about this life”*.

In some cases, when participants thought about nature, they compared the physical qualities of Finnish nature places and their subjective responses to them with those in their place of origin. For Masoud, the Finnish nature areas accessible to him made him feel *“quite the same”* as the mountains near his childhood home, which were *“so good for me”*. Samir, on the other hand, described Finnish nature as different to that of his place of origin and that he missed those places of his past which he felt connected to: *“in Finland there are no mountains. I miss mountains. If there were mountains it would be nice, I really miss those kinds of places a bit”*. Masoud’s and Samir’s examples reveal the complex connections between the physical characteristics of nature places in refugees’ past and present and their sense of attachment to them through thinking about, perceiving, interacting with and living in them. These examples also hint at the importance of physical access and proximity to nature places in which participants feel well.

In both Samir’s and Masoud’s descriptions of past and present nature interaction, the relational dimension of those encounters included both socialising and solitude. For Samir, the lake of his homeland was a place to go fishing with others or to find a peaceful place different from cities where there *“are so many people and so much noise”*. For Masoud, the mountains surrounding his childhood home were a place not only *“for calming down”* but also *“for having fun with friends”*, although, in Finland, he socialised in the forest *“only a few times”* with friends.

## 6.2. Maintaining Links with the Past

As alluded to above, aspects of participants’ past informed their present encounters with nature. In their artworks and explanations, several participants drew links between the affinity they felt for natural places in the present and the nature-related experiences and practices of their childhood. Masoud’s abovementioned practice of finding peace in the forest in Finland, for example, is linked to his past practice of going to the mountains near his childhood home to *“calm down”*. Similarly, Sara, for whom *“nature is so important”*, recalled a memory of being taken as a young child on a family trip to see snow for the first time as *“the best experience, that I’ll never forget”*.

These examples reveal not only the interrelationships between material and subjective dimensions of participants’ nature contact and the wellbeing arising from it but also the centrality of relationships in the experience. In Masoud and Sara’s examples, nature visits were experienced with others. They comprised perceptions of and interactions with the physical characteristics of the places as well as the emotional, cognitive and aesthetic responses to them. In Masoud’s example, nature is alluded to as a peaceful space within which to socialise with others, while in Sara’s example, it is a source of shared wonder.

The connection between nature contact and relationships was not only seen in the ways participants visited nature places but also in the way that participants incorporated elements of nature into their home life. Masoud, for example, described the connections he felt with his family and childhood home when he ate mandarin fruit in Finland. The smell of mandarin, he explained, *“ . . . reminds me of when I was in my homeland with my family. . . every time I eat mandarin, . . . like a flash. . . I remember. Also this mandarin was a favourite fruit of my father when he was alive. And he also loved this fruit. When I was child, in our home there were all these mandarins in the winter. So we ate together with my father and mother and also my sister and brother”* (see Figure 6). Masoud’s eating of mandarins in his new life in Finland can be seen as a way of him maintaining emotional bonds with his family and childhood. It can also be seen as a way for him to find a place for these bonds in the context of his present life.



**Figure 6.** Masoud's Workshop 3 artwork.

For Lilith, it is the pothos houseplant she bought for her new home in Finland that sustains memories of her family and childhood home: *"This plant... was in our home regardless of which city or country we lived in. The plant reminds me that I belong to my own family, even though we don't legally belong anywhere"* (see Figure 7). Of significance here is the intentionality of Lilith making this plant part of her new home. By continuing her family's practice of having those plants in her childhood home, Lilith's action can, like Masoud's, be seen as a way to both maintain bonds to her family and childhood as well as find a place for significant practices of the past in her present life.



**Figure 7.** Lilith's Workshop 3 artwork. The blue text, in Finnish language, reads (from top to bottom): Since the day I was born I've always been a foreigner. I've never belonged anywhere, never officially existed. But I've always existed and nobody and nothing has stopped me growing, like nature. The pothos has been my childhood and past nature, houseplant, and it reminds me that I can always develop and grow even though I'm in a dark place. The red text, also in Finnish language, reads: I exist and I belong to the whole world.



Also significant in the houseplant example is the affinity Lilith describes having with her pothos plant itself. Describing how “it always grew and stayed strong in difficult circumstances”, she explained that the plant “taught me that I can manage in difficult circumstances.” What is significant in Lilith’s explanation is her acknowledgement of the plant as a living entity, which led to her speaking of the broader interdependence of humans and nature: “We humans are part of nature and the plant is also part of nature. That’s why it reminds me a bit that we are nature, maybe”. This point is important because it speaks not only of relating to people in or through nature; it also speaks of relating to nature itself. The relationship Lilith has with her plant is one of reciprocity; while nurturing it physically with water, sunlight and care, it, in turn, provides her with emotional strength through its presence and the connection to the family it represents: nurturing and being nurtured. Here, too, the entwining of relational, subjective and material dimensions can be seen to constitute wellbeing.

This example highlights that nature is not only a site in which wellbeing emerges but can also be a constituent of the web of intersubjective relatings that generate wellbeing. This notion is also alluded to in Mathieu’s discussion about his childhood interactions with nature; “My home country is huge. And there we have a big forest. I remember that, as a child we went on holidays to a place where there is nature. And there we went fishing. We saw animals and those kinds of things. Then there was born the relationship between me and nature” (see Figure 8). For Mathieu, as a young refugee, this relationship with the nature of his home country aided him in his resettlement in Finland: “It was easy when I came to Finland”, he said; “here, as well, nature is quite important to many people. It’s the kind of point that connects my home country and Finland”. This statement suggests that Mathieu’s nature relationship made his resettlement process easier not only because of the physical similarity between the nature of his homeland and Finland but also because of a perceived similarity between the socio-cultural attitudes towards nature in the two countries. Returning to the notion that one’s wellbeing, consisting of subjective, material and relational dimensions, is informed by broader personal, socio-cultural and environmental contexts, this example shows Mathieu’s sense of wellbeing and belonging in Finland is informed by his perceptions of how people in Finland and in his homeland felt about nature as well as the characteristics and abundance of nature in both countries. What can also be seen in this example is the co-mingling of these broader personal, societal and environmental processes and structures.

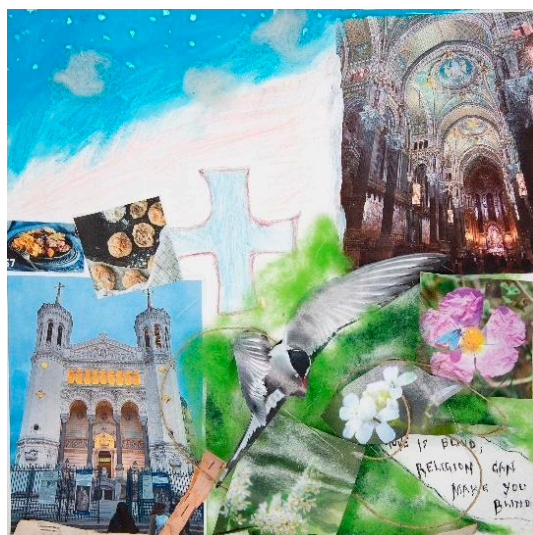


Figure 8. Mathieu’s Workshop 3 artwork.

### 6.3. Imagining a Future in Which to Thrive

Also significant in participants’ development of a sense of belonging in Finland is the way in which they imagine a future which allows them to thrive. In expressing their resettlement experiences through art and word, the participants articulated clear goals

about where, how and with whom they would like to live in the future. Nature, again, featured prominently in many of these imaginings, some of which related to a desire to live in or near nature-rich areas. Samir, continuing his abovementioned discussion about missing the mountains of his childhood, spoke of his desire to live in a place that *“reminded me a bit of my homeland”*. For Arman, the key aspect of the nature he desired to live in is that it is *“safe and healthy”*. Nala, when discussing the presence of a surfing figure in her artwork, expressed a wish to *“live in that kind of warm country, near the beach”*. In these examples, again, the participants’ holistic wellbeing can be seen to be informed by the particular personal, societal and environmental contexts that converge on it, including the legal requirements of living permanently in the country and having enough money and work opportunities to buy and maintain a house.

Other future-oriented examples related to participants’ desire to travel to places of natural beauty. While some participants spoke of their appreciation of Finnish nature in their local surroundings, others expressed a desire to travel abroad to experience different kinds of natural settings. Nala, for example, spoke of the need to study so that *“I could have a good job, not in Finland but overseas. I want to visit every corner of the earth, learn how to surf and . . . to go everywhere, every cold, warm place, enjoy there”*. Arman explained that, in order to visit the kind of *“beautiful nature”* represented in his artwork (see Figure 9), he would need to *“work hard and be successful, then I can go to these places. And I think my wellbeing depends on how hard I will work. I think the harder I work, the better I feel”*. Arman added that part of this desire to explore places of natural beauty was to share these experiences with a wished-for partner. Describing his artwork’s collage of forest, lake, plains and coral reef, Arman notes that *“here are two chairs, and this means that my girlfriend, or wife, and I are together in all of these”*. This wish to share a desired experience with a desired partner once again highlights the interrelations between the subjective, material and relational dimensions of the wellbeing Arman associates with the experience, where feeling good in and from nature interrelates with having enough resources to enjoy it and sharing the experience with others.



**Figure 9.** Arman’s Workshop 2 artwork.

The participants’ desire to travel to experience nature locations abroad can be seen as linked to broader socio-cultural notions of freedom, leisure and affluence, and it may be that the pursuit of these notions, as much as the encounters with the nature destinations, which drives the participants’ desires to travel. In these examples, nature has a perhaps more utilitarian role in participants’ wellbeing as an object to enjoy, and the ecological impact of travelling to see them contrasts with other participants’ concerns that if *“nature is not in good shape we can’t live here in the world”* (Aaqil). Set within these participants’ contexts of forced

dislocation from the natural environments of their childhood and present resettlement in the new environments of Finland. However, these examples can also be seen as linking to a broader process of imagining, seeking and exploring new natural settings in which to be well and belong.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to explore the complex ways that refugees encounter nature in Finland during resettlement and how these encounters inform their wellbeing and their sense of belonging. It showed that refugees encounter nature through thinking about it, perceiving it, interacting with it and living in it. It considered their nature experiences through a relational wellbeing perspective and showed that they encounter nature in simultaneously experienced physical, emotional, cognitive and social ways. The particular physical characteristics of the nature being encountered, the affective and cognitive responses to the encounters and the social connections fostered with and within nature together informed the wellbeing and sense of belonging these young people gained in and from the encounter.

This study found that in the context of refugee resettlement, nature contact can foster a sense of belonging in three ways: through *restoration and attachment*, *maintaining links with the past*, and *shaping desires about a future in which to thrive*. The temporality of the findings resonates with previous research highlighting the significance of nostalgia and desire in refugee resettlement (Chen and Schweitzer 2019; Nunn 2022; Rishbeth and Finney 2006). The first theme relating to the therapeutic and restorative benefits of nature interaction also resonates with the larger body of research on the positive effects of nature on subjective wellbeing (e.g., McMahan and Estes 2015; Reining et al. 2021; Russell et al. 2013). The study's findings relating to the significance of past connections with nature places, the similarities and differences between past and present places, and the types of social relations associated with the places are in line with previous studies on migrant and refugee belonging and resettlement (Brun 2001; Coughlan and Hermes 2016; Peters et al. 2016). The emphasis on natural beauty resonates with previous studies on its significance in the context of healing and restoration in refugee contexts (e.g., Sampson and Gifford 2010).

From a relational wellbeing perspective, the three aspects of refugees' belonging identified above represent particular interrelations between subjective, material and relational dimensions of refugees' wellbeing. The subjective dimension was seen in the way that the encounters made refugees feel good through the positive feelings and thoughts generated by and within the encounter. The material dimension was seen in their having enough access to, as well as enough time and resources to visit, particular nature places with characteristics important to them. The relational dimension is seen in the way that the encounters made these young people feel connected, either with other people through social interactions in nature or with nature itself. These wellbeing dimensions were not generated independently or in isolation from each other but simultaneously within the multifaceted experience of the nature encounters.

Subjectively feeling well in nature was seen as dependent upon the materiality of having enough proximity to and access to nature, which makes them feel well, as well as the kinds of relating that take place in the encounters. Participants stated that the need for money, study, and work was linked both to their capability of accessing nature as well as to more general material necessities for resettlement and living well in a new country, which is recognized as significant in broader research on refugee resettlement and adaption (e.g., Ryan et al. 2008). The significance that participants placed on having access to the kind of nature that makes them feel well resonates with broader research on the importance of nature access to physical and psychological wellbeing (Rishbeth et al. 2019).

The relational dimension of being connected in, through and with nature can also be seen as intrinsically related to the subjective and material dimensions. While in the broader Drawing Together Project, participants also discussed social relations in other environments, the nature-related examples seemed to occur mainly in the kind of nature

that otherwise felt good for them to be in and to which they had the material means to access. Participants' feelings of being connected to nature suggest that the significance of nature in relational wellbeing seemed, in some cases, to extend beyond the role of a setting for social or therapeutic experiences to being part of refugees' environmental relations of wellbeing. This draws links to Atkinson's (2013) notion of wellbeing as comprising "complex assemblages of relations not only between people, but also between people and places, material objects and less material constituents of places including atmosphere, histories and values" (p. 142), as well as to Cartwright et al.'s (2018) suggestion that nearby nature elicits "feelings of connection or relatedness" similar to that of social connection (p. 3). More broadly, it resonates with literature on the reciprocal relations with nature found in indigenous contexts (e.g., Arnold et al. 2021). As pointed out by Chen and Schweitzer (2019), feelings of connection to nature are a significant aspect of belonging that extends beyond social membership to an experience of belonging to something greater.

It is not possible from these findings to draw any deep conclusions about what it means for participants to feel "connected to nature", nor what "nature" itself represents for them when they speak of it. At the very least, however, we can see in these examples how aspects of refugees' sense of belonging can be understood in terms of the interplay between subjective, material and relational dimensions of refugees' wellbeing.

Other examples shed light on how refugees' wellbeing is informed and shaped by their personal histories as well as the broader socio-cultural and environmental contexts in which they resettle. These "drivers" of wellbeing (White and Jha, this volume) were themselves seen to interrelate. An example of this was Mathieu's discussion in which he described, on the one hand, his personal childhood history of nature interaction informing his present subjective nature experiences, and on the other hand, the respect for nature he saw in Finnish society easing his resettlement experiences. This intertwining of environmental, personal and societal factors is in line with White's (2017) conceptualization of environmental as well as personal and societal structures and processes driving relational wellbeing. Importantly, this example shows how these drivers do not work on the wellbeing dimensions separately; rather, they inform the wellbeing dimensions as a holistic experience.

The temporality of the findings suggests that, while belonging is something experienced in the present, it includes the capacity to reconcile the past with the present, as well as envision a positive path into the future (Chen and Schweitzer 2019; Vitus 2022). Through this temporal perspective of belonging, refugees' encounters with nature can be interpreted as active and intentional movements towards building those capacities for looking to the past and the future. In another way, the temporality of the findings resonates with previous studies on refugee belonging, which highlight the processual nature of belonging. Belonging is not a state to which one arrives but a continual process of becoming (Chen and Schweitzer 2019). This is in line with other understandings of wellbeing, including White's (2015) relational approach, which stresses the "dynamic inter-relations" of wellbeing dimensions over time (p. 11). Refugees' sense of belonging can, in this sense, be seen as a continual process of interrelating over time between the multiple dimensions of their wellbeing. This may mean, for example, that the ways that refugees encounter particular nature places might change over time depending on the shifting levels of feeling good, having enough and being connected that are generated from the encounter.

Using a combination of artmaking and interviews was an effective way of shedding light on the complex links between nature, wellbeing and belonging. The study was, however, limited in various respects. In terms of framing, this study was centred on the particular context of Finland with its own specific range of physical, social and cultural environments. The participants' places of origin were limited to particular regions in central and south Asia as well as central and eastern Africa. In terms of methodology, being sensitive to the importance of privacy in participants' resettlement experiences, I examined only the kind of nature encounters that participants wished to talk or create art about. Similarly, the study only considered the kinds of subjective, material and relational



responses to nature contact that the participants wished to reveal. Additionally, while participants' artworks and interviews contained a wide variety of details related to their wellbeing and resettlement experiences, this study focused only on those with explicit visual or verbal reference to nature contact. Also, while my interpretation of the artworks was based as much as possible on participants' own descriptions and explanations of them, the conclusions I drew from them were nevertheless, and unavoidably, mediated by my own cultural (Anglo-Australian) lens. Lastly, participants were encouraged to focus primarily on the positive aspect of relational wellbeing. This decision, following the broader methodological framework of the Drawing Together project, meant that potentially significant negative aspects of the nature–wellbeing nexus highlighted by previous research (see, e.g., Bates 2002; Rishbeth et al. 2019) remained unexplored.

Future research could build further on this study by examining the significance of nature in refugee resettlement experiences in other country contexts. Further investigations into the negative aspects of nature contact for refugees' senses of belonging would also provide valuable additional insights into how aspects of nature encounters can inhibit as well as foster a sense of belonging. More research on the links between Finnish built environments and relational wellbeing would also be of great value in complementing this study's focus on natural environments.

While there is still much to learn about the complex ways that natural environments impact and relate to refugees' wellbeing and belonging, I hope that the insights presented in this paper lead to more consideration of how the physical, as well as social, characteristics of places can be improved to shape their resettlement experiences. Improvements in the health and integrity of local natural environments, for example, as well as increased access to a range of natural environments, would benefit not only newcomers to Finland but also those already living there. Increased opportunities for learning about and encountering natural environments in social and therapeutic ways would also be of benefit. Another hope is that this chapter stimulates further discussion about the processual nature of being well and coming to belong. As forced migration to Finland and elsewhere continues at high levels, states need to provide continual and sustainable conditions to foster the wellbeing of all migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers. Included in these conditions is the opportunity to imagine a future in which to thrive.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was approved by the Tampere University Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region (44/2020, 4 June 2020) for studies involving humans.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data is not publicly available in order to protect participants' privacy.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Drawing Together project is an international NordForsk-funded study investigating relational wellbeing in the lives of young refugees in Finland, Norway and Scotland. The total participants for each country were Finland (17), Norway (17), and Scotland (17). See the Drawing Together website for more details: <https://www.drawingtogetherproject.org/> (accessed on 1 November 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> Each workshop ran for approximately 6 h during a single day. They were mainly held on the premises of participating research institutions. In Finland, these were Tampere University and the Migration Institute of Finland, Turku.
- <sup>3</sup> Participants have all given consent for their artworks and interview texts to be published. All artwork images and interview texts were checked and approved by participants before publication.
- <sup>4</sup> Acknowledging the complex debate regarding the defining of nature (Vining et al. 2008), the distinctions I drew at this stage between natural and non-natural were necessarily simplistic and artificial. They were used here merely as an analytical tool to narrow the data sample to that which I anticipated would yield the most relevant verbal data in the explanations and interviews.

- 5 In several cases, participants described nature elements in their artworks, such as trees, as metaphors for family or social relations. Although interesting, these cases were considered as lying outside the scope of this study.
- 6 To ensure rigour, I also analysed the transcripts corresponding to the artworks excluded in the first sampling stage to check for any general discussions on the nature–wellbeing nexus. As expected, those transcripts did not yield any relevant data.
- 7 To preserve participants’ privacy, all names in this paper have been anonymised.

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## Article

# Narratives of Symbolic Objects: Exploring Relational Wellbeing of Young Refugees Living in Scotland, Finland, and Norway

Masego Katsi <sup>1,\*</sup>, Milfrid Tonheim <sup>1,2</sup>, Sharon A. McGregor <sup>3</sup> and Fath E Mubeen <sup>4,5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Welfare and Participation, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, 5020 Bergen, Norway; milfrid.tonheim@hvl.no

<sup>2</sup> NORCE, Health & Social Sciences Division, Nygårdsgaten 112-114, 5008 Bergen, Norway

<sup>3</sup> Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow G4 0LG, UK; s.a.mcgregor@strath.ac.uk

<sup>4</sup> Migration Institute of Finland, 20500 Turku, Finland; fath.e.mubeen@migrationinstitute.fi

<sup>5</sup> Department of Education, Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, 33100 Tampere, Finland

\* Correspondence: masego.katsi@hvl.no

**Abstract: Background:** In this study, objects are used as a representation of relational wellbeing to help young refugees living in Norway, Scotland, and Finland to talk about important persons who make them feel well. At the time of this research, there is no known study that uses objects to facilitate narratives of how young refugees and members of their social networks generate relational wellbeing. **Methods:** Using a qualitative approach, young refugees participated in individual interviews about the objects they brought to art workshops to understand their experiences, feelings, and acts of wellbeing. **Results:** Treating each object as unique to the owner was powerful in revealing how relational wellbeing is experienced and expressed. There were overlaps in experiences and expressions of wellbeing, hence our themes of discussion: overlaps between old and new social ties; between time and space; and between the three constructs of relational wellbeing. Old ties were not forgotten; instead, they evolved to a different form, supporting young refugees from a distance, while new ties contributed to what is needed in their present and at their current age. Experiences of relational wellbeing transcended time and space between their disrupted places of origin, their experiences on the journey, and settling in their new countries. The constructs of relational wellbeing—*feeling good*, *being connected*, and *having enough*—were inseparable in the participants' experiences. **Conclusions:** We conclude that these overlaps have implications for a relational wellbeing approach in theory and practice. The results leave a challenge for both researchers and practitioners to develop complex research and intervention methods that can capture these tapestries of young refugees' experiences of relational wellbeing.

