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# Migrants' experiences of a nature-based vocational rehabilitation programme in relation to place, occupation, health and everyday life

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## ABSTRACT

Forced migration has dramatically increased around the world during the last decade. Integration, including health and work among migrants, is an important topic in many European countries; thus, it is crucial to develop relevant approaches to address challenges that arise in tandem with migration and work. Nature-based intervention is one such approach that addresses different kinds of challenges related to human health and social welfare. The aim of this study was to build on knowledge about how a nature-based vocational rehabilitation programme influences perceived health and how it integrates into the everyday lives of migrants. Seven participants from the establishment programme run by the Swedish Public Employment Service were interviewed twice, at the start and at the end of the intervention. The semi-structured interviews focused on occupation, health in everyday life, and experiences of participating in the programme. Data were analysed and interpreted using narrative analysis. The findings are presented in three themes: meaning of place and belonging in the garden, the meaning of occupation and its transferability to everyday life, and navigating uncertainty in everyday life. The findings are discussed and interpreted using concepts such as capability, occupation, place, and work. The authors argue that successful integration in society rests on a combination of factors that need to be understood as part of a whole.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Occupational science; Social integration; Immigration; Work; Capability approach; Horticulture; Nature-based therapy

Forced migration has dramatically increased in the last years due to political instabilities, human rights violations, and armed conflict and war. A prioritised aspect of European migration policies has been to support working-age adult migrants to enter the labour market and contribute to society through paid employment. Although these policies place individual and social economic aspects in focus (Björngren Cuadra & Carlzén, 2015;

Östergren, 2015), work is also relevant from an occupational perspective (Yerxa, 2000) because it contributes to a conceptualisation of work as more than paid employment, as well as being seen as important for health and well-being (Jahoda, 1982; Simic et al., 2018; Waddell & Burton, 2006). In this study we build on a growing body of knowledge about the work-related challenges faced by migrants and asylum seekers, as viewed from an occupational

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perspective (Bailliard, 2013; Berr et al., 2019; Burchett & Matheson, 2010; Huot et al., 2013; Huot & Laliberte Rudman, 2010; Kielsgaard et al., 2018; Lintner & Elsen, 2018; Mpofu & Hocking, 2013; Nayar & Sterling, 2013; Rivas-Quarneti et al., 2017) and contribute to understanding forced migration and work in a Swedish context.

People who stand outside the labour market risk occupational deprivation, ill-health, and social isolation (Crawford et al., 2016; Gushulak et al., 2010; Simic et al., 2018). Aspects that are particularly at stake during forced migration and the asylum-seeking process are feelings of having less control, experiences of stigma and a change of roles, social identities and motivation (Burchett & Matheson, 2010). It is therefore important that strategies addressing occupational deprivation build on individual strengths and human diversity as well as target social structures (Crawford et al., 2016). Work has previously been categorised as a type of occupation within occupational science, however it can also be relevant to shift focus to how work is socio-politically situated and experienced within a repertoire of everyday life occupations. In this paper the authors focus on empirical data from one study where the individual experience is placed in the foreground and a broader critique of social systems is part of the analysis of individual narratives, occupations, and situations.

To situate this study, it is important to briefly highlight the recent background to immigration in Sweden. Over the past decades many people have sought refuge in Nordic regions (Pitkänen et al., 2017), and a significant peak was reached in 2015 in Sweden, with nearly 163,000 asylum seekers (Migrationsverket, 2020). This called for interventions aiming to facilitate integration into society and the labour market for newly arrived migrants. During the course of this study, all newly arrived migrants in Sweden, with residence permits as refugees and of working age (mostly refugees seeking asylum) were offered the possibility to be enrolled in an establishment programme (Act 2010:197). The aim of the establishment programme is to speed up the entry of new arrivals into the labour market, with early introduction of interventions supporting work entry considered crucial

(Martín et al., 2016). The establishment programme includes “Swedish for Immigrants” (SFI), work preparation, and community orientation. Despite the available initiatives and resources to support immigrants through the establishment programme, statistics show that it takes a long time for refugees to secure gainful employment. In the Nordic region the time for refugees to enter the labour market is markedly longer than non-migrants (Simic et al., 2018). Among those who immigrated as refugees in 2015, 3.7% were employed 1 year later, 15.8% 2 years later and 32.5% 3 years later (Statistics Sweden, 2020). In 2018, the law changed (Act 2017:584, on the responsibility for establishment contributions for newly arrived immigrants, 2017) in order to emphasise the individuals’ responsibility in establishing themselves in the labour market. In tandem with these changes, work disparities continue to exist between Swedish residents and residents from forced migration backgrounds, which is also an important reason to study migration and work.

