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## **Reassembling Attachments: Place and Well-Being among Afghan Refugees in a Small Rural Town**

### **Abstract**

This article explores place attachment and well-being among Afghan refugees in a small Finnish town. The small town offers a unique perspective on newly arrived Afghan refugees' place attachment, as it only started receiving resettled Afghan refugees in 2012. Our analysis draws on the sociology of associations and the concept of assemblages, which provide a novel theoretical lens for integration studies. The data in this study were collected by utilising multi-sited ethnography from 2016 to 2018. The analysis reveals that there is a socio-material side to building place attachments. Different actor-assemblages can 'plug in' or attach themselves to a place in divergent ways, but neither the individual nor the place determines the outcome of the resettlement. Some of our research participants found it easy to connect with surrounding assemblages, while others could not connect at all. The third group had initial incompatibility issues but was able to reassemble attachments by using a variety of adapters. These adapters can be the 'keys to the city' for newly arrived refugees. Support in finding these adapters would be important for social service providers as well as policy makers to focus on.

Keywords: place attachment, well-being, assemblage, Afghan migrants, multi-sited ethnography

## Introduction

This article explores place attachment and well-being among Afghan refugees in a small Finnish town. The community first formed through the UNHCR resettlement programme, but at the time of the fieldwork, the town was hosting Afghans with different residency statuses and life situations, such as refugees, asylum seekers, family migrants and refugees who arrived as unaccompanied minors. Since the town only started hosting resettled Afghan refugees in 2012, it offers a unique perspective on the significance of *place* in refugees' well-being during the first years of resettlement. The concept of place is often overlooked in research on refugees and forced migrants' lives (see Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2015), but this study finds that it may be one of the main aspects of possibilities for well-being and belonging, especially in rural and peripheral areas.

Despite the great significance of place to the health and well-being of individuals (Macintyre, Ellaway, & Cummins, 2002; Lewicka, 2011), until recently, surprisingly little attention has been given to place in the context of refugees' and migrants' 'integration' studies (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). A particularly notable gap in research can be found regarding refugee resettlement outside large urban centres (for some notable exceptions, see El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015; Huisman, 2011; Larsen, 2011; Simard & Jentsch, 2009). There is also a need to understand and conceptualize refugee resettlement as a locally embedded and embodied process (Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2015). Refugees are forced to adjust to a new environment and community that may be drastically different from what they are accustomed to in terms of, for example, climate, culture and population density (Ahmad et al., 2005; Hickman, Crowley, & Mai, 2008; Carswell, Blackburn, & Barker, 2011; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015). Place-related differences are connected to variation in the experiences, impacts and consequences of resettlement for refugees and the receiving communities (Robinson, 2010). For refugees, these differences can be quite directly linked to mental health and emotional well-being (Beiser, 2009; Beiser et al., 2011). The importance of place for well-being and recovery from trauma is also highlighted in studies concerning so-called therapeutic landscapes (Sampson & Gifford, 2010; Coughlan & Hermes, 2016).

Perhaps the most common way to approach the significance of place for refugees and migrants is by trying to distinguish the specific features of a location that affect the likelihood of successful

'integration'. Studies have focused on, for example, the local labour market, employment rate, housing, and the availability of social and other services (e.g., Castles, Korac, Vasta, & Vertovec, 2002; Atfield, Brahmhatt, & O'Toole, 2007; Ager & Strang, 2008). Attention has also been paid to the 'cultural' features of the receiving community; is the community welcoming and tolerant, does it have a multi-ethnic history or is there a presence of the same or other ethnic groups in the area (e.g., Hickman et al., 2008; Stafford, Newbold, & Ross, 2011; Morén-Alegret, Mas, & Wladyka, 2012)? There are mixed views among scholars and policy makers about the significance of these factors. Many see inner cities as the most hospitable places for 'integration' due to their established multi-ethnic communities and warn about the risks of careless dispersal policies (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Stafford et al., 2011; Darling, 2016; Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018). Others point to the potential benefits of small towns and rural communities (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015; Marcher, Kofler, & Streifeneder, 2017) or note that a community of migrants from the same country can also be a hinderance to well-being and 'integration' (Baird & Boyle, 2012; Sohtorik & McWilliams, 2011; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015).