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**Keywords:** objects; relational wellbeing; young refugees; important persons; social ties; feeling good; being connected; having enough; overlaps

## 1. Introduction

Social relationships, both old and new social ties, can contribute to the wellbeing of young refugees as much as they can for the larger population (Mels et al. 2008). Recent studies have shown the importance of highlighting the positive life experiences of young refugees to help understand what factors contribute to their wellbeing (Löbel 2020; Sundvall et al. 2021). This notion goes against the popular and consistent focus on the negatives. Research that focuses on the relational wellbeing of young refugees is in its infancy. Recent studies have focused more on the social networks (Strang and Quinn 2021; Osman et al. 2020) and on the psychological wellbeing of young refugees (Dangmann et al. 2020; Bamford et al. 2021). This article is part of a large longitudinal qualitative research project called Drawing Together. The larger study uses objects, art, and ecomaps to map a timescape of relational wellbeing for young refugees who are settled in Scotland, Finland,

and Norway. This article focuses on objects which were preliminarily used for making art. It sets out to demonstrate that objects can be used as a representation of relational wellbeing and as talking tools to help young refugees describe both complex and simple relationships that make them feel at ease in their current situation. There are numerous studies that use visual, ethnographic, and participatory arts-based approaches to explore the wellbeing of young refugees and to support refugees' recovery and transition (Rose and Bingley 2017; Lenette 2019; Zadeh and Jorgia 2022). Photographs and photo-elicitation have been used in research to explore how refugees experience their world (Burlles and Thomas 2014; Sastre et al. 2019; Hazaveh 2022). Some studies have used objects to explore specific themes in people's life stories (Watson et al. 2020; Mäki 2020) and have affirmed that the past becomes accessible in the present through objects and stories. For example, there are recent studies using diasporic objects to explore migrants' homes and identities (Marschall 2019; Murcia et al. 2022; Pechurina 2020). However, at the time of this research, there is no known study using objects or things to facilitate narratives of how young refugees and members of their social networks generate relational wellbeing. Our study thus contributes to this thinly explored field in Northern Europe.

In this article, we use objects to explore relationships that have sustained young refugees in their present day-to-day experiences by helping them to "feel good, have enough and be connected" (White 2015, p. 160). "Young refugees" in this paper refers to young people who arrived as unaccompanied minors in Scotland, Finland, and Norway but are now eighteen years of age and above. The background of the young refugees is provided in the introduction to this Special Issue. Our study focuses on the objects young refugees brought with them to the art workshops to help inspire their art. Objects in this study were used as a conversational tool to understand the reasons behind their choice. This is explained more in the methods section. Using objects in research is known to bridge psychological barriers to allow sensemaking and meanings to be heard and visualised in a less intrusive manner (Brooker 2010). This benefit is also seen in the use of photographs in research, where in-depth communication, expression of feelings, and exploration of relationships is maximised (Burlles and Thomas 2014; Sastre et al. 2019; Loustaunau 2019). The basis of our exploration is that young peoples' experiences of forced migration, mobility, and settlement bring the opportunity to find new relations and reconnect with old ones. In this study, objects that young refugees brought to art workshops helped them tell stories of their social ties within and beyond their new host countries.

#### *Using Objects to Explore Narratives of Wellbeing*

Many objects in people's lives remind them of old and new social ties. Some may have been given by someone while others may be connected to events and experiences with important people. In previous research—particularly in disciplines such as religion, anthropology, and psychology—the use of objects helps people to express themselves in a way that complements verbal explanations, where expressing oneself can be difficult (Thibodeau et al. 2019; Mastandrea et al. 2019; Robertson and Atkins 2013; Akthar and Lovell 2019). In art therapy for refugees, however, objects are commonly used with art as metaphoric outward representations of feelings and experiences to reduce trauma-related symptoms, instead of helping them express their health and wellbeing (Rowe et al. 2017; Ugurlu et al. 2016; Akthar and Lovell 2019). This study is not therapy-focused and did not intend to explore painful experiences, unless participants chose to use them to describe their wellbeing. This study also did not explore the materiality of objects as in Knudsen (2005), for example. We only used objects to facilitate expressions of experiences, feelings, and acts of relational wellbeing within interactions with important people in the young refugees' lives.

Although mute, objects communicate with us, and can be a profound aid to facilitating self-expression and interpretation processes. Things and objects have been used in social relationships throughout decades by people of all cultures as symbols, representations of promise, commitment to a course, and commitment to relationships and they therefore

carry meaning of people's connections (Thibodeau et al. 2019). Objects can be items like wedding rings, flowers, photographs, letters, poems, and songs, just to list a few. What an object represents depends on the context. It is the owner who tells us what to feel and hear about the object. Whatever we are supposed to hear and feel about the object carries the meaning and experience of the relationship in context. The value of using objects is that it teaches one to see beyond the surface of "just a thing", of a person, of a real-life situation or event, and instead see the interactions at work (Van Lith 2016). This study uses the object as a talking tool, not as an apparatus of analysis, to describe both complex and simple relations that make young people feel at ease.

## 2. The Relational Wellbeing Approach

Contrary to the dominant individualistic notion of subjective wellbeing (Posselt et al. 2019; Hajak et al. 2021), Sarah White sees wellbeing as "something that belongs to and emerges through relationships with others" (White 2015, p. 6; see also Gergen 2009). Her relational approach to wellbeing is "grounded in a relational ontology that views relationality as logically prior to individuals, rather than vice versa" (White 2017, p. 133). It is, as Atkinson and colleagues express it, about being well together (Atkinson et al. 2020). Wellbeing is understood as socially and culturally constructed, rooted in time and place. White's approach pays attention to how people actively contribute to living a good life (White 2015). Wellbeing itself is an activity (Coulthard et al. 2018); a social process "between the collective and the individual; the local and the global; the people and the state" (White 2010, p. 168).

White's relational wellbeing approach is composed of three integrated and interdependent constructs or dimensions: the subjective (feeling good), the material (having enough), and the relational (being connected). Feeling good involves how people feel about themselves and their lives and other people's view of them (White and Jha 2023). Having enough is about giving, receiving, and sharing material things (Coulthard et al. 2018). Being connected refers to physical, emotional, and spiritual connections between people and their environment, including relationships to people as well as to nature. These different dimensions of wellbeing are not separated domains in people's lives but are intertwined and interconnected in complex ways (White 2017). What it means to be well requires contextual grounding—having a sense of wellbeing emerges "through the dynamic interplay of personal, societal and environmental structures and processes" (White 2017, p. 133). These structures are viewed as drivers across the three constructs of the relational wellbeing approach.

Indeed, in accordance with this relational wellbeing approach, we understand that relationships, as well as psychosocial and spiritual mechanisms, have an influence on whether people feel good, have enough, and are connected. Material objects and personal belongings may have emotional meaning, representing a connection to events, people, or places in the past as well as in the present. Objects may, in this sense, symbolise people's relationality and enhance their wellbeing. Employing a relational wellbeing lens to interpret narratives about material objects and wellbeing is both a well-suited combination and novel endeavour.

### 2.1. Old and New Social Ties

In this paper, we use the concepts of old and new social ties to describe social relationships that contribute to young refugees' relational wellbeing. Relationships may change over time, space, and place; sometimes being supportive and at times being stressful (Collado et al. 2017). Old ties are relationships formed prior to arriving in the new host country, while new ties are relationships formed in the process of arrival and settlement.

### 2.2. Old Social Ties

Parents, family members, and relatives are sometimes referred to as blood ties and form part of old social ties. Childhood peers and community members may also be important old

social ties for young refugees. Research on youth in general has identified that domains of young people's subjective wellbeing are influenced by their families' systems of caregiving and nurturance (Bortz et al. 2019). Indicators of such nurturance include love and a sense of security that is expressed by the family to the young person in different ways and at different times. Examples include support by family during challenging times; creating opportunities for young people to connect to their community and peers; being their spiritual examples; playing with them; sharing day-to-day experiences with them; economic and educational support; and imparting strength and role-modelling for them (Lamb 2010). Masten and Palmer (2019) assert that parents and other family members tend to be the ones who protect young people in the context of risk or adversity. This gives them a sense of security to face future challenges. Other studies show that young people in general acquire psychosocial skills from early childhood through the transference of love, attachment, socialisation, experiences of stress management, and acts of protecting cultural knowledge and practices (Aufseeser et al. 2018). They apply these skills in their lives to feel well during adversity (Aufseeser et al. 2018; Löbel 2020). In addition, social obligations to different kin, friends, and relatives can be a motivating factor for giving and receiving acts of love and care so as to keep their own relationships warm and thriving (Janta et al. 2015). Young refugees may not be exceptions to such experiences of socialisation by their families. Indeed, one 2016 study argues that young refugees keep constant communication with old social ties back in their home countries or elsewhere in the world to share good news and receive encouragement in challenging times (Muir and Gannon 2016).

This study recognises that wellbeing for young refugees is bittersweet, as relating with others is blended with experiences of happiness and deep-seated pain (Umer and Elliot 2021). It is observed that interactive relationships, whether within the host countries or abroad, bring a sense of comfort, closeness, safety, and confidence during the process of adjusting and transitioning (Osman et al. 2020). Some young refugees in different countries receive support from their old ties, while others do not, for various reasons such as death, migration, displacement, or just animosities and conflicts between themselves. A lack of support from such relations can account for a lack of wellness in the present (Seery et al. 2010). However, adverse experiences may also foster subsequent advantages for mental health and wellbeing, through what some call toughening up and others call resilience. Migrants and refugees' friends, family members, and other connections often provide a shoulder to cry on when they are hurting and are a source of motivation when they feel low (Juang et al. 2018). Even though they could be geographically far, such connections can act as the main sources of adjustment to the new place by providing emotional support (Juang et al. 2018). Doing family from a distance facilitates migrants' wellbeing. This includes co-presence routines like communications through social media and calls with old social ties and reminiscing on positive memories of the past together (Baldassar et al. 2016).

### *2.3. New Social Ties*

New social ties are relationships that are formed after arriving in host countries and which the young refugees continue to form. In the Nordic countries and Europe, formal structures like social welfare services and civil society organisations seem to facilitate opportunities for migrants to form new social networks (Brochmann and Hagelund 2011; Hodes et al. 2018). The level of interaction within structures varies across different contexts, sociodemographic groups, individuals, and sociocultural settings (Hodes et al. 2018). Though they come with complex interplays, activities that child welfare services, migration organisations, and schools offer to young refugees as they settle help to expand their networks of support (Hanley et al. 2018). Examples of such activities include connecting them to foster parents, social workers, or guardians, local sports clubs, and linking them to civil society organisations where they can meet both peers who have come from the same country as well as other fellow young refugees. Other ways of achieving this include group-based activities in schools and colleges, introducing them to local mentors and friendly families, and volunteering (Cureton 2022; Strzemecka 2015). One study (Daniel et al. 2020)

found that, in the Norwegian setting, while several of the young people in their study described good relationships through schools, universities, and work, others expressed challenges and rejection when trying to build relationships with the locals. Some explained difficulties in relating with fellow refugees from their home countries because of religious and political animosities. This shows that establishing relationships in new countries may not be easy for all migrants. In fact, several studies assert that refugee persons in Europe have difficulties in or few opportunities to establish both trust and reciprocal relationships within their host countries (Strang and Quinn 2021; Lindström and Eriksson 2011; Eriksson et al. 2019). Many find it hard to grasp relevant cultural codes of establishing friends because natives tend to keep to themselves (Daniel et al. 2020). However, those who engaged in sports and other activities appreciated the exchange of warmth, love, and care during such activities, though these contacts tended to be temporary and would not turn into long-term relationships.

### 3. Method

This article draws data from a larger study, namely the Drawing Together Project between Scotland, Finland, and Norway, which explores how wellbeing is aspired to, emerges, and is sustained in the spaces and relationships between young refugees and the people important to them. All authors of this article are part of this project and participated in the data collection between 2020 and 2022. The Drawing Together Project included a total of 53 participants between the ages of 18 and 30 (27 males and 26 females). The countries of origin represented among the young refugees were Sri Lanka, Somalia, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Uganda, Iran, the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Syria, and Myanmar.

We held a series of art workshops relating to young refugees' relational wellbeing across three timelines—the present, the future, and the past. For each timeline, participants were offered the opportunity to participate in an art workshop and create art based on a special object that symbolised a (present, past, and future) relationship they felt was important to their wellbeing. Across each country, the art workshops were delivered by a local art therapist alongside members of the research team. This paper explores participants' narratives of the objects they brought to the first workshops held in early 2021 (the present timeline).

At each art workshop and during a follow-up interview, each young person was invited to reflect on the representation and meaning of their object (as well as describe the artwork produced, which is not a focus of this paper).

A thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001) was conducted on 49 young people's narratives only, because four participants either did not bring an object or joined the project at a later stage. The analysis involved identifying basic themes, classifying the themes based on the story they told, and developing these into global themes.

For this article, we then purposively focused on the object narratives of 15 participants (five from each of the three countries the research was being conducted in), who consisted of seven females (Norway: 2; Scotland: 3; Finland: 2) and eight males (Scotland: 2; Norway: 3; Finland: 3). The selection of object narratives was based on their relevance to the developed themes and representations of quotations across the countries. The themes they represented are listed in the findings section below.

Written consent was sought and reconfirmed with each participant during every activity; in this case, it was sought at the beginning of the workshop and during the individual interviews. During the workshops, researchers worked closely with the art therapists and responded to the emotions and concerns of participants with adaptability for each situation. Participants were in control of what they did or did not want to discuss, and sensitive topics were avoided, unless the young person felt strongly about mentioning such experiences to express wellbeing. This study did not explore the materiality of objects but simply the meaning or way in which they represent wellbeing. Interviews were conducted in participants' second language, mainly English, Norwegian, or Finnish,



with the level of fluency differing between participants. All interviews and the object narratives in the workshops were recorded, uploaded to a secure server, and transcribed by trusted transcribers. Norwegian and Finnish coded data were translated to English for this publication. The findings presented in this article and all identifying information are anonymised. To ensure anonymity, we do not categorise objects according to country. We use the gender neutral “them and they” to avoid revealing the participants’ gender.

#### 4. Findings

Many of the 15 sample objects brought to the art workshop reminded the young refugees of an important relationship or were connected to important memories or certain incidences and experiences from their lives. Most objects were gifted by or had belonged to family members (e.g., to themselves, from their mother, uncle, brother, grandmother); friends or peers (e.g., boyfriend, best friend, special person in their life); professional or formal relationships (e.g., teacher, social worker); or were community-related (e.g., gym). Some objects were connected to the young refugees themselves rather than any other relationship.

Across all three countries and out of the fifteen objects, five related to a new social tie and ten related to an old one. Please refer to Table 1 below for a summary overview of the 15 objects, and to Table 2 (see attached at the end of this paper) for a summary of the 49 objects.

**Table 1.** Sample of the 15 objects discussed in this article.

Object	Old or New Social Tie	How the Object Is Connected to an Important Person
1 Orange thread	New	A symbol of what the important person is to them.
2 Gold necklace	Old	A symbol of support and remembrance.
3 Koran	Old	A symbol of protection.
4 Mobile phone	Old	Stores memories of relations.
5 Picture of two brothers	Old	A symbol of their dream to help their brother.
6 Salt lamp	New	A symbol of what the important person represents to them.
7 Mobile phone	New	A symbol of connecting to relations.
8 Art journal	Old	A means to connect with their cultural identity.
9 Wristwatch	Old	A gift representing friendship, love, and loss.
10 Religious necklace	Old	A symbol of love from their family and religion.
11 Wristwatch	New	A gift from their spouse representing their support in difficult times.
12 Gold necklace	Old	A Quranic-verse-engraved necklace gifted by their mother.
13 Dumbbells	New	An expression of relation to self.
14 (a) Shawl and (b) phone case	Old	A gift from the grandmother for motivation in moments of despair and mobile phone case as a tool to connect with family.
15 Ring	Old	Belonged to their deceased mother and reminds them of her presence.

**Table 2.** List of 49 objects brought to Workshop 1—The Present.

<b>The Object</b>	<b>How the Object Is Connected to an Important Person</b>
1. Salt lamp	New tie—a gift symbolic of an important friendship
2. Mobile phone	New Tie—a gift that keeps them linked to family
3. Art journal	Old tie—a means to connect with their cultural identity
4. Wristwatch	Old tie—gift representing friendship, love, and loss
5. Religious necklace	Old tie—a symbol of love, family, and religion
6. Ceramic photo	New tie—symbol of a supportive teacher, strength, and happiness
7. Language book	New tie—symbol of a supportive teacher and confidence builder
8. Photo of YP receiving certificate	New tie—important relationship in new country
9. Photo frame	New tie—a gift and symbol of a college project
10. Mug with family on it	New tie—gifted in new country (new tie) with photo of birth family (old tie)
11. Teddy bear	New tie—symbol of a new and special relationship that fills a void
12. iPad	New tie—gift from social worker symbolising support with every single step
13. Family photo	New tie—special photo representing their new family in their new country
14. Necklace	Old tie—gift from and reminder of a childhood friend
15. Dressing gown	New tie—the colours represent war and loss of their home country
16. Ring	Old tie—symbol representing family from home
17. Knitted jumper	New tie—represents new family in new country, safety, and support
18. Wristwatch	New tie—gift from spouse representing support in difficult times
19. Summer camp letter	New tie—symbol of motivation, encouragement, and support
20. Dumbbells	New tie—an expression of relation to self
21. Shawl and mobile phone case	Old tie—gift from grandmother providing motivation in moments of despair and mobile phone case as a tool to connect with family
22. Ring	Old tie—belonged to deceased mother and reminds the participant of her presence
23. Gold necklace	Old tie—Quranic-verse-engraved necklace gifted by mother
24. Wallet	Old tie—gift from a friend in times of struggle
25. Keychain	New tie—symbol of unlocking problems and moving on with life positively
26. Mobile phone	New tie—gift from a friend that connects with family and friends
27. Mobile phone case	Old tie—representation of mobile phone as only means to connect with family at home
28. Photograph of family	Old tie—photo showing the happiness of family reunification
29. Photograph of father	Old tie—symbol representing stronger connection with father
30. Angel figurine	Old tie—symbol of love, courage, and independence.
31. Ring	New tie—symbol of love and affection
32. Baby shoe	New tie—symbol representing the happiness of becoming a mother

Table 2. Cont.

The Object	How the Object Is Connected to an Important Person
33. Golden necklace	Old tie—gift from mother that always reminds the participant of her presence
34. Wristwatch	New tie—gift from a friend as a welcoming gesture
35. Orange thread	New tie—symbol of what the important person is to them
36. Gold necklace	Old tie—gift as a goodbye and remembrance
37. Koran	Old tie—given as a symbol of protection
38. Cell phone	Old tie—stores memories of relations
39. Cup	Old tie—memories of family
40. Picture of two brothers	Old tie—a symbol of their dream to help their brother
41. Shoe	New tie—a symbol of support during hard times
42. Pen	New tie—a symbol of support through education
43. Family photo of self and foster father	New tie—a father who is like a friend
44. Lentils	Old tie—remembrance of grandmother’s love
45. Self and young brother	Old tie—young brother loved and missed
46. Self and foster father	New tie—caring foster father to date
47. Drawing of a heart	New ties—supportive loving girlfriend
48. Book entitled freedom	New tie—themselves as they picture what is important now
49. Picture of two girls	Old tie—sister loved and missed as she lives away from Norway
50. Not recorded	n/a
51. Not recorded	n/a

We used an inductive approach to analyse the narrative meanings of all 49 objects and selected 15 that demonstrated the key themes selected for this article. We used the constructs of a relational wellbeing approach as part of our interpretations and discussion, not as themes of analysis. We organised our findings with one global theme: overlaps in representations of objects. The organising themes were 1. different objects, similar meanings; 2. similar objects, different meanings; 3. similar objects, similar meanings; 4. different objects, different meanings.

