

Making Home, Making Place: A Holistic Practice Approach for Social Workers Working Alongside Refugees



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Abstract: Social workers have a vital role supporting refugees resettling in Canada, however current practice approaches are limited in their capacity to address place-based (social and material) barriers and opportunities refugees face in resettlement contexts. In fact, social work has always specialized in social interventions over material or spatial interventions, resulting in only partial responses to hardships faced by structurally vulnerable communities, such as refugees. Homemaking is a key avenue to explore refugee resettlement holistically, taking into consideration place-based, social and material needs and desires of refugees to make home in new places. This article proposes social workers working alongside refugees take up a homemaking practice approach to meet the unique needs of refugees to improve their resettlement conditions.

Refugee Resettlement in Canada:

- A total of 74,979 refugees and protected persons were admitted as permanent residents to Canada in 2023 with an additional 10,199 individuals were admitted on humanitarian, compassionate, and public policy grounds (Government of Canada, 2024). An estimated 20,000-500,000 non-status migrants are living in proximity to Canada's three largest cities, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver (Alcaraz, 2021; Ellis, 2015; Foster & Luciano, 2020; Meloni et al., 2014).
- Approximately 50% of refugees in Canada are unable to afford quality housing and reside in overcrowded, sub-standard housing in unsafe, high-risk neighbourhoods (Carter et al., 2009; Oudshoorn et al., 2019; Powers & Nsonwu, 2020).
- Refugees commonly live in high levels of poverty due to ongoing barriers to employment (e.g., limited language proficiency, lack of recognition of foreign education credentials), limited income supports, and the financial burden of repaying sponsorship loans (Lacroix et al., 2015; St. Arnault & Merali, 2019).
- These inequities entangle with other stressors, including health problems and lack of access to healthcare; mental health issues due to the trauma of forced displacement (Potocky, 2010); discrimination resulting from intersectional oppressions such as racism, xenophobia, sexism, and homophobia (Ghahari et al., 2020; Lee & Brotman, 2013); and the process of acculturation (Potocky, 2010).

Social Work with Resettled Refugees:

- Financial interventions
- Housing supports
- Language and employment education and training
- Organizational support
- Research on successes, challenges, and barriers of refugees in the process of resettlement
- Awareness of immigration policies
- Culturally appropriate interventions
- Mental health and trauma supports
- Facilitation of family reunification (Drolet et al., 2017)
- Key practice approaches with refugees: human rights-based practice, trauma-informed care, community-based practice, feminism, cultural competency, anti-oppressive practice, and critical social work practice.

Social Work and the Material World:

- Social work research has examined the connection between the material world and various marginalized groups (i.e., sex workers, older adults experiencing homelessness, children, and child sexual abuse survivors) (Burns, 2016; Grittner & Sitter, 2020; Grittner, 2023; Hodge, 2015; Jeysingham, 2014, 2018); however, the link between materialism and refugees is underexamined.
- For example, Grittner and Burns (2021) outline the significance of the built environment, suggesting that social work has neglected the salience of the material realm on vulnerable populations by placing disproportionate emphasis on the impacts of the social environment on vulnerable people and groups.
- Growing social work scholarship attests to the effects of the material realm on good health and well-being and also demonstrates how locational disadvantage limits opportunity (Bryant & Williams, 2020; Burns, 2016; Grittner & Burns, 2021; Grittner & Walsh, 2021; Kemp, 2011).
- Bryant and Williams (2020) suggest that social workers are "critically implicated in producing space" (p. 323) and that both research and practice are crucial domains for addressing the ways in which the material realm can function as a producer of various socio-material inequities or a field of possibility for redressing socio-material justice (Grittner & Burns, 2021; Kemp, 2011).

Homemaking and Refugees:

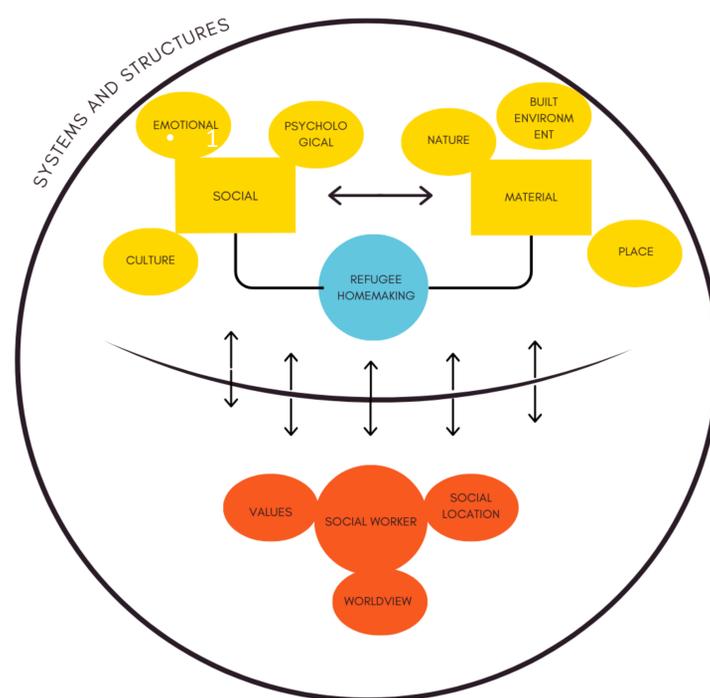
- Homemaking is a key avenue for understanding refugee experiences of resettlement related to both the social and material environment. Because refugees have been forcibly displaced from home, how they seek to recreate home and what contributes to feeling at home in a new environment becomes a critical aspect of their experience and encompasses both social and material negotiations.
- As Dossa and Golubovic (2019) state, "homemaking practices are not only the domain of migrants and displaced persons; each of us engages in imagining and sustaining a sense of home every day, however passively. But the experience of forced displacement deeply unsettles our received notions of home, exposing the significant labour that goes into cultivating and achieving this most basic sense of security. This task entails struggles as well as accomplishments, continuities." (p. 172)

Key Tenets of Homemaking Conceptual Practice Model:

1. Consider the place-based (social-material) elements that inform service users' homemaking in the resettlement context. Discuss these different parts in collaboration with service users.
2. Inquire about how place-based elements work and interact to inform the strengths and challenges faced by service users.
3. Consider how service users respond to, engage with, or resist their place-based conditions that shape their ability to make home. Consider how cultural factors might impact service user engagement, employing cultural humility to resist making assumptions or perpetuating stereotypes about service users' cultures. Instead, attend to the place-based context of the individual, family, or community by learning about their culture from their service users' perspective.
4. Identify how stigma and discrimination impact the conditions of service user homemaking. Consider how systemic oppressions such as sexism, racism, classism/poverty, legal status, sexual orientation etc., effect homemaking.
5. Harness cultural humility to avoid making assumptions surrounding homemaking. Recognize that categories of privilege and oppression are not static and are context-dependent.
6. Examine how interventions can respond to place-based inequities to effect change on micro, meso, and macro levels.
7. Engage in ongoing critical reflexivity to consider how your positionality might impact your relationship with service users and aim to find solutions to any barriers that might arise.

Figure 1:

Homemaking Conceptual Practice Model



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