While studies like this offer a lot of valuable information, there are also several pitfalls to approaching the significance of place for 'integration' through a standard set of variables. First, one can focus too much on individual factors in isolation while missing their locally specific interconnections, as Platts-Fowler and Robinson (2015) have noted. Second, a study may end up examining 'integration' by looking exclusively at the attributes of either the place or the migrants without capturing both of them in the same picture. Attention should be paid to their dynamic relationship and interaction (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015; Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2015). The third pitfall is to imagine either the migrants or the receiving community as a homogenous group. Even forced migrants arriving from the same country do not necessarily share similar resources, needs or hopes (Hickman et al., 2008; Phillimore, 2012; Rutter, 2013). Neither should one expect all the people in their destination to hold common attitudes, values and ideals (Amin, 2002). This means that one cannot expect there to be specific attributes of a location that would have the same impact on all of the migrants or that all would find the same features welcoming. Similarly, it is futile to conceptualise 'integration' as a process of increasing social cohesion wherein the migrants come to share the values and customs of the local community, especially as these can vary significantly among the 'locals' (Amin, 2002; Nagel & Staeheli, 2008). Although we have started this article by

reviewing studies on ‘integration’ and place, we disengage ourselves from the narrow concept of ‘integration’ and instead aim to focus more broadly on well-being. Specifically, we ask, how are individuals able to attach themselves to their surroundings? How do they build material and social connections to a place in a difficult situation, and how does this affect their well-being?

The article proceeds as follows. We start by connecting our main concepts – place attachment, well-being and assemblages – to migration and refugee studies. We then discuss the ethnographic fieldwork of this study. This is followed by our findings, which show that place attachment has a strong impact on well-being and refugees use a variety of ways to attach themselves to their social and material surroundings. We argue that neither the place nor the individual determines the outcome of a resettlement process. Rather, it depends on the capability of forming a suitable fit between an actor and their surrounding socio-material assemblages. We conclude by discussing the contributions of the study to the field of refugee studies.

### **Place attachment and well-being**

The scholarship on place attachment and belonging seems to work with the most comprehensive conception of the relationship between people and place. It offers a fruitful approach for examining the resettlement of forced migrants. Place attachment refers to the emotional bond between individuals and place, where the place holds a special meaning to a person and is connected to feelings of belonging, security and well-being (Lewicka, 2011). Scholarship on place attachment studies how these bonds are formed and maintained. From this perspective, place is not understood merely as a collection of services and measurable variables, such as employment rate or number of schools. Instead, place is something that is experienced subjectively and infused with meaning and emotions in a complex relationship between individuals and their surroundings.

Previous studies concerning the place attachment of refugees have shown that attachment to a new place may form even if an individual embraces a transnational identity and also has a strong attachment to his or her previous home (Nagel & Staeheli, 2008). A sense of belonging in a place may build on pragmatic, everyday encounters with one’s surroundings, without a need for a

profound negotiation of cultural values or identities with the local community (Amin, 2002; Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018). Forging an attachment to a place can involve intense engagement with the location, or it can be based on just a fleeting experience (Kale, 2019). Then again, long-term residence does not guarantee that one gets attached to a place (Boğaç, 2009). A person may live in the same place for decades without ever feeling at home.

Following Nagel and Staehli (2008) we suggest that ‘integration’ should not be conceived through the concepts of social cohesion, core values and cultural sameness. Rather, it should be understood as a question of whether refugees experience belonging and membership in the place where they live, work and raise their families. Hence, successful integration comes to mean *place attachment that is accompanied by a sense of well-being*. As Al-Sharmani, Tiilikainen and Mustasaari (2019) note well-being should not be seen as an outcome or a staple state that can be measured by a list of indicators. It should be viewed as a continual and multidimensional process that depends on people’s interaction with their surroundings. There is no sudden step from misery to permanent well-being after people are relocated from one place to another. Favourable resettlement – understood here as the continual well-being of the refugees – is not determined just by the specific features of the receiving community and place. It is also about the emotional and pragmatic bonds that refugees build – or are unable to build – with their surroundings. No combination of local features can ensure that every refugee builds an attachment to it; no one place fits all.

Similar to Robinson (2010), we feel that there is an urgent need for the development of new conceptual frameworks for understanding the ways through which place informs and is impacted by resettlement. We aim to contribute to this effort by building on earlier literature concerning place attachment and by broadening this concept so that it is able to capture a wider set of phenomena in more detail. We argue that there are two aspects to place attachment. On the one hand, there is the established meaning of an emotional bond to a place. This is about the subjective significance that a place holds for an individual. On the other hand, the metaphor of ‘attachment’ can also be understood from a more externalised and interactional perspective. The question then becomes to what extent individuals are able to *attach themselves* to their surroundings. This type of attachment is surely connected to feelings of belonging, but it is not just about emotional ties. It is also about the material and social connections that people build to a place in a reciprocal process

wherein the place becomes significant for them and they become significant for the place. When these connections are developed successfully, each side affects the other. In this paper, we aim to shed light on the latter side of place attachment and develop conceptual tools for analysing it by drawing on the sociology of associations (Latour, 2005).

