

The role of contextual knowledge through the eyes of a resettlement social worker

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly known that social workers are required to possess wide-ranging knowledge. Furthermore, a multi-dimensional approach to social work knowledge is required to help social workers make decisions in their practice. Thus, for many social workers, it is almost impossible to emphasise only one dimension of knowledge over others. One area of social work that is of particular interest is resettlement for former refugees. The knowledge required for social workers practising in refugee resettlement must include contextual knowledge of both local and global contexts. This article is a reflection from a resettlement social worker, who shares her own practice journey in working with former refugees in Aotearoa New Zealand. As part of this reflection, the social worker shares her experience in utilising different types of knowledge to inform decision-making processes in her practice. She hopes this article can encourage further reflections in our social work practice with former refugees to become more culturally sensitive, effective and contextual to each social work scenario.

Keywords: Social work; contextual knowledge; refugee resettlement

Social work knowledge

My work in refugee resettlement started when I was a volunteer for Refugee Services while studying towards a social work degree. I was then employed as a social worker in different fields before working as a resettlement social worker for New Zealand Red Cross (NZRC) for 6.5 years, before I moved on to child protection social work and I am currently teaching an undergraduate social work degree. I am a migrant from Indonesia who has had the privilege of gaining a variety of social work practice experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand; this article is a small way of showing my gratitude for the privilege I have been blessed with.

My attempt to work effectively with former refugees was influenced by the ongoing process of acquiring knowledge and

applying it into practice. The different types of knowledge I possessed also influenced my decision-making in assessment, planning process, intervention and evaluation for each social work case I was allocated to work with. In the literature, there is an increasing analysis of knowledge used to inform social workers' decision-making processes (Hyslop, 2013). For example, Hay (2019) contends knowledge of individual and collective strengths in the community has also been recognised as an important aspect of decision-making process in social work response to disasters. In particular, the knowledge that social workers possess as part of their strengths influences their decision-making processes—which contribute to the success of their practice with clients. Similarly, social work practice in refugee resettlement requires the use of various knowledge including local and

AOTEAROA
NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL
WORK 33(3), 74–78.

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international knowledge on refugee matters. Based on my practice experience, the application of knowledge requires constant reflection of our contextual knowledge relevant to refugee resettlement; this involves our understanding of contextual knowledge, how we develop the knowledge and how it can help us inform our decision-making processes. Equally important is our acknowledgement of the refugee journey our clients are going through and the key terms and concepts used in the local and global arenas.

It is the intention of this article to share my practice experience and provide a brief discussion to stimulate further dialogue amongst social workers, social work students and social services professionals to critically reflect on the current social work knowledge in refugee resettlement services in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Contextual knowledge

In my view, the importance of contextual knowledge cannot be emphasised enough for social work practice in refugee resettlement. I have not found a single definition of contextual knowledge; however, many authors such as Forster (2015), Hyslop (2013), and O'Donoghue (2003) have written about contextual knowledge in great detail in their studies; these authors argued that contextual knowledge encompasses knowledge in the specific contexts of practice, which includes knowledge focused on the context of the individual's experience. Furthermore, Imre (1984) maintained contextual knowledge is knowledge gained by practitioners through experience in the job, consisting of general experience as well as specific knowledge. Thus, social workers require practical experience for the contextual knowledge to develop. This view was endorsed by a study conducted by Payne (2007) involving beginning social work practitioners in constructing their professional identity; the study found participants "did not feel they possessed adequate knowledge as new social

workers" (p. 81). Some participants felt an inevitable need for possessing specialist knowledge in order to practise in their field area.

The study conducted by Payne (2007) resonates with my experience as a new graduate; for example, I gained my general knowledge (such as theories and models relevant to social work practice), but it was not until I had a number of years of practice experience that I developed my contextual knowledge—specific to refugee resettlement. Furthermore, knowledge construction and application in social work is far from a straightforward process (Stanfield, 2021). The types of knowledge needed varied from technical knowledge such as government legislation, organisational policies, research studies and theories to practical, cultural, local and intuitive knowledge. An example of a case scenario where I applied knowledge to practice was when I was allocated several families from Colombia to work with. I learned about their cultural and religious background, their language and the support available from their own community. Technical knowledge from policies, concerning their residency status enriched my understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, practical knowledge such as their traditions, communication style and customs had helped me build relationships with the families and their community. I learned that Colombian clients were more open talking about their strengths and needs so most of the time I only needed to briefly prompt them when discussing their issues and together we came up with solutions. I always had a Spanish-speaking caseworker or interpreter to help me with the language since I do not speak Spanish. Food was also part of their custom in showing hospitality—many times they made arepas or empanadas when I visited them no matter how often I said they did not need to do that.

Currently working in academic social work, I concur with the recommendations made by Payne (2007) to tertiary educators in

enhancing students' knowledge of micro and macro social work to help them become more prepared in stepping into the profession and applying knowledge to the specific context of their social work area. Specifically, contextual knowledge is required to develop social workers' speciality in practice which is usually enhanced with the length of experience in practising social work. Moreover, Munford and O'Donoghue (2019) argued that it is necessary for social workers to include the application of knowledge in general to a specific social work case—taking into account practice wisdom and local knowledge in order to establish and maintain a constructive, considerate, culturally appropriate and caring relationship with their clients. Most importantly, in order to be competent in their social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, social workers must understand and articulate social work theories, indigenous practice knowledge, other relevant theories, and social work practice methods and models (Social Workers Registration Board, 2020).

