Article

An Ethnographic Perspective of Well-Being, Salutogenesis and Meaning Making among Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Gambia and the United Kingdom

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Abstract: Research on refugees and asylum seekers largely focuses on the negative impacts that forced migration has on well-being. Though most individuals do not experience poor long-term mental health because of forced migration, less attention has been given to what factors promote positive well-being. Using an ethnographic approach, I elucidate how the concept of salutogenesis can be applied to African refugees and asylum seekers living in the greater Serrekunda area of the Gambia and in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the United Kingdom. Specifically, I explore what resources impact on the sense of coherence construct and its three components—comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness—and how these are embedded in everyday discussions and understandings. In total, I spent twenty months conducting ethnographic fieldwork between the two sites and conducted forty individual interviews. Amongst my interlocutors, the three most common resources that people spoke positively about, particularly as it relates to meaning making, are work, education and religion. Further research in this area is crucial in order to identify, promote and strengthen those factors facilitating positive well-being amongst those who have been forcibly displaced.

Keywords: forced migration; anthropology; migration; resilience; coping; qualitative

1. Introduction

Much of the research looking at the health and well-being of refugees and asylum seekers tends to be pathological in nature—that is, it focuses on the negative effects and experiences that forced migration can have on people and communities. One of the dominant themes in the literature on refugees and mental health is that those who have undergone this experience must necessarily be 'damaged' or 'traumatised' (Tribe 2002, p. 245). Refugees are 'habitually portrayed as if they are without agency, like corks bobbing along on the surface of an unstoppable wave of displacement' (Gatrell 2013, p. 9). Malkki critiques much of the literature on refugees, claiming it 'locates "the problem" not first in the political oppression or violence that produces massive territorial displacements of people, but within the bodies and minds of people classified as refugees' (Malkki 1995, p. 8). Because of this, many tend to pathologise the very experience of becoming a refugee.

This position is certainly understandable, especially considering the frequently violent and abrupt upheaval many have experienced to their daily lives and social routines. While refugees and asylum seekers have certainly encountered hardships before, during and after flight, a focus on these experiences misses other aspects of experience. This focus on the negative neglects areas of strength and resilience. A common yet largely unexpected finding is that most people do not suffer lasting and adverse consequences as the result of a traumatic event. In fact, being resilient is seen as 'more ordinary than extraordinary' and other factors are far more detrimental to one's well-being than a traumatic event, such as social and economic disruptions (Barber and Doty 2013, p. 237). Even those exposed to continuous traumatic situations—such as those living in the conflict area in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—do not develop post-traumatic stress disorder

(PTSD), major depression or any other psychopathology (Pham et al. 2010). Studies suggest that four out five refugees do not suffer from long-term mental health or stress effects (Asaam 2015), making a focus on what facilitates positive resettlement all the more important for future refugee programs.

1.1. Well-Being in Refugee Studies

Research on migrants (especially refugees and asylum seekers) and well-being—whether that be in psychology, sociology, economics or anthropology—remains underdeveloped. Research in this area is increasing, though it has yet to make a meaningful impact on forced migration studies beyond a handful of cases. In fact, Jayawickreme and Blackie (2016, p. 59) sum up the literature on refugees by stating that 'there is little insight on how most refugees continue to function adaptively in the wake of extreme situations, and on which resources and strengths facilitate such functioning, mainly because of the focus on concepts of loss, separation, stress, and trauma, which emphasizes what is lacking for refugees to experience well-being.' Others echo this stance and highlight the need for more qualitative evidence on resilience amongst those forcibly displaced (e.g., Siriwardhana et al. 2014). While any qualitative studies will contribute to this underdeveloped area, they note the need for those set in resource-poor settings. This research fits into both of these areas (a qualitative study on well-being and in a resource-poor setting) and seeks to help fill these current gaps. To do so, the concept of salutogenesis is used to elucidate how social scientists, particularly those working in the field of migration and forced migration, can apply a more positive lens to their work with this group of people.

1.2. Salutogenesis

The concept of salutogenesis—literally, the origins of health—was initially put forth by Aaron Antonovsky (1979). He considered that everyone, at all times, is surrounded by stressors. These stressors impact upon one's ability to remain well and subsequently render a majority of the population at the lower end of health. He saw health and illness not as dichotomies, but rather as opposing classifications at either end of a continuum. On one end of the continuum was 'ease' and on the other 'dis-ease'. To explain how one moved up or down the scale, he employed the use of a concept called the sense of coherence (SOC). He defines the sense of coherence as a 'generalised orientation toward the world which perceives it, on a continuum, as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful' (Antonovsky 1996, p. 15). The SOC is informed by life experiences; how one perceives, or attaches meaning to, these life experiences are determined by the type and strength of one's generalised resistance resources, or GRRs. These generalised resistance resources are defined as 'any characteristic of the person, the group, or the environment that can facilitate effective tension management' (Antonovsky 1979, p. 99). Having a strong SOC means a person can identify and use the resources available both within themselves and their environment, thus evaluating a particular stimulus as neutral (Vaandrager and Koelen 2013; Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2019). Antonovsky noted that perhaps some of the most important GRRs include having money or being literate.

Antonovsky posited that the sense of coherence was a cross-cultural construct. Thus far, it has been translated into nearly fifty languages and been used in hundreds of studies (Bauer et al. 2020). Yet despite this popularity of the concept in the literature, much of the research has been quantitative and largely focused on the Orientation to Life Questionnaire scale developed to study the SOC. To date, few qualitative researchers have taken up the call by Antonovsky—and others—to engage qualitatively with this construct.