### **Assemblages and adapters**

Our analysis draws on the socio-material concept of assemblages as developed by Latour (2005) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987). While these scholars use the concept similarly, there are also important differences (see Müller, 2015), and our analysis is more aligned with the sociology of associations developed by Latour. From this socio-material perspective, what is commonly called ‘society’ starts to look more like an endless compilation of assemblages and actor-networks that bond together people and things. These assemblages can sometimes have the appearance of staple and formal organisations (e.g. political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), nation-states), but they may also look like informal associations of people (e.g., street gangs, social movements, groups based on shared interests). What is common for all these assemblages is that they consist of heterogeneous human and non-human elements, and they are precarious and processual by nature (Latour, 2005). It requires constant work and material support to keep the associations together and the order going. Otherwise, the bonds begin to dissolve and the possibility for concentrated action is lost. The more strongly these groupings are pinned down by material supports, such as legal documents and administrative technologies, the more they resemble solid ‘structures’ that have permanence and can stand on their own. For Latour, these material things are also ‘actors’, as they do things and affect the activity of others in assemblages.

The sociology of associations is perhaps best suited for analysing the formation of new actor-networks through distinct phases, such as problematization, interessement, enrolment and mobilisation (Callon, 1984). This is when the hard work required to build these groupings and to make the associations stick is at its most noticeable and easiest to analyse (Latour, 2005). However, the approach can also be used to analyse the composition, maintenance and transformation of established assemblages. The perspective taken in this study differs a bit from both of these. We are interested in what happens when an individual comes into contact with existing, yet unfamiliar

assemblages and tries to connect with them. We ask: how can this be done, and with what consequences to the actor and the assemblage? We want to test whether the sociology of association offers useful conceptual tools for making sense of refugee resettlement and place attachment. Resettled refugees often arrive at unfamiliar surroundings with little knowledge of the local infrastructure, geography and people. In order to ‘make a place’ for themselves, they need to find a way to navigate the local terrain and make it familiar. This can transform initially strange and frightening places into ones that offer safety and well-being (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015). But while they may start feeling an attachment to the place, they also need to attach themselves to the place in a way that enables them to actualize their potential, utilise surrounding resources and make themselves relevant for the place.

Similar to these social assemblages, individuals can also be conceived as assemblages that are never quite fixed in place (DeLanda, 2006, 47–49). Following DeLanda, a ‘person’ can be considered something that emerges through the continuous organising work of the heterogeneous – and sometimes conflicting – subpersonal components that human beings are made of. These heterogeneous elements include, for example, bodily capabilities and inabilities, a multitude of emotions, hopes and fears, as well as traumas and skills formed along the way. As with social assemblages, presenting this actor-assemblage as a centrally governed unit that has a clear purpose and singular identity requires constant work. Maintaining an orderly composition (or at least an image of such) requires external supports such as identity cards (Latour, 2005, 207), habitual repetition (DeLanda, 2006, 49), (self-) governance through technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988) and the use of culturally acceptable scripts to construct personal narratives (Bruner, 2004).

This paper focuses on place attachment in a situation where an actor-assemblage (a refugee) arrives at a new place and tries to attach him- or herself to surrounding social assemblages. In a way, the situation is familiar to many a traveller. You arrive at a new country with all your luggage and high-tech devices. Soon you realise that none of your smart technology is able to connect with the surrounding infrastructure. You cannot even plug those items into an electrical outlet, let alone go online. Nonetheless, the problem is not with your devices, nor is there anything wrong with the surrounding infrastructure. The problem is in adequately connecting these complex systems together. In the same way, it can be difficult for an actor-assemblage to connect to the surrounding

social assemblages. We call this aspect of place attachment *plugging in*. Cities and towns are not single places or communities. Rather, they are collections of assemblages, which comes close to Amin's (2002, 972) description of mixed neighbourhoods as 'mixtures of social groups with varying intensities of local affiliation, varying reasons for local attachment, and varying values and cultural practices'. However, we would extend this description to all kinds of neighbourhoods and also include more formal organisations in the picture. Actor-networks may be local, or they may reach far beyond the immediate geographical area. Actors who are geographically far away can be tightly connected, while people living next to each other may have no associations (Müller, 2015). Technological development has made this an even more distinct feature of life. As our analysis shows, plugging into surrounding assemblages is not always successful. It involves building new connections, reconfiguring boundaries between people and making use of surrounding resources. There may be several obstacles in the way, and other actors may actively oppose efforts to plug in. However, sometimes even an inadequate fit between systems can be overcome by finding a suitable adapter. This is when an actor-assemblage can begin to attach itself to social assemblages, and they start to affect each other.