Due to increased immigration there is an urgent need to develop methods and interventions that support health, work, and integration of migrants into society. Nature-based solutions have been suggested to be an effective resource to address different kinds of challenges related to human health and social welfare (European Commission, 2015). There is increasing evidence about positive benefits of natural surroundings on mental and physical health and well-being (Bosch & Bird, 2018) and increased integration can be supported by nature-based occupations (Gentin et al., 2018). More specifically, engaging in therapeutic horticulture occupations within a supportive social environment can have a positive impact on the health and well-being for refugees (Bishop & Purcell, 2013). However, there are still knowledge gaps relating to how and in what way these kinds of interventions can be effective for supporting integration (Gentin et al., 2019).

Because the use of nature-based rehabilitation in supporting work among newly arrived migrants is a new area, it is important to examine processes of work-entry grounded in experiences among those who have utilised the support and services, in this case through the

Swedish Public Employment Service (SPES) establishment programme (Pálsdóttir, Shahrada, et al., 2018). The authors drew upon empirical data from interviews juxtaposed with a critique of the migration to work-entry process using a capability approach (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993). The capability approach can be useful in illuminating influences, and arguably some paradigmatic idea disparities, in the Swedish refugee reception programme. A core assumption of the capability approach is that having resources is not sufficient for achieving a good life for citizens, who also require real possibilities to transform resources into something of social and personal value and relevance (Sen, 1995). In order to transform resources, the structural environment needs to promote motivation, self-organisation, self-responsibility, and skills development (Lintner & Elsen, 2018). Capabilities have been proposed as part of the answer to questions such as, “what is the person able to do and to be?” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 20). This is relevant when critically exploring the current system designed to help migrants acquire language skills and enter work. Despite extensive resources spent on language education upfront, there is insufficient flexibility and integration of language education with individualised needs, which results in a focus on one skill set that might be more or less relevant in a given type of work.

The aim of this study was to build on knowledge about how a nature-based vocational rehabilitation programme influences perceived health and how it integrates into the everyday lives of migrants participating in the establishment programme run by the Swedish Public Employment Service.

## Methods

This study was part of a project to evaluate a nature-based vocational rehabilitation programme for newly arrived migrants (Pálsdóttir, Shahrada et al., 2018). The design of the current study is based on narrative analysis of qualitative interviews (Polkinghorne, 1995). Grounding this study in narrative methods rests on the argument that individual experiences that are nested amid individual and social tensions, at times also difficult for the informant to put

into words, can best be understood through interpretive analyses that pay homage to context. Moreover, it was important to give a relevant space to the voices of the persons in focus in this study, integrating their words, stories, and in a broader sense experiences of nature-based vocational rehabilitation as part of forced migration and integration.

The study was guided by the ethical principles of respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice, in line with the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013). All participants were informed that it was completely voluntary to participate in the interviews and if they declined it would have no influence on the intervention. Ethical approval was obtained from the Regional Ethical Board in Lund (Dr.nr.2917/167) (can be retrieved from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority). In the findings, pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality and integrity of the participants.

## Setting

The study was conducted at Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) Alnarp Rehabilitation Garden, a living lab, where researchers, garden members, and community partners collaborate around nature-based interventions. Several nature-based rehabilitation projects targeting diverse groups have previously been hosted by SLU Alnarp rehabilitation garden (Pálsdóttir, Stigsdotter et al., 2018; Pálsdóttir et al., 2020). The 1.5 ha SLU Alnarp Rehabilitation Garden is divided into two major areas: 1) the formal and cultivation area and 2) the informal nature area (Pálsdóttir, 2016). The garden is designed for both doing and being. That is, it offers opportunities for different garden occupations and places for rest and recovery. The garden has outdoor and indoor settings, including two greenhouses. In the formal garden, there are different water features with either running or still water as well as flower beds and raised horticultural beds in enclosed garden rooms. The informal nature area offers an open view over a flower meadow framed with larger deciduous trees (Pálsdóttir, 2016; Tengart Ivarsson, 2011).

### ***The nature-based vocational rehabilitation programme***

All participants were part of the 24-month establishment programme run by SPES and had been identified, by a rehabilitation expert, to be in need of vocational rehabilitation in order to continue their participation (Pálsdóttir et al., 2016, Figure 1, page 9). The vocational rehabilitation programme intended to support and strengthen the participants' function and work ability through nature-based occupations (Millet, 2008; Pálsdóttir, Shahradsad et al., 2018). The intervention took its theoretical stamp from a salutogenic point of view of health and focus on supporting the participants' capability and perceived health (Antonovsky, 1979; Lillefjell et al., 2017).

