



# Forced Migration: A Relational Wellbeing Approach

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## 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 Ni 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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