

# Finding ‘belonging’ in the caring relationships of young people with migration experiences in South Africa

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*Abstract:* Young people with migration experiences in South Africa are navigating the everyday realities of a socially divided context, within which xenophobia is often marked. Countering narratives of individualisation and criminalisation of young migrants, this article explores caring relationships as a response to precarity. Drawing from participatory arts and story-based research with young people with migration experiences aged 14–25, this article explores the landscapes of care they are establishing with peers and siblings. It argues that young people are expressing and enacting care, for, with and about, others to build belonging and drive social change. This is an underexplored area and provides important insight into the meaning of everyday care and caring relationships as driven by young people themselves.

*Keywords:* Young people, migration, belonging, care, participatory research.

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## Introduction

Narratives about young people with migration experiences in research rarely incorporate their expressions of care and construction of belonging. Within studies on African youth migration, engagement with young lives is often from the perspective of what they lack, the pain of their experience, their perceived victimhood, or their lack of acceptance in society (Opfermann 2019; Mahati & Palmary 2018; Orgocka 2012). By focusing on experiences of victimhood and trauma, constructions of vulnerability are being centred. For young people with migration experiences, these identities of vulnerability risk creating hierarchies regarding who is more or less deserving of protection and care within society. Young people with migration experiences are being reduced to a single story (Ngozi Adichie 2009), and their whole selves and the multiplicities of their lives become silenced (Twum-Danso Imoh 2016). Not only does this undermine their agency, it also limits the possibilities of knowing about the generative aspects of their lives, such as where they find care, support, love and growth.

This article explores young people's expressions and enactments of care at personal, relational, and political levels within the South African context. Histories of colonialism and apartheid, and dominant narratives of intergenerational trauma and persistent violence make South Africa an important context for challenging reductive ideas of lack and victimhood. For young people with migration experiences, this intersects with the politics of belonging and experiences of exclusion and marginality, reinforced in public and political discourse through xenophobic stereotypes. The research shared in this article, presents knowledge created by young people with migration experiences aged 14–25 who co-created a participatory arts and story-based research project between 2017 and 2019 in Cape Town, South Africa. Young people's own narratives, including of their efforts to build their lives in new environments, do not centre on what they lack, they instead explore their complex and multiple caring relationships, in particular with peers and siblings. Care, in this context is understood from the perspectives of young people themselves, which focuses on peer support and friendship in their everyday lives. Their understanding of care is grounded in a relational experience, the interaction between people, and how this relates to a sense of feeling accepted, and having a place in the world.

Within research with young migrants in Europe, caring relationships between children and young people have gained greater visibility, including in response to inadequate care and protection within social welfare regimes (Rosen *et al.* 2019; De-Graeve & Bex 2017). Research on young people's role within caring relationships and networks in southern Africa has primarily focused on young people's caring capacities within extended kinship networks such as between children and relatives within households affected by HIV and AIDS (Robson *et al.* 2006; Young & Ansell 2003). This research also recognises care as an expression of young people's agency

within precarious circumstances, including as a factor driving their migration (Ansell 2009; Aitken 2001; Ofosu-Kusi 2017). Care between young people themselves, as peer support, as friendship and community building is however, underexplored. In her research with street-connected young people in South Africa, van Blerk (2012) argues that emphasis is placed on their being different, and out of place, as opposed to the interdependencies they hold within family and friendship networks. The result was that young people's aspirations for, and enactments of, care were made invisible, and consequently, this part of their lifeworld was silenced.

The silencing of these caring relationships takes on particular pertinence for young people with migration experiences in the South African context, where high levels of xenophobia exist (Hlatshwayo & Vally 2014; Cooper 2009). Young people with migration experiences find themselves constructed in relation to identities with a perceived threat (Cooper 2009). Research on the South Africa-Zimbabwe border highlighted that young Zimbabwean women who reported experiences of sexual violence found their own behaviour being policed, and their morality questioned by service providers (Mahati & Palmary 2018). Within this context, young people with experiences of migrating within (such as rural to urban migration) and from outside of South Africa are less likely to have improved life chances (Hall *et al.* 2015). Those arriving in the country without support networks face multiple barriers to their inclusion and well-being, including language, insecurity and violence, inadequate housing and restricted access to education and healthcare (Magqibelo *et al.* 2016; Willie & Mfubu 2016; Opfermann 2019).