The programme was carried out in groups of 6-9 people attending the intervention for 12 weeks, 3 days per week for 4 hours per day. It included various garden and horticultural occupations such as horticulture (propagation, growing, harvest, and post-harvest) and different garden work including maintenance and planting trees, plants, and bulbs. These tasks have different cognitive and physical challenges intended to improve the participants' mental and physical functioning as a part of their vocational rehabilitation. All garden and horticultural occupations followed the seasonal changes. The intervention was carried out by a team of two: The occupational therapist responsible for the vocational rehabilitation and a gardener responsible for all garden and horticultural tasks. All participants had a work ability assessment conducted by the occupational therapist during the 12-week intervention, based on the individual treatment goal set at the beginning of the programme. The outcomes of assessments were provided to the SPES after completion of the intervention, for further planning of suitable interventions to be included in the establishment programme on individual basis. For more detailed information about the programme and the specific occupations offered as vocational rehabilitation please see the study protocol (Pálsdóttir, Shahradsad et al., 2018).

### ***Recruitment and description of participants***

As part of the establishment programme in this study, there were four intervention groups implemented during April 2017 to July 2018. Participants were consecutively recruited, and we aimed to interview two persons from each of the four groups, in order to gather individuals' experiences from different groups and across different seasons.

Inclusion criteria for the project and this study were: being part of the establishment programme and in need of vocational rehabilitation due to ill health, with resultant lack of motivation or strength to participate in other occupations within the programme; being aged between 20 and 65 years and Arabic or Farsi speaking; reported sleep disturbance; and wanting to participate in the programme of their own free will. Also, they needed to be able to commute from their home to the garden. Exclusion criteria were showing signs of severe depression and anxiety and presence of suicidal risk. The assessments for inclusion were conducted by a rehabilitation coordinator at SPES.

Seven participants (4 females, 3 males) were recruited for this study. Their ages ranged from 39 to 63 years old. All of them had fled their home countries and been granted a residence permit in Sweden. Some had family connection in Sweden; others had their family spread out in different countries. They had been in Sweden between 6 months and 4 years before entering the programme. Their educational level varied from no formal education to a university degree. Most of the women had never worked outside the home nor had formal education, whereas the men had worked, for example in trade or machinery. Participants came mainly from urban settings, that is, densely populated cities and only a few had prior gardening or horticultural experience.

### ***Data gathering***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each informant during the first and last week of participation in the nature-based intervention, which resulted in 14 interviews. The

interview guide covered how the participants experienced occupation and health in their everyday life and during the intervention, and what life events and/or aspects of the intervention might have influenced any changes in their health and everyday life. The goal of the first interview was to establish a trusting relationship and was based on questions about their personal history, current life situation, and expectations about the intervention. In the second interview the questions focused on changes in everyday life, experiences of taking part in the intervention, and thoughts of the future. The interviews were conducted by the first author in a room at Alnarp Rehabilitation garden together with an interpreter and the interviewee. The interviews where audio recorded, lasted approximately 1 hour, and were transcribed verbatim.

### **Data analysis**

Narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995) was used to analyse the data. All interviews were read by all three authors to grasp a sense of meaning in context and as a whole. The first author applied open coding to the first six interviews to organise data inductively and achieve meaningful expressions. Thereafter, the first and third author explored and discussed the logic of the codes and if the level of abstraction was adequate to the aims of analysis. In the iterative coding process, codes were added, refined, and merged in order to thematically organise the data. After this, the second author read through all coded text to check for accuracy between codes and the interview text. All three authors engaged in discussions where codes were compared and clustered according to shared meanings or where codes were identified as illuminating various aspects of a phenomenon.

This was an extensive process where the authors' different disciplines and areas of knowledge contributed to analyse the data from different perspectives. Themes were written to illustrate common and diverse narratives and experiences of the nature-based vocational rehabilitation programme at Alnarp, and its integration into everyday life, based on and grounded in the analytic

codes. The themes were continually discussed between all the authors and re-organised through the analytic process, resulting in three main themes. Comprehensive examples are provided in the findings for the reader to determine confirmability and trustworthiness. The quotes included in this manuscript were translated into English by the first and last author separately and compared for consistency. When there were inconsistencies all the authors discussed the wording, prioritising meaning over semantic detail. Final translations were discussed and agreed among the authors. In the external professional language review, both the English and Swedish version of the quotations were reviewed. The language reviewer was asked to specifically review the accuracy of the translated quotations.