## 5. Overlaps in Representations of Objects

### 5.1. Different Objects, Similar Meanings

Our analysis found that many participants ascribed similar meanings to their objects, although their objects were quite different. Their objects are expressions of their lived experiences and personal narratives. Recurring themes were how the object represented an important person as a comforter and source of strength or an important connection during separation.

### 5.2. Comforter and Source of Strength

Several participants brought different objects that carried similar meanings. Both the orange thread and the shawl, for instance, represented important persons as comforters and sources of strength. A comforter is someone who gives consolation, empathises, and commiserates with others when they are experiencing challenges. When talking about

their objects, many participants said important persons consoled, calmed, motivated, and strengthened them amid challenges, pain, and sometimes confusion. They felt relieved and ready to face their challenges after receiving such comfort. One participant brought an orange thread as a representation of what the important person (new social tie) meant to them. The thread symbolised that the important person “knits” the participant’s psychological wounds in times of challenges.



*The orange thread represents the person I know. She likes knitting, . . . she loves orange. She helps me to get my feelings together. [. . .] Like I said, I go to her whenever I have a problem, when I have a big break down, and then she kind of holds me back. Even on the phone, it feels like she is really there. Because. . . she feels empathy for you. But at the same time, she makes you stronger and to stay strong. (New social tie.)*

Another participant regarded their grandmother as a source of comfort and strength. The object brought to the workshop was a picture of the grandmother’s hand-woven shawl.

*. . . it’s like when you’re feeling sad, you call your grandmother and she’s going to tell you a life story from her experiences from the past . . . you will feel very relieved when you talk to your grandmother. Whenever I feel sad, whenever I miss home, I just call her. So, she will motivate me not to feel sad. Her love is big. It is actually not limited, it is infinite . . . So that’s the one thing. (Old social tie.)*

All of the participants had experienced hardships of some kind at some point in their life. This shows that although our study focuses on wellbeing, it is not easy to focus on exceptional success because young refugees’ pain is blended with their success. Important persons have helped some young people to grow and learn from their painful experiences rather than continuing to suffer. Communicating their pain to important people in their lives gave opportunity for such anchors of support to help them do well despite the challenges. Accessing a resource like this in times of need and getting what one needs gave them a sense of wellbeing.

### 5.3. Connection during Separation

Messages of connection with important persons, and sometimes with a place and other people during separation, overlapped through time and space. Some of the objects in this theme were symbols gifted by old social ties at the time of departure from the young refugees’ countries of origin. The risky journeys the young refugees took required assurance of support from their important persons during separation. The gifted objects represented presence in absence and support in times of need. One young person brought a gold necklace given by a family member:

*This necklace reminds me of what I have been through and back home and stuff like that . . . It is kind of like a goodbye . . . Remember me. He used to tell me don’t forget where you come from no matter what happens in the future. So, in the present, he is still in my life. . . I wear it all the time. (Old social tie.)*

In the example of the necklace, we see that the meaning of objects and of relationships can transcend time and space. We also observe that one object can carry multiple meanings

of connection, remembrance, and hope for the future. In other cases, the objects represented both connections to important people as well as serving as reminders of God's protection on their journeys. One participant brought a small ceramic Koran (a stone) that was a gift from their mother. The object was a symbol of divine protection on the way from their country till they reached their destination.



*This is a stone that I got from my mother when I had to travel. On the stone it is written . . . Or it's a little part of the Koran that says: "God protects you." It is a sun or glass or something. It's like the two hands mean that my mother gave it to me so that I have it the whole journey. (Old social tie.)*

There are many ways in which important people remained in the young refugees' lives while physically absent. Emotions of missing and longing during separation motivated the young refugees and their families to create a feeling of "co-presence" which reignited a sense of closeness regardless of separation and distance. The created co-presence seemed to give them the will to continue their journeys. In addition, it seems the presence of God promotes wellbeing. God is mentioned as a source of support amid challenges by several of the young people.

## 6. Similar Objects, Different Meanings

The owners of the objects had authority and control in describing what the object means to them. Even though some objects were similar, the meanings were different in many instances. This shows that wellbeing is experienced differently by different people and that wellbeing can be interpreted from the descriptions of these unique social interactions. Examples of objects seen in more than one country were family photos, mobile phones, rings, and necklaces. Though similar, many of these objects carried different meanings. Below we present two examples of similar objects with different meanings, first the meaning of two mobile phones and one phone case and then the meaning attached to two gold necklaces.

### 6.1. Mobile Phone: Connecting with the Past and the Present

It seems that conscious memories that are connected to important experiences of the past and the present are amplified in young refugees' lives as tapestries of their lives. These memories help them form their identity. They also give meaning to their experiences; hence, they keep them activated by storing them on their phones. Memories connected the past to the present and prepared the young refugees for the future. The mobile phone in the example below is seen as an extension of the young refugee's mind, storing memories whose visualisation may otherwise disappear. These stored memories helped them tell the story of their past to the people in the new country, but also helped them to capture their present life and communicate it to old social ties back in their home country. These memories came in the form of pictures of places and people as well as in the form of music, just to mention a few.

*It's my mobile, yes. It's all about good memories that I have in my heart, and which are stored on my mobile. Somethings make me smile; some things make me sad . . . It is memories, one can't change that. . . . thousands and thousands and thousands of pictures . . . there is a part of my story that lies within it. . . . what I've been through, and that it can make me happy to have it with me all the time . . . it lies more in family, friendship, my childhood, and the pictures I have. The things I've experienced, or the places I've been.*

*When you go back you can show for example your family what they look like. . . . It's better to have it that way, than to just have it (the memories) in your heart.*

The phone was seen as a way of connecting them with the past and as a tool that helps them tell stories of their childhood as well as the present.

*. . . You didn't have your childhood here in the country of residence, so it becomes difficult to talk to someone who has lived their childhood here. There is a bit of a difference. The things we have done are not the same. The way we grew up is not the same. That is why I say the mobile phone is very important today, for many. (Old and new social tie.)*

Memories of important people and impactful experiences and places transcend time and place. In this case, they are remembered as distinct and cohesive events that define their identity and contribute to their wellbeing. The brain and the phone seem to work together to bind events that would later transform the young refugee's everyday experiences into meaningful memory representations of wellbeing.

### 6.2. Mobile Phone: A Symbol of Communication with Important People

Several young people in this study said that communicating with important persons in their lives was important in times of need and to maintain their connection. Two objects in our sample—one mobile phone and one phone case—were described as communication tools that facilitated contact with both old and new social ties.

*This is my phone case, because I can have contact with my loved ones through the phone. I have to always be on the phone with my family or friends from back home. Some are not living in (country) anymore. So the phone is actually what connects me to where my roots are. (Old social tie.)*

*This is the first phone I had [pictured in image]. A social worker bought it for me. So I've just kept it. . . . If I need something from someone [I can call them] . . . So it's important to me and useful. . . .from making friends and going to the gym, listening to music, or the radio. (Old and new social tie.)*

While the first quote emphasises connections to old social ties, the last quote draws attention to how the phone facilitates young people's peer relationships and participation in social activities in the here and now. The fact that the mobile phone was provided by a social worker may suggest that welfare services, or at least individual social workers, acknowledge that maintaining old social ties and creating new ones may have a positive effect on the wellbeing of young refugees. Communication with the wider community through mobile phones, for instance by listening to the radio, may also be understood as a way in which young refugees can access information and hear about relevant services in their new places.

### 6.3. Gold Religious Necklace: A Symbol of Family, Religion, and Protection

The object of one young person represented their religion as a blessing of love and care from their family and community back home (old social ties) and provided a sense of meaning as they build their new life in their new country:



*That [necklace] is a blessing because we grew up with a very strict religion, orthodox you know. It's all about good things, they just teach about the culture and the religion . . . they believe if we have a cross, on a necklace, around our neck, they can bless us . . . So, if someone gives you this, that means it means a lot to them . . . So, she [mother] means a lot to me. (Old social tie.)*

Parents' acts of love and sharing facilitate wellbeing. These acts of love can produce ripple effects on other systems. The objects reminded the young refugees of their fundamental connections, like family, religion, spirituality, culture, and community, as well as the intimacy and reciprocity of these social connections. We see here that the love of an important person is communicated together with assurances of protection, the importance of spirituality, and the importance of relating to the larger community.

#### 6.4. Gold Necklace: Safety and a Source of Support

The other gold necklace was a gift from a family member who wanted to communicate safety and a source of support to the young person. The young person described the necklace as a "form of investment"—a valuable object that could be sold in times of financial need. In this sense, the necklace provided a feeling of safety, something to fall back on if the person were to find themselves in trouble. At the same time, we may interpret the necklace as a way of providing a feeling of safety and presence of the giver, even when that person is at a distance. Additionally, the necklace also served as a reminder of a family member from their past that had been a source of support and protection.

It is the meaning behind the object that uniquely differentiates each person's personal story of wellbeing. Though the two necklaces presented here are different, they both communicate messages of relationships that impact and improve wellbeing.



### 7. Similar Objects, Similar Meanings

Contrary to the point above, some of the young refugees brought in similar objects that carried similar meanings. We present examples of two participants from different countries who both brought wristwatches that had been gifted by their partner or friend. Both represented new social ties.

#### *Watches: Symbols of Connection with Friends and Partners*



*Thinking about the watch, the person who is important to me, and then like this is the first happiness I had, we were together, happy, going to concerts' or 'listening to music together. . . We respected each other . . . like friends. Unfortunately, he is not alive. It reminds me of this happiness, it was a gift for my birthday. (New social tie.)*

Another example of a new social tie was observed in another wristwatch brought in by one of the young refugees:



*This watch, my girlfriend bought me. I had a very difficult life situation. When I found her, she helped me a lot. And after that I had a person with whom I could speak to. This is how I got to know her and have a family here in (country). This watch reminds me of my soon to be wife and that we are together and united until the end. (New social tie.)*

Aspects of wellbeing like love, respect, and happiness are experienced through interactions with others. Wellbeing in the above examples can be understood as interactive and realised through involvement in activities with important persons. It seems that acts of relating have an impact on the young refugees' wellbeing. The contrast that needs to be highlighted here is that similar messages about partners and friends were also communicated through different objects like heart-shaped objects, rings, and meeting places by other participants. This shows that wellbeing is brought about by meaningful experiences when relating to others, not by objects of representation.

### 8. Different Objects, Different Meanings

In this section, we present examples of different objects with different meanings. We demonstrate that there were some that did not show overlaps across meanings or the objects themselves. We respect the uniqueness of each individual and their narrative of wellbeing. They do not have to be the same. Four of the fifteen objects were different from the rest and carried unique representations. Three of them represented old social ties, while one represented a new tie.

The object representing a new social tie was a salt lamp that symbolised an important person who was seen as a role model who brought the best out of the young person. The objects representing old ties were (a) a ring representing a deceased mother whose love remains regardless of physical absence; (b) a picture of two brothers that represented the participant's dream to become a doctor and provide medical assistance to his younger brother who lived in their home country; and (c) a journal that was a reflection of connection to culture and important persons across countries.

#### *The Dumbbell: A Symbol of Finding Strength from Within*

Not all of the young refugees described their experience of wellbeing through direct interactions with important persons. For some, wellbeing was experienced through activities carried out in solitude. The literal objects selected to represent such activities generated power and strength from within. They found strength from within to motivate themselves when there was no one else to turn to during challenging times. They therefore became their own "important person". For instance, one young person chose dumbbells to describe their relationship with the gym and how that stimulated strength from within. The dumbbells were a friend "who never leaves." (New social tie.)



*The hand weight (dumbbell) has been my best friend. It has supported me in good and bad times. Whenever I've had a bad day, I've gone to the gym to work out. It has eased my mind. It calms me. It's been the only friend who has never left me. (New tie.)*

Spending time in solitude can be a powerful tool for productivity, engaging in acts of health, and attaining wellbeing. Physical activities can help young refugees experience quiet contemplation, communicate with themselves, and grow stronger.



## 9. Discussion

This study demonstrates that old and new social ties sustain young refugees in their present day-to-day experiences. We have identified three overlaps revealing complexities and similarities in how wellbeing is experienced by young refugees: overlaps in time and space; overlaps between old and new social ties; and overlaps between the three constructs of the relational wellbeing approach of *being connected*, *having enough*, and *feeling good* (White 2015; White and Jha 2023). Before we discuss these overlaps, we reflect on the objects.

This study has established that objects are effective tools to help young refugees express relational wellbeing. They are also a profound aid to the interpretation processes of the meanings expressed. The objects carried deeper meanings beyond the surface of what was visible to the eye. Using objects helped the researchers to see beyond the surface of “just a thing”, of a person, of a real-life situation or event, and instead to see the interactions at play (Van Lith 2016). The use of objects helped reveal rich meanings behind the participants’ simple descriptions. We conclude that objects can be symbols of comfort; of love and lovers, of role models; dreams for the future; memories of relationships and experiences; assurance of safety and a source of support in separation. Most importantly, they carry deeper meanings of helping them to feel good regardless of the challenges they face, staying connected with important persons, and a sense of having enough. These will be discussed more in the overlaps below. Additionally, although the objects may be similar, the meanings are unique to everyone; what they feel, share, experience, and hear in life differs between each participant (Mastandrea et al. 2019). This has implications for practice. Interventions created to enhance the wellbeing of young refugees should take the form of in-depth work carried out with the individuals themselves, and with high consideration of the context of their relational experiences. Although this study did not explore the materiality of and psychoemotional connections to these objects (Knudsen 2005; Akthar and Lovell 2019), many were gifts that were kept for a long time, over time and space. This could be a demonstration of the depth of their importance to the owners. For example, the ceramic Koran and the gold necklace were carried through migration journeys and kept in their new environments.

This study has established that relational wellbeing transcends and overlaps through time and space. Relationships and their meanings are not static (Thibodeau et al. 2019) and can reflect multiple belongings. The experiences of wellbeing moved along with changes to young refugees’ relational interactions as they moved between space, place, and time, from their home countries to the host countries (Di Masso et al. 2019). Connection to social ties through time, place, and space is constantly revealed across most objects. While in the new country, the young refugee with the necklace wore it all the time as a constant reminder of the connection with their family back in their home country. The ceramic Koran was also kept safe over the years, possibly as a reminder too. The stories of wellbeing in the present time were thus interconnected to the past in the lives of the young refugees (Mastandrea et al. 2019).

This study also affirms that old social ties can vary over one’s life, take a different form, and provide different purposes than before. Regardless of change in time and space, old social ties are not forgotten; instead, they seem to take a different form (Cheng 2015). Blood ties like mothers and fathers are seen as close friends in the present. Co-presence routines like communicating through social media and phone calls and maintaining the family unit from a distance seemed to facilitate the young refugees’ wellbeing (Baldassar et al. 2016). In addition, positive memories of the past and old social ties are carried throughout time and space. Some objects symbolised longing during the time of separation with old ties, while some memories of past experiences were carried through objects like phones, which in turn enhanced the young refugees’ wellbeing in the present (Pechurina 2020).

### 9.1. Overlaps of Old and New Social Ties

There seemed to be a balance between the number of old social ties and new ties representing the young refugees' wellbeing. We observed that in Scotland, most of the objects brought to the art workshop related to a new social tie, which differed in Finland and Norway, where the objects were evenly split across old and new ties. Old ties are important in the present, even in their absence. These old ties, even though living in different countries at the time of the research, were present in the minds, emotions, and experiences of the young people. One participant said: *"It is like he is here even when he is not here."* Blood ties seemed to mostly be the ones that sustained the young refugees in their present day-to-day experiences within the new countries. But new friends and some formal networks like social workers (new ties) were also a source of strength in challenging times. This demonstrates how old and new social ties are intermingled and intertwined in young refugees' experiences of wellbeing (White 2017). Besides the natural common paths of relating within the community, interactions with formal structures within Norway, Finland, and Scotland produced important and significant relationships in the young refugees' lives too (Cureton 2022; Strzemecka 2015). Formal networks and networks of acquaintances within the host countries often act as bridges in creating social networks for young refugees (Hanley et al. 2018; Daniel et al. 2020).

Memories generate wellbeing. Mäki (2020) and Marschall (2019) argue that objects can be interpreted as active agents shaping people stories. In this case, young people's stories of wellbeing have a combination of the bitter and the sweet, hurtful experiences and happiness. Childhood memories were connected to old ties in many ways. Whatever memories and feelings were brought out in the young people, these were embraced with wholeness as they were part of their identity. As Mozeley et al. (2023, p. 615) demonstrate in their study exploring "object centered stories" of women, objects are involved in social interactions that create and maintain identity and community. Things, events, experiences, and people from their childhood formed these memories. One participant's mobile phone stored thousands of pictures of memories that they held in their heart, which sometimes made them happy, sometimes sad. Memory has its role in the continuing emotional adjustments in which most transnational experience is embroiled (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004; Watson et al. 2020). Migrants tap into their memories to make sense of and construct coherent and incoherent experiences of their present and how that relates with their past and future (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004; Mäki 2020). Pictures of people and events in one's life can be a treasure trove of one's history and the family unit through which young refugees find their identity and happiness (Thibodeau et al. 2019).

### 9.2. Overlaps between the Three Constructs: Being Connected, Having Enough, and Feeling Good

The three constructs of relational wellbeing—*being connected*, *feeling good*, and *having enough*—were embedded in the findings of this paper. In line with White (2017), we find that these dimensions overlap and are inseparable. The three dimensions appeared in the descriptions of acts of love and care that were in almost all narratives of the objects. As an example: the gold necklace that was described as a "form of investment" was given to be sold in times of need, though also a form of "goodbye" and an assurance of safety and love from the family member. In most instances, these objects assured them of their families' love and presence, while at the same time instilling hope during times when they experienced a combination of fears and aspirations for material things. Although all dimensions of wellbeing are present in our analysis, as shown in the examples of the gold necklaces and phones used for communication, we found the material dimension of *having enough* to largely be lacking in the participants' narratives about their objects. We can only speculate as to why—one interpretation being that using objects as the starting point of the narration did not invite a discussion of the material aspects of relational wellbeing. We conclude that examples of each construct of relational wellbeing could hardly be represented by a single quotation, but rather, this was seen throughout the four themes in the findings above—specifically, in the overlaps of representations of objects.

## 10. Concluding Remarks

This study has shown implications for the relational wellbeing approach in practice. Through this research, the voice of the marginalised is heard. Their past and present as living oral archives narrated from a strength-based approach can be tapped into for policy making and the development of interventions in practice. Our findings suggest that practitioners should be alert to the interconnectedness of past and present experiences as key to wellbeing. The significance of interacting with both old and new social ties shows the need for these ways of relating to be maximised by policy makers and practitioners to enhance young people's relational wellbeing in the host countries. We have demonstrated that object-centred methodologies with young refugees can give them agency to tell stories that would otherwise not be told. We conclude that objects are vessels of meanings.

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## Article

# Family-like Relationships and Wellbeing of Young Refugees in Finland, Norway, and Scotland

Marja Tiilikainen <sup>1,\*</sup>, Marte Knag Fylkesnes <sup>2</sup> and Sharon A. McGregor <sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup> Migration Institute of Finland, Hämeenkatu 13, 20500 Turku, Finland<sup>2</sup> Regional Centre for Child and Youth Mental Health and Child Welfare, NORCE, Nygårdsgaten 112-114, 5008 Bergen, Norway; mafy@norceresearch.no<sup>3</sup> Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, University of Strathclyde, Curran Building, 94 Cathedral Street, Glasgow G4 0LG, UK; s.a.mcgregor@strath.ac.uk

\* Correspondence: marja.tiilikainen@migrationinstitute.fi

**Abstract:** In this article, we explore the role of family-like relationships in creating wellbeing for unaccompanied minor refugees (UMRs) to Europe. Our theoretical point of departure is a relational approach to wellbeing as conceptualized by Sarah C. White. The data comprises interviews with 51 settled UMRs in Finland, Norway, and Scotland, focused on their social networks, and a selection of paired interviews with young people alongside someone they defined as family-like and important for their wellbeing today. Findings illuminate the important role family-like relationships have in meeting the daily needs of young refugees. These relationships are ascribed meaning in the context of young people's wider networks and ideas of 'what family should do'. Family-like relationships gain particular importance for UMRs in two different ways: first, the physical absence of the family of origin enforces children and young people's need to create trusted, reciprocal networks. Second, building family-like relationships is necessary in a new country where UMRs grow up and face new expectations, needs, and opportunities. We argue that relational wellbeing is built in a hybrid 'third space'. A welfare state should support the wellbeing of UMRs by nurturing welcoming communities and providing UMRs help with building family-like relationships through formal and other support networks.