This article presents an analysis of the narrations and experiences of young people with migration experiences shared within a participatory arts-based research project. This approach was chosen as part of a commitment to decolonising research. Being participatory meant that young people chose the research methods, and shaped the focus of the inquiry. The resulting overarching research question was to explore in what ways young people with migration experiences navigate identities and build belonging through their expressions of agency? Why, and how? In exploring this question, young people were particularly interested in how and why caring relationships take on a particular power as they navigate uncertain and unequal realities.

In undertaking the participatory research with young people as co-creators of knowledge, I followed Cooper *et al.*'s (2018: 40) argument for establishing youth studies for the Global South as an area of scholarship, within which, the 'loci of enunciation needs to become part of interpreting the meaning, relevance and usefulness of knowledge'. This means that understanding how care and belonging are entangled should be generated from within young people's situated knowledge. In this study, this enunciation was facilitated through arts and story-based research to support contextualised, and culturally specific self-expression by young people.

In generating situated and self-determined knowledge, notions of ‘childhood’ and ‘youth’, understood as universal and ‘natural’, are also being deconstructed and reconstructed as context-dependent, multiple (Ofosu-Kusi 2017; Huijsmans 2011; James & Prout 2015; 1990) and decolonised (Cannella & Viruru 2004; Cooper, Swartz & Mahali 2018). This article contributes new empirical knowledge grounded in young people’s subjectivities, on the complexity of caring relationships between peers and siblings with experiences of migration. The relational emphasis of the knowledge produced counters narratives that individualise and ‘other’ young people with migration experiences, and which rarely connect them to friends, care and the building of community.

Within this article, I first review literature which critically discusses the concept of agency from a situated perspective. From this, I argue that understanding agency as social navigation can provide nuanced insight into young people’s expressions of self within the world. I then explore literature on the concept of care, as a particular enactment of agency centred by young people, and how this relates to ideas of belonging. Following this, the participatory arts and story-based methodological approach is elaborated. I then present the empirical findings from the research which make visible young people’s enactments of social navigation as caring for, caring about, and caring with others so as to build future pathways and wider social change.

## **Agency, care and belonging within young people’s migration experiences**

### **Young people’s agency as social navigation**

The idea of ‘agency’ for children and young people in the global South has been largely constructed in relation to the neo-liberal ideal of the autonomous subject; that agency is defined as rational choice and individual freedom (Kesby, Gwanzura-Ottmoller & Chizororo 2006). In her critical analysis, Madhok (2013) argues that conceptions of agency as autonomous personhood reinforce colonial power relations, as they rely on stable contexts that assume actions are freely chosen and directed. The implication for agents in insecure, and ‘coercive’ contexts, Madhok argues, is that a failure to translate deeply-held desires into actions equates to a ‘lack’ of agency. Reinforcing this analysis, Wanjiku Kihato (2007) argues that migrant women are often positioned as lacking agency, in how they are labelled as ‘victims’. She argues that this both objectifies and makes invisible a person’s humanity, rendering them without power to change their circumstances.

In this article, I will explore how agency is understood within the ongoing negotiations in lives that are ‘in motion’ (Palmary, Hamber & Núñez 2015: 6). Informed by their research in Johannesburg, Palmary, Hamber & Núñez (2015)

conceptualise agency in relation to how people with migration experiences respond to, and cope with, precarity, and how they negotiate change, albeit within contexts of constraint. The precarity of everyday life involves understanding ‘people’s practices of help-seeking, care, support and healing in response to their everyday insecurity’.

Drawing on this idea of agency as negotiation, migration research globally has begun to engage with the concept of social navigation developed through research with young people in Africa (De-Boeck & Honwana 2005; Durham 2004; Honwana 2012; 2014; Vigh 2006), establishing, in particular, its utility in the lives of young people that move. Social navigation’ emerged from research with young people in conflict affected contexts (Oosterom 2019). It refers to the way that young people actively respond to socially ‘immediate’ struggles for survival, whilst plotting courses towards ‘imagined’ horizons. The language of horizons suggests ways of looking ahead which are socially, historically and culturally constituted (Vigh 2009). By emphasising the complexity of power relations within social environments Vigh (2010) highlights the importance of negotiations of power, going beyond defining certain groups as either powerful or powerless.

The value of social navigation as a concept is placed in its recognition of young people’s complex forms and expressions of agency as they move through dynamic contexts. Denov & Bryan (2012) argue that in the context of migration, ‘social navigation’ defies notions of victimhood, and reveals the decision-making power, networking, and survival strategies that young people employ to navigate flight. In Nunn *et al.*’s (2017) analysis of a young man’s settlement in Australia, social navigation disrupts notions of linearity. The concept of navigation leaves openness to the continuous nature of navigating, and the skills and resources required.