### **Findings**

For participants in this study, the rehabilitation garden at Alnarp was not only a place to reach goals and measurable outcomes, it was also described as a place to do and be, yet it was filled with challenges and uncertainty. This was expressed through the three main emerging themes that influenced participants' perceived health and everyday life whilst participating in the programme: 1) *Meaning of place and belonging in the garden*, 2) *The meaning of occupation and its transferability to everyday life* and 3) *Navigating uncertainty in everyday life*. Each theme includes sub-themes on specific aspects, illustrating the participants' experiences.

#### **Theme 1: The meaning of place and belonging in the garden**

The nature-based vocational rehabilitation programme contributed with a place where the participants could find peace and quiet. For some, it evoked memories from their home country. Being there and engaging in occupation was described as contributing to integration into Swedish society. It was also a place that offered the possibility of relating to other persons. Most of the time, the meaning of place contributed to a sense of well-being.

### **To settle in at Alnarp**

Being at Alnarp was described as being able to land in another context and take a break from worries that imbued everyday life. Some participants experienced that nature in itself had a calming effect, reduced stress, and gave energy. Josef described the time at Alnarp as “*escaping from the truth*”, in a positive sense. He forgot about difficulties and worries when he left the city to get there, and he expressed feeling so free when he “*came out into nature*”. This experience was shared by Zarah, who also felt free from disturbances, stress, and discomfort when in the garden. For some, Alnarp sparked earlier experiences of gardening and memories of their homeland. Zarah, Abir, and Maria spoke about being and doing in the garden at Alnarp as reminding them of their home village and of how life was before the war. For Josef, spending time in the nature at Alnarp was like regressing to when he was young. “*When I get to be out in nature here at Alnarp, I feel like when I was little and out in nature playing*”. His father was a garden engineer and taught him to plant when he was little. These emotional ties to the garden can be seen as starting points in connecting with Swedish society. Zarah also explained that “*one important thing that had an impact is the way we were received by the staff here*”.

### **A place to meet other people**

Being at Alnarp was also a place that opened up interactions with other people. Several found new friends among the participants in the programme. Lukas experienced a strong fellowship within his group, talking about them as his family. He said:

*Exactly, it's been like we who are here are around the same age, so we are many that have almost or yeah almost similar mentality and everyone has some form of problem with health. It can be diabetes or something else, so we understand one another well; so, we have been like one big family and we help each other and collaborate.*

However, whereas Lukas placed value in being able to share experiences, Hanna found it exhausting to spend time with people who

were all in pain. The leaders were described as “*friends*” or “*sisters*” with whom the participants expressed good collaboration and for many, one of the rare contacts with “*Swedish people*”. Gorgis was grateful that the leaders had helped him to become more aware of his feelings. He explained how they had encouraged him to listen to his body and be tentative towards its limits, something that he found helpful and that he could practice in his everyday life.

### **Theme 2: The meaning of occupations and its transferability to everyday life**

While in the garden at Alnarp, participants felt they were caring for the garden, learning new things, and that they were contributing and being useful. However, transferring what they learnt and experienced at Alnarp into everyday life was challenging.

#### **Caring for the garden and trying out new things**

Many of the participants experienced caring for the garden as meaningful and providing them with a purpose. For example, to prepare and eat what they had grown themselves was satisfying. Abir expressed the meaning of caring for the garden as she was giving life while working in the garden:

*I mean, for me it's life here. A bush or what I grow. When I see this, that it gets a little yellowish and I give water and it grows. I feel like life [the interpreter clarifies - she says human (life), but it is like life, like I save a life but she says like a human (life)].*

Spontaneous occupations, unrelated to gardening, also contributed positively to community and capacity building in the group. For instance, Zarah learned to ride a bicycle during the breaks. She emphasised the feeling of liberation while speeding by on the bike and also gratitude towards having the opportunity to learn how to ride. “*I feel like the happiest of all to have had the chance to learn to ride a bike*”. Abir raised the physical benefits of bicycling and how this occupation filled her body with energy and led to less pain in her back and hips. Josef emphasised the doing perspective in the programme as something positive. He said that at Alnarp they

were doing things together in the garden, which led to shared moments that gave birth to new things to talk about. In reference to another programme in which he had participated, they did not do anything, thus he had only talked about his history and problems; since they had nothing else to talk about.