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**Keywords:** unaccompanied minor refugees; young refugees; relational wellbeing; family-like relationships; doing family; kinship; third space

## 1. Introduction

In this article, we explore the wellbeing of young people who arrived as unaccompanied minor refugees (UMRs) to Europe. We are interested in how wellbeing is created through establishing and maintaining family-like relationships. Since 2015, due to tightened migration policies in many European countries, family reunification for forced migrants, including UMRs, has become increasingly difficult or practically impossible. Forced separation from their families of origin may therefore remain permanent, resulting in family relationships becoming transnational (Tiilikainen et al. 2023, pp. 4–5). Consequently, new supportive family-like relationships that young refugees make during the refugee journey and after settlement in a new country may take on particular meaning and significance. In the literature, these new family-like relationships have also been referred to as fictive, chosen, or voluntary kin (Nelson 2013).

UMRs are often seen as particularly vulnerable because of their age and aloneness during often traumatic refugee journeys and resettlement (El Baba and Colucci 2018; Höhne et al. 2022). However, UMRs maintain a complex web of relationships (Herz and Lalander 2017), and in addition to their vulnerability, it is important to also pay attention to their resources sustaining wellbeing (Kohli and Mather 2003; Eide et al. 2020). Despite long distances and socio-economic disparities, transnational families of origin often manage

to provide young refugees with social, material, and emotional support (e.g., Seidel et al. 2022). In addition, some young refugees have family members or relatives living in their country of settlement and create and rely on new trusted relationships to rebuild their daily life in a new society and environment.

In this article, we are interested in the formation and role of family-like relationships in creating and maintaining wellbeing for young refugees over time. To understand how young people, together with their family-like members, ascribe meaning to these relationships, we explore how they define, do, and display family. How are family-like practices connected with building wellbeing for former unaccompanied minor refugees?

We use ‘family-like relationship’ primarily as an analytical concept, but it was also inherently employed by our interlocutors who described certain people, mostly living locally in the same country, being ‘like family’. By ‘transnational family’, we refer to the family of origin, who in our data remained outside the settlement countries of our young participants.

### *1.1. Becoming Kin and Relational Wellbeing*

While kinship is commonly understood as something that is set or inherited, recent scholarship has suggested that the idea of ‘becoming kin’ underlines the practices and processes of ‘doing’ kinship and relatedness (Carsten 2020). In this article, we understand kinship and family not as a given, but a fluid entity where family is being displayed, negotiated, and constantly done through family practices, identities, and evolving relationships (Finch 2007; Gilligan 1982; Williams 2004). The meanings of family are reflected in how trust, commitment and belonging are demonstrated through practices within the family, but also displayed to the outside world in different ways. The use of family terminology is one way through which the doing and displaying of family-like relationships is articulated.

Weston (1997) introduced the concept of family-like relationships as being families we choose. Struening (2002) posits that the definition of family can be wider than traditional family structures formed through birth or marriage. Janet Carsten (2020) has argued that kinship ‘provides a dynamic reservoir of resources with which to creatively imagine and put into practice ideas and visions that enable moving to and living in new worlds’ (Carsten 2020, p. 321). Kinship and family-like ties can be reproduced, and idioms of family can be employed to create everyday proximity and relatedness (Bjarnesen and Utas 2018). For example, Sudanese refugee boys who were living without their parents in refugee camps referred to the peer groups with whom they shared the daily life in the camp as family (Luster et al. 2009). Similarly, Nelson (2013) notes that separation from one’s own family generates a need to search for new people and groups who may provide socio-emotional and material support. In return, this kind of situational kin often require similar responsibilities and loyalties. In religious communities in general, terms such as family, sister, or brother are commonly used. Particularly for forced migrants, belonging to a religious community may provide an important sense of safety, belonging, and family (Zanfrini and Antonelli 2020). Familial language was also used by Afghan refugees and their Albany advocates to identify a relationship which had gone beyond formal roles (Tilbury 2007). For instance, the term ‘mother’ represented respect and the close relationship with their advocate, and practical support associated with parenting, including providing meals, transport, accommodation, and help with paperwork.<sup>1</sup>

According to Kauhanen and Kaukko (2020), some studies illuminate how UMRs form close, family-like ties not only with friends and their families, but also in institutional settings, non-governmental organisations, and foster families. Foster family care is often considered the preferred option for children and young people in care more generally (Burns et al. 2017) and UMRs in particular (Palmer 2014). Paulsen et al. (2023) found that relationships with carers or social workers were emphasised as important and ‘family-like’ when these relationships continued after the young person left care. To our knowledge, there is little in-depth research on how family-like relationships are formed and maintained

over time and connected with wellbeing for young refugees. Such knowledge has the potential to inform policies and practices that aim to support processes of wellbeing.

We utilize the conceptualization of relational wellbeing by Sarah C. White (2010, 2017, 2018; White and Jha 2020) to investigate the interlinkages between family-like relationships and wellbeing of young refugees. Instead of understanding wellbeing as an individual outcome, we see it as a relational process (White 2017). According to White, wellbeing is centrally about being connected and related to other people. Feeling good—or not feeling good—is also related to the material dimension of wellbeing (having enough), and being connected (or not), and on what terms, to other people (White 2010, 2017). The three dimensions, conditioned by individual, societal, and environmental factors, are co-constitutive and, thus, they need to be looked at jointly (see White and Jha 2023).

Through the analysis of our data, we show how unaccompanied minor refugees recreate themselves as relational beings in their new countries of settlement. They seem to embed themselves, however, by not simply drawing either from the family-like relationships and new society, or the family and culture of origin, but by negotiating their identifications and sense of belonging in a hybrid ‘third space’ as originally described by Homi Bhabha (Rutherford 1990; Teerling 2011). According to Bhabha, the third space is characterized by processes of hybridity, where cultural meanings are reconstructed by drawing from a variety of components that give rise to something new.

### 1.2. Country Contexts: Finland, Norway, and Scotland

The article is based on data collected with young adults who migrated as unaccompanied minor refugees to Finland, Norway, and Scotland. There are similarities, but also differences, between the three countries. For example, the population structure in Finland is more homogeneous and migration history more recent compared to Norway, and in particular, to Scotland. Welfare systems in all three countries are in many ways similar, but Nordic welfare models in Finland and Norway provide more universal services to their residents than Scotland. Care and living arrangements offered to unaccompanied minor refugees share similarities, but also differ between countries: in Norway, the majority are placed in group homes or institutional care with varying degrees of support from social workers, while a (younger) minority are placed in foster care. In Finland, accommodation for UMRs is mostly organised in so-called family group homes. In Scotland, unaccompanied children are appointed a social worker and automatically granted ‘looked after’ status, which means they are looked after by the local authority and have the same right to support that all children in care in Scotland have. A variety of different accommodation types are offered to unaccompanied children, including supported accommodation (with various levels of support—light to more intensive), supported lodgings (in other local authorities), student accommodation, and increasingly, host family-supported carers<sup>2</sup> are being used. When no other accommodation is available, they may be given urgent temporary accommodation in Bed and Breakfast establishments or hotels.

These societal differences and similarities shape young refugees’ opportunities to build new relationships. Due to limited space, we cannot, however, analyse how different country contexts may impact the experiences of young refugees. Furthermore, numbers of participants are too small for systematic cross-national comparisons.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Our research was conducted as part of the international Drawing Together project, funded by NordForsk (2020–2024) in Finland, Norway, and Scotland. Each country’s research team was responsible for participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, and reporting of their findings.

### 2.1. Participants

Researchers were aware that participants who have been through multiple rounds of interviews in their asylum application processes may have been cautious and less trusting



about entering another interview process, influencing their commitment and willingness to participate in our longitudinal study (McMichael et al. 2015). Therefore, before each interview, researchers ensured that consent was revisited and explained, and a reminder and reassurance given that participation was voluntary and that it was acceptable to decide to withdraw at any time. Participants were also reassured that they were in control of what they chose to share. Participants' time and effort was compensated with financial incentives within country-specific tax regulations. For instance, in Scotland, participants were gifted a £20 Amazon voucher per interview.

The project initially involved working alongside 51 young people who are refugees in Finland, Norway, and Scotland (17 young people from each country) over two years. An additional two participants joined later in Scotland (bringing the overall project total to 53 participants), but as they did not participate in 'the present' phase of the research, they are not included in this paper. Participants were aged between 18 to 30 and consisted of 26 men and 25 women from 13 countries who at the beginning of the project had been settled in their new country between 2 and 17 years. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participant information.

**Table 1.** Participant background information across Norway, Finland, and Scotland as of 2020 (beginning of project).

	Norway	Finland	Scotland	Totals
Participant Nos.	17	17	17	51
Gender	9 men; 8 women	9 men; 8 women	8 men; 9 women	26 men; 25 women
Age Range	18–28	18–30	18–28	18–30
Total No. of Countries	6 countries	5 countries	9 countries	14 different countries
Years settled in new country	4–13 years	2–17 years	2–11 years	2–17 years
List of Countries of Origin (total no. from 51 participants) *	Afghanistan (13), Eritrea (10), Somalia (10), the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Sudan, Iran, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Gambia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Syria.			

\* These are the countries that our young people advised they were from. Numbers are only included for the three most mentioned countries to ensure anonymity.

At the time of our interviews, the majority of participants were students and/or working in low-paid jobs, as well as living in single households. A small minority of participants were married and/or living with their partner; in foster care or shared household with family of origin; or caring for small children. All reported some form of permanency in their legal settlement status, but only a minority had been granted formal citizenship. Differences were noted in the number of young people who mentioned members of original family (e.g., siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, or cousins) as also living in their new countries, with the majority reporting having some members in Norway, almost half of the participants in Finland, and a minority in Scotland.

## 2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The project took an arts-based methods approach (e.g., Lenette 2019; O'Neill 2008) that incorporated a series of art workshops, individual interviews, and paired interviews across three timelines—the Present, the Future, and the Past/Childhood days (see also Haswell 2023). Participants were asked to bring an object that reminded them of wellbeing and important relationships into the workshop, where they created pictures and images using different materials and colours. At the end of each workshop, participants narrated the meaning of their artwork, and the discussion continued in an individual interview later.

Thus, our analysis focused on meaning-making rather than the artwork as a product. The arts-based approach allowed participants to do and think at the same time (Kalmanowitz and Ho 2016; Fath-E-Mubeen et al. Forthcoming). Our research reported in this paper focused on individual interviews, held with 51 young people about ‘the Present’, and examined how young participants drew and described their current networks and relationships, together with a selection of paired interviews with people whom they named using family terms or otherwise explicitly described as family-like. Paired interviews were held with some of the young people alongside someone they defined as a ‘value person’, someone important to them, so we could understand their lives together.

The individual interviews about ‘the Present’ involved supporting the young people to describe and draw an ecomap of the important people in their life across four relationship areas—‘family’, ‘friends/peers’, ‘formal/professional’, and ‘community’. The ecomap was originally developed for social work practice to measure social support (Hartman 1995). Today, it is used in different health and social science research settings. The ecomap was chosen as a tool in our project because it has been found suitable in exploring the role of social networks for young people in minority settings (see, e.g., Bennett and Grant 2016; Hodge and Williams 2002; Manja et al. 2021).

All interviews were held using our interviewees’ second languages (i.e., English, Norwegian, or Finnish). In Finland, 11 individual interviews were conducted in Finnish and six in English. In Norway, 12 interviews were conducted in Norwegian and five in English, and in Scotland all 17 interviews were conducted in English. The young people’s fluency in their second language varied from limited to very fluent. Through the ecomap activity, the participants drew persons and networks of importance to them, which helped transcend language barriers. Individual interview questions focused on how different relationships affected the young person’s wellbeing, as well as how the young person saw their own role in establishing and maintaining wellbeing for people important to them. Paired interviews explored how young people and their chosen value person had met, how their relationship had evolved over time, and how it affected their wellbeing. All interviews were recorded, uploaded to secure servers, and transcribed verbatim. Information about body language was included if possible.

Many of the young people used family terms to ascribe meaning to certain relationships outside of their family of origin. To unpack how these relationships affected the young people’s wellbeing, we conducted a thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach. This approach was chosen because it provided flexibility for analysing and identifying patterns across our data and was an approach familiar to the researchers across all three countries. Firstly, we identified relationship narratives described as family-like, then analysed them using the dimensions of relational wellbeing (White 2010) as a framework according to themes of emotionality (feeling good), relationality (being connected), and resources (having enough). We collectively reviewed our themes and data for similarities and differences. To illuminate our findings across the dataset, we chose three cases (one from each country) for in-depth analysis. Pseudonyms are used so that the young people cannot be identified.

The criteria for selection were that the young person had described the relationship with the chosen important person as family-like, and the case illuminated the three dimensions of wellbeing. In Scotland and Finland, the person identified as being in a family-like relationship selected for the case study also participated in a paired interview.

### 3. Results

In addition to speaking about persons belonging to their family of origin who were important and affected their wellbeing today, family terms occurred spontaneously to describe and display also other important relationships. In some cases, the young person and family-like person said they had agreed on what would be a good term to describe their relationship. Family-like relationships were thus displayed by using family terminology.

Family-like relationships in the data can be divided into two large categories: first, peers and friends, whom young refugees had come to know in informal contexts and who often shared a background as unaccompanied minor refugees and a similar ethnic or cultural background. Most had met during the refugee journey, at school, college or university, group home, after-school activities, or as volunteers in an NGO. These relationships were typically categorized as girl/boyfriend, friend, or family friend. Second, family-like relationships included persons originally introduced to the young persons through the formal support system for integration of refugees and migrants and with whom the family-like relationship developed over time. The people named in the interviews and ecomaps included teacher, lecturer, social worker, legal guardian, supported lodgings practitioner, group home supervisor, foster parents, NGO leader, volunteer in a church meeting place, and volunteer friend/befriender.

Next, we present three case examples where the first is an example of an informal friend relationship and the following two examples of relationships established in more formal settings (foster carer and teacher). The cases illustrate various roles of family-like relationships and family practices in building wellbeing for young refugees. In the analysis of the examples, we also introduce nuances from the whole dataset.

### 3.1. *My Brother-like Friend*

Amir is a young adult who worked full time as a healthcare worker and had migrated to Norway around 10 years prior to the interview. He placed a friend in the family quadrant of the ecomap. They both originated from central Africa and fled as teenagers. He said:

I can ask him (for help) if something happens, both economy and food. We also have a lot of friends in common. We live together, know each other well, and we don't argue about money. We help each other. It's a brother I live with. He is important in my life. For example, my workplace can contact him if I disappear, or I am hurt. [...] Since I am alone (in Norway) and anything can happen in life, it is also important (for my family) to have someone that they know well and that they can contact. [...] I connect well with his family too. So, we share a lot and that is why it feels like we are brothers. [...] He is kind [...] and he doesn't have family here either.

The 'being connected' aspect of wellbeing is shown as Amir describes how they supported each other in ways often associated with family, such as reciprocal economic commitment, acting as next of kin, and sharing a household. In the interview, Amir added that they shared responsibility for cleaning, grocery shopping, and meal preparation. Since they volunteer for the same organisation, they also help each other out if working hours or other obligations collide with their other responsibilities. His narrative illuminates a sense of reciprocity and mutuality: "we help each other", "we share a lot". In terms of emotional wellbeing, Amir said that it felt good to have someone to come home to after a long day at work and safe to know someone was looking out for him.

The excerpt also illuminates how 'being connected' also meant mutually supporting each other's transnational family ties. Like most other participants, Amir kept in touch with his family of origin through frequent telephone calls; to stay informed about family affairs, keep family informed about his wellbeing, and perform family obligations. When his busy work schedule made him difficult to reach, kin family contacted his brother-like friend, were reassured, and could pass on a message. He did the same for his friend. His narrative thus shows how family-like relationships may support sustaining bonds with transnational family.

Amir explains that their relationship is mutually important to them because neither have kin close by. The precarity of 'being alone' thus runs through Amir's narrative as he also distinguished between three different types of friends: best friends, football friends, and 'gjeng'<sup>3</sup> friends. His best friends were special, which he indicated by naming them as "kind of a family":

I am more available to them, when it comes to economy and coping with challenges I face. We travel more together and do stuff together. I can call them for help. Since I am alone in Norway, they can do a lot of things for me. They are particularly special and strong relationships, a kind of family to me and we are really good friends.

This shows the ‘having enough’ aspect of wellbeing and the important role family-like friend networks may play for UMRs when family relationships are transnational. Amir added that ‘best friends’ were particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic; they were the ones to bring food and medicine to friends living alone when they became sick. Furthermore, if there was a flood or drought in the home country, or someone needed to raise money for a hospital bill or a marriage in the homeland, this was shared in an online group chat. Amir distinguished his brother-like friend from other friends by placing him in the family quadrant of the eco-map, naming him as “a brother I live with”. This relationship included all three dimensions of relational wellbeing: having enough, feeling good, and being connected. Their relationship is furthermore ‘done’ and given meaning in the context of everyday joys and struggles and interconnected with processes of wellbeing in his wider network of friends and kin.

### 3.2. *My Best Mum*

The second case is a young adult female from East Africa, who had lived in Scotland for under 10 years at the time she joined the project. For the purposes of this paper, we call her Sophia. A family-like relationship described by Sophia was with her foster parent (formal title is Supported Lodgings Provider<sup>4</sup>) who she had been living with for two years prior to the interview. Sophia also maintains telephone contact with her family of origin.

As expected, when talking about relationships, the ‘being connected’ aspect of wellbeing was present throughout the interview. For instance, in the contrasting moment when Sophia described her relationship with her family of origin as being built on love and care, while descriptions of her new family-like relationship tended to be focused on the types of support she received as she built her new life in Scotland and negotiated being part of a new family. Sophia also included her foster parent in the family quadrant of her present and future network map in recognition of their close relationship and described her foster parent as being her “English family”, and “my best mum” and shares that “it’s not different between family and foster family”. In a paired interview, her foster parent reciprocated the family-like sentiment and described Sophia as being “like a daughter” who “... will be part of our family life forever really ... her UK family. Her Scottish family, but we’re spread around the UK”.

An important point relating to the ‘being connected’ aspect of wellbeing is that the strength of connection can deepen (or weaken) over time. For instance, Sophia’s foster parent reflected on the transition and development of their relationship from being professional and supportive to becoming closer and more relaxed once they got to know and trust each other:

We went [a walk] up the hill the other night ... that’s normal family life, and I think the trust I have in you and you have in me, we can be ourselves ... It’s kind of unpeeling the layers of when someone’s new you’re a little bit ... but trying to be good, trying to help her, and then you get to know each other and you can just be yourself.

An example of their deeper connection over time was provided when Sophia’s foster parent described them becoming more comfortable in their relationship and recalled a memory of mistakenly putting an item that was not machine-washable in the washing machine. On discovering their own error, she expressed her annoyance aloud in the presence of Sophia when, the foster carer explained, she would have previously kept her annoyance to herself as a form of parental emotional protection of the young person when she first joined their family. This example also shows how our participants displayed family

to each other: one can show even negative emotions to a family member. The dimensions of wellbeing do not work mutually exclusively, and the interplay between the aspects of wellbeing was also present during the interview. For instance, during the paired interview, the 'being connected' and 'feeling okay' aspects of wellbeing were shown when Sophia and her foster parent provided insight into some of the features of their relationship that included trust, understanding, importance, longevity, and planning for the future. Sophia also described her foster parent as being a nice person, open minded, teacher, and best mum who would be there if she ever needed or wanted anything, while her foster parent described Sophia as being adaptable, hardworking, and an inspiration who enriched their lives.

The following dialogue demonstrates how, during the interview, Sophia and her foster parent communicated, navigated, and worked together to reach a sense of shared meaning and understanding that they both felt okay about:

Sophia: Yeah. Because she's like on my side always, so she's so important for my life.

Foster parent: Yeah. I think we have a level of trust, don't we Sophia, and understanding?

