



Article

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

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

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



Citation: Lønning, Moa Nyamwathi. 2024. After Being Granted or Refused Asylum in Norway: Relational Migration Journeys among Afghan Unaccompanied Young Men. *Social Sciences* 13: 45. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13010045>

Academic Editors: Ravi K. S. Kohli, Marte Knag Fylkesnes, Mervi Kaukko and Sarah C. White

Received: 13 September 2023

Revised: 30 December 2023

Accepted: 4 January 2024

Published: 10 January 2024



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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

2. Background and Methods

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Migration Journeys and Relationality

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3. Idealised and Longed for Family and Care

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Conclusions

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

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

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

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

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: My PhD research is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. In addition, my postdoctoral research is approved by INN University's Research Ethics Committee (protocol code 21/01894 and date of approval 1 April 2022).

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

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

Acknowledgments: I extend my deepest thanks to the young people who shared their experiences and those who supported the research as gatekeepers. I am also grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for constructive comments on earlier versions of this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

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

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