Some notable exceptions do exist on the salutogenic theory and its core component, meaning. For instance, a study conducted by Borwick et al. (2013) used a narrative approach, combined with the salutogenic theory, to explore themes of well-being and strength among Burmese refugees in Australia. A set of existential values was key for their group of participants; among these were factors that create a valuable, meaningful life worth living (Borwick et al. 2013). This process of meaning making is crucial, particularly to

refugees who may undergo a series of experiences that seem in complete discordance with the world they knew before. Thus far, however, anthropologists have yet to meaningfully engage with the salutogenic model in general or the sense of coherence in particular, despite its easy facilitation into the discipline.

This article draws upon participant's discussions about what makes life valuable, meaningful and worth living—essentially, where they find their sense of purpose in life. This article focuses heavily on ethnography to situate interlocutors within their personal stories and demonstrate how they talk about their sense of purpose and make sense of their lives and experiences. This is largely done through a focus on narratives. King et al. (2006, p. 193) posit that 'narratives have been portrayed as instantiations of meaning making' as they can provide insight into how meaning is created from experiences. Similarly, Sommer and Baumeister (1998, p. 145) remark that 'life meaning is often represented and related in story form,' lending itself readily to studies that are qualitative in nature. It is for these reasons that the focus is on the stories people told about how they came to make sense of their lives and where they located these driving forces in their narratives.

1.3. Refugees and Asylum Seekers

It is important here to briefly discuss the differences in who constitutes a refugee and asylum seeker between the UK and the Gambia. The United Nations defined refugees in their 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. In this convention, refugees have to have a well-founded fear of persecution based on certain characteristics, such as race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion and is outside of their country of nationality (UN General Assembly 1951). This definition is the one that the UK ascribes to. In the following examples, all of those based in the UK were asylum seekers and thus had applied to be recognised as refugees.

This narrow definition was seen as inadequate to represent the flows of forced migration on the African continent. Therefore, the Organisation for Africa Unity expanded their definition in the 1969 Convention on the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa to also include

> every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality. (Organization of African Unity OAU, p. 3)

Because of this much broader definition, entire groups of people are accepted as prima facie refugees, forgoing the individual assessment heralded by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). For the Gambia, this means that asylum seekers (i.e., those who have submitted a refugee claim) are largely non-existent and thus the potential stressor of submitting an asylum claim was not something they had experienced.

A further issue to note relates to what is called a protracted refugee situation. Though these situations have only been defined by the UNHCR since 2009 (Milner and Loescher 2011), they have generally been understood to be a situation in which refugees have been living in exile for more than five years without the immediate prospect of finding a 'durable solution' to their plight (Crisp 2003). 'Durable solutions' refer to voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement. Voluntary repatriation is seen as the most viable solution in Africa. Resettlement remains at the whim of Western countries while local integration is rejected due to the perceived burden on host countries as well as the perceived threat to security (Crisp 2003, p. 4).

These protracted refugee situations remain a serious concern for the well-being of refugees. Milner and Loescher (2011, p. 3) note that nearly two-thirds of the world's refugees are living in what can be called a protracted situation, with the average length of stay in these 'states of virtual limbo' reaching twenty years. Though more refugees are living in urban situations than camp situations, much more is known about the camp situations, highlighting the largely neglected aspect of this already vulnerable group of

people. All of those in this study were urban refugees, and of these, most of them (in both the Gambia and in the UK) lived in a protracted refugee situation. It is important to note this because it has direct implications both for resources available to people and to the strength of their SOC. Those interviewed were familiar with their environment and with sources of social, financial and emotional support. The resources available to them, coupled with their ability to adapt the stressors in their environment, indicates that they should not necessarily be compared to those refugees who have just fled their country and situation. Furthermore, studies comparing those who have recently fled with those who have been in their situation for a year or longer report that recent arrivals score lower on the SOC scale as their lives are still mired in insecurity and uncertain futures (Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2019, p. 8). Those in this study were not experiencing these same effects on their SOC.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design

This study was entirely qualitative. Through a mixture of ethnographic methods, I employed participant observation and semi-structured interviews to understand the daily lives of refugees and asylum seekers and to listen to their stories, both 'the good and the bad'.

2.2. Setting and Data Collection

Fieldwork took place in two discrete phases. I spent twelve months in the UK between September 2014 and September 2015, and a further eight months in the small West African country of the Gambia between May 2015 and April 2016, which consisted of a pilot study in May 2015, with formal fieldwork commencing in October 2016.

During my fieldwork, I worked closely with a local organisation based in each country. In the UK, fieldwork took place at a charity called the West End Refugee Service (WERS) based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the North East of England. In the Gambia, I worked with UNHCR's implementing partner, the Gambia Food and Nutrition Association (GAFNA), which was based in the wider Serrekunda area of Bakau. Both organisations facilitated my introduction to the local refugee community they supported through their activities.

The first several months were devoted to participant observation in which I became accustomed to the country, organisation and those supported by the organisation. While I spoke with many individuals in the context of my participant observation, more formal semi-structured interviews took place with twenty individuals in each country, bringing the total number of interviews to forty. Multiple informal meetings with potential participants occurred before they were invited to participate in an interview. This was to build rapport and also to underscore my position as an independent researcher. This approach was especially important in the Gambia as I was often initially confused with the resettlement officer from UNHCR's regional office in Dakar, Senegal. Delaying the interview ensured that no participants agreed to participate in the hopes it would strengthen their resettlement chances.