Sophia: Yeah.

Foster parent: I mean it's like with my other [child] ... I don't see them much but I'm always there. And same with you ... it's just a wonderful way of having that relationship that was made in those wonderful two years that Sophia was living with me, and I hope really does help her for the future to give her a sense of security, that even though you're independent, and when you eventually probably get married at some point I'll still be here, God willing, you know. It's making those connections, and it's a joy really to have that.

The 'feeling okay' aspect of wellbeing also appeared when Sophia and her foster parent described some of their shared experiences, which also brought laughter and joy to the interview through their retelling and reminiscing. They also laughed and provided insight into the cultural differences that Sophia has had to adjust to. For example, seeing a male person washing dishes for the first time. They also reminisced about taking part in shared activities such as walking, swimming and cooking together.

The 'having enough' aspect of wellbeing featured particularly during conversations about receiving or giving support. As well as providing a home and family for Sophia, support from the foster parent also included helping with learning to understand, read, and write English. Sophia and her foster parent also reflected on how they developed their own sign language to help each other understand what they were saying: "drink [signs], book [signs]", and the use of the internet to help, "there was a lot of Google searching", and the need for sign language decreasing as Sophia learned and developed her confidence in understanding and speaking English. Sophia also shared that she did not like reading in her home country, and her love of reading was something she developed in Scotland—Sophia described her favourite book in which the main character is a refugee.

The interconnectedness between all three dimensions of wellbeing—'having enough', 'feeling okay', and 'being connected'—was illustrated beautifully in Sophia's summing up of her relationship with her foster parent, "... She helped me everything and she just meant a lot ... You did [speaking directly to her foster parent]. You changed my life really".

### 3.3. *She Is Like Another Mother*

The third example is Rahma, who migrated from Africa when she was 13 years old. She received her parents and siblings to Finland through family reunification two years later. She is 30 years of age and has lived in Finland for 17 years. She is married, has her own children, and works as a practical nurse.<sup>5</sup>

Rahma's family-like relationship is with a teacher, who taught her at comprehensive school for about a year, and they have remained in contact ever since. This example shows

how in the course of 15 years their relationship developed from a formal one into a private, family-like relationship, including an emotional bond.

I am like a child (daughter) for her, as both of her own children are boys. For me she is like another mother. I have asked that she tells about me to her sons, so that if she develops dementia and is taken to an old people's home, they can contact me. I want to visit her even in the future. I want to take care of her even when she is 100 years old. . . . Some old people are lonely, they have no children, or children are busy. I know how glad a person can get when someone comes to a visit. Therefore, I always visit her when I go to (her town). . . . She is so important for me. . . . I cannot just throw her away even if I am doing well now, I have my own life and work, and everything. She helped me when I could not manage on my own. Therefore, she is important for me. I thank her, I respect her.

Rahma married early, had a child, dropped out of school, and soon divorced. After divorce, the teacher helped Rahma with many practical things in order for her to reorganize her life and get started as a single mother. According to Rahma, her own family became angry after the divorce and even though they at the time already lived close to her in Finland, she did not receive the support that she would have needed from them as they "did not understand the whole matter".

The relationship between Rahma and her teacher is mutually described as a daughter-mother relationship. Rahma's children also call the teacher grandmother. The teacher has greatly supported the 'having enough' dimension of Rahma's wellbeing by giving her advice and helping in her studies. She sometimes bought Rahma food, and she helped Rahma to move house and transfer furniture from one town to another after the divorce. Sometimes she also organised small amounts of financial support for her. She advised how to deal with Finnish authorities and paperwork. For example, how to apply for maternal custody. The teacher has thus been a great resource and guide to Finnish society.

The teacher provided Rahma important socioemotional support in particular when she was struggling as a single mother and trying to complete her education. The teacher also supported her in becoming empowered as a woman and in questioning certain expectations in her culture of origin. These are examples of the 'feeling good' aspect of wellbeing.

Now, Rahma stands on her own two feet. She is concerned about the health of the ageing teacher and how to make sure that she can maintain their connection and care for her in case the teacher cannot manage alone at home any longer. Rahma wants to return the help she has received. She also acts out of respect. The respect she feels towards the old mother-like teacher is related to the appreciation and gratitude she feels towards her, but also to her socio-cultural background in Africa, where elderly people are respected and taken care of by the younger generation.

These days, Rahma and the teacher live in different towns, and the 'being connected' aspect of wellbeing is displayed by them connecting approximately once a month by telephone to find out how they and their families are doing. The teacher and Rahma's mother live in the same town, so she also visits the teacher when she travels to meet her biological mother. The teacher has also visited Rahma.

This case shows how the teacher, especially during the divorce crisis, fulfilled a role as Rahma's second mother. According to Rahma's understanding, the teacher was able to provide Rahma with support, understanding, and knowledge that her biological mother was not able to provide due to lack of knowledge, Finnish language skills, and experience of the Finnish context and support system. The teacher also understood Rahma's desire to manage independently and take care of her child alone as a shift from her culture of origin to Finnish cultural practice, whereas her biological mother wanted her to follow their cultural norm of moving back to the parental home after divorce. These days Rahma's relationship with her biological mother is also good.

### 3.4. *The Role of Family-like Relationships*

Like Amir, Sophia and Rahma, our young interlocutors, first, describe many instances and types of practical support they have received from or given to their family-like person, from mastering everyday hassles (cooking lessons, moving house) to help with education (homework, advice on career), economic support and help to access the labour market (applying for a job, serving as a reference person). Some young people expressed gratitude towards family-like members who helped them renew settlement cards and apply for citizenship or family reunification with family of origin.

Secondly, emotional support was equally important: UMRs could ask for help if anything happened. A young woman explained that in the absence of family of origin, “those who help you become your family”, which is in line with Tilbury (2007) in their discussion of relationships that had gone beyond formal roles. However, the age of the family-like person may be a factor in whether they are asked for help or not. For instance, while Rahma acknowledges the immense practical and emotional support she has received in the past from her teacher, she now expresses concern for the teacher’s health and makes plans for how to care for her in the future.

Everyday sharing and connecting, lastly, included, for example, walking, swimming, shopping, cooking, and eating together. In addition, young participants described how they shared their inner thoughts with family-like friends, how they knew each other’s history. Some emphasised how family relatedness was about not needing to explain or ask for permission to come or go, or stay in each other’s place, or use clothes or borrow items from the other person. Some have been given keys to homes, which strongly symbolizes family-like relationship and trust. Family-like peers had often travelled or lived together, spent time together, and done things together. Thus, when relationships develop into family-like ones, that also entails an element of reciprocity.

## 4. Discussion

Our three cases, as well as the overall data, illuminate how young refugees along with their family-like relationships apply family terms and engage in family practices to signify the importance of the other person for their wellbeing.

### 4.1. *Naming and Doing Family-like Relationships*

First, family-like relations play an important role in meeting the daily needs of young refugees, but also the needs of people they define as family. As found in Carsten (2020), providing practical and emotional support as well as sharing everyday life are ways of doing and displaying family.

Second, hierarchical positions, gender, and age/generation are reflected by and inter-linked with chosen family terms and how relationships develop over time. According to our data, peers were typically named brother/sister, whereas older people and relationships established through formal systems were often referred to as (god)mother, father, or aunt. For example, in asymmetrical relationships or relationships, where the other person has a formal position (e.g., a social worker), mutuality may be more limited, and the formal status of the person whom the UMR considers as family-like structures the relationships in terms of contact keeping and mutuality. There were instances when only the young person claimed a kin relation. For example, some young people referred to social workers as “like a mother”, while simultaneously acknowledging that the relationship was time-limited and the young person was at the receiving end in terms of support. This is in line with how Nelson (2013) describes the relational dynamics of ‘caregiving kin’, where the attachment may not be mutual due to the hierarchical positionings.

Over time, formal relationships may, however, change to informal ones, allowing a mutual family-like relationship to develop. Similar to Paulsen et al. (2023), participants have described how some people, such as Rahma’s teacher and Sophia’s foster carer, went beyond their ascribed role as professionals. ‘Going the extra mile’ was thus seen as a symbol of the person’s stepping out of the formal into the informal family sphere. However,

the professional role that a family-like relationship evolved from also mattered. While teachers are not expected to take on a life-long commitment or engage in support outside school on behalf of their students, foster carers' roles are more fluid, as continuity and intimacy beyond the foster home placement are often aspired to (although not required). We found that this was reflected, for example, in how young people in care defined foster families as family (not family-like): 'my mum' and 'my grandfather' as opposed to 'my mum in my homeland' and 'my grandfather in my homeland'. However, relationships with foster carers did not always develop into long-lasting, supportive relationships. For some, foster care was described as a challenging time where they depended on other family-like relations to support their wellbeing. Thus, on one hand, a family setting presents an opportunity to form long-lasting, trusting, caring relationships for UMRs (Wade et al. 2012), but on the other hand, it can also entail disruptions due to placement breakdown (Crea et al. 2017) and feelings of estrangement (Sirriyeh 2013).

In general, relationships formed through informal networks were more symmetrical and built along same-gender lines. Furthermore, when peers were defined as family and ascribed roles as 'sister' or 'brother', young people more often described the relationship as equal and mutual.<sup>6</sup> These family-like persons were also more often part of the young person's wider network of friends, as shown by Amir's case.

Third, family-like relationships are ascribed meaning in the context of wider networks and expectations regarding 'what family should do'. As unaccompanied minors, the young people's family of origin was often either physically absent and/or not able to meet their needs in new circumstances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, family-like relations gained special importance for some young people, as they chose to be each other's 'cohort' and therefore could meet regardless of restrictions. Digital contacts with transnational families continued undisturbed. Many young people have also been introduced to the extended family of their family-like friends. In addition, the family-like relations may play a role in negotiating relationships with the family of origin, as in the cases of Amir and Rahma. For example, bonds between family and family-like members were established (e.g., a foster father travelled with the young person to the home country to meet his family); family-like persons supported attempts for family reunification; family-like people acted as contact persons for family of origin; and family-like members helped the young people to find a job, and thus, made it possible to support the transnational family financially.

Experiences of family life from families of origin guided UMRs to reflect and give meaning to new family-like relationships (also Bjarnesen and Utas 2018; Nelson 2013; Carsten 2020). On one hand, Amir and Sophia's cases illustrate how family-like relationships may provide a mutual sense of safety and create socio-emotional and material wellbeing in the absence of the family of origin. Rahma's case, on the other hand, is an example of perceived 'deficiency' and lack of trust in the skills of the family of origin to support in a matter which requires knowledge and understanding of how Finnish society functions.

Maintaining relationships with the family of origin included negotiating conflicts, tensions, and worries that were much less often described in relation to family-like relationships. Perhaps this illuminates the more precarious status of family-like relationships: families 'we choose' (Weston 1997; Nelson 2013) have to be functional at some level to persist, whereas family of origin relationships 'stick' even if they are deeply dysfunctional.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in new relationships, conflicts may be deliberately avoided, whereas ties with original family are expected to survive in spite of disagreements and tensions. In the data, relationships with family of origin were also described as life-long commitments where bonds needed maintenance, for example, through keeping in touch, providing economic support, or arranging trips to the homeland. However, young participants also expressed strong emotional ties to family of origin in general, or some family members in particular, such as mothers.



#### 4.2. Wellbeing in the 'Third Space'

All three dimensions of wellbeing (White 2010, 2017)—feeling good, having enough, and being connected—were important in young people's narratives of building and sustaining their family-like relationships. These relationships were also salient for the wellbeing of young people, as they were crucial for meeting their various needs. Family-like relationships gained particular importance for unaccompanied minor refugees in at least two different ways: first, the absence of the family of origin from everyday life enforced the need to create and be related to new supporting networks. Previous understandings of how family works and how wellbeing builds in relation to the security, stability and mutuality of family relationships guided young refugees who searched for and built new meaningful family-like relationships. For example, young people expected that people whom they considered family-like could be trusted when whatever support or help were needed. However, the analysis also reveals how wellbeing emerges in the relational space between young people and family-like persons. The benefits of family-like relationships for people engaging with young refugees needs further exploration in future research.

Second, building new family-like relationships was necessary in a new cultural context where young refugees were growing up and facing new expectations, needs, changes, and opportunities that their families of origin could not fully comprehend or accept. In the interviews, some young participants, for example, spoke about conflicts with their parents, who, according to the young people, tried to control them. In contrast, new family-like parents were described as more accepting and supportive. Thus, the young people's needs as regards to parenting change in a new socio-cultural environment, and they evaluate and contrast their new family-like relationships with the family of origin. But also, young people become who they are through different routes because of the different cultural environment. For example, Rahma's conflict with her family of origin and their differing cultural views on the appropriate female role and behaviour can be seen as an example of 'emotional acculturation', where migrants gradually take on the emotional culture of the new society (see Mesquita 2022).

Family-like relationships were important social capital, providing young refugees with access to both material and emotional resources, creating and thus enforcing their relational wellbeing. The family-like relations established in formal contexts, most often connected with the welfare system, typically comprised of persons born in Finland, Norway, or the UK. Therefore, they were valuable help for UMRs who tried to navigate the new system and society. Family-like persons from the informal sector, on the other hand, were often peers who shared the same ethnic or cultural background and provided the young people with sense of belonging and identity.

Cultural ideas of what family is, or what it should be, evolve over time. Hence, the views and expectations of young refugees regarding family are also likely to change due to norms and practices in the countries of settlement. Temporal aspects impacting change are related to different phases of settlement and wellbeing-related needs, but also to different changes in the personal life-course, such as starting student life or becoming a parent. As circumstances change, the needs as well as the expectations for family-like relationships are also continuously renegotiated. Hence, coming back to Bhabha's (Rutherford 1990) idea of the 'third space', unaccompanied minor refugees in our study seem to build new kinds of selves and identifications that combine different cultural understandings regarding self and relationships and go beyond them. This hybrid new space is the place of wellbeing for these young people.

The strength of our approach lies in our focus on who matters to young people in precarious refugee contexts. This has allowed us to unpack the important role family-like relationships may play. Our focus on 'doing family' also emphasises young people's agency in building family-like relationships. However, we acknowledge that our small sample has important limitations. For example, we have not recruited young people that are excluded from the labour market, suffer from severe psycho-social challenges, or live in more rural

areas. Thus, specific challenges that other young people may experience are not illuminated by our analysis.

## 5. Conclusions

Family reunification policies for UMRs across our three countries are restrictive, but particularly in Scotland, where responsibility for asylum seekers and refugee resettlement legislation are not devolved and remain with the UK Government. Some of the young participants in Norway and Finland had been successful in reunification with their parents and siblings. This was, however, not the case for Scotland. Our analysis shows that unaccompanied minor refugees, however, frustrate the stereotypes of vulnerability by forming strong bonds with peers and members of the society of settlement, at the same time maintaining links with families of origin. Young refugees navigate and aspire to wellbeing not only for themselves but also others close to them. Age, generation, gender, and hierarchical positions, however, matter in how these relationships are formed and maintained.

An important role of the welfare state would be to nurture communities that welcome and include unaccompanied minors in everyday interactions, which includes acknowledging the resources and wellbeing young people represent. This has implications for local neighbourhoods, organisations, schools, and so forth. Our analysis also shows that social welfare services can play an important role in connecting young people with relevant communities, and thereby support building family-like relationships. Foster care stands out as particularly important in building relationships that young people can rely on over time. In Norway and Finland, so-called ‘visiting families’ played a similar role for some young people. Furthermore, extending the period of formal support from social services can be important for some, as forming new, trusting, informal relationships takes time and effort. Our findings also indicate that formal helpers are defined as family by UMRs, and continuing relationships into adult life can function to symbolize family-like care (see Paulsen et al. 2023). Considering the limitations of our study, further research should focus on how welfare policies and practices can support family-like relationship formations for marginalised young people.

It is important for the wellbeing of young refugees to feel that they have a family with whom to share daily life. Thus, naming someone as family expresses the need to belong and establish new family-like relationships while maintaining their existing family relationships. However, family-like members cannot simply replace the family of origin, and forced family separation is likely to have a long-term negative impact on the wellbeing of many young refugees. As our data show, over time, family and family-like relationships may become a mutually important foundation for relational wellbeing.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This of course may also reflect a cultural practice of referring to people by kin terms.
- <sup>2</sup> In Scotland, host family carers are those recruited specifically to become carers for unaccompanied children.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Gjeng' officially translates to the English term 'gang'. However, in this context it bears a positive meaning of shared community that would get lost in translation.
- <sup>4</sup> A supported lodgings provider is a new role in Scotland that was established in 2016/2017 who also provides mentoring and support to help young people in care on their journey to independence.
- <sup>5</sup> In Finland, practical nurses are both health care and social care professionals with a protected occupational title. Practical nurses' work ranges from primary health care to specialised medical care.
- <sup>6</sup> It is, however, important to remember that in many societies there is quite a clear hierarchy between siblings, so someone is, e.g., an 'older brother' or 'younger brother', not just a brother.
- <sup>7</sup> We thank Sarah C. White for this suggestion.

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Article

# “The Will to Survive”: The Lives of Young People with “No Papers” in the United Kingdom

Yeşim Deveci

School of Education and Communities, University of East London, London E16 2RD, UK; y.deveci@uel.ac.uk

**Abstract:** This article considers how undocumented youth in the UK survive and construct their everyday lives in precarious circumstances. Drawing on multiple in-depth narrative interviews with ( $n = 7$ ) undocumented youth, I illustrate how these young people focus on the future and engage in purposeful activities as a way of enduring the everyday challenges of living with no papers. I reflect on the relationships, which young people draw on to enable them to endure adversity and rebuild their everyday lives. I conclude that the presence of love and community is critical for young people’s survival, safety and wellbeing, and I suggest how practitioners and researchers might make use of these findings.

**Keywords:** undocumented youth; young refugees; relational; love; wellbeing; UK

## 1. Introduction

“Look, being undocumented or to put it with no papers, in a country like this, it’s almost impossible, but people are living it, right. People are living the experience [in somewhat] amazing ways. You don’t have documents. You can’t access the doctor. You can’t have a bank account. You can’t have National Insurance number, so you can’t work in a legal job. People will exploit you. For you, that’s the nature of reality. You can’t do anything about it. . .” (Rayyan)

“ . . .it’s really hard when you don’t have a paper in this country. . . You don’t have a choice. . .you can’t go out with your friends at night, in weekends. You’re scared. You feel scared always. When I go to sleep I feel scared, I’m thinking, oh the immigration, they’re going to come now to take me. Always scared. They can catch me any time. It’s very hard”. (Ahmed)

As research participants, Ahmed and Rayyan<sup>1</sup> explain how living with “no papers” is a daily struggle; this is echoed in Tommi’s reflection that they, as undocumented youth, had nothing but “hope and the will to survive”. The ways in which people end up with irregular immigration status in the UK are multiple and may include refusal of asylum applications, visa overstaying, bureaucratic failures in processing immigration applications and, to a lesser extent, unauthorised entry (Sigona and Hughes 2012). Children and young people migrate for numerous reasons, and young people in particular transition between regular and irregular status during their migratory journey (UNHCR/Council of Europe 2014; Bloch et al. 2014; Schuster 2011). Bloch and McKay (2017, p. 71) argue that being undocumented is “one stage in a fluid process between different types of status”. I am using “undocumented” and “irregular status” interchangeably with “no papers” here to describe those who do not have authorised leave in the UK, as this is the term most often used by young people.

The experience of living in limbo, without status or leave to remain in the UK, is reflected in the literature on young refugees and migrants (e.g., Chase 2020; Deveci 2012; Gladwell and Elwyn 2012; Kohli 2014; Matthews 2014; Meloni and Chase 2017). Restrictive UK immigration and citizenship policies mean that many refugee and migrant children

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and young people grow up with uncertain and/or irregular immigration status, which significantly impacts their everyday lives, health and wellbeing (e.g., Aplan and Yarrow 2017; Thomas et al. 2018; The Children’s Society 2018). This article intends to contribute to the limited body of research focusing specifically on the lived experiences of children and young people in the UK with “no papers” (Bloch 2013; Bloch et al. 2009, 2011, 2014; Coram Children’s Legal Centre 2013; Sigona and Hughes 2012).

This article aims to illustrate how young refugees with “no papers” survive and construct their lives in precarious circumstances by holding on to their dreams for the future and drawing strength from loved ones and communities. First, I outline the context and methods used in this research with undocumented youth and discuss the key concepts and issues of relevance to the findings. Following this, I consider how the participants focus on the future as a way of managing an uncertain present, their relationships with loved ones, past and present, and the ways in which they participate and belong to different communities, both local and transglobal. I conclude that the presence of love and community is critical for young people’s survival, safety and wellbeing, and I consider the implications of these findings for practice and further research in the field.