### **Navigating care and belonging**

Young people with migration experiences have moved for myriad reasons, including fleeing war, conflict, and persecution, to build lives for themselves outside of contexts of economic and political crisis, and to access opportunities so that they can better their lives. This experience of migration, whether dislocation or relocation, is a process of change that young people are navigating, and one that is deeply affected by shifts in relationships with people and places.

Research into the complex childhoods of young people in southern Africa, including independent child migrants, has incorporated an understanding of their caring practices, in particular their role in *caring for*, and *caring about*, others (Tronto 1989). The impact of the AIDS pandemic across sub-Saharan Africa has contributed to changes in household structure and the role of extended family relations, impacting young people as they have taken on roles as carers, household heads and migrants

(Nyambedha, Wandibba & Angaarg-Hansen 2003; Payne 2012; Robson *et al.* 2006). For children, this has often meant moving between extended familial households to provide support, and be supported (Ansell *et al.* 2012; Young & Ansell 2003; Hall & Posel 2018). In the South African context, young people have moved from neighbouring countries to join family members that have moved for labour, or to establish lives of their own (van Blerk 2012; Ansell *et al.* 2012).

Research conducted with young migrants in Italy and the UK by Chase & Allsopp (2021), found that caring, support and helping others were important capabilities identified by young people. Peer-to-peer support was seen as critical in the material, practical and emotional resources that young people could draw on. This emphasis on *caring about*, is that the emotional and affective dimensions of care can provide important insight into young people's aspirations and priorities. Caring for and caring about are deeply interconnected, in particular within the notion of a feminist 'caring ethics' (Tronto 1993) which establishes the role of care in ways of being in the world. Within the South African context, it is pertinent to relate the idea of caring ethics to the relational notion of *Ubuntu*, an ethics of communality, mutuality and reciprocity in decision-making (Chisale 2018).

Drawing on the framework of 'landscapes of care', as articulated by Milligan & Wiles (2010: 736), to unpack the complex interconnections between people, places and care, young people can be understood as navigating 'caringscapes' (Mckie & Gregory 2004: 2). This notion relates to the dynamic terrain that comprises a person's aspirations for, and obligations toward care. In their research with unaccompanied minors in Sweden, De Graeve & Bex (2017: 81) use the framing to take into account the factors that enable and constrain young people's access to significant care relationships. In this article, the notion is used to understand young people's articulation, construction and navigation of their own 'caringscapes', as a way of understanding and recognising their agency and power within their environments.

Within the diverse realities of young people with migration experiences, the intersections of care and belonging are pertinent, as they build their lives in new locations, both with, and without, family members. Home portrays the emotional attachment people hold to subjective experiences of familiarity and safety (Yuval-Davis 2006) and relational, cultural, economic, and legal influences contribute to feelings of home rooted in place (Antonsich 2010). Experiences of care from peers, and within communities, have been shown to enhance the quality of belonging for young people as caring relationships give value to who they are and their personhood (Bourdillon 2004; De-Graeve & Bex 2017; Robson *et al.* 2006; van-Blerk 2012; Rosen, Crafter & Meetoo 2019; Chase & Allsopp 2021). It is argued that places, are in turn, made meaningful by the social relations that include or alienate, provide care or drive loneliness (Massey 1994).

As articulated by Tronto (1993), the distribution of care and caring relationships within a landscape can make visible power relations and inequalities; what Yuval-Davis

(2006) refers to as the politics of belonging. Within analysis of the ‘moral economy of care’ the idea of deservingness ‘of care’ maps onto the politics of belonging (Watters 2007); who is and who is not deserving of care, friendship and peer support in a society. In exploring how and why young people navigate these politics of belonging, within caringscapes, I build on Kirby’s (1996) argument, (drawing from Probyn, 1996), and theorisations within research on youth and place (Habib & Ward 2019), that belonging should be seen as in-process, and a personal dialectic in negotiation with one’s surroundings. This conceptualisation provides an opportunity to better understand how young people with migration experiences creatively construct and resist power, in their navigation of care and belonging.