Interviews ranged from thirty minutes to three hours long. Verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview due to variable literacy levels. All were conducted in English as it is the official language of both the UK and the Gambia. While this certainly has its limitations, it did provide more opportunities to engage with a wider variety of individuals from a multitude of backgrounds and countries. While neither Newcastle-upon-Tyne nor the greater Serrekunda area in the Gambia represent the 'super-diversity' as Vertovec (2007) initially conceived it, both cities certainly contained those from a wide range of cultural, political, socioeconomic, educational and religious backgrounds. Participants came from fourteen different countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. By not limiting this research to one particular nationality or ethnic group, I was able to better understand how places like WERS (West End Refugee Service) and GAFNA (Gambia Food and Nutrition Association) supported a range of forced migrants and, furthermore, how

individuals accessing these services engaged with others both from similar and different backgrounds.

2.3. Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and each interviewee was given a pseudonym. Topics discussed were then coded and organised into themes and subthemes. This thematic analysis represented an iterative and ongoing process throughout this study (Guest et al. 2012).

2.4. Ethics

This study gained ethical approval through the ethical review process in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Edinburgh.

3. Results

A salutogenic approach 'acknowledge[s] the active role of people in creating health, their crucial role in bringing about change, and that health arises from interplay between people and their context' (Mittlemark et al. 2017, p. 52). Three main sources of GRRs relating to salutogenesis were identified through this research. These are, consequently, some of the most salient themes related to this concept across different disciplines. The individuals described in this article engaged with these domains—work, education and religion—in such a way that they represented positive resources that facilitated their movement toward 'ease' on the ease/dis-ease continuum. Specific examples, drawn from five of participants (three in the Gambia and two in the UK), are used below to elucidate how these GRRs manifested and were spoken about in the context of a life story.

3.1. Work and a Sense of Purpose

Perhaps the most obvious example of where people find meaning is through work. Indeed, if one is searching for a way to make life manageable (i.e., have the resources at one's disposal in order to meet demands), then this is certainly a logical place to start. This link between work and meaning is so strong that Derek Summerfield's commentary on Tribe (2002, p. 248) asserts, 'The one surely indisputable fact in the literature of involuntary migration is that people do well, or not, as a function of their capacity to rebuild social capital and meaningful ways of life. Work is central to this.' This statement is corroborated by research on this topic. For instance, Ying et al. (1997) found that employment was a key generalised resistance resource—therefore central in maintaining a high sense of coherence—for Southeast Asian refugees resettled in the US. Employment as a generalised resistance resource acted both to increase understanding of the host culture as well as to provide a financial resource (Ying et al. 1997). Research suggests that though work increases one's utility and consumption potential, most people attach meaning to work that exceeds its monetary usefulness (Krause 2015). Additionally, it may be seen as an essential social norm, especially for those of working age, and can have profound effects on one's identity beyond its economic implications.

Refugees in the Gambia are entitled to the same benefits as citizens, including accessing paid employment. The same is true for refugees in the UK, though asylum seekers are largely unable to access paid employment. During my fieldwork, most of my interlocutors were unemployed as they lacked a formal contract with an employer. Some, however, did work in the informal economy (in the Gambia) or engaged in voluntary work (the UK). I considered all of these as work in this article. While much research on the benefits of an adequate and stable income exists (e.g., Volanen et al. 2004; Pham et al. 2010; Bauer and Jenny 2013), it was largely irrelevant for the participants in this study as a whole. Therefore, this aspect of employment will not be explored as attention on the meaning and purpose it could, and often did, provide is more appropriate.

3.1.1. Business Opportunities in the Gambia

One of the most highly educated men I met in the Gambia was both a refugee and unemployed. William, a man in his fifties, had previously attended the University of Dakar to study law before he fled the country. He claimed with a laugh that he came to the Gambia 'without any level, without any skills out(side) of law.' Due to heavy fees for foreigners to practice law and the fact that he entered the country in 1998, a time when refugees from the Casamance region were unrecognised as such, he found his degree useless. Though he mocked himself for a lack of what he saw as more practical skills to help him in his new environment, he was not content to merely sit around idly.

In the Gambia, William dabbled in the informal economy to make ends meet. At first, he mainly collected firewood from 'the bush' to sell in town as this is what most people use for cooking. The main source of firewood for the greater Serrekunda/Banjul area was found along the southern border with Senegal—the Casamance region. '*I started with this charcoal, selling this thing. But after, everything stop because they used to get the wood and material from the Casamance bush. And after, when the government stop this thing, it become very difficult to get.*' The government of the Gambia, pressured by Senegal, clamped down on the firewood business and made it illegal to sell wood chopped across the border, thus effectively ending this option.

Following this unsuccessful venture, William turned to buying and reselling clothes for small sums. Most of his family's income came from the sale of these clothes and from the small sums his wife collected by selling groundnuts. His wife, Binta, was very keen to start a salon business but the start-up costs proved to be too much. Nevertheless, she used her hairdressing skills whenever she could. Somehow, between these small and sporadic jobs, they supported not only their three daughters, but also the wife's younger sister and brother who lived with them. This family shared a small, two-room concrete house—the cheapest accommodation in the greater Serrekunda area according to GAFNA statistics. They had no electricity or running water. Food was also a challenge, and I noticed Binta collecting leftovers after one GAFNA workshop. The family had few other viable avenues of income.