## 2. Context and Methods

The doctoral research project grew out of 15 years of experience of working with young refugees and migrants in an urban context and a desire to understand more about the lives of those without authorised status in the UK. In 2000, I founded the Dost Centre for Young Refugees and Migrants and led the development of a “360° relationship-based model” of practice (Price 2013), offering practical and emotional support (advice, advocacy, therapeutic casework), education and social activities (Deveci 2012). This practice experience informed all aspects of the research, which aimed to explore the everyday lives, life histories and hopes and dreams of young people aged 16–25 with “no papers”.

Drawing on my professional networks, I recruited participants via an intermediary “gatekeeper” or relevant “trusted person” in their life (Miller 2004; Duvell et al. 2009). The Table 1 below provides demographic information about the participants.

**Table 1.** List of research participants.

Name (Pseudonym)	Age on Arrival in UK	Age at First Research Meeting	Gender	Country of Birth
Ahmad	15	23	Male	Afghanistan
Muhammed	14	22	Male	Afghanistan
Precious	10	17	Female	Nigeria
Rayyan	9	19	Male	Bangladesh
Sarah	8	22	Female	Jamaica
Sekou	17	24	Male	Guinea
Tommi	3	20	Male	Jamaica

Over a period of nine months, the young people took part in multiple individual in-depth narrative interviews. I took a reflexive, relational approach to data gathering, prioritising relational responsibility throughout the process (Gergen 2015; Price and Deveci 2022). Rich interview data were analysed using a relational, thematic analytic process to explore subjective experience and social life in the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). The project was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) at the University of East London.

## 3. Key Concepts and Issues

### 3.1. *Waiting and Living*

Research with children and young people subject to immigration control has drawn attention to the frustrations and stresses of waiting and delays in the asylum process (Brighter Futures 2013; Chase and Allsopp 2021; Stalford et al. 2023). Drawing on research

with 30 young migrants and further dialogue with some of the participants spanning over a decade, Back et al. (2018) speak to the experience of seeking asylum in the UK as one characterised by waiting and living in limbo. Waiting in this context is described as an “existential straitjacket”, which restrains and defines the limits of life for young migrants (Back et al. 2018, p. 77), who are effectively “sentenced to the condition of waiting” (Back et al. 2018, p. 82). While Back et al. (2018, p. 99) conceptualise this period constrained by precarious immigration status as the “dead time” of waiting, they also note that this time may be used to think and plan. This is shown by Allsopp et al. (2015) and Ramachandran and Vathi (2022), who demonstrate how people subject to immigration control use creative tactics to counter the system and take agency over their futures. The paradox of waiting is explored in Kohli and Kaukko’s (2017) research with asylum-seeking girls in residential care in Finland, in which the participants’ experience of waiting is shown to be both debilitating and productive.

“[Name] told me that sometimes, on bad days, they feel like prisoners. What is even worse, the difference is that prisoners know the length of their sentence, unlike these young people (Field notes)”. (Kohli and Kaukko 2017, p. 10)

The parallels between imprisonment and living without papers are echoed in evidence given to the All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry into the Use of Immigration Detention in the United Kingdom in 2015 by an individual, who had served a prison sentence for working illegally, before being held in detention, who said “*in prison, you count your days down but in detention you count your days up*” (Bail for Immigration Detainees 2019).

Although for the girls in Kohli and Kaukko’s (2017) study the length of waiting was unknown and often felt unbearable, the present was shown to be not merely a liminal gap between the past and the future but rather a time of generative activity in which living continued.

### 3.2. Enduring Relationships and Love

Young peoples’ capacity to endure the challenges of living in limbo is closely tied to their engagement in meaningful activities and the availability of social networks and supportive relationships. The significance of a supportive, enduring relationship with an adult professional—someone “like family”—can be seen in research about vulnerable youth in a variety of contexts (Crawley and Kohli 2013; Kaukko et al. 2022; Thrana 2016). Building on Gergen’s (2009) conceptualisation of a relational self, wherein “the individual represents the common intersection in a myriad of relationships” (Gergen 2009, p. 150), White (2017) argues that the quality and availability of the relationships we are engaged in are key to health and wellbeing. This is further developed by White and Jha (2023, this volume), where they identify being seen, known, respected, even loved (“cared for”) in everyday life, as a central feature of wellbeing.

Love has become the subject of considerable attention among scholars exploring the concept of love in social work and education (e.g., Byrne 2016; Collins 2023; Gatwiri and Ife 2023; Ross 2023; Vincent 2016). In hooks’ (2001, p. 4) seminal work *All About Love*, she cites Peck’s (1978) definition of love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth”. She emphasises Peck’s focus on love as a choice: “Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action” (Peck 1978 cited in hooks 2001, pp. 4–5). For hooks (2001, p. 94), love is an intentional practice, an ethic defined by actions of “care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect and knowledge”. While the interpretations and contexts differ, there is some agreement among the scholars cited above that “love” involves what hooks (2001, p. 5) describes as a “mix of ingredients”, including care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust, honesty and open communication. Lanias and Zembylas (2015, p. 36) theorise love as a transformational political concept with six dimensions—“love as an emotion, love as choice, love as response, love as relational, love as political, and love as praxis”—arguing that love has a “transforming power” in our institutions and everyday lives. The possibilities of love in professional practice as potentially transformative for those experiencing difficulty

and distress in their everyday lives are suggested in a number of recent studies, including Thrana's (2016) research with vulnerable youth in Finland, Ross et al.'s (2023) study with peer mentor trainees, carers and mental health professionals in Australia and Kaukko et al.'s (2022) research with refugee children and teachers in Finland and Australia. In Kaukko et al.'s (2022, p. 732) study, the loving actions of teachers are shown to be experienced by children as a form of "devotional attention to their wellbeing", supporting the establishment of a sense of safety in an unfamiliar context.

### 3.3. Community

In *All About Love*, bell hooks (2001) equates love and belonging, saying "...where I felt loved, where I felt a sense of belonging" (hooks 2001, p. ix). The linking of love and belonging, as articulated by hooks (2001), is helpful for thinking about the lives of young people with no papers and considering the role of community in wellbeing, as discussed by White and Jha (2023) in this volume. As hooks (2001, pp. 129–30) argues, communities sustain human survival:

"To ensure human survival everywhere in the world, females and males organize themselves into communities. Communities sustain life...[. . .]. We are born into the world of community. Rarely if ever does a child come into the world in isolation, with only one or two onlookers. Children are born into a world surrounded by the possibility of communities. Family, doctors, nurses, midwives, and even admiring strangers comprise this field of connection, some more intimate than others".

The significance of community and social support is confirmed by White (2017, p. 14), who draws attention to the relational aspect of wellbeing as "arising from the common life, the shared enterprise of living in community—in whatever sense—with others". While relationships sustain life, and relationality is generative, questions of belonging are complex, and particularly for those, whose right to belong is constantly in question. In Meloni's (2019) research with undocumented youth in Canada, she conceptualises belonging as ambivalent and fluid; an assemblage of meanings which allow for the possibility of multiple belongings across space and time, rather than anchored to a specific place or identity. Meloni (2019, p. 43) posits that the social worlds and relationships of the young people in her study were "constantly shaped by constraints that defined, in ambivalent terms, their subjectivity and materiality of belonging". The notion of belonging as a concept encompassing permanence and impermanence is helpful for considering the role of faith and religious practice in the lives of young refugees and migrants, and particularly the ways in which belonging to a religious community might sustain the will to survive. Raghallaigh and Gilligan's (2010) research with unaccompanied minors identifies six coping strategies, which contribute to resilience and "active survival". Significantly, religious practice alongside a strong belief in God was shown to support young people's use of the various coping strategies. Similarly, Scott et al.'s (2022) research with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people found that religious activities and faith were an important sustaining and guiding aspect for the participants, as they had been foundational to the societies, communities and families they were born into.

## 4. Findings: Dreams for the Future, Love and Community

This analysis focuses on young people's articulations of their dreams for the future and conversations about significant individuals and communities in their lives. From here, I discuss how these future plans and experiences of love and community sustain life and wellbeing for young people with "no papers" in their present—and imagined future—material and social contexts (White and Jha 2023).

### 4.1. Dreams for the Future

A vivid uncertainty about the future was an everyday reality for the participants. As in Bloch et al.'s (2009) study, the young people I met with often spoke about the difficulty



in imagining a future. Muhammed spoke of “hard work for nothing. . .”, Rayyan described his sense of “nothing changing”, while continuing to live in the face of despair was the closest thing to hope:

“...the only options you have is continue with life—doesn’t matter how shit it is—and just hope that things will be positive in the future. That’s the motivation. It can be years. I mean, for me it’s been five, six, seven years. It’s continuous rolling and rolling and rolling, but nothing seems to be changing. But I’m hoping things will change soon”.

Nonetheless, it is notable that alongside these stories of struggle were young people’s plans for the future. The future offered the possibility of freedom from the limitations and restrictions of the present. For example, Precious planned to become a social worker:

“...life is hard. Every time I cry. Every time, every day I cry that I don’t want to be like this.

But I know that—I always have a hope that one day I will have papers, I’ll be able to work. Because my plan is I want to be a social worker. I want to have a public school for children who are in need, who doesn’t have anything, who doesn’t have warm parents because like now my mum is dead and my dad, he doesn’t care about me, he doesn’t even remember me. I’m just by myself. So, I want to do the same thing for children because I’m having the benefits now so I want people in the future, if I have the ability to have my papers and study more and work . . . I want to give to other people in future”. (Precious)

Many of the young people I spoke to had clear plans, which sustained them through their present struggles. Sarah also intended to train as a social worker when she was granted status.

“I still want to be a social worker. I’m still going to do it. I’m still going to call the College and get my interview again and go back to college, so I can do what I want to do”.

Those, such as Precious, who were currently in education articulated the steps they needed to take to reach their goal and retained a clear focus on the future, regardless of immigration status:

“I just focus on my education because even if my immigration comes I’ll continue and if my immigration doesn’t come I’ll still try to continue until I get what I want and . . . try to achieve my goal. I haven’t achieved it but I’m still achieving. I will see. . . just have to put that faith, put faith that I’ll achieve. . . Even if I had like 20 steps, I’ve reached like five steps, it means 15 steps to go”. (Precious)

Precious, Rayyan, Tommi and Sekou described a multitude of ways in which their lack of settled status had hindered their ability to continue or progress at various points in their educational journeys. However, they held on to their ambitions and aspirations, determined to continue striving towards their future goals. Precious took every opportunity available to study; she had no control over when her “papers” would come and so took agency over the areas of her life, which were within her control.

For some, engagement in education offered a framework within which to construct an idea of the future and organise daily life. For others, preparing for the future was enacted in the careful organisation of everyday life, engaging in meaningful activities and building social networks (Allsopp et al. 2015; Ramachandran and Vathi 2022). Although Rayyan had been offered a place at university and had a scholarship for the first year, his focus was on working to fund his immigration case and gain status. Likewise, Ahmed organised himself in the present to stay physically and mentally healthy, dividing his time between home, work, gym and mosque. Like Rayyan, planning involved focusing on employment and saving as a priority:

“So that’s why I just think, let me wait. . . if they send me back home I’m going to come again. I’m not going to stay in Afghanistan because if I stay in Afghanistan

that's it, I'm going to die there. I'm going to come and put my life in danger again but I have to come here, because I can't stay there. So I just save a little bit of money for myself, every week when I work I save, maybe, I just think, if anything happened to me in the future then I can use this money for—again to come to the UK or to other country, to do something". (Ahmed)

Reflecting back on his experience of living without papers, Tommi identified the importance of having a goal:

"Have a goal. If you have a goal, I believe that will get you far in life. Because when you have nothing to hold on to it makes situations worse. Whereas if you can channel your frustration into reaching for something that you want, eventually you're going to get that thing".

This importance of a dream to hold onto was echoed by Sarah:

"...never give up on your dreams. That's a big one, because even though you haven't got what you have, the faith and the hope and the reaching for your dreams, it still helps you to get by in everyday life".

For Sarah and Precious, accepting the limitations of their present circumstances offered a way of managing the everyday uncertainty of life without papers:

"I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, so you have to enjoy today. Every day I keep thinking okay what is going to happen tomorrow? Without papers I've learned a lot and I've achieved a lot. I'm able to have a lawyer who helped me to put my papers in but even though they haven't said yes, they haven't said no. They haven't even decided what they will do. So. That's it. I just have to hope. That hope is still there with a question mark. That dream is still there, hope and dream with a question mark". (Precious)

The tension between enforced waiting and the desire to keep pushing forward towards a goal explored in Kohli and Kaukko's (2017) study is evident in the narratives of all the participants and illustrated by this quotation from Sarah:

"...so you have all that opportunity and all the dreams and that but you still have to wait because the thing that you're waiting for is not there..."

For those on the cusp of adulthood, reaching 18 with uncertain immigration status exacerbated their anxieties about the future; turning 18 frequently resulted in significantly less social care support (Meloni and Chase 2017). Despite being former unaccompanied children, Muhammed and Ahmed were no longer considered eligible for support and were forced to survive by illegal means or risk destitution. At 17, Precious was entirely preoccupied by what would happen when she turned 18 and was no longer legally a child.

"Now they told me that they delay my application for three months... I'm going to be 18 in the next two months and if I don't have papers, it's just going to be too difficult for me".

Although living in limbo was experienced by the participants as intensely stressful and often debilitating, they continued to live their lives and progress their "life projects" (Chase and Allsopp 2021). Sekou described getting married during this time:

"...it was so tough. My wife wanted to do civic marriage. I couldn't. She has to wait for two years for me to provide a document for that wedding to happen. It was stressful, but we made it. It was good. It was a joyful day. I just wanted to do a wedding where everybody will come and enjoy themselves".

Sekou hoped that one day "...this immigration thing will be behind me" and he would be able to move on with his life, saying:

"It's a big hope for me, because I know when it's behind me there are other things I can do.

I always wanted to be a doctor, not because it's a dream, but it's actually a realistic dream for me. I just want to do this, because what happened to my mum, I don't

want that to happen to anybody else. . . [a] Career where I'm stable. Offering something to people that I care about, I'm passionate about. And also these immigration things, I want to leave it behind. I don't want my life to be about immigration. I really don't".

In this quotation, Sekou traces a line between his past, his present commitment to studying to become a doctor and his dreams for the future. As illustrated by the data, the persistent tenacity of the participants is enacted in their focus on future goals; this focus is an organising feature of everyday life, enabling them to endure the daily grind of life with "no papers" and survive in a hostile environment. In the sections below, I discuss how this focus and generative activity are sustained by love—past and present—and the community of others.

#### 4.2. Love

Love, notwithstanding its many complexities, can be seen in multiple aspects of young people's lives: in significant relationships with family and friends and with professional "helpers" and educators. In this context, I use the notion of love as a lived experience of being held precious—of recognition and regard, of being known and respected, cared for and accepted (hooks 2001).

For some of the participants, the love they had experienced as children was a treasured memory, which sustained them in the present. Sekou describes his relationship with his father, saying:

"I was so close to my dad. I relied on him so much on anything, everything. We'll debate, we'll discuss, six o'clock in the morning, because he used to wake me up. When he's sleeping and I'm awake, I would go and wake him up, say, Dad, come on, come on, even if it's weekend".

Similarly, Precious and Muhammed spoke about being woken up for school by their grandmother and mother, this small act representing love as care and attention. For Precious, this appeared to help her organise herself in the present; she drew upon memories of her grandmother as a source of strength. However, for Muhammed, the absence of this love was particularly hard to bear. Muhammed described how he had been happy in Afghanistan "because of family", but now in the UK, he was alone and struggling with depression, often unable to sleep or sleeping whole days. These ordinary features of daily life—a parental figure, who woke them up at the start of the day—were experienced by some as a memory to hold onto and others as a devastating loss.

As some participants started to build lives in the UK, they developed loving bonds with partners and imagined their future lives. Precious had a supportive boyfriend, and Sekou was married, planning for a time when he could become a father:

"I do want to have a family when I'm stable. I'll spend more time with them not worrying about what's going to happen to me. That is a big thing for me. Family is very important".

Alongside narratives of familial love, many young people told stories about individuals, often practitioners, who supported them. These were people who believed in them and helped them navigate systems, advocating on their behalf, enabling access to finance and resources. Often, these relationships provided loving care akin to that of family and friends.

Rayyan spoke about the importance of the relationships he had with staff at his college and his psychologist in keeping him alive, helping him heal and continue living.

"I certainly have been helped by a lot of people. . . There have been occasions where people pushed me forward positively where I just didn't want to. People encouraged me when I really wasn't even into it. It's almost like people forced me into living my life when I just couldn't be bothered. . . It's down to a few individuals. A few individuals, a tutor, a counsellor, welfare and guidance manager, form tutor, these people have been constantly with me all this time, years and years".

Rayyan's experience of being "pushed forward" was repeated by Precious, who described how the manager of the shared accommodation provided continuous support and reassurance, a calming presence in times of distress.

"...it's one woman...she's the one that actually pushed me far...Not pushing me that you have to do this but she's saying that you can do this. If you could do this way, you can get to that place... Because when the Home Office sent me a letter that said they're going to send me back home, when I start crying and I don't know what to do, I was going crazy, start screaming, I was so stressed, I'm having chest pain, like proper pain. I couldn't sleep..."

In the quotation below, Precious explains how she calls the manager "mum" and "sister"—a person she could always rely on to help her cope with the constant pressure of life with irregular status.

"She keeps pushing me saying don't worry, everything is alright. Then we do it starting step by step...She told me that you don't need to cry, you know what, we're going to find another way. She helped me to find another way... I call her my mum, I call her my sister... For me to be in here today, for me to have a lawyer, for me to have most of the things, even for me to stand as Precious... standing like that, she's the one, she's the one that kept pushing me every time saying that everything's going to be alright".

This "transformative love" (Lanas and Zembylas 2015) can be seen in several participants' accounts. For example, Sarah describes a "support family", which includes professionals, saying: "That's been helpful, sustaining me".

"Alice and the charity, if it wasn't for them I would be literally on the streets. And Craig... He's amazing. If I need anything and I ask him, he'll give it to me. If I need someone to talk to, he'll talk to me".

When Sarah speaks about the "stranger" who took her in through a scheme to provide a temporary home for homeless youth, there is a profound sense that she experiences this as an act of love:

"Where I'm living, that's a really big support, because a stranger took you in and you've been there for—since Christmas. Since Christmas, you met all her friends, practically like family. So that's a big support for me, because when she first—when she was, like, oh, yeah, you can stay here for Christmas dinner, I was, like, is she serious? I stayed and met all her family. They were really nice and friendly. Do you know what she gave me for my birthday? A card and £20. I stayed in that room and I cried all night. That's how emotional I was. It was so emotional... I really can't know what I'll do but she's amazing..."

Similarly, Sekou in the quotation below states the importance of having a parent-like figure to bear witness to his achievements.

"Things like when I first got my Endeavour Certificate for Science and Maths at my school, I invited them to come with me. It was so important. My social worker should have been there, but I invited Matthew and Kate to come with me. That was special, I've got somebody, because everybody came with their parents. That certificate doesn't mean much to them to be honest, but being with me means a lot to me... Things like that".

In this example, Matthew and Kate's presence at the award ceremony can be understood as an expression of love, for Sekou to feel "I've got somebody". This long-term "parent-like" relationship with Matthew was crucial for Sekou, holding him through uncertainty and sustaining his capacity to believe in his own abilities. Sekou continues, describing how his teacher Matthew would advocate for him in educational contexts.

"Like the university places. When people were refusing me, Matthew would come with me and would try to explain my situation where we are today. But

again, even if he didn't have to say anything, the fact that he's there to be with me, I think it means a lot".

Here, Matthew represents a British adult who believed in him and was invested in the relationship and Sekou's growth and development. The stories above indicate that where the young people were able to remember being loved and experienced being held in healthy, nurturing relationships in the present, they were more resilient in the face of adversity and often felt more positive and hopeful about the future.

### 5. Being in Community

"For me, my childhood and teenage-hood living on the estate, we wasn't the good kids, we wasn't the greatest kids, we got into so much trouble, but I wouldn't change it for the world, because behind that situation what was going on in my life, that's the only thing that made me feel normal, being around all those people, doing all that fun stuff, and just having general friends and friends that are not from school; friends that I live with them, my community".