Some of the occupations that participants engaged in at Alnarp were experienced as promoting integration into Swedish society. Cooking was such an occupation, with several of the other women appreciating spending time in the kitchen and preparing what they had harvested in the garden. Zarah explained:

*I have learned [from the staff] how to cook certain Swedish dishes, also what kind of plants you use in cooking and I think it's important because you are going to live in this country and it's not possible to just ignore this integration, but you have to integrate yourself.*

Although learning the Swedish language was not a primary aim in the programme, several participants expected to learn Swedish at Alnarp and they also felt that they did. Further, they learned to communicate in other ways than words. For example, Maria said: *"We understand each other even though I can't answer because of the language, but I still understand when they talk to me and they understand me too"*. Abir believed that language was the key to entering a new society and Zarah expressed the importance of learning the language: *"The Swedish language is important; for me, first and foremost, it allows me to not be dependent on someone, such as people from social service, in terms of the financial part that I can arrange my own finances"*.

### ***Transferring experiences from Alnarp to the everyday was possible but challenging***

Although the temporary escape from worries that some participants experienced was positive, it was challenging to transfer what they learned at Alnarp into everyday life and when leaving Alnarp the problems resurfaced. Some participants described how already on the bus journey on their way home from Alnarp the positive energy began to subside, being replaced by

worries and tensions awaiting at home. Josef, who felt free and forgot his worries when he came to Alnarp, later described that when he returned home to "reality", the problems and everything that needed to be done bounced back at him. He described that *"when you come here to Alnarp, you escape from your worries, but when you get home, the first two hours are nice and easy with no problems, but then [you get into] the same routine"*.

He thought that even though the place, nature, and the time at Alnarp was good, it is too short a time to have a lasting effect on everyday life. In contrast, other participants described how they managed to integrate new knowledge in their everyday life. For Abir, it was about integrating bicycling into her daily routines, and for Zarah it was about cooking healthy food. When asked if they would benefit from what they had learned, Zarah replied: *"Of course, no doubt and a big part is the cooking. Here, I have learned to cook in a healthier way compared with how I am used to cooking, which is rather heavy"*. She explained that everything she experienced as positive at Alnarp she had tried to transfer into practice at home.

### ***Theme 3: Navigating uncertainty in everyday life***

Participants' lives were characterised by their own and significant others' health being unstable and everyday life uncertain. They were uncertain about the enrolment process and what they were supposed to do or gain from being in the programme. When leaving the programme, they described being uncertain about what to do next and how the future would be. The participants identified many different strategies and resources to handle all this uncertainty, such as going for a walk to clear one's thoughts, finding strength in praying (to God) or through relationships with family and friends, including the other participants at Alnarp and the staff, as well as from Swedish people and society.

### ***To feel worried and uncertain about one's own and significant others' health and well-being***

Health and well-being was affected by life events that occurred during the programme, both

positively and negatively. For some, their housing situation resolved for the better, but others explained that concerns about their housing situation, their significant others, and how they would be able to support themselves in the future were constantly present. Even though most participants experienced problems related to their health, many described that they felt better while being at Alnarp. Zarah described how she felt free from the hassles, stress, and discomfort she had known before and that she had got more energy and felt better since coming to Alnarp.

Many felt burdened by their relatives' health problems and worried about relatives who were in a war zone or were a refugee in another country. Zarah had been denied a family reunification application. Some had children who were too old to be reunified; others had children who had chosen to stay in the home country. Josef was constantly thinking about how to get his fiancée to Sweden. Maria was worried about her son, who had just been called to reserve duty in Syria. When asked what were her thoughts, she replied: *“Well, it is hard to describe the feelings actually; it is hard because sometimes I sit and think that he has passed away because in the city where he is there are bombings everywhere. So, it's painful for me”*. She was in contact with her children every day. *“I call them daily. Although I cry quickly, I am strong actually; because sometimes you hear bad news and instead of just breaking down, you can stand on your own legs if you are prepared”*.

### **Ambiguity and unclear expectations regarding participation in the intervention at Alnarp**

All participants had previously attended SFI (Swedish language course for immigrants), and some described that they had felt bad because of the stress and pressure they felt there, and that the pace was too fast for them. The programme at Alnarp was then offered based on their described health problems in order to provide occupations that suited their needs. However, several participants expressed that they had received limited information about why they should be at Alnarp or what the programme would lead to. Their case officers had

told them that they should go to Alnarp and that it would do them good and they relied on that. Josef described how Alnarp was introduced by his case officer as: *“This place should make you feel a little better mentally; you will forget the worries you have, [when you] work with plants and flowers in nature; it can be healing”*. However, he kept wondering how a programme over 12 weeks could have the power to change his health status and everyday life. Although most participants understood that participation in the programme was voluntary, some described the opposite: *“The Employment Service sent a mail saying that we should come here. ... They didn't ask us if we wanted to or not, but they said we should take part in this activity and I went there”*.