### **Ethnographic path**

The data in this study were collected by utilising multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Falzon, 2009) from 2016 to 2018. This allows for the study of groups of people in motion and in multiple locations. The data include 57 pages of field notes (notes from visits to families' houses and to religious and other celebrations, such as weddings and birthdays) and 18 group and individual interviews<sup>1</sup> concerning 22 informants, eight men and 14 women. Three informants were interviewed twice. The Afghan community in the town consists of about 150 Afghans (20 families), including children.

The site of the fieldwork was a small town in Finland, which is situated far away from larger cities, and the closest urban centre is 120 kilometres away. The population of the whole municipality is around 40,000 people,<sup>2</sup> but it is spread across a large geographical area and consists of many smaller agricultural towns. The actual centre is not large, and many of the informants in this study described it as 'empty and small'. Some of the informants compared the town to the large cities



they had previously lived in, such as Tehran or Kabul, and narrated how they felt that the small town was an entirely different, empty world.

All the refugees resettled in Finland through the UNHCR programme and are part of what are called 'integration services', which consist of language courses, help with housing and social work guidance. What made the service provision unique in the town was that there was only one social worker, in addition to a few lower-level assistant workers, assigned to work with resettled refugees. This meant that the newly arrived refugees were highly dependent on just a few people for information. In bigger cities, there are more staff and different kinds of services available, and thus receiving information is not as strongly tied to individual actors. A low number of NGOs outside the official integration services also contributed to a higher dependency on the individual social worker. Thus, it was also the way in which welfare services were arranged in the town that contributed to the perception of the town's small size for the Afghan informants.

During the fieldwork, the researcher concentrated on the informed consent of the participants, since the acquisition of informants was based on informal contacts rather than being done through institutions. The main guiding principle was the 'do no harm' principle, following the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre's (2007) guidelines. The topic is highly sensitive, as it poses a possible threat to the people involved in the research (see Lee, 1993, 4). First, there is the possible threat of other members of the community and the social worker in the town recognising the families. This might have unforeseen consequences. Second, the immigration officials might be interested in the stories and, thus, failure to hide the informants' identities might result in repercussions. Telling the stories of precarious residency might also influence immigration policy makers. Third, the current public discussion in Finland presents Muslim migrants in particular as a security threat. Poorly presented or contextualised research findings might further fuel the negative attitudes towards refugees held by (some) members of the public. Fourth, in line with the recent refugee-studies scholars, there is an ethical dilemma in furthering one's career based on vulnerable migrants' stories. Therefore, researchers suggest that research should 'bring about reciprocal benefits for refugee participants and/or communities' (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007). However, this type of reciprocal relationship with the researcher brings about other ethical considerations,

such as increased power imbalances between the informants and the researcher (see Pittaway, Bartolomei, & Hugman, 2010).

To address these ethical issues, we have first of all carefully protected the anonymity of the informants. All the names have been changed to pseudonyms, and some details have been changed to avoid identification. We do not mention the town by name, which is essential for protecting the informants from the attention of Finnish immigration officials, among other issues. We also aim to present the results of the study in a way that gives the reader the context to understand the unique situations of refugees instead of relying on stereotypical information, which fuels anti-immigrant sentiments. In addition, we have engaged in reciprocal relationships with the informants in various ways, which has benefitted the community through grant money, job opportunities and organised events. However, we do not describe these specific actions in this article, since it might endanger the anonymity of the town and the informants.

### **Reassembling attachments**

#### *Easy fit*

Our study looks at actor networks from the viewpoint of what happens when an individual tries to plug him- or herself into existing assemblages. When the Afghan informants in this study came to Finland, they already had a long history of migration, re-migration and forced migration. Many had lived in exile in Iran for decades and endured multiple hardships while living as undocumented migrants. Nonetheless, all of the informants have a unique set of skills, resources and tendencies, which they either are or are not able to utilise in the new country. These unique actor-assemblages also include familiarity with certain types of places and things. Smell, taste, landscape, architecture and so on may bring a sense of familiarity in a new place. Similarly, some things or events may be recognised as traumatic, which may bring additional distress and fear into the process of settling in. In this section, we will present an example of an actor-assemblage that helps to fit into the unique system of the small town.

The example here is that of Tariq and Laila, who had five children at the time of the fieldwork. Before having to flee to Iran, they were landowners in a rural region in Afghanistan. Tariq's grandfather had been a local leader (*khan*), and the family had a good standing in their village. In the interview, Tariq painted a picture of a communal lifestyle in the village in Afghanistan, where all the farm work was done by the whole village together: 'All the neighbours would work together at one house at a time'. The women would then also join together and prepare food for the men. 'We don't like to work alone', Tariq added. After working, 'all the people go to the neighbour's house to talk until one or two o'clock at night', he said. This agricultural community is part of Tariq's and Laila's unique actor-assemblage.