In this quote, Tommi recalls his childhood on the estate and a sense of being part of a community. He describes the children in his neighbourhood like family:

"We're all a family. We all protect each other. If there's any trouble or anything, we look after each other, we go out together, all the fun stuff we did was together and a lot of us went to the same school as well. . . . It was the greatest feeling ever, your neighbour, your best friends, coming knocking at your door in the morning and you can walk to school. You never have to go to school alone. . . . When you're at a school, you know that you have a family outside of it and that family protected you in school as well, even though when we were in school, we all had friends. But when we came out of school, we were like this is home now, all on our estate".

Hence, for Tommi, his "community" was both the physical locality of "the estate" but also the community of shared experience, which he described as "friends that I live with" and "family". In the quotation above, Tommi links his sense of wellbeing to being part of a community where he feels safe and protected—this connection with his peers being "the greatest feeling ever". This sense of community is also echoed in Sekou's reminiscence about his wedding day and the description of his relationships with people who have become family to him:

"...my wedding day... they were full of people who were my groomsmen, people I met in this country. There was only one Guinean person in my wedding. That was my best man. . . . For me, that diversity in my wedding, it was good. . . . I know I have people I can rely on. Those are people that make me wake up every day morning and I want to do things differently, because they are like me. They're just getting on with their lives and doing things. [ . . . ] In the UK, I think I have learned from friends. I have met people here I call families. Uncle Matthew is like a family to me. Kate and her family is like a family to me. Omar is like a brother to me". (Sekou)

Sekou's comment that he had people to rely on speaks to the way in which being part of a community sustains human survival (hooks 2001) and wellbeing (White and Jha 2020). Ahmed was able to call on support from those in his social network when making a fresh claim for refugee status:

"... I told them when I had a fresh claim last time, like ten peoples, they was English, they give me papers, their passports to photocopy, to help with me. I have lots of friends like, big relationship with people. I had a lot of friends that say we can help. . . ."

This quote captures both the practical support, which this network provides, but also his sense of a community—friends from the gym, the mosque, his customers:

“I just chat with them. . . I have a lot of friends. They’re like my best friends. . . we get policemen, businessmen. . . We get a lot of different people. . . I am a good barber. If I was not illegal I’d maybe have my own business. I have a lot of customers that like me because I have been cutting hair for a long time”.

Ahmed lived on a knife edge, skilfully negotiating relationships with friends who knew of his circumstances and those unaware of his status, customers, including police officers, for whom he was simply a good barber. In Ahmed’s narrative, there is a sense that he belonged to both a community of peers and to the local “barber shop community”.

For many participants, the community, which sustained them in the present, was a link to their place of birth, a place where their right to belong was unquestioned. In Rayyan’s words, a place where

“ . . . there’s a natural sense of belonging. . . a place that you were born, you grew up in and you’re just part of the soil and the life and the air”.

Similarly, Sekou described being from Guinea as a key reference point:

“I’m from Guinea. . . even if my children are born here, even if I have a British nationality, I will always be a Guinean, I think. You can never erase that. . . because that’s where I grew up. That’s what I refer to”.

For Rayyan, it was his relationship with God, which offered continuity and constancy, his religious identity being an expression of his membership of a transnational community beyond the bounds of citizenship:

“As a Muslim you need to understand the British Government still doesn’t concern [consider] me as a British National so I am forced to find myself an identity. Even if become a British National when that happens I’ll still consider myself to be as a Muslim because I consider this to be the fundamental aspect of me”.

This is exemplified by Sekou, who described how his faith was an integral part of his life from a young age:

“My ethnic group, Jakhanke, they’re very strong in religion, agriculture. . . My dad is more liberal. My dad actually is a very good believer. He taught me Qur’an by himself. I know the Qur’an in and out, because his dad taught him when he was young”.

In exile in the UK, Sekou’s wife was Christian; they got married in a church and continued to follow their own faiths, each respecting the other’s choices.

“I’ll go to church with [my wife], but I’ll just sit there quiet, like I don’t know anything. But that’s fine. If I want to know, I’ll question her. When I’m doing Ramadan, I don’t force her to sit until nine o’clock or 9:30 to eat with me. When I’m in [Ramadan], I say to her, go and eat on your own unless you want to wait. That’s your choice”.

Precious describes growing up with both Islam and Christianity as part of her heritage. However, it was only when she came to the UK that she started to attend church regularly, finding a strong community among the congregation at her local African church and joining the choir.

“ . . . it’s only when I get here then I actually practice going to church, and doing all these night vigils, all the everything. I start having more interest and I’m in the choir. So I love to sing. So when they bring me song I just sing and I just feel the grace, and then now I just want to go every time. I just want to go and just sing and dance, and just sit there”.

For these young people, the religious practices, values and communal activities provided a connection to the past and a thread of continuity, which helped them navigate the uncertainty of the present. Like those in Raghallaigh and Gilligan’s (2010) and Scott et al.’s (2022) research, for Ahmed, Rayyan, Sekou and Precious, having grown up in

religious societies, their faith provided direction, comfort and a way of coping with their present circumstances.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

“Love is life force.

I believe that the creative spirit is nothing less than love made manifest.

I see love as the essential nature of all that supports life.

Love is opposed to the death of the dream. Love is opposed to the delimiting of possibilities of experience”. (Jordan 1977, p. 11)

Reading Jordan’s (1977) description of love as a life force, I am reminded of the multitude of ways in which young people with “no papers” resist the impact of UK immigration control by holding onto their dreams and experiences of love and community. In a hostile environment, love supports life. As a small-scale qualitative study, the research findings are not generalisable, and the participants cannot be seen as representative of all undocumented youth in the UK. However, by documenting the lived experiences of the young people in this study, I have attempted to highlight the themes, which, in my view, are important to consider when seeking to understand more about the lives of young people with “no papers”.

The findings presented here are not intended to be conclusive but rather are offered as a first step towards sensitising practitioners working in social care and social work, education, healthcare, youth and community work settings to the lives and everyday experiences of those with “no papers”. This research speaks to the importance of practitioners establishing and sustaining long-term relationships with young people with irregular immigration status and of actively supporting them to achieve their future goals. Moreover, it invites practitioners to consider the strengths and adaptive strategies, which these young people bring and explore together what might help them construct their everyday lives safely.

Beyond the practice implications of this research, data from this study suggest several avenues for further exploration. One area, which merits further consideration, would be research with young refugees and practitioners to explore their understanding and experience of “love” and how professionals might develop and deepen their practice to align with a love ethic (hooks 2001). Similarly, further research using methodological approaches which centre young refugees and migrants knowledge creation, can contribute to developing praxis around issues which matter to them, and methods which enable their participation in, and authoring of, research. Finally, despite a growing scholarship concerning the experiences of children arriving as lone migrants, there remains a limited body of scholarship regarding undocumented youth in the UK or longitudinal research with those, who were given permission to settle. Further research exploring the everyday lives, histories, desires and dreams for the future of these young people and adults is therefore needed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> To preserve participants’ anonymity, all names in this paper are pseudonyms.

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## Article

# Drawing Together in Scotland: The Opportunities and Challenges for Young Refugees within a 'Relational Wellbeing' Approach to Integration

Ravi K. S. Kohli <sup>1,\*</sup>, Paul Sullivan <sup>2</sup> and Kirstie Baughan <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Applied Social Research, University of Bedfordshire, Luton LU1 3JU, UK; kirstie.baughan@study.beds.ac.uk

<sup>2</sup> Sistema Scotland, Glasgow G42 8JL, UK; paul.sullivan2407@outlook.com

\* Correspondence: ravi.kohli@beds.ac.uk

**Abstract:** In this paper, we consider how young refugees in the Drawing Together project experience integration in Scotland. We critically examine the term 'refugee integration' and emphasise its multiple dimensions. Specifically, we analyse Scotland's role as a country committed to the protection and care of young refugees by mapping some key Scottish legal, political, social and cultural policies and strategies that provide the contexts for refugee integration as a mutual endeavour based on hospitality and reciprocity. Finally, we show the ways young refugees talk of rebuilding a life in Scotland that feels coherent in relation to their past and present circumstances, and their future plans despite the challenges that they encounter in their everyday lives. We suggest that a 'relational wellbeing' approach to integration in Scotland is tangible. It confirms the importance of the practical and social opportunities available to young refugees as they resettle. This approach extends the meaning of integration beyond its political and social categories, to include young refugees' attachment to their faith of origin as well as the natural environment of Scotland. In all, we suggest that young refugees face the challenges and use the opportunities for integration in Scotland in ways that are of sustained benefit, for them as well as Scotland as their new country.

**Keywords:** refugee integration; young refugees; Scotland integration; relational wellbeing; Drawing Together project

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## 1. Introduction

Over time, some unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people are successful in their asylum claim and are recognised as refugees. When they resettle into host nations, a powerful dynamic plays out. After long periods of waiting, when they have not been in charge of their movements forward in life (Kohli and Kaukko 2018), they are invited to integrate in a lifelong way into their new countries. There is permission to establish new rhythms and patterns of living. There is, following the elation associated with being allowed to resettle, a dawning realisation that integration is a word that carries multiple meanings (Kohli 2014). It brings opportunities and challenges. It defines much of the actions and reflections in the current and future lives of young refugees as they try to connect who they are with who they will become. On that basis, we briefly outline what we mean by the term 'refugee integration'. In developing our focus on the Scottish context for the Drawing Together Project, we then consider the ways the United Kingdom overall and Scotland are similar and different in giving meaning to the idea of refugee integration. To do so, we summarise some ways Scotland has created its own paths of refugee integration within the turbulent complexities of the UK political context. We then frame some key findings within the dimensions and drivers of a relational wellbeing approach and suggest that the ways young refugees are integrating in Scotland offers some hope that policies are

having a beneficial impact on their lives within Scotland. As observed by one of the young people in the Drawing Together project:

*To me, Scotland is like a second chance God is giving me in Scotland, and I've been taking advantage of it. To me, Scotland would be like the start of my successful story. When I tell my story to my future kids or grandkids I'll be like, "Once upon a time", and I start with Scotland. . . Because the things I got here I could never dream of back home. . . . Connections are very important to have in life. Scotland has given me plenty of that.*

Within this hope-filled rendition of life beginning again, the young person is a witness to their own experiences. The past is a foreign country (Hartley 1953). The future beckons. Opportunities arise, not just to do well materially, but to extend networks, create a family, and to live well as a citizen. Arguably, what is underplayed by this respondent is the common everyday struggle to make life work out in ways that are clear, coherent and continuous for young refugees. In this paper, we attempt to show that this working out is fundamentally tied to the ways refugee integration is conceptualised and enacted, not just as a set of behaviours and thoughts by individual refugees, but as part of a process of contextual exchanges with others over time aimed at bringing mutual benefits. We suggest that refugee integration is alive, knotty, challenging, and worthwhile.

## 2. Refugee Integration and Its Multiple Dimensions

There is, at first glance at least, a simple solidity to the term 'refugee integration' (UNHCR 1951). The 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees emphasises a right to integration, by placing the expectation on receiving countries to promote access to education, employment, housing and welfare (UNHCR 1951). This can support refugees to begin creating roots in a new country, but does this come at a price? The 1951 protocol refers to the assimilation of refugees, which implies that there is an expectation for newcomers to adapt to the needs of the host country. In the work of Berry (1997, p. 10), assimilation is one of four different 'strategies' of acculturation. This is the process of adaptation, which takes place within an individual and the receiving society. The remaining three strategies include 'marginalisation', 'separation' and 'integration' (Berry 1997, p. 10). Berry (1997) highlights integration as the most preferential form of acculturation. Although Berry's work helped to progress the study of acculturation, and indeed integration, the model has been criticised for placing undue emphasis on newcomers eventually adapting to fit in to the way of life of the host country (Phillimore 2021).

Further developments in the field of refugee integration were led by Ager and Strang (2004, 2008, p. 170), who developed the 'Indicators of Integration' framework. This model outlines different domains connected to integration, beginning with the foundations ('rights and citizenship'), facilitators ('language and cultural knowledge' and 'safety and stability'), social connections ('social bridges', 'social bonds' and 'social links') and markers and means ('employment', 'housing', 'education' and 'health') (Ager and Strang 2008, p. 170). This model continues to be the reference point of integration used by the UK's Home Office (Ndofor-Tah et al. 2019).

In this paper, we suggest that refugee integration contains two main aspects. The first is related to the material and structural resources required to stabilise and develop a replenished life. The second involves making connections with those material elements, with integration seeking out relational and community aspects (see Figure 1). The material and relational thereby co-exist in an intermingled way, maintaining a symbiotic dependence on each other. Thus, for example, finding and tactically engaging with opportunities for and access to employment, housing, education, welfare and leisure lead to finding and becoming embedded within communities, where a sense of belonging can emerge over time. Here, the rhythms and patterns of ordinary life can evolve in sustainable ways for newcomers and their hosts. From the material and structural aspects, Figure 1 shows that resources, tools, and skills are embedded in opportunities where access is controlled in one form or another by service providers. The relationship with service providers and refugees seeking access is, essentially, a vertical one, where supplicants and donors face

each other in order to arrange movements of integration that may be mutually beneficial. Formal and mechanical means of delivering services and progressing through layers of refugee integration become an agreed two-step dance of belonging within the new country. Within the relational/community aspects, the movements of this dance are a little looser and perhaps more organic in their shapes and contours. Here, integration is neither linear nor one way. There are no stories of refugees cutting and pasting themselves into the frames of living supplied by donor communities. Rather, host communities adapt and adopt ways of living with refugees, perhaps through seeing diversity not as a problem to be overcome, but as an opportunity for living well together. Therefore, refugee integration switches from a sense of hospitality, to one in which reciprocity creates mutually beneficial outcomes. In these terms, integration is liquid rather than solid, pouring itself into the containers of law, policy and cultures of understanding created at the level of the state, the region or the locality in which refugees live.

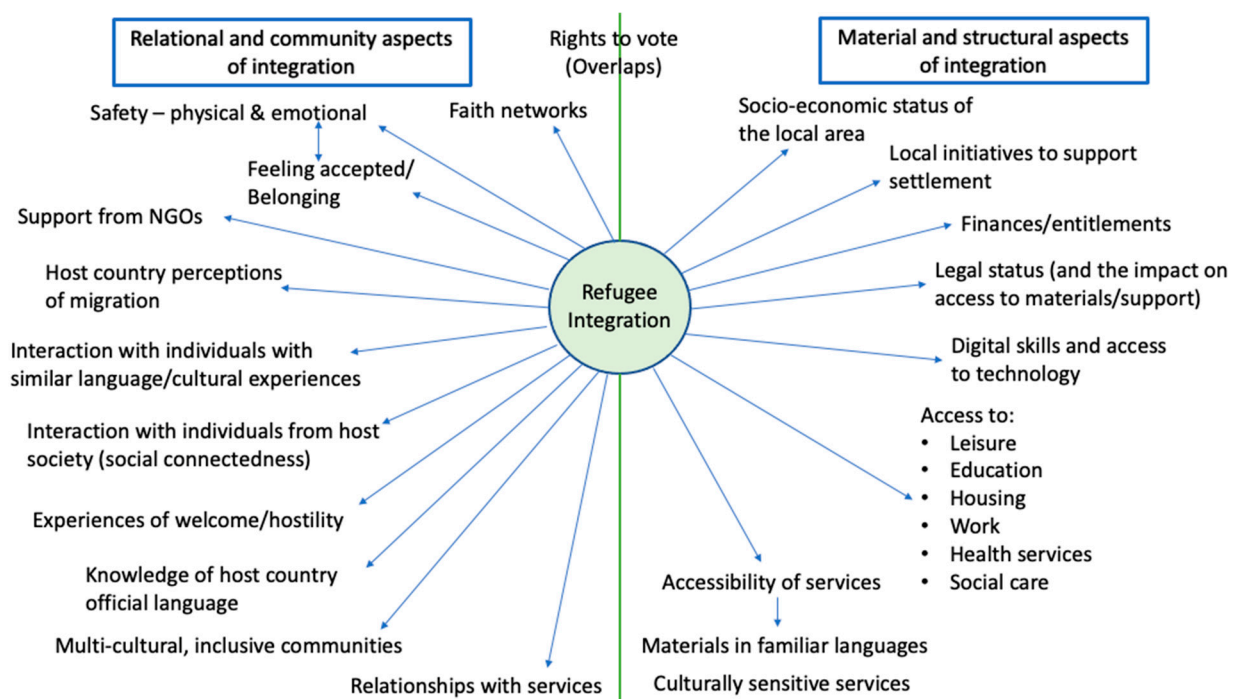


Figure 1. Two aspects of ‘refugee integration’.

Yet, a map is never a territory. Integration is seen as troublesome by some. For example, Rytter (2019), in reference to Denmark, warns against the concept and its slippery nature, with too many people bending its shape to suit their intentions and desires. Over 30 years, asserts Rytter (2019), integration has been ‘loose on the streets’ in Denmark. In that sense, particularly written from the perspective of suspicion or adversarial view, integration is at once a promise and a threat. Overall, defining its many tendrils is presented as trying to catch a cloud with a stick, making it simultaneously (un)desirable and (un)attainable. Also, as Phillimore (2021) shows, the colours, flavours and textures of the term change across contexts and over time. What integration means can become clear, flimsy or opaque, depending on the ways the term is understood and enacted by those on its giving or receiving end. For Ager and Strang (2008), there are questions about how refugee integration is measured, and what thresholds of ‘successful integration’ might look like for refugees and the communities in which they live. Others point to integration as a mutual endeavour. Refugee integration thus becomes ‘multi-dimensional’, ‘multi-directional’, ‘context-specific’ and ‘a shared responsibility’ (Ndofor-Tah et al. 2019, pp. 20–21). It is this mutability and adaptability inherent within the term that amplifies the contextually embedded and relational nature of integration used within the Drawing Together project.

### 3. The Drawing Together Project, Relational Wellbeing and Refugee Integration

The Drawing Together project is a longitudinal collaboration between three countries—Finland, Norway and Scotland. Its focus is on how 53 young refugees establish new lives in those countries. Its participants are aged between 18 to 30 and consist of 26 men and 25 women from 13 countries who, at the beginning of the project, had been settled in their new country between 2 and 17 years.

Within the project, we consider refugee integration as a lived experience within the two aspects delineated in Figure 1 above. Moreover, integration is constantly seen within the project as both a process and an outcome. Contrary to some commentators, we do not regard the term ‘integration’ as dangerous, exploitative or subversive. Nor do we present it sentimentally, as if it was made of unalloyed goodness. We consider that it is neither dramatic nor sudden. We see it as quiet, unremarkable, and made over time by communities that live together within borders that seek to preserve and evolve national identities. Among the range of topics in the project that focus on the experiences of relational wellbeing in the past, present and future, we are guided by the following research questions related to integration in everyday life:

1. What does it mean to become or be Finnish, Norwegian, or Scottish for young refugees and the people whom they value in life?
2. What local or national resources, cultures, and behaviours make integration work, both for young people who are refugees, and hosts who are prepared to receive them?

Answering such questions means that we have developed an understanding of the contours of hospitality and reciprocity as they emerge over time in relation to the material and structural aspects of integration, as well as the relational and community aspects in each of the three countries. Within the terms of Figure 1, these may be familiar as well as new to those who shape refugee integration, including policy and law makers and practitioners. Moreover, the ‘Relational Wellbeing’ (RWB) approach, as postulated by White (2008), White and Jha (2020) and White and Jha (2023), allows us to examine the ‘outer worlds’ of our respondents and how these are informed by their ‘inner worlds’ of feelings and sense making related to integrating into the new country (see Schofield 1998). This approach indicates that integration policies in each country need to be built, not just around the two aspects in Figure 1, but around three interlinked dimensions, as defined by White and Jha (2020) and White and Jha (2023)—their paper in this special edition.

- First, people ‘having enough’ in terms of their material needs, and achieving stability through, for example, the provision of education and employment, housing, health and social care services.
- Second, people ‘being connected’ to others and exercising their relational rights and responsibilities within sustaining communities of protection and care.
- Third, ‘feeling good’ subjectively, not just in relation to others and to resources, but also in relation to their environments and faith systems.

