




Article

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

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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.

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



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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 Jogia 2022). Photographs and photo-elicitation have been used in research to explore how refugees experience their world (Burles 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 (Burles 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.

The Object	How the Object Is Connected to an Important Person
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.

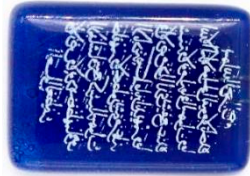
5.3. Connection during Separation

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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