Tariq and Laila seemed very comfortable in the small town, and the researcher asked them directly if they felt that the size of a city affected their adaptation to a place. No, they replied, but added that 'people coming from big cities might find it hard to adapt here [in the small town]'. Tariq and Laila saw their own success, compared to many other Afghans in the town, as being due to 'hard work, honesty and speaking the Finnish language well'. These, according to Tariq and Laila, are essential in plugging into the new place. However, their narrations also reveal that there is a certain attachment to a small place. In the interview, Laila narrated how they now feel anxious when visiting their relatives in a big European city. 'There are too many people there', Laila said. 'It takes hours to just go from one place to another', Tariq added. We continued speaking about the small town where they live and how easy it is to get around, taking five children to day care and schools in just five minutes. Both Tariq and Laila also expressed how the town is safe and secure. Tariq and Laila's well-being is clearly connected to belonging to a place, which builds on several elements.

Right after their arrival in 2012, Tariq and Laila's dealings with the social workers provided guidance and help for them. They got along with the social workers and benefitted from the vocational training available in the town. They fit the system perfectly: they were not over-qualified to feel that the town restricted their possibilities for education, but neither were they severely traumatised or completely devoid of education, which would have hindered their language learning. However, Laila had never been to school as a child and was not able to read and write when she

arrived in Finland. Her learning ability had proved to be excellent, however, and she was ready to move to vocational school right after the year-long language course.

Tariq and Laila acquired new occupations relatively quickly. Tariq graduated a year earlier than Laila; their youngest daughter was born when Laila was in bakery school, and she took a year off. Tariq worked in construction, and Laila had just acquired a permanent job at a bakery during the fieldwork period. The whole family also acquired Finnish citizenship during the fieldwork. In contrast to many other research participants, who said that they did not know any Finnish people other than their language teacher, Tariq and Laila were socially very active in the town. Tariq was employed in a company owned by a religious *Laestadian*<sup>3</sup> family, who had introduced them to many other families of the same faith. It seemed that the religiously framed lifestyle of Tariq's employer was a good fit for forming a friendship and plugging into local networks. Although Tariq and Laila described themselves as secular, they shared many of the values of Tariq's employer. For example, they did not drink alcohol and their lives were centred around family life. Laila had also found her job through Tariq's employer's networks. Tariq and Laila's successful adaptation to their surroundings was a result of several different details in both their unique actor-assemblage and the characteristics of their surroundings.

Tariq's and Laila's possibilities for building place attachment were also influenced by the fact that their *khanawada* (extended close families) were wealthy enough to lend the family a down payment for a new house:

When we wanted to buy a house, the local Afghan community wanted to help. But they only had very little money, and we needed a lot of money [for the down payment]. Then we borrowed it from our relatives in France.

Owning their own house further strengthened their respectable standing in the town. Tariq and Laila's position was strong not only in local circles, but also in the Afghan community living in the town. However, for most of the informants in this study – unlike for Tariq and Laila – the first years after resettlement were far from easy. We will next describe some of these difficulties of not being able to plug into the local system.

### *Failing to plug in*

During the two years of fieldwork, I saw that many Afghan families initially came with optimism and enthusiasm to start their new lives in the town, but over the years they became increasingly disappointed by their stagnation. However, some interviewees had already found the local system incompatible very soon after moving to the town. One research participant, Ali, had owned his own tailoring company in Iran. His work as an owner of a company in Iran was exceptional, since most Afghan migrants in Iran held no citizenship rights. Even children's schooling was restricted. Somehow, though, Ali had been able to carry on with his business. Ali's hope had been to continue with his business model in Finland, but it had proved to be impossible as is apparent in the following excerpt.

Ali: And well, in my opinion, the [UNHCR] interview board that had come from Finland to Iran for our interviews, they could have so easily said that in our country [Finland] tailoring is not common. I came here with a passion and motivation, and I had many dreams and thought that as soon as I came to Finland, I could pursue them very easily. Because I had a good market [for products] in Iran. There were Iranian and Afghan competing businesses. Although usually Afghans could not work [in Iran], but I had a business for 15 years, and Inshallah, it was good. And I told myself if I reach Finland, after one or two years I can open a workshop and produce [tailoring works] and clothes and I would be self-dependent.

Interviewer: You can start your company in Finland.

Research assistant: You can start your workshop or your company here. Why not?

Ali: But as far as I know, in Finland the tailoring work has no use at all. There are some people who sew pillows and curtains.