When expectations did not match reality, dissatisfaction could easily arise. Hanna was disappointed that the group was not bigger and filled with liveliness and playfulness. She had also expected that she would receive physical (passive) treatment for her pain through the programme, which was not the case. While some were very happy to attend, others were not. The participants who had enjoyed gardens and gardening before had a more positive attitude. Gorgis expressed that he enjoyed being in nature, planting flowers, and watching them grow. He saw the time as work training, where he could learn more about cultivation and plants. Many expressed a hope that they would feel better after participating in the programme. Learning the Swedish language was not a central part of the programme and a common ambition among participants was to combine the programme with SFI, but this did not prove to be possible for various practical reasons. Hanna expressed great dissatisfaction with having to quit SFI, as she very much wanted to learn Swedish but thought she had forgotten many Swedish words and grammar.

### **An uncertain future**

When the programme at Alnarp ended, the future was uncertain for most of the participants. Most wanted to find a job and stay in Sweden. Possible employment could be anything from office work, cultivation, gardening, working with animals or children, or cooking and sewing. How to enter the labour market

was for most participants still filled with uncertainty. But having a job was important for several of them, as exemplified by Maria's statement: "*If I get a job, it would be so good for me because I cannot imagine being at home and staring at the walls when the children are in school. I have to do something*".

## Discussion

The nature-based vocational rehabilitation programme at Alnarp had a clear foundation in doing meaningful occupations in a garden environment. The participants all experienced difficulties with committing to the regular establishment programme. Being in the garden gave the participants a break from everyday hassles and stress, where they could engage in occupations with others and feel a sense of calm. Gardens can be viewed as a refuge and a safe place, where people can let go of their everyday worries (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Pálsdóttir et al., 2014) and instead experience self-rewarded values of engaging in enjoyable occupations (Persson et al., 2011). This experience of the garden environment could also be referred to as *being away*, an attribute of a restorative setting (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1998; Pálsdóttir, Stigsdóttir et al., 2018). In such a setting, people can rest and recover from everyday worries and just for a moment feel enjoyment (Poulsen et al., 2016). The participants with experiences of forced migration expressed an urgent need for mental recovery, and several described the feeling of returning to tiredness and worries after pleasant time spent in the garden.

Being allowed to stabilise and feel safe is the first step in trauma treatment (Herman, 1992), allowing people to process information, be curious, and learn new things in a social context first when they feel sufficiently safe (Gerge, 2017). This is in line with the first theme, "The meaning of place and belonging in the garden". This first step can be seen as a condition to being able to try out and learn new things, which are important attributes to being able to enter the labour market. Several studies indicate that individuals in need of mental recovery can benefit from engaging with the natural environment through meaningful occupations (Hartig et al., 2014; Sonntag-Öström et al., 2014;

Wästberg et al., 2020), and only a few hours of engagement per week can contribute to significant improvements (Corazon et al., 2019).

The participants described how being in the garden milieu brought back pleasant memories from times before the war back home. To experience familiarity through pleasant memories evoked by nature-based occupations can support emotional ties and give a place meaning. As such, the rehabilitation garden can serve as a meaningful place for the participants (Lillefjell et al., 2017). When people are forced into migration, narratives, roles, identities, health, and the possibility of creating a future can be negatively impacted (Huot & Laliberte Rudman, 2010). Our findings show that the garden can be seen as a place that offered a possibility to connect to the new country and spark thoughts about a possible future.

This leads us to the garden as a place for doing, where the second theme of the findings captures the participants' subjective occupational experiences. Hammell's (2009) categorisation of occupations and Doble and Santha's (2008) occupational needs can be applied to how the participants experienced their occupations. Through doing things and caring for the garden, the participants felt responsible and needed, and this doing also helped them to connect and facilitate integration. The need for affirmation was addressed when doing things together and for others. For example, several participants brought food to Alnarp, and in doing so received some kind of affirmation from others, which highlights the importance of contributing.