### **Methodology as participation, creativity and care**

This article draws from youth-centred research with young people with migration experiences living in Cape Town, South Africa. Participatory dialogue between the young participants and myself, as the researcher, led to the development of a participatory arts and story-based research methodology grounded in the contextual realities, aspirations and cultural histories of those involved. The participatory approach was a decolonising commitment underpinned by an understanding that people ‘hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, and should help shape the questions, [and] frame the interpretations’ (Torre & Fine 2006: 458). The role of storytelling was important within this, re-positioning the power to conceptualise and narrate agency, identities and belonging with young people themselves (Bradbury & Clark 2012; de-Leeuw & Rydin 2007). This moved away from extractive experiences of personal storytelling, for example within the asylum system, towards what Lenette (2019: 43) refers to as ‘alternative storytelling’. Creative expression further provided space for self-exploration, whilst recognising young people’s agency as artists and creators (Ncube 2006; Ndlovu 2017). The resulting process was both personal and relational and brought the individual and collective into a learning dynamic enabling co-creation through critical reflection (Willox, Harper & Edge 2012: 132).

### **Identifying and engaging young participants**

This research aimed to engage with realities of migration experiences across diverse histories, contexts and experiences. By going beyond binaries of migrant/non-migrant or citizen/other, the research complicated the experience of migration, dislocation, and relocation, and how this intersects with other markers of identity and belonging in young people’s lives. The young people involved held diverse backgrounds and had moved to Cape Town from war-affected countries such as Democratic Republic of

Congo, Burundi and Angola but also from complex crisis contexts such as Malawi, Zimbabwe as well as from within South Africa, and Cape Town itself. The use of the term ‘young people with migration experiences’ is in line with arguments emphasising the harmful nature of politicised labelling and categorisations. Seeing a more fluid and dynamic relationship between young people’s different positionalities holds the potential to counter divisive labels, and instead recognise shared claims for inclusion and rights (Landau 2012a).

The study took place with 51 participants who made up four participatory research groups of young people aged 14–25. Of those that participated in the research, 28 identified as male, and 23 as female. The four groups of participants reflected a sub-set of the diverse housing and residential environments of young people with migration-experiences in Cape Town. Two participant groups were with young people within residential care settings, one with young women, and the other with young men. A further mixed gender group was developed in partnership with a community-based organisation and a final mixed gender group was established more informally with young people within their own local area. The latter groups were located within two of Cape Town’s structurally marginalised townships.

### **Relationships and trust-building as ethical practice**

Organised in partnership with youth organisations working to enhance the lives of diverse youth facing marginalisation, a set of engagement activities including cooking sessions, youth workshops at museums and galleries, and organised hikes, aimed to build relationships and trust with young people living in Cape Town. From here, young people started to engage with the issue of migration experience in their lives, and made choices about whether and how they would like to participate in a project that brought this experience into view. As a female international researcher originally from the UK, with dual Iranian and Scottish heritage, I was also situated in this exploration, around issues of migration, power and privilege, including along lines of race, gender, migratory and socioeconomic status.

Cultivating relationships needed space and time, prior to, during and within the research process, and those established within this project built on five years of collaborative research partnerships with civil society organisations in Cape Town. These collaborations shaped an ethics application to Coventry University (UK), the researcher’s host institution, which supported a contextually grounded approach, including towards safeguarding and child protection. Relatedly, and in agreement with the young participants involved, all names in this article have been pseudonymised.

For the young participants informed consent was a continuous process. Following an initial agreement, continuous consent encouraged young participants to actively



grapple with decisions around what they wanted to include in the project and why. I also produced ethical practice agreements with each participant group. These were reviewed regularly, and provided direct accountability between myself as the researcher and the young participants. Deeper trust was also built through the research approach, over time, as young people saw the commitment in the project to centring their knowledge and agency play out in practice (Cahill 2007; Torre & Fine 2006). These approaches brought myself as the researcher and the participants into shared, contextualised ethical commitments grounded in care (Edwards & Mauthner 2012; Tronto 1993; Gouws & Zyl 2015).

### **Participatory arts and story-based methods in practice**

The central research processes took place over a period of between seven and ten months, through weekly workshops. Further cycles of action and reflection took place through unfolding opportunities for reflection and action over a further two years. Each of the four participatory research processes started at the personal level through sharing stories of lived experiences using creative and reflective techniques. From here, young people moved into cycles of personal, collective and relational learning through different creative modes (Wheeler *et al.* 2018). Depending on the participant group, young people's stories were developed as films, songs, poetry, theatre, visual storybooks, and body maps. The creative approaches connected to different young people's ways of feeling comfortable and confident in expressing themselves (Leavy 2018; Denov & Shevell 2019), and the process of art-making supported a sense of control and containment (Shahrokh & Treves 2020).