Ali's experience was a *plugging-in problem* related to place. His resources and knowledge about a successful business fit into a different societal context, where cheap labour was available and the demand for tailored products was high. Ali's example shows an inability to actualize one's potential in a given environment. His dreams of running his own business in Finland were crushed because of an ill fit between an actor-assemblage and the surrounding socio-material assemblages.

He did not have any formal education, which could have benefitted him in Finland, and his experience was from a totally different societal system, which also did not give him any benefit in the small Finnish town. When we met for the interview, it was a cold and dark time of the year in December, and in addition to describing his disappointment with the opportunities for advancing his goals in Finland, Ali also told the researcher about depression, which hindered his language learning.

Another example of an ill-fitting actor-assemblage is that of two sisters who describe in an interview how it had been especially cruel that, after coming to Finland, the ‘integration work’ did not support their aspirations for higher education, which they had already entered into as migrants in Iran as described in the following interview excerpt.

Zahra: When we said to the social worker that we want to study at the college or at the university, they said no, you can’t, the language is too difficult. But when we said we would study to be practical nurses, they were happy. But they were shocked when we wanted to study at the university.

Interviewer: Did anyone ask you what you want to do? What is your goal?

Both: No.

Sabera: They just said. They didn’t ask. [ . . . ]

Zahra: All people are different. If this country has freedom, you don’t have the right to stop us. I said this to the social worker. I said, I chose this country, because I didn’t want to be limited. If I wanted to live with limitations, I would live in Iran. I would have stayed there. But I came here because I wanted to be free and have rights.

This is a family of three sisters who are in their twenties. Their mother passed away when they were young, and they were raised in Iran by a very religious father. Everyone in the family was able to go to high school in Iran, which was very rare amongst Afghan migrants in Iran.

As these two women describe, the limitations faced in a new country can prove difficult to overcome, especially after already living for long periods in very limited situations. The women’s actor-assemblages were shaped by moving from a metropolis, Tehran, to a small town with limited resources, which did not fit their social positions. The women explained how their aspirations for

higher education were met with disbelief, while studying for a practical occupation was encouraged. However, the women expressed resistance to these limitations. In the excerpt, Zahra strongly states that if she wanted limitations, she would have stayed in Iran. She already had a university degree from Iran, and completing her studies required great sacrifices. Zahra told me she used to work during the night and go to school during the day, whilst the family struggled to have enough to eat. Her yearning to move forward in her career was tightly connected to her previous struggles and experiences, and therefore cannot be understood as separate from them.

During the fieldwork, it became apparent that Afghan migrants particularly remembered these hurtful encounters that occurred directly after first moving to Finland. These early encounters especially shaped the ways in which informants saw the new country (and their new lives) as either safe or threatening. One family with two small children told me that soon after migration, they had a neighbour who regularly threw dog faeces onto their balcony. These kinds of experiences of racism often appeared as a side note in connection with other, more pressing life circumstances, such as depression, financial difficulties or the fear of deportation. Racism happened in addition to all these different hardships, often making life seem unbearable, as many informants described to the researcher.

The mother whose balcony was a target of the regular batches of dog faeces was later able to move away from the apartment where her family was harassed. However, at the time of our meeting, the family's possibilities for action were limited: the mother was exhausted from waiting for her husband's residence permit and fearing for his deportation. The mother's actor-assemblage was influenced by her inability to read and write in her native tongue, Persian (Dari), and thus learning a new language, getting work or gaining Finnish citizenship was extremely hard. The location of the town offered her very few opportunities for support in trying to manage complicated immigration issues and everyday struggles since, unlike in the bigger cities, there were no activists in the town who could compensate for the lack of social services. The lawyers in the town's legal aid centre (*oikeusaputoimisto*) were also not well-informed about the complex issues that immigration law included.

We find that plugging into a place is a dynamic relationship with the place and the person. Much like in the example of the electrical network, the flows of energy do not only change the ‘appliance’ that is plugged in – the whole network changes. In this section, we have especially brought up how experiences of racism and othering work to make the place seem uninviting and threatening. Although these experiences are not the (sole) focus of this analysis, they did appear to be the main reason why the participants experienced difficulties in plugging into the town’s local system. For example, the two young women, Zahra and Sabera, certainly had many existing resources available, but the social worker’s belittling and othering responses, and the mismatch between their educational goals and what the town had to offer in terms of educational advancement, caused problems in connecting with the local system.

### *Discovering adapters*

In addition to actor-assemblages that were well- or ill-fitted to the small-town context, we have identified different types of *adapters* that enabled our research participants to plug into existing assemblages through the translation of currents and components so that they can work in a mutually beneficial way. This means that the actor was not necessarily compatible with the local system to begin with, but with the right kind of adapter, they were able to attach themselves to the place.