The importance of contextual knowledge is seen in a research study involving 41 health professionals focusing on information literacy (Forster, 2015). The research findings showed all categories in their interviews were contextual, specific to the knowledge required for particular clinical situations. Similarly, Cha et al. (2006) conducted a research study to better understand the use of knowledge in social work; they found that social work practitioners appreciated theoretical knowledge but utilise contextual knowledge more in solving problems in their cases.

Key contexts and terms in refugee resettlement

Contextual social work knowledge in refugee resettlement cannot be separated from key contexts and terms used in the resettlement topic area. My social work practice with these population groups—which Nash (2005) described as *minorities*—required critical analysis and a great deal of global

and local knowledge to effectively support clients in their resettlement. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand the fundamental differences between migrants and refugees, which involves understanding the context of voluntary and forced migration. Migrants are people who migrate to another country, most of these movements are voluntary, planned (Fitzgerald, 2017; Marlowe, 2019; Nash, 2005), and people are able to return to their country of origin. Like myself, a migrant from Indonesia, many immigrants may have an intention to attain better life opportunities (Fitzgerald, 2017). However, many also have challenges in their migration story, for example, as found in a research study conducted by Kim (2014) on the experiences of Korean immigrants in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. The study found language and limited social networks as some of the barriers faced by the participants. Moreover, knowledge regarding societal contexts was identified as one of the most important aspects of resettlement support.

In regard to former refugees, there are circumstances that cause people to be in refugee situations and different descriptive terms are currently being used (Fitzgerald, 2017; Marlowe, 2019) which would be useful for social workers to understand when working with former refugees in Aotearoa New Zealand. One of the key terms used is the official definition of refugees that was set out by the United Nations under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons and its 1967 Protocol—a refugee is that of a person who:

Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. (United Nations, as cited in OHCHR, 2020)

Another term being used for people who have fled their homes for similar reasons to refugees but who are within the territory of their own country are *internally displaced persons* (OHCHR, 2020). Furthermore, people who have neither an official refugee status nor citizenship are called *stateless persons* (OHCHR, 2020). And when people have left their country of nationality and entered another country to seek asylum are called *asylum seekers*.

In my experience, both as a frontline resettlement social worker and, for a short time, leading a team of resettlement social workers, the types of knowledge that are important and applicable include knowledge of refugees' strengths and needs, countries of origin, cultural and religious backgrounds, traditions, customs, languages, and most of all the local knowledge in the communities that might support refugees in their resettlement and integration.

Previously the quota for former refugees in Aotearoa New Zealand was set at 1000 people per year and this increased to 1500 people in July 2020. However, the new annual quota has not been implemented due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The resettlement areas are: Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Nelson, Blenheim, Christchurch, Timaru, Dunedin and Invercargill. Once refugees resettled in Aotearoa New Zealand, they are granted permanent residence status and therefore technically, they are no longer refugees (Fitzgerald, 2017), and in my view it is socially acceptable to consider them to be *former refugees* in order to respect many former refugees' wish to speak about themselves as no longer in a refugee situation.

The challenges that I observed for these people during my time working as a resettlement social worker were learning new languages, new cultures, new systems and loss of the support systems they used to have back in their home country. Specifically, I observed different cultural experiences

were influenced by the different gender roles between men and women, for example, in my research study on the resettlement of Syrian former refugee women in Aotearoa New Zealand (Fitzgerald, 2017), the study found a strong presence of different gender roles in the Syrian community. Similar findings were found in a research study by Kamri-McGurk (2012) on the resettlement experiences of Burmese former refugee women in the Wellington region. Both studies confirmed the importance of resettlement social workers and their roles in supporting former refugees in Aotearoa New Zealand. For many newly resettled former refugees, their social workers and volunteers are the first people they engage with, therefore, it is crucial for social workers to have adequate contextual resettlement knowledge. Specifically, understanding the culture of the family they are working with as well as understanding their own culture has been identified as contributing factors for a successful resettlement.

Resettlement social work in Aotearoa New Zealand

In my opinion, the number of quota refugees in Aotearoa New Zealand is debatable; however, the services provided are well organised and community oriented with a wraparound support from NGOs and government agencies starting from when former refugees arrive in the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre (MRRC) to their local resettlement areas. NZRC is currently providing the initial resettlement support in the local areas. The resettlement social workers generally engage with their clients between 6 and 12 months upon their arrival. The work they do, ranging from local orientation programmes (partnership with local government and NGOs), getting the right entitlements, housing issues, children's schooling, adult education, employment, health, regular home visits and psychosocial assessments, and community engagement.

This humble reflection of my practice has allowed me to hope for further reflections as

I have come to understand the importance of utilising knowledge in decision-making process and developing contextual knowledge in specific social work areas through practice experience.

Conclusion

It is important for social workers to utilise various types of knowledge—technical knowledge, practical knowledge and contextual—to inform their decision-making process, in particular, contextual knowledge is necessary when working with a specific area of social work, such as refugee resettlement. The essential knowledge includes but is not limited to knowledge of the former refugees' countries of origin, culture, religious background, traditions, customs, languages, and most of all the local knowledge specific to the community where the clients are resettling. The possession of different types of knowledge enables resettlement social workers to deliver practice in effective and meaningful ways for both practitioners and clients.

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