Grounded in a commitment to social justice, the research was also action oriented and questioned how spaces of inclusion could be created (Nunn 2020). The research moved through dialogic consciousness raising for both researchers and participants (Torre & Fine 2006; Cahill 2010). This learning process was also extended outwards towards social actors in the systems that surround young people's lives through influencing workshops and symposia with youth-workers, social workers, and government officials. Building on young people's research findings, the youth participants grew further initiatives—supported by grassroots organisations—including a youth-led peer support programme for young people newly arrived in Cape Town and a youth-led storytelling process with young men with complex vulnerabilities.

### **Participatory analysis and researcher synthesis**

Drawing from ideas of emergence, collaboration and dialogue in participatory research, the process of analysis and sense-making was iterative throughout (Blakey,

[Milne & Kilburn 2012](#)). I undertook reflective analysis workshops with the young people involved to highlight key themes emerging in their storytelling and arts processes. The analysis incorporated the multiple data that had been generated, including the transcripts of workshop discussions, the narrations of meaning connected to artistic outputs, the artefacts and stories produced. Further, through reflective diaries and conversations we captured the changes young people went through as they (re) defined and (re)presented their realities ([Jackson & Mazzei 2011](#)). As I worked across the four groups, I undertook a further layer of thematic analysis, to learn across and between their diverse experiences. I recognise this knowledge, alongside my ways of telling, are still only ‘traces’ of young people’s lives, and remain deeply entangled in my interpretation ([Denzin 1989](#): 26).

### **Understanding care and belonging in young people’s everyday lives**

Within the presentation of empirical findings that follows I enter into the caringscapes of young people with migration experiences in South Africa. It is important however to note that, whilst wanting to explore themes of care and belonging in the analysis of their research, the young participants highlighted that audiences should remain aware of the webs of pain, loss and violence in their pasts and experiences of exclusion, xenophobia and violence in their present lives. The emphasis on care presented here is not to undermine these experiences, but it is to show how caring relationships, in particular those amongst peers and siblings, both facilitated practical assistance and emotional support, providing sustenance to young people navigating the complex reality of being young and a migrant in a structurally unequal and socially divided South Africa ([Bradbury & Clark 2012](#); [Newman & De-Lannoy 2014](#)).

In the findings that follow the first theme presented focuses on young people’s work to care for peers and siblings whilst preparing for migration, within the migration journey and in building their lives in a new context. This care-work was both about navigating daily challenges, and providing the space for strategic future planning. The second theme highlights how caring for others brought a sense of personal value in young people’s self-definition. Young people’s expressions of care were interventions in creating the identities and belonging that they imagined, however within wider societal constraints. The final theme surfaces young people’s inclusive enactments of care, and how youth-led initiatives to build spaces and places of belonging are direct interventions into their caringscapes. The complexities of navigating unequal power relations whilst building care and belonging are also discussed, and signalled as an area of further research.

### **Caring for and about the future for self and others**

The caring relationships expressed between young people provided both everyday, and strategic support within their social navigation that created a foundation for future-building. Young people who migrated on their own highlighted how relationships with other children and young people became significant as an integrated part of their survival. In Peter's (aged 18) journey from Zimbabwe to South Africa, he spoke of the importance of other children and young people in passing on information about routes and strategies for moving without being arrested, sharing access to clothes and food, providing support and sharing ideas and strategies for migration:

I ran away to Harare where I stayed in the streets. I don't remember how long, but it was very long, maybe a year. I got clothes from my friends I made on the streets; my friend robbed a drunken man. I had a lot of friends on the street. My friends then told me we should go to South Africa. We took a train but when we got to the border, we got too scared to cross the border and went back to Harare. I then made two other friends who also said we should go to South Africa.

It was in these acts that we learn 'not only about violence but also aspects of the everyday that negotiate through and outside of violence' (Walker 2010: 9). These experiences of friends working together to strategise, and provide practical support were shared by many young men and women in this research. Takudzwa (aged 19), a young man originally from Zimbabwe, also explained how at 18, he experienced further dislocation, as he was asked to leave the family that was caring for him in South Africa. He said that this was because he 'was now a man' and was no longer perceived as a young person in need of care. At that time, he was writing his end of school exams, and his peers living in a shack in an informal settlement supported him to live with them without paying rent whilst he finished his education. In these examples caring relationships can be seen as a part of, and in support of, young people's strategic negotiations to build their futures.

