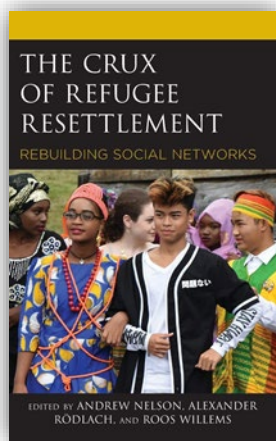


BOOK REVIEW

The Crux of Refugee Resettlement: Rebuilding Social Networks

Edited by Andrew Nelson, Alexander Rödlach, and Roos Willems

Reviewed by Meagan Mann



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The Crux of Refugee Resettlement: Rebuilding Social Networks is a thoroughly thoughtful and very applicable tool for those interested in helping to assess and reform refugee resettlement policies. Written by 39 different contributors, the book is broken up into 12 chapters, clearly labeled with the topic discussed within. Each chapter discusses an element of resettlement and how it specifically contributes to or harms the creation of social networks for refugees. Using ethnography as the main descriptor in each chapter, *The Crux of Refugee Resettlement* allows the reader to learn of resettlement realities from the perspective of education, health care, theology, administration, politics, social work and most importantly, the refugees themselves. Each chapter, though various in its content, points to the same conclusion: global refugee resettlement policies currently lead to exclusion and austerity. Instead, there needs to be a shift in the culture of policy development

to account for the realities of experienced displacement and resettlement.

Outlined in the introduction, resettled refugees lose social capital through the loss of their networks, community reciprocity, and social trust. This leads to a depleted emotional and social support network at a time when it is badly needed. Andrew Nelson, Alexander Rödlach, and Roos Willems write in the introduction that, “Such loss can be traumatizing, and can further isolate individuals and communities already reeling from the conditions and experiences surrounding forced displacement. The maintenance and reconstruction of an extensive base of social capital, then, is essential for successful resettlement” (4). In Chapter 1, Martin Renzo Rosales and Juana Domingo Andrés look at Guatemalan Mayas in the American Midwest and their creative intercultural networking. They describe through ethnography three different kinds of social network: bridging, bonding, and linking (40). Bonding social networking refers to the ties that connect individuals with those of similar demographic characteristics or affective closeness (friends, close relatives, neighbors, and work colleagues). Bridging networks refers to the ties that connect more diverse groups in terms of sociocultural or economic background. Finally, linking social networks refers to the individuals’ connections with contacts who are outside their social network and have some degree of power over them. In linking relationships there is normally an element of “receiving” on the part of the refugees in the form of resources, ideas, and information.

This typology of bridging, bonding, and linking social networks is confirmed in the following chapters through several ethnographic case studies. The idea of “home” was examined in the two accounts of refugees in Ohio and North Carolina. These ethnographies call for a more thoughtful and detailed approach to

integration for refugees settling into a new space. Resettlement agencies globally have an appointed window of interaction with the refugee that is no more than 90 days. It is concluded in this book that the 90 day window of care is not adequate to actually establish enough care (particularly social networks) for newly arrived refugees. There is a role anthropologists can play here. Kelly Yotebieng, Surendra Bir Adhikari, Jaclyn Kirsch, and Jennifer Kue state, “The role anthropologists and ethnographic approaches can play in engaging community social networks is an important one. They not only bring in diverse perspectives for a more holistic approach, but they can also help to identify, and devise ways to address cultural and linguistic barriers between refugee communities and mainstream service providers” (71).

In terms of social networks, the information on how to establish them and to get community support may be available to the refugee community, but if the refugees do not know where to find the information or do not have digital access, the information is useless. Additionally, there needs to be more cultural sensitivity in the approaches and theories used in resettlement. Particularly in the United States, the merits of self-sufficiency and economic success have marked the designs of successful integration. If a refugee does not show signs of either they are not succeeding and are therefore not a successful resettlement case. Social value is marked by economic development. This however, is not possible—even systematically impossible—for many refugees.

Here is another central theme in the writing. Refugee resettlement is not necessarily built on what the refugee needs, but what the resettlement country wants to produce from the refugee. Georgina Ramsay, who has worked in spaces of resettlement with Central African Women in Australia notes that, “Whilst providing refugees with physical safety, resettlement does not automatically result in a sense of belonging” (174). Throughout the ethnographies of various refugees, it is clear that it is not the governmental organizations that are currently creating a sense of belonging. Because of the heavy limitations set on governmental resettlement agencies, it is impossible to help create social networks, assist in creating belonging, or adequately assess mental health needs in the 90 days of exposure they have with a client. Instead, it is the community (bonded, bridged, and linked) that creates the sense of home and brings forth truly successful integration and resettlement. Roos Willems writes about the importance of these social

networks that are community-based, “As the crux of refugee resettlement, assisting with and helping the development of resettled refugees’ social networks will allow for their increased well-being and swifter all-round integration, to the benefit of both the refugees themselves as well as their host society” (281).

This book leaves the reader with an inspired view of what the future of resettlement could look like. For NGOs and 501c3s working specifically to create social networks, this book is a strong encouragement. The collected ethnographies, data, and summaries create a unique and personable insider view into what it is like to be resettled as a refugee. Even more than understanding what the experience of a refugee is, the reader is left with the knowledge of some of the major gaps that are still to be filled in terms of the resources provided for incoming refugees. In particular, the need for social networking is highlighted time and time again.

This collection was published in 2019, before the global pandemic of COVID-19 and the major fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban in 2021. The world of resettlement has shifted dramatically since then, particularly for Europe and the United States. During COVID-19 when resettlement was locked down, many resettlement agents were let go from their positions, offices were closed, and the infrastructure shrunk significantly. Thus an extra layer of confusion and complexity to resettlement has been added since the publication of this book. Mandatory isolations, the increase in digital communication, and social distancing have all altered how social networks are thought about and pursued. Additionally, the unprecedented number of Afghans who were evacuated globally to receiving countries has altered how social networks are pursued. During the evacuations from Afghanistan, Afghans went through different channels than an average refugee would to be resettled in the United States. The sheer volume of Afghans arriving suddenly and without proper paperwork or funding overwhelmed the already fractured infrastructure of resettlement agencies. Additionally, some do not have refugee status, but rather a Humanitarian Parole status (HP). This adds to the complications involved in building identity, social networks, and a sense of belonging. Still, the data from this collection is valid today. It just needs to be viewed through the lens that the events of 2019, 2020 and 2021 brought to the world. The world is ever changing and shifting, so resettlement policies for refugees must ever change and shift to keep up.



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