These largely unsuccessful business ventures increased his feelings of stress. '*It's why, sometimes, even at night, I just lie but I couldn't sleep because my mind is not . . . stable. Confused,*' he admitted. However, the unease that kept him awake had been transformed. '*Now I don't have time*' he explained. This was due to a new business he was keen to launch with the support of GAFNA and UNHCR. This business would not only benefit his family, but also potentially that of several hundred urban refugees residing in the greater Serrekunda area.

William's business idea involved a fishing boat. Specifically, he envisaged a refugee-manned fishing boat that would trawl the coast of the Gambia. After the fish were caught, vans would drive the fish to the waiting refugee women who would dry some of the fish and take both the fresh and dried fish to the market to be sold. All refugees would put money into this venture. The women would pay to sell the fish, keeping the profits they made for themselves, while the money they paid for the fish would go to the fishing crew and back into the venture to ensure the upkeep of the boat and nets as well as paying for other essentials such as petrol. He even proposed to use the money to ensure everyone in this community had enough rice to eat. Those who would be active in this venture, particularly the sellers, would be those identified as the most 'vulnerable' refugees in the community and for whom UNHCR was not in a position to help further. William used his extensive network in the Senegalese refugee community to gather nearly four hundred signatures of urban refugees who supported this venture and would like to be a part of it. Embolden by this initial interest, he applied for a livelihood grant through UNHCR to turn this dream into a reality.

William saw his fishing venture as a way to finally pull his family and much of his social network out of poverty. While he admitted that he had little experience in fishing—beyond helping family members during school holidays as a child—he boasted that he had the 'level' required to 'manage the system'. He was, after all, the one who completed

the application and applied for the funds. This corroborates research on the psychosocial benefits of work. In particular, personal satisfaction from work is associated with a stronger SOC, and this satisfaction comes from opportunities to use one's skills and knowledge, much like William was doing (Volanen et al. 2004).

This dream gave him a sense of meaning in his life. Though the initial proposal had been scaled down somewhat, he was undeterred in his pursuit. '*Okay, they accept me now, the thing is approved. But he [the person involved in approving the project] changed some thing in the system, that why the thing didn't come out like I wanted, but I feel happy. It's for the first time that we have this type of help.*' It seemed like he had found a way to regain what he felt was a lost sense of confidence and capability. '*It is what makes me happy,*' he admitted with a laugh. His prediction rang out in the space between us: '*I think, by God's grace, by the time you are back, you find something very soon!*' This was not only a much-needed source of income for his family, but could provide much-needed income for the wider displaced Senegalese community, many of whom he felt fell into the 'most vulnerable' category as recognised by GAFNA and UNHCR. By drawing upon his resources to improve not only his circumstance but those around him, William can be described as a 'positive deviant' (Mittlemark et al. 2017). In the official definition, it is recognised that 'in every community or organization, there are a few individuals or groups whose uncommon but successful behaviors and strategies have enabled them to find better solutions to problems than their neighbors who face the same challenges and barriers and have access to the same resources.' (The Positive Deviance Initiative 2010). Certainly anyone could have developed a business proposal, and many I met were educated to secondary and tertiary level and had strong social networks, yet it was William who harnessed these resources to benefit himself and his community. Positive deviants such as William are actively engaged in their move to the 'ease' side of the salutogenic continuum (Mittlemark et al. 2017) and, through his business proposal, he sought to bring others to the same side. This demonstrates not only William's initially strong SOC, but, by creating an opportunity for even more meaning-making, he was further strengthening it. Indeed, Steger et al. (2013, p. 173) remark that 'meaning is most fully achieved when people actively engage in pursuits that transcend their own immediate interests.' This self-transcendence is 'a defining feature of purpose in life', indicating that these roles provided a way for him to recognise and practice his character strengths (Steger et al. 2013, p. 173). In this way, this work represented a resource that would provide him with meaning—a core component of the SOC—and improve his overall well-being in a multitude of ways.

3.1.2. Voluntary Work in the UK

There is a small but growing body of anthropological research that examines how asylum seekers, particularly in the UK, structure their time spent 'waiting' for either a positive decision, more evidence for a fresh claim or deportation. Rotter (2016) remarks that this period of stereotypical idleness can in fact be quite active and meaningful. During this period of waiting, her informants 'socialised, studied, shopped, undertook domestic work, prayed, gathered information about the asylum process, and supported and elicited support from peers' (Rotter 2016, p. 93). Several of her informants and my own turned to regular voluntary work. This work became so important to their lives that many simply filled up their days with different voluntary positions. It provided their days with a sense of purpose and meaning, as well as produced a sense of progress in time (Rotter 2016, p. 93) even if it did not provide financial security. During fieldwork in the UK (2014–2015), asylum seekers were entitled to a small weekly sum of £36.59 per week (UK Government 2018). As refused asylum seekers were entitled to nothing from the government, those with whom I spoke were receiving £15 a week from the WERS hardship fund.

One of my informants, Abigail, spent time engaging in voluntary work. She was a single mother of two in her late thirties, having fled her home country of Nigeria with her children to join her sister in the UK. Her asylum claim had been refused and she was facing threats of deportation from the government. Nevertheless, she was seeking out

opportunities that provided her with a sense of purpose and meaning. Though she devoted herself to her children, a counsellor '*suggested I get myself busy doing things I love doing. I was thinking too much*.' This 'thinking too much' was causing feelings of depression. By encouraging her to seek out other forms of engagement, her counsellor was reiterating much of what is echoed in the literature on well-being: that 'employment provides time structure, social contact, collective effort and purpose, social identity, and regular activity' (Vaandrager and Koelen 2013, p. 79). Abigail turned to a familiar activity that kept her busy doing what she enjoyed: working in a clothes store as a volunteer.