Young people in this study linked their present caring acts to these earlier experiences. The group of young men that were living in the residential care setting, for example, explained how they showed care towards younger children, who would come in from 'the street' in a drop-in capacity. They would play games, do art and make them food. Reflecting on these expressions of care, Peter said: 'this is about providing hope, like others did for us, and giving these young children a way of seeing that a different kind of life is possible'. These caring relationships were reproduced again by older young people who had moved out of residential care settings into the community. Three young men in their early twenties who were extended kin from the Democratic Republic of Congo, opened up their home to other younger men preparing to leave care, or having recently left. Bassam (aged 21) said this was because, 'I knew how important our relationships with each other were in building up our lives in the community, and most young people don't have this, they don't have anyone'.

Seeing these caring acts as recreating kin or sibling relationships (Andrikopoulos & Duyvendak 2020) also helps to make sense of the flow of care from those older to younger, or across different positions of stability and security.

Young men in particular also shared their experiences of their commitment to caring for siblings, and how their experiences of social and economic marginalisation intersected with their aspirations for safe and just care. Joseph (aged 23), a young man from the Democratic Republic of Congo, was residing in a supported living environment for young men. He fought to have his 15-year-old brother stay with him after he learned that he had experienced abuse in a residential care setting. Joseph felt responsible for this happening, ‘because I was not there to protect him, a brother should be with his brother, so he is safe’. Although Joseph managed to take on the role of care and protection of his brother, he also felt conflicted in bringing his brother into a hostile environment with older youth. This experience shows how the enactments of care that young people aspired for were not always within reach, and their care work was both an effort towards building belonging, and highlighting feelings of ‘(un)belonging’ (Ward 2019) simultaneously.

This simultaneous experience of (un)belonging resonated for Jean (aged 22), a young man from DR-Congo, whose caring relationship with his brothers was complicated by fracturing within his family network. Jean had to move out of the home of an uncle that he was staying in with his two brothers because of tensions in the household, in particular because Jean stood up to a situation of domestic violence. However, he explained that this made his care a deeply significant intervention for him personally:

[I]t is hard for me to see my brothers because I don't have a good relationship with [my uncle]. But I am trying to make sure that I stay connected with them ... it is my responsibility to ensure that they stay positive and that they receive positivity and love so that they do not turn to into people that don't know how to love in their lives.

In recognising the significance of love and care in young people's development, Jean is potentially intervening in the effects of trauma in his brothers' lives. Although he was able to look towards the future, the sense of not being able to care for his brothers in the present, and ensure their safety, was quite overwhelming. As Jean explained in one of our group sessions:

I don't know how to find a, a way to make sure they are okay. My uncle [pauses] just treats them however he likes. It is more than just everyday stuff too, I also need to find a way for them to get their documents, but I don't have money, I also want to be in school, and this is really stressing me, agh, [shakes his head] ... you know it is too much stress.

Jean's experiences establish how young people's commitment to care is a significant responsibility, and highlights the emotional labour involved in building meaningful caring relationships in support of others' wellbeing and longer-term sense of belonging.

Young women spoke more negatively about feelings of being restricted, controlled and policed in their behaviour, and they felt that being ‘cared for’ enabled a position of power over them by adults, and legal caregivers, that was not always in their interest. A young woman with Angolan heritage called Esther (aged 17) also highlighted the complexities of sibling care for children and young people. She explained that the abuse she experienced from her mother led to her becoming ‘a mother to my sister’, and this made her ‘very sad’ as she was taken out of school. She felt that this ‘took away my childhood’. For Esther, her care-work undermined her access to education, constraining her sense of power, and her rights within her childhood. Her experiences also speak to the gendering of care-work which the burden has been shown to predominantly fall upon girls in sub-Saharan Africa (Robson *et al.* 2006).

### **Caring with others and building place-based belonging**

Young people yearned for close peer relationships, and friendships that they felt would give them value and enable them to bring value to others. Kabelo (aged 18), a young man from Lesotho, said that he wanted other people to see him: ‘as a guardian that can be there for other people that will always be there for others’. As Aviwe (aged 16), from the Eastern Cape, described, he wanted his identity to be seen as ‘kind, caring, positive and helpful’. The active construction of identity narratives of ‘being caring’ largely took place for young men, who related them to wider, racialised criminalisation and individualisation experienced in society. By focusing on others, they were establishing themselves as agents with positive contributions and conceptualising their belonging as being in constructive, reciprocal and caring relationships.

The young people shared how they were building care with others through spaces of peer support. Although these remained spaces of intimacy, they reflected the interaction of their caring values within the private sphere, with their connection to a public realm, albeit an intimate public (Poletti 2011). The spaces of peer support were built on shared foundations, whether of experiences of loss, dislocation and being placed in care, or of sociocultural intimacy and safety in self-expression. As Takudzwa (aged 18), originally from Zimbabwe, mentioned, this was particularly pertinent as he felt that he had to ‘work to make myself less visible in South African society because I don’t have [legal] status here’. The peer support groups were creating ‘alternate spheres for articulating and recounting experiences silenced’ (Das & Kleinman 2001: 3). This was an enactment of care produced with and for other young people with migration experiences.

