Socio-spatial initiatives to foster belonging among refugee families resettled in Canada:
A narrative review and future directions

About the project:

Displacement and resettlement can be a destabilizing experience for refugee families, exacerbating feelings of isolation and detachment. Refugee families arrive in the receiving country after facing a variety of challenges ranging from traumatic stress reactions related to living in a war-affected context to stress during displacement journeys. Displacement and resettlement in an unfamiliar place far from their country of origin has important impacts on virtually every aspect of families' socio-spatial environments including cultural norms, religious traditions, and support networks. Despite the importance of both the social and physical environments in supporting wellbeing and belonging among refugee families, programs and policies that assist in the resettlement of refugee families often do not explicitly address elements related to place. Therefore, our narrative review focused on socio-spatial initiatives that help refugee families to maintain their cultural identities and connections with their country of origin and establish a new sense of belonging in their communities of resettlement.

We identified relevant sources from 2012-2022 reviewing academic literature, policy documents, and key resources recommended by experts and local refugee-serving organizations. Synthesizing knowledge on refugee belonging from family-centred and place-based sources revealed a dearth of publications with a socio-spatial focus. Often found were small exploratory studies or theoretical musings suggesting that a socio-spatial approach to understanding refugee family belonging is in its infancy. Nonetheless, our review underscores the potential of this focus for informing practice and policy considerations in pursuit of greater refugee family belonging and wellbeing in the global context of an emerging asocial society.

Key findings:

- There is value in taking a socio-spatial approach to understanding refugee family belonging as it recognizes the multidimensional nature of belonging, as well as the integral role place plays in the displacement and resettlement experience.

- Notions of place permeate the refugee experience. As such it is a useful concept by which to view practices, policies, and research with refugee families. Place, however, is an abstract concept because of its ubiquitousness, and therefore its role in the human experience is often taken for granted. In the sources we reviewed, socio-spatial approaches included locations (dwellings, community centres, green spaces), activities (homemaking, family practices, everyday interactions with others), or a methodological approach (spatial analysis, ethnographic fieldwork).

- Developing a sense of belonging is tied to multiple interactions and exchanges between both people and place and that occur from micro to macro spaces. Refugee family belonging results from familiar repetitive actions in everyday spaces and social interactions between people. For these families, a sense of belonging can manifest as attachment to home, neighbourhood, and to previous places such as refugee families' homes in their country of origin.

- For refugee families, a sense of belonging includes elements of safety and security. Creating physical environments free from fear or harm fosters the security needed for refugee families to focus on everyday activities of belonging like homemaking, interactions with neighbours, community engagement, and attending school or work.

- Finding places of respite, joy, and belonging in their resettlement communities is beneficial to the wellbeing of refugee families. In particular, parks, green spaces, and community centres provide opportunities for refugee families to engage with the restorative aspects of the environment and to connect with others for leisure or informational exchange.

- Having a sense of belonging to both country of origin and country of resettlement is common among refugee families and reflects the complex pathways to belonging. This 'transnational belonging' can be beneficial to refugee family wellbeing by increasing psychological and sociocultural adjustment and engagement with the resettlement community.

Policy implications:

- Program and policy design should consider the plural levels of belonging and multiple opportunities to impact feelings of belonging from the family to the community to the larger nation-sate.

- In addition to focusing on individuals, programs should consider family-focused approaches that reflect the everyday experiences of families: mealtimes, religious gatherings, and holidays. The strength of day-to-day family practices and routines to create security and feelings of belonging should be recognized in program design.

- Policies should ensure 'freedom of movement' by allowing refugee families to make choices about what spaces and places bring about meaningful activities and foster belonging in their lives. For example, dispersal policies in Canada could benefit from greater flexibility regarding where refugee families resettle. This approach values the agency of refugees in shaping their own environments and reflects the changing needs of displaced families along their resettlement trajectories.

- While Canada is one of the world leaders in immigrant and refugee integration, future policy, practice, and research should more fully incorporate the direction and input of refugee families. Understanding the nuances of refugee families' sense of belonging is pivotal in designing programs that are culturally specific, responsive, and effective.

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