One example of finding an adapter is that of a young woman, Shokria, who described a hurtful encounter with social services. She had wished for her family to move to a more peaceful area, as her neighbours were harassing the family by showing up at their door, drunk, at night. Shokria’s struggle to move was a long process. First, she asked for help from the local social worker, who declined and stated that since the municipality had offered housing for Shokria, she could not move. Second, Shokria found a local NGO that worked with migrant youth, and she was able to search for apartments with them. Together with the NGO worker, she got a time for a house showing. Unfortunately, meanwhile, the town’s social worker had found out about this new resource and made an angry telephone call to the NGO prohibiting the workers from helping the family at all. As a result, the NGO worker cancelled the house visit appointment and told Shokria that she could no longer help her. This incident was not, according to our interpretation, connected to legal or policy restrictions about moving but rather to small-town politics, where the social work office for



migrants held a very strong position in organising the lives of newly arrived refugees for the first three years after their arrival. The social worker, who was accustomed to being the authority in dealing with all the newly arrived refugees' issues, did not accept dealings outside of their control.

Finally, Shokria turned to a local business owner, a migrant herself, who understood her difficult situation. Together, they went from office to office and managed to find a new place for Shokria's family to live. When I talked to Shokria later, she explained that the social worker had been very angry about this new turn of events. By introducing outside actors into the situation, Shokria had challenged the social worker's status in an assemblage where she was accustomed to holding a powerful position as an 'obligatory passage point' (cf. Callon, 1984). Although the events made Shokria's future dealings with social workers more difficult, the possibility of making a place for herself and arranging a better situation for herself and her family was an important possibility for agency for Shokria. We see that in Shokria's case, the adapter was the local business owner who supported her in the house search. In fact, later on, the same business owner even offered temporary work to Shokria, lent her money and advised her on many complicated immigration issues.

Sometimes adapters emerged from surprising places. Jassin was a young man who had initially come to Finland as an unaccompanied minor. He had ended up in the small town as an asylum seeker because his aunt lived in the town as a UNHCR resettled refugee. After gaining residency, Jassin stayed in the town, living with his aunt and her family. However, as he became older, he started to look for his own place. His situation was even more difficult than for those who had come to Finland as UNHCR refugees and were under the strict surveillance of the town's social worker. Jassin did not get any assistance at all from the social services. Most of the private renters turned him away right after they heard his foreign-sounding name. The isolation also extended to other walks of life.

However, after months of searching, Jassin found an apartment. The researcher had grown very fond of Jassin during the fieldwork and checked up on him regularly after he moved to live on his own. His aunt was too busy with her small children to make sure Jassin was doing well, so he was left alone in dealing with this life change. Despite Jassin having lived in a dangerous and

challenging situation as an undocumented child migrant in Iran, he was still very young and inexperienced in many ways.

During the researcher's first visit to Jassin's new home, doubts about him managing on his own were dissolved. He had found an adapter: the old pensioner who rented him the apartment had befriended him and was teaching him how to live on his own. 'He comes to see me every other day', Jassin said. Together, they had been to the store to buy Jassin the needed cooking equipment. The man had taught Jassin how to use the stove and the washing machine. 'He also has given me advice on how to approach girls', said Jassin. It seemed that the two men had developed a meaningful relationship, and Jassin was starting to feel at home.

In another interview, Jassin described people who were important to him:

These grandmas and grandpas. They are always meeting me. I saw [the grandpa] on Friday. When he sees me on the street, he comes to visit. We play games and eat and enjoy each other's company. With me he is comfortable, he likes these things [sitting and talking together]. They [this grandma and grandpa] don't have their families in the area.

Jassin refers to his landlord as 'Grandpa' and to another ageing friend as 'Grandma'. The grandma is his aunt's acquaintance, a woman from the local church. Much like the pensioner who rented Jassin his first home, the grandma also comes to visit him regularly. For Jassin, the small-town context provided a possibility for place attachment after these adapters appeared in his life. We see that the adapters transformed the small town from a hostile and often racist environment to a place where Jassin could feel safety and belonging. Belonging was built through everyday experiences and encounters, even by bumping into 'Grandpa' on the street.

Both Jassin and Shokria had unique sets of skills and experiences, actor-assemblages which initially did not fit in with the town's system. However, both were able to resolve the mismatch through the help of an adapter who worked to help them to plug into the small town. Of course, the two short examples of adapters give a very limited picture of all the different types of adapters that Shokria and Jassin, as well as the other Afghan migrants in the town, had. For some, a suitable adapter could be a language teacher encouraging the individual to get a driver's license so they

would be able to visit friends in the nearby towns. In a sense, even the driver's license and the car could be considered adapters, as they open up a great deal of previously unattainable territory and connections to the refugees.