This opportunity to learn from others and understand their experiences, helped young people to feel less alone and in turn build their sense of personal, or inner, strength. As Ramiro (aged 21), a young man from Angola, explained, ‘for young

people that came here, we all think our story is the worst story, and then you come here, and you find people who are stronger than you so I feel that young people are resilient because they don't feel alone'. Young people also explained how the isolation they experienced was disrupted by having a consistent place where relationships and friendships could grow. Sylvia (aged 18), a young woman born in South Africa to parents from the Democratic Republic of Congo, explained that, 'being in my area you don't really have that kind of environment, where they encourage you and things [like that]. You come here, and you meet new people, and you find yourself'. In these reflections the relationship between care and belonging is reflected, not only in the personal sense of strength being built through the caring acts of others, but also in the affective relationship with place, an environment within which positive caring relationships manifested.

This enactment of care and belonging with and for other young people, intersected with young people creating safe and supportive spaces to share their stories. Young people were creating witnessing spaces that upheld their sense of value and worth and reinstated their sense of power. Within this, I learnt from Natasha (aged 18), a young woman born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and who grew up in Angola, about the role of listening in caring for, and with, others.

I have learnt that through listening truly transformative things can happen, it is through listening that people can find their voice and then find a way to build a voice with others. It is so important that I give recognition to you and what you have taught me, to be relaxed in who you are and find your voice and your story and share that. ... As I move forward and grow, I now see all of you as a part of who I am, you have nurtured me and helped me to grow and I am the better and richer for it.

Through these listening relationships young people were supported to see themselves as someone with worth and value, not only to recognise their own contributions, but also that they were worthy of care themselves. The work these young people were doing to construct and enact care reflects Rogoff's (2003) articulation of human development, and how new generations adapt their heritage, and past influences, in the face of new circumstances.

Young people's aspirations for an enactment of care were taking place within relations of power, and distributions of caring relationships were constructing the boundaries of caring and belonging, and how far these could be extended to others (Tronto 1993). Aisha (aged 18), a young woman from Somalia, related this to her experiences at school.

It is important to me because I have experienced a feeling of not belonging ... when I was at my last school I felt like I didn't belong and I was rejected by the people around me. I felt lost and I didn't know what to do, I couldn't study. Now I have a friendship group.

Young people felt constrained by boundaries of belonging, or (un)belonging, as they considered how to mobilise the ethics of care they had generated within their peer support groups into their wider public lives. For example, Priscilla (aged 16), from Angola, who within this research process had set up peer support groups for young people with migration experiences, felt afraid to try to implement something similar within her school where she felt many people positioned her as an outsider. She felt that an encroachment on ‘their space’ at school could lead to violent push-back by other young people. Instead, she decided to continue to ‘act quietly’. Her strategy was to ‘try and understand why people behave the way they do to exclude others’, and ‘show other students that foreigners are kind and caring’. Priscilla thus developed a strategy to perform acts of everyday care as a form of quiet resistance (Weitz 2001).

### **Caring together for wider social change**

The participatory research process led by the group of young men living in a residential care setting led to the creation of a programme supporting creative expression with younger men and boys living in an early intervention setting within an informal settlement. They used the short films that they had made about their life story within their research process to create a space for sharing and dialogue with young men affected by issues including violence and neglect. They wanted to create a space to promote the idea that strength can come from sharing your story and counter harmful ideas of strength as exerting power over others. After watching Luke’s film, the following discussion took place between Luke (aged 15), originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Themba (aged 15), a young Xhosa South African:

Themba: In your story you said that you said that when your mum didn’t come, that you stopped crying, how did this happen, how can others find this ... peace?

Luke: Ya, you know, I don’t know, it isn’t that I stopped crying completely, it’s just that I wasn’t waiting for her to come anymore, I knew that she wasn’t coming. I tried to focus on who was here and that was my brother, I was lucky that he was here.

Themba: Ya I see, it is not easy and you’re not the only one.

This interaction was significant as it indicates how hearing someone else’s story can catalyse the possibility of an open conversation around healing and change. As Luke explains, the feelings of loss he was carrying stayed with him, but at the same time he explained how he was trying to build strength from his present relationships.