As the programme was a group intervention, the need for companionship was easily addressed for the majority; however, there were participants who were dissatisfied with the liveliness, playfulness, and size of the group. Agency was experienced by choosing what occupations to do, also for how long and with whom to perform them. The leaders' tasks were to guide the participants in finding meaningful occupations in which to engage, taking appropriate breaks, and listening to their individual needs. The need for accomplishment was addressed when the participants were engaged in different kinds of doing, learnt and mastered new skills, and met the

expectations of others and their own goals. The participants also experienced restorative occupations in the garden, by walking around and finding their own peaceful corner. The need for pleasure, contentment, happiness, and joy was, for example, addressed by the woman who rode a bicycle for the first time. Finally, the need for a sense of coherence was something that many participants struggled with, and it is illustrated across the three themes how their engagement in occupations in the garden helped them to connect to the past, the present and, to an uncertain but for some participants, a possible future.

Although participating in the programme seemed to have had several benefits for the participants, several of them felt unsure about the next step and their future work-life. They expressed that they did not understand the process they were involved in nor what to expect after the intervention was ended. Other approaches such as Individual Placement and Support (“Place then Train”) that have been shown to be effective in gaining employment and community integration among people with severe mental illness (Bejerholm et al., 2015) might be worth evaluating in vocational rehabilitation programmes for migrants.

In relation to the long-term goal to enter the labour market, we drew on a capability approach as a tool in arguing that it is not just a matter of providing resources; a person must also have the ability to use and apply the resources and there must be supportive structures that allow this to unfold. A capability approach can provide relevant conceptual tools in exploring how work entry is supported for recent immigrants who have faced difficulties in securing paid employment. Capabilities are about “freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 20). Using this lens, a person’s abilities are part of capabilities, but capability is not conceptualised as a solely individual endeavour.

Participants in this study reflected on the importance of language as an ability and important prerequisite to being able to obtain work and be part of Swedish society. However, the participants’ narratives are also laden with

stories about uncertainty and ambiguity. Uncertainties were grounded in a broader socio-political environment exemplified by having family members trapped amid migration processes, feeling down, and not understanding how to navigate through different public systems. Utilising the capability approach, nuances that emerge when people receive training and support in developing particular skills (internal capabilities) can be teased out, such as when learning a language or acquiring skills for a job, while there can still be socio-politically hinderances or barriers to expressing internal capabilities. This is what has been referred to as combined capabilities, which are the sum of complex internal and external factors.

The capability approach is relevant in understanding the results from this study because it provides a frame in which to socially situate and operationalise factors that contribute to poor work integration among persons who have undergone forced migration, refuting an over simplistic ascription of the problem to the individual. For example, as a consequence of the passing of 2010 Act (2010: 197), there was a shift in responsibility from municipalities to SPES for supporting work among recent migrants. The introduction of, and continued change in, Acts exemplifies an external factor that impacts on work possibilities among migrants. In tandem with the change in the law and shift in responsibility, the ‘work line’ (arbetslinjen) was introduced for immigrants who did not have work. Its aim is to ultimately enable a 40-hour work-week through support over a 2-year period that would include compulsory activities such as community information, Swedish language courses, and workplace internships. The work line initiative was intended to increase employability, and it particularly targeted persons who were deemed to be able to work at least 25% of full-time.

Systematically working with health promotion and health education in the same group has thus far not been introduced in the Swedish refugee reception programme (Eriksson-Sjöo et al., 2012). After the completion of the vocational rehabilitation programme in the current study, the law changed again (Act 2017:584, 2017). This new law also emphasises the individual’s responsibility to establish

themselves on the labour market. The law is reinforced so that individuals who do not participate in proposed efforts risk getting their compensation withdrawn, with the intention of incentivising people to establish themselves. There is a risk that when the causes of ill-health are put on individuals instead of social structures, so too will the demands for solutions be linked to the individual instead of changing the external social structures that contribute to ill health (Asaba et al., 2020).

When seen from a broader occupational perspective, the social context in which migrants in this study seek work can be seen as what has been described as “activated but stuck” (Rudman & Aldrich, 2016, p. 4). In other words, each individual who participated in the nature-based rehabilitation programme had been and was activated in a process towards gaining paid employment, however many other occupations in their daily lives pertaining to family, friends, and balancing a new culture were made invisible within a formal system. One interpretation of the nature-based rehabilitation site as a safe haven can be that it was a place in which members were allowed to make the otherwise invisible visible. Moreover, balancing a repertoire of migrants’ occupations, including seeking work, has been described as something that can involve multiple injustices and as requiring more attention (Rivas-Quarneti et al., 2017).