In the clothes store at WERS, items were donated and completely free for asylum seekers and refugees. Shoppers checked in with counter staff to have their chosen items counted and logged, so as to ensure there was enough stock for everyone who needed it. Abigail was one of the staff, responsible for checking people out as well as choosing what items to pull out of their garage warehouse and restock when necessary. She found this work to be crucial to her well-being. '*This voluntary work really makes me feel . . . I go back home fulfilled because I've done something I love doing,*' she admitted with a shy smile. She spoke of her life in her home country and how she ran her own clothing business. She travelled extensively to buy nice fabrics, not just around Africa but even going as far as Dubai. Being active in a clothing store, even if it was vastly different from the one she owned before, still provided her enough similarity to lend a sense of meaning to her life. Her past and present were not—for the moment at least—completely ruptured, and it was this voluntary job that allowed her to use her skills in an environment that was comfortable to her. She was using her previous knowledge and skills, contributing to a stronger SOC, and she was participating in 'socially valued decision-making' (Liukkonen 2012, p. 28). Engaging in this decision making—what stock to put out, how to arrange the goods, making suggestions to shoppers—turned this voluntary position into a positive experience. This job, then, allowed her to feel some sense of continuity with her pre-migration life (the 'comprehensibility' component of the sense of coherence) as well as acted as a generalised resistance resource by providing her with a social network of other staff members who were also asylum seekers or refugees. Furthermore, it allowed her to contribute to the community. '*Being able to be of help to people by giving back to society . . . this gives me a sense of fulfilment,*' she stated. Contributing to the community, whether it is time or resources, has been found in other studies to provide meaning and increase well-being (see for example Grouden and Jose 2015).

Both William and Abigail found work meaningful outside of its ability to provide economic support. While this aspect would undoubtedly have had positive impacts in their lives (see, for example, Graham 2009 or Vaandrager and Koelen 2013), it was not their current reality. Yet, despite this, employment does contribute to meaning and thus a stronger SOC. They both felt that their work mattered and that it had positive impacts not only on them and their families but on others around them (Vaandrager and Koelen 2013). It also strengthened social relations and could be said to create a stronger sense of belonging (Gagnon and Vaandrager 2012). Both were able to identify themselves as a part of the refugee community and demonstrate their usefulness to this community through their work, which often has a powerful emotional and motivational impact (Gagnon and Vaandrager 2012).

3.2. Better than Silver and Gold

As the previous example of William highlighted, it was not necessarily education itself which allowed him to find a meaning and purpose in his life. Similarly, Borwick et al. (2013) note that amongst their informants, education is often associated with a secure and stable future through its link with employment. Education, for their informants and for William, merely gave them the tools to seek out jobs and businesses through which they were able to find a sense of meaning. It is clear, in this sense then, that education acted as one of Antonovsky's generalised resistance resources through which coping and meaning were made possible. Others, however, found purpose through education itself, not solely through to its link with employment. In the literature, education has been called 'a critical

resource' ([Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2017](), p. 134) while others note that that an individual's educational level is an important factor in building a strong SOC ([Joseph and Sagy 2017](), p. 86). Education in itself can have a profound effect on one's perception of the world as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. Two examples are discussed below.

3.2.1. Education in the Gambia

In the Gambia, education opportunities were not as abundant as in the UK. While they were not non-existent, for most refugees attending university in the Gambia was not possible. Tuition was virtually unaffordable for most of the population. Though several people I spoke to had begun studies in their home countries, these were universally abandoned. It was not practical to continue with a university education given the large sums of money involved. Many focused instead on gaining certificates, diplomas or experience through apprenticeships. While the government did not support refugees to take these courses, GAFNA did receive funds through UNHCR to help fund these education and training opportunities.

During my first day at GAFNA, I met with a senior staff member. He outlined, among other things, the role that GAFNA played in education. At the time, they were mainly dedicated to supporting children to attend primary and secondary school by helping with school fees and books. A few individuals were supported in tertiary education in subjects such as computer skills, accounting, managerial skills and conflict resolution. '*Learning is better than silver and gold,*' he confided in me with a proud grin. He rifled around in a filing cabinet and came out with a stack of papers. He handed them to me and explained that these were the applications they had received for educational assistance. It was a simple form, photocopied with a picture of the beneficiary in the top right-hand corner. Most, though not all, were pictures of young children. '*We don't discriminate on applications,*' he explained. '*Some may be dropouts but now want to better themselves by getting an education.*' This service was clearly a source of pride for him and, among those I spoke with, it was invaluable for realising a better future.

While all of my interlocutors asked for education assistance for their children, a few also sought it for themselves. I met with Benjamin just before the start of one of the workshops organised by GAFNA. Because the building itself was becoming increasingly crowded as people turned up for the workshop, we each picked up a white plastic chair and took them outside to sit in the shade of the orange trees in the GAFNA compound. Though Benjamin came from Senegal, I complimented him on his nearly flawless English. He beamed at me and admitted that languages were his passion—he had studied French, English and German at school and was fluent in all of them. He also spoke his local language, Jola, in addition to Wolof and some Mandinka, though his current focus was on mastering Spanish. English, however, was his favourite language. '*The best books are written in English,*' he explained with a grin.