Within the youth-led peer support groups introduced above, young people were also actively constructing spaces of change in their lives. Within these groups were both young people with migration experiences living in community settings, and those living in residential care settings, from diverse genders, nationalities, ages and

racialised social positions, which shaped different relational, cultural and institutionally informed experiences. The young people emphasised that within these peer support groups, they were, seeking a kind of ‘togetherness in difference’, and to go beyond a ‘totalising “we”’ (O’Neill *et al.* 2019: 133) in order to move towards spaces that practise the kind of inclusivity they were looking for in wider society.

A further example of this inclusive enactment of care was within a dance-based social movement set up by Nimi (aged 21), a young man originally from Angola, who grew up in a residential care setting with his older sister. Nimi found dancing freestyle and drawing enabled him to express himself when he was growing up, which helped him to ‘work through my worries’. Through meeting other dancers, it became clear to him that he wanted to initiate a movement across diverse backgrounds. He created this movement with his friend Antonio (aged 21), who was born in South Africa with Mozambican heritage, and around 15 other young people participated. Nimi explained that, ‘I wanted to create a platform for other young people in Cape Town from difficult backgrounds to be able to express themselves and find ways to discover who they are’. Kaye, (aged 16), a mixed heritage South African young woman, explained how the idea behind the ‘movement’ spoke to her when she said, ‘dancing is a way of expressing my feelings... I decided to join the crew as I thought it was a really good way to like, learn different styles and meet different people and have a place to share this stuff with them’. Although Nimi and Antonio’s use of language of ‘movement’ was not explicitly constructing a political narrative, they were conscious that their efforts were happening in an overtly political space and built upon young people’s desires for expressing their feelings and stories. Their actions reflect findings in [Staheli’s \(2003\)](#) work on community activism, which trace how an ethic of care has been used to build towards ideas of social justice and inclusion.

Whilst recognising their shared realities of migration and aspirations for belonging, the young people involved in setting up and leading these groups emphasised the importance of diversity in these spaces. As Sylvia explained, ‘[S]o I feel like it is the environment and the people you are with, meeting new people from different places and seeing their point of view, not always yours. That’s what helps you to grow’. The young people were becoming ‘accountable for the processes which produce us’ by enacting their conceptualisations of belonging ([Carrillo-Rowe 2009](#): 28). At the same time, the power relations that intersect within the young people’s experiences and enactments created important differences. For example, gendered differences existed between the young women and men taking on leadership positions. Young men were translating their engagement into public and political life, whereas young women felt constrained or limited in doing this. This highlights the need for further exploration of the extent to which these spaces are addressing wider intersectional inequalities, how and why.



## Conclusion

By exploring young people's aspirations for, and enactments of caring relationships, this study has made visible young people's expressions of agency whilst navigating precarity. Through their experiences and enactments of caring relationships the young participants were constructing new imaginaries of self, and established the power of positive connection with others to affect change. In doing so, they are challenging individualised approaches to agency and the achievement of aspirations, reductive narratives of lack and victimhood. Rather, they are cultivating agency through their caring relationships.

Young people have shown that building care in their lives is a collective and relational effort, countering the often atomising approaches of institutional care and protection. The recognition of significant caring relationships that young people hold with peers and siblings, should be facilitated and nurtured within their pathway planning. Within this, supporting opportunities to listen to others and to be listened to can build strength and promote wellbeing. Young people, in particular those caring for siblings, felt a huge sense of responsibility, and sometimes overwhelming emotional labour. It is important that these findings do not place the burden of care onto young people, but rather provide a way of understanding what socially 'just' care could look like from their perspective.

The findings from this research have shown that where young people organise to come together to express themselves, and to witness life stories, a deep kind of empathic listening was possible. Further exploration of how and why young people navigate across boundaries of difference in their everyday lives to build understanding and be able to heal is important. Committing to learning how diverse lives touch and interweave, across social divides can become a catalyst for change towards inclusive, non-oppressive identities (Swartz & Soudien 2015).

Ultimately, young people's diverse experiences with and expressions of care help build an understanding of their aspirations for belonging. We have learnt that young people's expressions and enactments of care exist in relation to the exclusions that they have experienced. However, young people are responding to these exclusions with actions that aim to build close relationships made up of inclusivity and tolerance. This desire to hold significant friendships and experience trust and care with their peers from diverse backgrounds counters the exclusionary narratives that exist within the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006) in the South African context (Landau 2012b). As a result, the caringscapes that young people with migration experiences are building through their social navigation have a transformative potential. A potential that that deserves further exploration both within South Africa, and globally.

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