When integrated with a capabilities approach, a basic tenet is that civic and social participation should not only be a basic right, but also cannot be fulfilled unless other basic needs such as bodily health and senses, imagination, or freedom of thought are also met. In the first theme of the results, the importance of being at Alnarp is illustrated. Although the concept of ‘being’ can be seen as passive, there is a potency in being in this context because it can be seen, not as betwixt and between (Bamber et al., 2017; Turner, 1986), but as the liminal space in which people can build skills, energies, and hopes to move forward (Mondaca & Josephsson, 2013; Peralta-Catipon 2009; Turner, 1986). The concurrent building of potential and establishing a sense of safety in being are conditions for planning ahead. Participants raised needs for reasonable expectations that given capabilities still exist in the

future. When participants lost confidence that capabilities exist, feelings of precarity arose and this in turn was exponentially more corrosive than strengthening. For the participants in this study, experiences of precarity cut through stories about family, work, friendship, being part of society to revisit just some of the results. The participants’ expressions of uncertainty about what would happen after the programme ended likely contributed to insecurity concerning capabilities. The need to plan ahead for future occupations before the end of the rehabilitation programme is crucial to limit unnecessary uncertainty and worries for the future (Nordh et al., 2009) and thereby set a focus on constructive thoughts and actions.

The occupational nature of refugee resettlement stresses the need to develop resettlement life skills, such as finding information, accessing services, and managing money, tenancy issues, employment, and education (Suleman & Whiteford, 2013). Resettlement life skills is dependent on the transferability of existing skills and the individuals’ occupational needs, which can be hindered or facilitated by environmental and political aspects. Based on our findings, we argue that it is not only a matter of multiple life skills, but a matter of situating these in a context of occupations needed to meet individual needs in society (Aldrich et al., 2017). Our findings show how participants were struggling to navigate uncertainty in everyday life and had difficulty transferring experiences they made in the garden into everyday life. It can be assumed that this transferability requires more time than was available in this programme and according to the capability approach (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993), participants also require actual possibilities to transform resources into something of social and personal value and relevance (Sen, 1995).

### **Limitations and further research**

We faced similar methodological challenges in conducting research involving ethnic minorities as discussed by Morville and Erlandsson (2016). Performing interviews through an interpreter challenged the development of a respectful, confident, and trusting relationship. The interviewer used strategies such as observations and communications in simple language to

build rapport with the interviewee. Member checks were done at the end of each interview when the interviewer summarised her understanding of what the interviewee had been talking about and asked the interviewee to determine accuracy. Other studies have reported that the interviewees did not always have trust in the interpreters (Ikonen, 2015), but this was difficult to judge here.

Another challenge was the use of several different interpreters. Using a specific interpreter trained for the project could probably have reduced those challenges and improved the chances that the interpreter would capture the meaning of the interviewer's questions (Ingvarsdotter et al., 2012). Cultural and language barriers during the interviews, for example talking about feelings and experiences with an unknown person, seemed difficult for some participants and resulted in some interviews being more descriptive in nature. There were also challenges related to analysing the data. In the present study, only the Swedish statements of the interviews were transcribed. The transcriptions show how the interpreters sometimes interpreted in the third person, like "he is saying that he likes weeding". Triangulating the data in a translation and back-translation process, as described by Morville and Erlandsson (2016), could improve the trustworthiness of the data.

Several participants had experienced post-traumatic stress disorders triggered from war and forced migration, which could have been a limitation. However, participants that needed specific therapy or treatment due to pain, trauma, or sleep disturbances were referred to the regular healthcare system. The exclusion criteria of severe depression, anxiety, and suicidal risk allowed for exclusion of participants with needs that could not be handled in this programme.

Despite existing challenges and limitations, it is important to take on the challenges of including migrants and ethnical minorities in studies, in order to live up to the World Federation of Occupational Therapists' (WFOT) position statement on human rights (2019), highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity. The authors encourage advancement of methods that include people with other native languages or minorities in research to develop socially relevant research knowledge. Future studies would benefit from having a longitudinal approach, following

migrants process of integration into work. Further, studies, policies, and interventions should focus on individual, social, and political factors to support work entry for migrants.

## Conclusion

The nature-based programme in a rehabilitation garden gave the participants a break from everyday hassles and stress, which allowed for a temporary feeling of calmness through engaging in meaningful occupations and subsequently feeling safe. However, the temporary feeling of calmness could be paradoxical when juxtaposed with a sense of uncertainty and feeling stuck in everyday life. Supporting work entry for migrants in Sweden rests on a combination of social, political, and individual factors; furthermore, the detriments of societal discourses that place blame at the individual level should be dealt with in future policy and intervention work.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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