Benjamin, a man in his thirties, came to the Gambia in 2000 while the rest of his family fled to Guinea Bissau. He told me that he had been to the Gambia on holiday once when he was younger and he had remembered which road to take when the fighting in Casamance escalated. '*When I was here, my first problem . . . you know me, I like education, I like school. So when I came here in 2000, my first thing is to go to school. But at that time, I don't have money to go to school,*' he explained to me. He had been unaware of how to apply for refugee status or that, as a refugee, he could apply for funding to help him return to school. It was only after speaking to the president of Senegalese refugees that he received the information, and gentle prodding, to present himself to the Gambia Refugee Commission and GAFNA to register as an official refugee and to begin benefitting from initiatives set up for people like him.

With a characteristic grin and a laugh at his own eagerness, he explained how he got his identity card and immediately wrote to GAFNA to ask for training assistance. '*I was paid by GAFNA to do IT!*' he boasted proudly. He immediately reached down and began digging around in his bag, searching for the right piece of paper. He thrust the paper into

my hands while explaining. '*Me, if I go, I go with everything [all of his education documents].*' '*Just in case?*' I asked. '*Yeah! In case,*' he affirmed. '*Maybe tomorrow they [potential employers] will ask for a certificate—for a transcript—to see whether you work well or not. It will help you a lot,*' he stated, shuffling through the various certificates, transcripts and proof of payment forms in his bag. While these courses were paid for by GAFNA, they did not contribute anything toward a salary. Benjamin picked up gardening work while his wife did cleaning jobs. He explained that gardening was one of the few work opportunities available to him as he needed a job that was flexible enough to allow for either morning or afternoon classes. Many other jobs required an 8 a.m.–4 p.m. working schedule that was simply out of the question for him if he wanted to pursue his education.

Education was clearly of central importance to him. '*If I am not educated,*' he explained, '*we cannot sit down here and talk. It's very different because you don't speak very good Jola,*' he added matter-of-factly. Benjamin was passionate about education, and his eyes sparkled as he grinned and laughed during our chat. I wonder who I would have met just a year or two prior to this, before he realised he was entitled to some assistance with education and training. His life now revolved around gaining competencies and creating a good life for his wife and baby daughter. '*Education, that is my pride,*' he boasted toward the end of our conversation. He then told me two of his favourite sayings. The first echoed what I heard in the senior staff member's office on my first day at GAFNA: Learning is better than silver and gold. '*We have also another saying, "Education is the key to success,"*' he said. '*So these two proverbs make me like to study more,*' he finished with a grin, fastening his bag as the final call for the workshop rang out. Education represented a key resource for him, providing not only meaning but also a sense of comprehensibility as it represented a constant in his life, bridging his pre- and post-migration life.

3.2.2. Becoming Bigger and Better in the UK

Since, as stated previously, paid employment was barred to asylum seekers in the UK, many instead turned to education to find meaning and a sense of purpose. Many enrolled in classes they would never have considered before, such as hairdressing. It should be noted that asylum seekers were not eligible for all classes. The government offered free courses in certain areas and up to a certain level. All refugees and asylum seekers, however, were entitled to free English classes through Newcastle College. Newcastle College was, unfortunately, oversubscribed, and many were put on waiting lists.

I met Mariam, a young Eritrean girl of nineteen, collapsed in a chair in the Operation Manager's office at WERS, wiping a fistful of tissues across her sodden cheeks. She had come to WERS for support and began sobbing during her chat with a support worker. I was called into the room once it was established that she was, quite simply, overwhelmed by the negativity she perceived in her life: she was not enrolled in education courses, she felt like her English skills were severely lacking, she hated the town she lived in (located outside of Newcastle) and she felt incredibly alone and isolated. I was asked if I would like to help her integrate more into the community and show her around. I arranged a time and place to meet with her in a few days' time.

When we next met, Mariam expressed embarrassment at her previous outburst and admitted that she was just feeling overwhelmed. We met at least once a week over the next year where I learned about her 'back home' as well as her new life in the UK. I saw the overwhelmed young girl I met in WERS blossom into a funny and vivacious character. She told me it was who she was before. '*In my back home, I was always giving my parents headaches! I used to be very naughty,*' she laughed one afternoon as we strolled through the centre of Newcastle's busy shopping district along Northumberland Street. What, then, had brought about this change? The reasons are no doubt manifold and nuanced. Yet, crucially, she herself highlighted the meaning that education brought to her life and recognised its life-changing role.

Enrolling in classes gave her life a sense of purpose. She loved to talk about education and sought out opportunities to enrol in any classes that would accept her as an asylum

seeker. Mariam admitted that before she accessed these classes, '*I'm very stressed, I'm always crying as well, I don't get sleep. But when I start college, I become bigger, better better! Now, thanks to God, everything's well and I love my school.*' For her, the added benefits of accessing education extended beyond providing meaning to her life.

Education acted as a generalised resistance resource as it allowed her to make her life more manageable by not only giving her a choice and thus sense of agency over her life (Rotter 2016), but by also facilitating her access to a support network of other students and even others from her home country. It was actually through this network that she met a man who was friends with another asylum seeker (in Germany) who came from the town next to hers. The asylum seeker in Germany assured Mariam that her family was safe and well, and revealed that since she had left, her mother had given birth to a baby girl. Mariam came rushing to the usual meeting spot at the back of the ground floor of the local library to tell me the good news. Her eyes shone bright with excitement and emotion as she thanked God her family was safe and imagined what her new sister was like. This information would not have been possible without the extensive and indirect benefits that enrolling in education brought.