Moreover, relational wellbeing assumes that, in order to create and sustain a balance between these dimensions of living, there are three drivers. One is societal, encompassing social, cultural and economic aspects of life. Another is environmental, lodged within an understanding of ecosystems, climate, and the ‘sacred and moral order’ of life. The third is personal, reflected in the ways people absorb their individual, family and community histories, and sharpen their talents, skills, temperaments and outlooks on life. Within the terms of the RWB approach, these drivers and dimensions together create the dynamic scaffolding for integration. This ebb and flow in people’s lives shapes the ways wellbeing \*(and therefore ill-being) are experienced and turned into stories by the project’s respondents.

#### *Methods and Data Analysis*

At the time of our interviews, the majority of participants were students and/or working in low-paid jobs, as well as living in single households. All reported some form of

permanency in their legal settlement status, but only a minority had been granted formal citizenship. In Scotland, all interviews were conducted in English.

The project's main data were drawn from a series of individual interviews about RWB in three periods in their lives—childhood days, the present, imagined futures. In addition, paired interviews about the present and future were held with people whom our participants chose as 'value people'—that is, those who kept an eye on their wellbeing and supported them. These value people were generally chosen by participants from people they knew locally, although a minority were in other countries. Individual interviews within the three time periods focused on how different relationships impacted the participants' wellbeing, as well as how they saw themselves generating and maintaining wellbeing for the people around them. Paired interviews established accounts of the contexts in which the participants and their 'value person' had met, the ways their relationship had changed over time, and how this affected their wellbeing. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. All data were maintained securely, in line with the ethics protocols of each country and location. The transcript-based data were supplemented in two other ways. First, a diagramming approach was used to construct ecomaps (Ekoh and Sitter 2023); that is, relational diagrams that represent the perceived presence or absence of support in people's lives (Hartman 1995). In the Drawing Together project, these maps were drawn by each respondent in connection with four groups of others: 'family', 'friends/peers', 'formal/professional', and 'community'. Finally, interspersed with the interviews, art workshops were held in each country, focussing on the young people's communications beyond the spoken word in their new languages. Artwork also allowed the young participants to draw images related to a memento or object that was relationally important in their lives. Therefore, the participants created visual art, showcasing their talents through art exhibitions in each country. These art events included short films about the project, with testimonies drawn from the participants about, among other relational considerations, the meanings of integrating into a new country. Data were analysed using Nvivo, taking a deductive approach from the RWB framework, and identifying codes and sub-codes related to the three dimensions described above. Where drivers appeared in the data, these were cross-referenced within each dimension. Ethics approval for the Scotland component was obtained through a University based ethics panel focussed on applied social research.

#### **4. Drawing Together in the Context of Scottish and UK Approaches to Integration**

Now, we describe the ways in which the project findings in Scotland sit within a broader exposition of approaches to refugee integration taken in the UK as a whole, and in Scotland in particular. This sets the stage for our findings. We show the labile and complex ways in which refugee integration is considered and enacted, alongside the ebb and flow of political and legislative factors which allow refugees to be embedded as citizens within Scotland's borders. We suggest, overall, that despite obstacles and difficulties, Scotland exemplifies the ways a country can think about refugee integration as part of a broader promise of relational wellbeing for its citizens.

The political and policy contexts of forced migration are complex and ever-changing everywhere that refugees seek sanctuary (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020). As with many high-income countries, the arrival and resettlement of asylum seekers and refugees within the UK has polarised political debate (Gibney 2004). This polarisation has sharpened since the UK left the European Union (UKICE 2021). Between the polarities of 'yes' and 'no' regarding the presence of forced migrants (and therefore the 'care' and 'control' of asylum seekers and refugees), there continues to be a wide spectrum of public and political opinion. This shapes debates on what matters and what should be done to shelter asylum seekers and to enable refugee integration. To some extent, the spread of opinions is based on the country's own capacity to say yes in ways that sustain its economic and cultural priorities. And the consistent worry, in contexts of economic and political turbulence over time, is about the death of nationhood as tied to customs, histories and traditions, as well as a

nation's vision of its own future as being safe and prosperous. The ebbs and flows of debates about forced migrants fit within wider European shifts in voting patterns, with many countries in 2022 moving to the right in terms of public opinion and their attendant political calibrations of saying 'no' where possible and 'yes' where necessary. In contrast within the context of Scotland, the slightly left-of-centre Scottish National Party (SNP) has chosen to say 'yes' where necessary to welcoming asylum seekers and refugees (Scottish National Party 2022). This is in contrast to England, where since 2017, the Conservative party has made a commitment to reducing net immigration. The National Census found that those who voted for the SNP are generally inclined to take a positive view of the economic consequences of migration; nearly three-fifths (59%) of those who voted for the SNP in 2017 present a score that implies they think that migration is good for Britain's economy, compared to two-fifths of Conservative voters (Curtice and Montagu 2018). Compared with the rest of Britain, there is less opposition to immigration in Scotland; in England and Wales, 75% support reduced immigration, compared to 58% in Scotland. Immigration ranks lower on the public's list of priorities (fourth in Scotland, compared to second in England and Wales).

There are political gains for the SNP-dominated Scottish Government portraying itself as more 'progressive' than the UK Government. Within the precept that managed immigration brings economic and cultural benefits to Scotland, the SNP deploys an image of Scotland being 'held back' by the Westminster establishment. In this context, the Scottish Government has emphasised that Scotland is open, kind and inclusive as a nation (Nicolson and Korkut 2022), building a further narrative in public policy terms of being more caring than the rest of the United Kingdom, particularly England (Davidson and Virdee 2018; McCrone 2017). Therefore, this context frames how Scotland demonstrates a welcoming and relational approach to integration in its articulations of material, structural, and community-based aspects of refugee wellbeing. Beyond the UK Home Office's Indicators of Integration Framework (Ndofor-Tah et al. 2019), the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018–2022 (Scottish Government 2018) is the key policy for refugee integration at a national level. Following an approach that "immigration only works when integration works" (Katwala et al. 2014, p. 20), a key principle of the strategy is that refugees and asylum seekers should be supported to integrate into communities from 'day one' of arrival, rather than once they have been granted permission to permanently remain. The strategy recognises integration as a 'long-term, two-way' process, and defines the benefits of cohesive, diverse communities. However, under constitutional arrangements in the UK, the Scottish Government cannot directly decide matters about asylum and immigration. These remain in the control of the UK Government under Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998. The strategy therefore acknowledges the complex limitations of power that come as part of a devolved nation.

### 5. Relational Wellbeing and Scottish Civil Society

Relationality is also visible within Glasgow in particular, where there is evidence of a strong civil society infrastructure and local community action that support refugee integration. For example, the Scottish Government provides funding to the Scottish Refugee Council, an independent charity focussed on support, advice and advocacy for people in need of refugee protection. The Scottish Refugee Council is integrated within Scottish refugee policy, having worked alongside the Scottish Government, The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), as well as voluntary and community organisations to co-produce Scotland's national refugee integration strategy. This wide network of charitable organisations and community groups makes up a key aspect of the fabric of support for refugees in Scotland. Within the scaffolding provided by these networks, services and resources, the lives of refugees in Scotland are maintained and grown, in what could be described as a sense of 'conviviality' between hosts and newcomers (Valluvan 2016) within what Evans (2020) terms '*the still fraught and bumpy landscape of contemporary Scotland*' (Evans 2020, p. 256). This landscape is manifest in Glasgow's combination of affluence and deprivation (GCPH 2022), the main site of the Scottish arm of the Drawing Together project.

Yet, within this conflux, Glaswegians are attributed attitudes of hospitality, warmth and welcome for immigrants (Hickman et al. 2008).

An important symbolic example of this welcoming came on 13 May 2021, with the resistance to the Kenmure Street immigration raid. When Police Scotland, on behalf of a Home Office order, attempted to remove two Sikh men of Indian origin, the local community organisations quickly mobilised to provide a ‘human wall’ around the immigration van to prevent the police removing the two men (The Guardian 2021). This rapid mobilisation came through organisations that used WhatsApp to bring together as many members of the public as possible to prevent the two men being removed, ultimately being successful in blocking the police, a response that appeared to be about galvanising civic power.

The impact of these locally driven interventions is significant. While the Scottish Government provides an important policy context (and funding), local authorities working alongside other policy actors such as the Third Sector are often viewed as the critical players in supporting integration at a local level. This is due to their practical and direct experience of dealing with the material and structural dimensions and drivers of integration; these include, for example, decisions about the settlement of asylum seekers, the delivery of ESOL classes, managing community relations at the neighbourhood level and, more generally, the provision of statutory services (e.g., health, education) (Galardini et al. 2019).

## 6. Child-Focused Policy and Relational Wellbeing

Outside of their control over asylum and immigration matters, the Scottish Government has responsibility over health, education, accommodation and welfare provisions. Therefore, the support and protection of asylum-seeking and refugee children and young people once they arrive in Scotland becomes the responsibility of the Scottish Government’s childcare laws and policies. The Scottish Government has committed to incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) into Scots law. Already, the UNCRC is the basis of Scotland’s national policy framework approach for supporting children: *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government 2022). GIRFEC is framed by a vision of the child (and their family) at the centre of decision making, so that they can receive the right help, at the right time, from the right people. The aim of GIRFEC is for all children in Scotland, including young refugees (Scottish Government 2022), to grow up feeling safe, loved and respected. In February 2020, Scotland’s Independent Root and Branch Review of Care concluded with the publication of *The Promise* (Independent Care Review 2020). This review calls for a fundamental shift in Scotland’s approach to the experience of care for children—a shift which enables stable, loving, supportive and nurturing relationships to be strong foundations throughout all children’s lives. *The Promise* also recognises Scotland’s responsibility to care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and the difficulties that many of them have shared during the Independent Care Review process (Independent Care Review 2020). *The Promise* calls for unaccompanied children and young people in Scotland to be placed in caring, supportive settings. It states that they must have access to education, health services and other appropriate services as required, and have their religious and cultural contexts treated with respect. In doing so, *The Promise* illuminates the policy landscape for young refugees in Scotland to be one of welcome and hospitality.

Perhaps what is less visible in these policy frameworks is the ways young refugees can feel integrated within the ecosystems of their environments. Similarly, there is little written in *The New Scots Approach*, GIRFEC or *The Promise* in relation to subjective feelings of integration via the religion and faith that guides people. Therefore, to capture these elements of heaven and earth, one has look at other Scottish social policies. In Scotland, these appear within the Scottish Government’s Environment Strategy for Scotland (Scottish Government 2020), and its Equality Outcomes: Religion and Belief Evidence Review (Scottish Government 2013). Each delineates a sense that Scotland is a country with opportunities for integration; not just for refugees, but for all migrants. They also suggest that refugees may become citizens of a country that can promise them safety, belonging



and success. To work in harmonic ways, says Scotland, policies need to coalesce with each other so that integration feels coherent and meaningful over time.

## 7. Drawing Together, Integration and Relational Wellbeing

Now, we move on to what the young people say about day-to-day integration in Scotland within the framework provided by the RWB approach. Here, we give brief examples of 'having enough' and the material dimensions of integration, the experiences of young refugees being connected and being relational within Scotland, and feeling good in terms of the subjective experiences of living out their lives in their new environments.

### 7.1. HAVING ENOUGH, and the Material Dimensions of Integration

One of the participants' firm intentions in the Drawing Together project is to be financially successful, building skills that allow them to become materially secure. This fits with the emphasis in refugee integration policy frameworks in Scotland to establishing the material and environmental pathways to achieve such security and success as citizens. Therefore, many participants discussed having an initial focus on language acquisition and finding resources to support language development. Access to technology, particularly having a mobile phone to navigate, remained enduringly important. They used their mobile phones to navigate around their new environments. Phones also allowed them to chart a way to the future through accessing relevant information. Importantly, their phones held images of the past, including family, music, food, and evoked nostalgia and memories that were not always comfortable. But they were pilots in finding ways forward. A sense of freedom lived in the simple choices that they made in the comfort of a little more safety in their lives. They were not complacent about the racism that they occasionally encountered, but regarded it as relatively uncommon. In instances in which they had encountered it, they were wary, learning to step back from danger rather than step forward.

In terms of gainful employment, the young refugees talked about their own persistence, and the kindness of strangers in helping them find employment. Here is one young person's experience:

*I went straight into the restaurant and asked them for a work. 'Do you guys have any work for me?' He said, 'Come back tomorrow'. And then when I come back the day after, the boss, the owner was there. And I said to him, 'I'm looking for work. The dishwasher was leaving. They said to me, 'We have you a dishwasher to start with, do you want it?' It was a hard job, I was doing it, I was doing it for two months . . . I was working very hard, they look at what I was doing, I was coming on time, everything. So, he give me the chance, I explained to him all my situation, my English is not good enough, my first time in this country, I don't have work experience. Even I say this, he give me the opportunity, he say, 'Not a problem, everyone has their situation'*

Finding helpers was not just about their social networks. It also meant using welfare services to find housing, and education as a means of achieving success. Guides such as social workers and teachers became important people. But foster carers also did small things well. For example, in finding a dentist, one participant stated the following:

*And then she was trying always to make me happy. I remember my teeth was like a rabbit, like you know, was quite a bit out, and then when I laugh with her, I was hiding my teeth like this. Then she say to me, "Why you hiding your teeth because they are so beautiful, why are you hiding your teeth?" Because I said to her, I'm not comfortable when I laugh because my teeth is quite out, and when I laugh, I feel like I have rabbit teeth . . . And then she'd say to me, "Let's go to the dentist to do a brace."*

### 7.2. BEING CONNECTED and Being Relational

Young people often talked of people who champion them and are 'family-like' companions. These relationships reached in toward the circle of other young refugees and were

often reciprocal, and they also reached out to the communities in which they live. As noted by a college teacher for one of the participants:

*The word belonging, for me, is crucial . . . because I think what teachers on this programme always try to create, is this sense of connection, not just between the teacher and the young person[who is a refugee], but between the young people and each other . . . The connection that they can find with each other is something that can sustain them when they're not in the classroom, when they're not in college, when things have moved on in their life. To make those relationships with each other and to see how they can support each other . . . Because my sense is that very often young people feel that everything is being done to them and for them, whereas when they are able to support each other, they're doing it for each other. They're bringing something. They're offering something . . .*

Therefore, for many of the participants, these wider relations were often about giving or receiving assistance. Overall, the small and wider networks of support and obligation were there to steady them and carry them forward. As a project, we focussed on local networks first. As the project concludes, we will explore their relationships within wider networks—for example, in relation to social, political and cultural identities, or their relationships with the state, law, politics and welfare. We have glimpses of the larger picture. Within the smaller notes about connectedness, examples have emerged of football teams, language teachers, local guides explaining the rules of living, and people who understand the value of mutual respect and dignity. Looking trans-nationally, young refugees also showed their reliance on wider kin networks, far away but close to them. Equally, they talked about establishing a rhythm and pattern of life with others that is predictable and safe. For some young people, their connections were with faith communities. For them, finding a suitable mosque or a church appears to bridge the present and past, and also the future.

*It means for me church, when I go church, so I can understand singing and if I want to be quiet, so I can be quiet, I can read bible, to teach people and to pray. Yeah, that's why its important for me to go church, to understand deep.*

As we drew young people's lives over time using ecomaps, we saw evidence of the ways their social networks contracted and expanded, and the dynamics they contained. Some relationships from the homeland withered, and others remained vibrant, at least in their mind's eye. Mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers all made cameo appearances within the remembered past as part of the memories of relational wellbeing. New relationships, with peers, teachers, social workers and foster families, showed the extent to which integration remained a spellbinding importance. The project's further analysis will focus on the pulse of social networks, not just across nations, but also how wellbeing is maintained or evolves within contexts of hospitality and reciprocity. Our evidence for now also shows the ways integration was impacted by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants spoke about loneliness, and the chaos and mess created by withdrawing from public living, as well as the opportunities to maintain friendships.

*If you ask a bird in a cage, "How do you feel?", what would the bird tell you? You've got freedom outside but you're in the cage, you cannot go outside [because of Covid], . . . I just look out of my window because there is a nice park out of my window, I can see the freedom outside, I can't use that freedom because of this COVID19 which is separating myself from my outside community*

*But we stay on the positive side and encourage each other, being part of each other life, to feel that way, and to share that loneliness together, so not being able to face-to-face talk.*

### 7.3. FEELING GOOD and the Subjective Aspects of Integration

A key aspect of integration for some of the participants was endurance—the stubborn will to make it through to a new life. Feeling good also meant being receptive to not feeling good. Disintegration and integration lived together for them, the same as many migrants

seeking new roots. There were no short cuts, just the realisation that they had to be bigger than their barriers. Similarly, feeling good was connected to community. As one young person said about football: *It brightens every cell in my body*. Sometimes, when saturated with stress, having access to a gym was necessary, and contact sports like boxing came as a relief. In terms of outlooks and characteristics, young refugees' faith in themselves appeared important, just having access to nature and the open environment was also important. Happiness was a matter of practice before it became spontaneous. Being kind to people and animals, being curious about learning, becoming skilled at a job, and learning a new language all add to a sense of achievement and progress. Overall, arriving in a new country and being accepted by strangers was for some a high point of living peacefully:

*[X country] people they are humble . . . In [this city] in the middle of the night I can walk by myself, no one can ask me, and [] people everywhere they say, "Hi mate," make you feel like safety ... In my country whenever you see someone you have to say salaam alaykum. Like here in [this country] you say hi, it's the same as salaam alaykum. People here are good . . .*

The two images below (Figure 2) were created by a young refugee in one of the art workshops in Scotland. The first is a gift he received from a teacher, so that he could begin to decorate his room. This was a valued object from his new life. He said the following:



**Figure 2.** Object and Artwork.

*Yeah, I like this picture, it reminds me of when I first come to this country. When I came here it was so strange this country and I received from my teacher. So, she helped me a lot and the way I am here, and I am able here to learn from people and how I learn from society. I think that it represents her, how she likes helping people to encourage them to go to community, to people, get on well with them, to get to know them, to find yourself, be independent, to be freedom. Just makes you stronger. And every time I look at this picture, it makes me very stronger and makes me very happy.*

From this gift from the teacher, the above artwork was made. It shows the complexity of striving towards integration, in terms of hopefulness and joy, as well as sadness and barriers. The confusion of the past is drawn like wire wool in the bottom right of the picture. The doves are still flying. The young person has colour. In the top left, he sees himself as a tree providing shelter for others. He says the following:

*So, like at the beginning I didn't know what I'm going to be, so I imagined myself and saw my future by these people, so I can help people in the future, I can give them something, hope . . .*

This hope was expressed in a final art workshop in March 2022 (Figure 3). We began by asking participants to gather around a large table covered with a large map of the world. After identifying their own countries, they found Ukraine. From Ukraine, they built corridors of safety to other countries using toy bricks as vehicles. They made bridges and

buildings. They worked silently in solidarity, evoked not only by their own memories, but in sympathy with the people of Ukraine. They said that they were just people helping other people. Together, they hoped for calm.



Figure 3. Art workshops and solidarity.

## 8. Conclusions

For now, based on these findings from the Drawing Together project in Scotland, we can say that, as a personal experience, integration for young refugees continues to be complex and fragile. Their stories appeared to be bigger than the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of the material aspects of integration. The analysis also identifies the ‘who’—that is, the young person’s own biographical likeness with the people around them in their new countries. The young people sometimes discussed the ‘why’ of being away from their lands of birth, within the stories they told about their life before leaving. They talked of the ‘where’ of integration, encompassing the ecology of living. They located themselves within the constructed and natural environments of their new countries, and how these limited or showed themselves as places of multiple belongings. In linking the stories of their childhood with their present circumstances and future dreams and hopes, they provided a sense of ‘when’, so that time did not appear to move in a straight line. Rather, it constantly unfolded around them. Thus, overall, integration as ‘multiple belongings’ is not only about their place in the world, but also about travelling in time. We can also tentatively show that the young refugees in the Drawing Together project in Scotland were intent on giving something back to the country that had accepted them. Within the terms of Scotland’s refugee integration policy frameworks, integration was built step by step, layer by layer, into a scaffolding that young refugees used to grow their lives organically. As part of that re-growth, reciprocity was as important as hospitality. Here, accepting their rights and responsibilities as a new citizen was balanced with taking and offering opportunities for their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. The promise was that integration could be a win–win. We end with a quote from one of our participants walking in a park and reflecting on the laws of natural order that generate integration across ages:

*Some of the trees are very old and broken  
they lean on other trees and they hold on  
for me it’s absolutely amazing,  
it’s not just human being that can help each other,  
look at nature, the trees are encouraging, holding each other’s weight  
It’s as if they were saying  
“Yes, don’t worry, I’m holding you, we’re not finished here”*

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