Although Shokria and Jassin found adapters that helped them to attach their unique systems into the town's assemblages, only Jassin ended up staying in the town. Shokria moved to a bigger city as soon as her 'integration period' of three years was over. On the contrary, Jassin told me, in our dealings in later years, that he was satisfied and happy staying in the small town. He had gotten a job as a janitor and moved to a nicer apartment. His old 'grandpa' from his first apartment was still his friend, though. In our last interview, Jassin said, 'Why should I build a fancy house even though I would be happy in a small house? I don't need. My life in the future, it connects to this future I have now. I want to live like I do now. Be regular. Just regular folk'. We believe that, for Jassin, his initial plug-in was possible through the adapters, but the final decision to stay in the small town was a complex decision based on his unique actor-assemblage of past and present experiences.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we examined how individuals are able to attach themselves to their surroundings, how they build material and social connections and how this affects their well-being. The results indicate that there is no ideal type of place that would fit all refugees similarly. Instead, issues such as population density, the community of other refugees from the same region, age, gender, country of origin, education, wealth, rural or urban background, and ethnic or cultural group and so forth all play a role in place attachment. Nonetheless, we argue that place is one of the most significant aspects of refugees' well-being. Our article develops the conceptual toolbox for analysing the dynamic and complex relationships between actors and places through such concepts as actor-assemblages and adapters.

We have proposed that the key to well-being is place attachment (see also Robinson, 2010; Lewicka, 2011) and that there is a need to extend the meaning of place attachment beyond inner feelings of attachment. For this task, we offer new viewpoints and concepts for refugee and forced-migration studies. We suggest that there is a 'socio-material' side of building place attachments.

Different actor-assemblages can plug in or attach themselves to a place in divergent ways and with varying degrees of ease. These processes can be conceptualised as ‘reassembling attachments’. Neither the individual nor the place determines the outcome of resettlement. Successful integration, in the sense of continuous well-being, requires reassembling attachments ‘internally’ and ‘externally’. However, the distinction between internal and external is extremely problematic in this context, which is why we rather talk about the difference between ‘feeling attached’ and ‘attaching oneself’.

Our analysis presented three types of engagements between actor-assemblages and their surrounding systems (assemblages). Some of our research participants found it easy to connect with surrounding assemblages, while others could not connect at all. The third group had initial incompatibility issues but was able to reassemble attachments by using a variety of adapters. We see that our results have two main contributions for policy-making and practice. First, it would be ideal if the UNHCR selection of resettled refugees would perceive individuals more in the sense of complex actor-assemblages and take into consideration their capabilities of forming attachments to places of resettlement. This requires paying attention to refugees’ earlier experiences and, most importantly, their wishes concerning their future place of living. Second, people’s preferences and experiences connected to place are complex and their positions are formed intersectionally; thus, it is often impossible to fully predetermine how an actor will fit into a particular place. Thus, and as we found in our analysis, the role of adapters would be an important aspect to focus on in social-service provision. The adapters may come in many forms and shapes, and they may often appear modest and insignificant for outsiders. Nonetheless, for the refugees, they can very literally be the ‘keys to the city’.

We have suggested a new conceptual framework for dealing with place, well-being and the reassembling of attachments in the field of refugee studies. However, several empirical issues should be researched further. It would be important to look more in depth at individuals’ experiences of othering and racism, which was the most common obstacle for our research participants’ efforts at plugging in (see also Garland & Chakraborti, 2006). The research on the ways in which people find and construct adapters in varying environments would provide important information for refugee resettlement and academic discussions. Finally, as we found in our data

describing the small-town social worker, it would be important to further examine the politics that come into play when actors try to plug into social assemblages in a way that may threaten established power relations and the status of other actors.

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<sup>1</sup> Thirteen interviews and the fieldwork have been conducted during the project *Social Empowerment in Rural Areas* (SEMPRE), and five interviews were done during the project *Family Separation, Migration Status and Everyday Security* (Academy of Finland 2018-2021). For the ethnographic fieldwork during SEMPRE, permissions for



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research were obtained from the city where the research was carried out (in 2016), following the University of Jyväskylä ethics instructions at the time. For the Family Separation, Migration Status and Everyday Security project, a statement from the Ethics board of the University of Turku was received in the Spring of 2018.

<sup>2</sup> To protect anonymity, the reference to the town statistic is not provided.

<sup>3</sup> Laestadian Lutheranism is a pietistic revival movement part of the Lutheran branch of Christianity. Members mainly live in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia. Conservative members do not drink, dance, watch television or use birth control.