Education proved to be a vital GRR for her, unlocking social support and creating a sense that her life had now become manageable and imbued with a sense of purpose and meaning. She felt lost upon her arrival in the UK, but education, and the secondary benefits like a support network which tied her, however tenuously, to her family back home, made other stressors in her life more bearable. As this example shows, education is a resource in itself, but the importance of the sociophysical environment of an educational setting can also have significant effects by 'help[ing] people maintain their sense of coherence during difficult times by enhancing manageability, comprehensibility, and meaning (Von Lindern et al. 2017, p. 191). This was certainly the case for Mariam.

3.3. Religion

The role of religion on existential forms of well-being, such as meaning making, is well researched in the literature. The appeal of religion is that it can be accessed by all at any time, and many people do turn to religion to provide a meaningful framework through which to structure their lives. Indeed, religion seems to be one of the most common resources at one's disposal when it comes to meaning making. Religion is cited as a source of strength and coping in refugee groups as diverse as Burmese refugees in Australia (Borwick et al. 2013) and Somali and Zimbabwean refugees in the UK (Sherwood and Liebling-Kalifani 2012). Jackson and Piette (2015, p. 12) even claim that submitting to a higher power is actually a way of recovering one's agency by creating a relationship with something beyond oneself.

Religious coping allows an individual to continue their daily lives while fostering, where possible, a positive sense of well-being. Coping successfully can allow people to lead a happy life, and, given the high rates of religiosity around the world, religion has a clear role to play in fostering this happiness. In fact, data on this subject strongly suggest that religious people are happier than non-religious ones (e.g., Graham 2009; Clark and Lelkes 2009; Dolan et al. 2008). Eyber (2016, p. 202) contends that 'to ignore the religious facets of people's personal, social, cultural and political lives excludes a significant element in how people construct their own well-being.' It cannot be divorced from a sense of coherence for many diverse groups of refugees and my informants, whether in the Gambia or the UK, appeared to be no different. Religion provided meaning in a way that covered a series of events, both past and present, and would, presumably, carry on into the future, adding an element of comprehensibility.

The Power of Religion in the Gambia

Grace, a thirty-four year old refugee in the Gambia, was one of the most devout Christians I met. Christianity was very much a part of who she was and she relished the opportunity to teach me about this side of her life. Religion—more specifically, her

close relationship with God—was one of the few constants she could trace consistently throughout her life, giving it a sense of comprehensibility. This is not unusual in the literature and, in fact, one of the first major collections in the anthropology of Christianity focused on the ways that 'Christians find themselves compelled to find the world religiously meaningful at all times and in all particulars' (Bialecki et al. 2008, p. 1146).

Grace certainly saw the hand of God in all aspects of her life. She originally came from Côte d'Ivoire. Her husband was working in the city of Abidjan when the war broke out. He called her as he was fleeing, saying that the situation was dangerous and he needed to leave. She followed after him, first going to Mali like he instructed, and then, she told me, '*I saw him on the Facebook. I say, "Me and my mother, my kids, we in Bamako!" He say, "Ah, I'm in Gambia, come to Gambia!"*' Her husband had heard that '*Gambia is good, everybody is going to Gambia!*' which prompted his onward voyage, unbeknownst to his wife and children. Grace's mother declined to make the trip, saying she was poorly and preferred to stay in Mali, leaving Grace to travel to the Gambia with the couple's two sons, who were six and eight at the time. They made it without incident, '*By the grace of God,*' Grace emphasised. '*God favour us, we came here, I meet my husband.*' It was God's work that saw them safely reunited.

Grace believed in the healing powers of God and relied heavily on her Nigerian pastor to bring her own ailments under control. Since coming to the Gambia, she and her youngest son suffered from the occasional bout of asthma. Her son would often miss days at a time from school because he could not breathe well enough to make the journey there. If he did, the teachers would send him home because of the disruptions caused by his incessant coughing and wheezing. While Grace felt her son needed medical help to stop his symptoms, she frequently turned to her pastor to alleviate hers.

Grace had absolute faith in the healing powers of her pastor. She confided in me the miracles that he had performed. We were sat in her living room, a small, square room crammed full of furniture. One couch was placed along the back wall, while two oversized armchairs were placed along the wall facing it. A wooden TV stand with a TV sat against the adjacent wall with a final armchair opposite it. A low table was placed between all of this, and whoever was trying to move through the room would often have to shift it to one side or the other, taking care not to knock against anyone's knees, in order to do so. Sat in this room she leaned close to me, her voice rising higher and higher, as she told me how her pastor had cured a woman with HIV whose fiancé had just died of the disease. At my raised eyebrows, which she took to be astonishment at his curative abilities, she reached the highest pitch yet. '*Yes!*' she shrieked. '*You see? God is good! God is good,*' she repeated.

Because of the pastor's reputation, Grace sought him for easement of her own symptoms. She told me that whenever she has an asthma attack, even if it is in the middle of the night, she calls the pastor who will pray for her over the phone. '*The demon goes into hiding for a few weeks after that,*' she told me. To keep on top of her asthma, she made sure she prayed every night before bed, even if she was tired. '*I left Ivory Coast healthy, I want to return healthy,*' she explained.

