Article

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

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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.

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.[1]

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[2] 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'[3] 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[4]) 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.[5]

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 interlinked 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.[6] 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.[7] 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

1 This of course may also reflect a cultural practice of referring to people by kin terms.
2 In Scotland, host family carers are those recruited specifically to become carers for unaccompanied children.
3 '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.
4 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.
5 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.
6 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.
7 We thank Sarah C. White for this suggestion.

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