She admitted that she also dabbled in her own curative powers through God. Her eyes widened in earnest conviction as she told me how she woke up in the middle of the night to see her husband writhing in pain. When she woke him up, he told her that he was having terrible chest pains. She could not reach the pastor and, for lack of anything else to do, she took matters into her own hands and prayed over a bottle of water. During her retelling of this night, Grace grabbed a plastic bottle of water off the table in front of us and leaned over it, mimicking the prayers that she did for approximately half an hour. '*The water turned into Jesus' blood,*' she explained, '*and I had my husband drink it. When he drank it—his chest pains were cured,*' she whispered in amazement. It is not uncommon in the literature to see health, illness and suffering as related not only to traditional and cultural practices, but to spiritual and religious practices as well (Eyber 2016, p. 203). The conflation of these experiences in everyday life is certainly evident in the stories that Grace told me.

After these incredible stories about the curative power of God, it was time for me to go home. Grace often accompanied me. She would ride in the taxi to the end of the paved road and together we would make our way through the dark and dusty dirt path, my trusty torch picking out the potholes to avoid. It was during these walks that she would talk about her childhood and about her relationship with God. She had always felt that she had an extremely close relationship with God. Though her mother was a Christian and raised her as such, her father was a Muslim with a second wife who was also Muslim.

Grace admitted that she was the most religious in her family. She always prayed for her brother and sister, as well as for her mother. In fact, she told me that earlier that day her mother had called her from Mali to ask her to pray for her brother. When fighting broke out in her country, she and her mother had fled to Mali, but her brother had gone to Ghana. He usually called the mother every week to tell her where he was and what he was doing. His money was running out and, because they had not heard from him recently, they were worried that he was turning to increasingly dangerous jobs in order to survive. '*My mother said that I have a special gift when it comes to God. When I pray to God, He makes it happen for me. Whatever I pray for I know He will answer*.' Grace's voice had gone quieter in the still blackness, but the conviction of her words rang strong.

God provided Grace with a constant and unwavering sense that life contained some kind of meaning, even if it was unknown to her at the time, and a sense of purpose that she was carrying out His will. In this way, her life made sense: she was doing as God asked of her. It also made every obstacle manageable as she felt she could overcome it through God. Even her illness was construed in a religious context. None of her life experiences had shaken this core component of who she saw herself to be: a devoted follower of God. The fact that her family escaped the war safely, and she was reunited with her husband, only added to the belief that if one puts one's fate in God's hand and trusts Him completely, then He will ensure that one gets all that one needs. Religion, for her, provided all three components of the SOC: it made life meaningful, manageable and comprehensible.

4. Conclusions

This study sought to demonstrate, qualitatively, the factors in narratives that appear to have the greatest impact on positive well-being. This positive well-being is framed using Antonovsky's salutogenesis concept. This concept posits that those factors which make life comprehensible, manageable and meaningful contribute to a stronger sense of coherence (SOC). As a strong SOC is commonly associated with fewer mental health problems (Pham et al. 2010), it seems pertinent to focus on these aspects, particularly amongst those who may have been exposed to traumas.

In this study, the most common resources mentioned were work, education and religion. These three domains certainly fit with what are described as generalised resistance resources and provide a way for effective tension management by providing a means to cope with an otherwise stressful situation. Furthermore, these domains build upon themselves by providing the resources necessary (social networks, financial capital, careers, even motivation) to allow people to pursue their goals. This commitment to personal goals 'lends a sense of agency, life structure, and personal meaning to people's lives' (Steger et al. 2013, p. 174). Striving to attain these goals and a sense of purpose more broadly positively impacts upon a person's sense of well-being.

These three specific factors have been found to be important in other contexts as well. For instance, in Pham et al. (2010) research in eastern DRC, higher educational levels and positive social relationships were associated with a higher sense of coherence. Likewise, in a study among Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese first- and second-generation migrants in the Netherlands, the centrality of religion for strengthening the SOC was apparent (Slootjes et al. 2017). So important are these GRRs that it is even claimed that they can 'neutralise the threat of migration and integration on developing a strong SOC' (Slootjes et al. 2017, p. 576). This is especially important in those living in protracted refugee situations as their

prolonged nature may continually erode a person's SOC and contribute to poorer health and well-being.

Framing this research around the salutogenic concept is not to imply that those individuals highlighted above experienced greater well-being than other forced migrants. Rather, it was to highlight what generalised resistance resources people draw upon to facilitate positive well-being in their lives. The importance of this approach is to explore what resources seem to be the most common in facilitating movement toward 'ease' on the ease/dis-ease continuum, especially when much of the current focus is centred on dis-ease. In general, these resources seem to be the most common regardless of specific circumstance.

As of yet, the positive factors affecting well-being among refugees and asylum seekers, particularly amongst those residing in the Global South, remain largely unexplored. This study advances our understanding of how people cope and adapt in various contexts across cultures (Braun-Lewensohn and Mayer 2020, p. 4). Much of the current literature focuses on the stressors that forced migrants face and the effects of these stressors. While these areas should receive attention, it is often to the neglect of positive, protective factors that many individuals turn to during hardships. By understanding and strengthening access to these resources, researchers can facilitate the implementation of practices to improve the lives of forced migrants. Through this article, I am attempting to add to the small but growing number of ethnographic studies focused on what goes right and works well for those who have experienced, or are experiencing, hardships in their lives in the form of forced migration.

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