

Summary: ‘The Power of Sponsorship: Power and Moral Action in Private Refugee Resettlement’

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The Power of Sponsorship: Power and Moral Action in Private Refugee Resettlement

Executive Summary

- This article explores the inherent power dynamics between Canadian refugee sponsors and the newcomers they support, drawing on theoretical frameworks and empirical data from interviews with Canadian refugee sponsors as well as the authors' own experiences as members of a sponsorship group.
- The authors identify two distinct forms of power: power over resettlement, which is the act of sponsors leveraging their resources and skills to ensure service access for newcomers, and power over newcomers, which involves sponsors shaping choices and options through superior social knowledge.
- The authors further categorize sponsor orientations into two types: mutualistic orientations that aim to minimize hierarchy and respect autonomy, and paternalistic orientations that involve making decisions for newcomers based on assumed best interests.
- The findings suggest that while awareness of inherent power inequalities is not sufficient to ensure ethical behavior, it is a necessary condition for sponsors to support rather than dominate the autonomous newcomers they welcome.

Introduction

- Private Refugee Sponsorship (PSR) is going global, with countries like the UK, the U.S., Australia, and Germany adopting models originally unique to Canada.
- A key benefit of private/community sponsorship is that it strengthens social capital and can help refugees access resources more quickly, including faster entry into the workforce.
- A key critique is that it shifts responsibility away from the state onto private citizens and can create structural dependencies where refugees rely heavily on sponsors for access to essential services.
- This article seeks to encourage moral reflection on the power dynamics inherent in private sponsorship, arguing that ethical resettlement necessitates an awareness of structural inequalities and the adoption of a mutualistic orientation to ensure sponsor influence supports newcomer autonomy rather than resulting in paternalistic domination.

Data and Methodology

- The research is based on two empirical projects conducted over six years in Ottawa, involving nearly 80 sponsors.
- The first project focused on the 2015–2016 wave of Syrian refugee sponsorship, while the second focused on groups supporting LGBTQ+ refugees.
- The methodology utilized in-depth interviews, sequential coding, and the authors' own experiences as members of a sponsorship group.

Power and Private Refugee Sponsorship

- The authors apply various theoretical frameworks to show that sponsors exercise power over resettlement by enabling access to services, and exercise power over newcomers by shaping their choices through superior knowledge of the host system.
 - Foucauldian framework: power is both productive and repressive, meaning it not only restricts but also shapes individuals' actions and identities, while social categories like race, gender, and class structure the opportunities people have available to them.
 - Amy Allen's theory of power: power is divided into power to (individual agency), power over (domination or control), and power with (collaborative and solidaristic action between people).
 - Mirror image of power: the same power can either support collaboration or control, depending on how it is used, becoming power with when decisions are shared equally, or power over when sponsors direct outcomes for newcomers.

Power within the Settlement Process

- Structural power in the settlement process is concentrated in sponsors, who control access to essential resources and services such as housing, healthcare, financial support, and bureaucratic navigation, particularly in the early stages of arrival and even pre-arrival.
- Sponsors often function as cultural and institutional intermediaries, using their social capital and knowledge advantages to interpret systems, navigate bureaucracy, and shape newcomers' initial experiences in the host society.
- These power imbalances are frequently reinforced by broader social hierarchies (including race, class, and education), although some sponsors attempt to mitigate this through ethical reflection and by setting boundaries to support newcomer autonomy.

Mentorship or Paternalism: Orientations Towards Sponsorship

Mutualistic orientation (resource approach)

- Treats newcomers as equals and sees sponsors as support resources, not authority figures.
- Is self-reflective and flexible about what "successful" sponsorship looks like.
- Focuses on independence and self-determination rather than directing decisions.
- "Clears the path" so newcomers can make their own choices, even if sponsors disagree.
- Treats mistakes (e.g., financial missteps) as part of learning, not failure.

Paternalistic orientation (pseudo-parental approach)

- Assumes hierarchy is natural and adopts a parent-like role toward newcomers.
- Frames newcomers as dependents who need guidance or correction.
- Makes decisions without full consultation, often claiming it is in the newcomer's "best interest."
- Interprets disagreement or autonomy as resistance or poor judgment.

How these approaches play out in practice

- Employment and Education Decisions:
 - **Mutualistic Approach:** these sponsors act as advisors who respect the newcomer's right to set their own priorities, even when they differ from sponsor preferences, and aim to meet them halfway by supporting choices like immediate employment while linking language learning to personal goals.
 - **Paternalistic Approach:** these sponsors prioritize their own judgment of what is best for the newcomer, sometimes hammering in hard their preferred pathways, such as continued schooling, even when newcomers express different preferences or the group is divided.
- Housing and Neighborhood Selection:
 - **Mutualistic Approach:** these sponsors prioritize newcomer autonomy in housing decisions, recognizing preferences for immigrant-heavy neighbourhoods and actively avoiding pressuring newcomers due to their own influence.
 - **Paternalistic Approach:** selection is sometimes driven by sponsor convenience, with newcomer preferences dismissed as unnecessarily oppositional or unrealistic.

Power, Awareness, and Domination

- Domination occurs when power is used without constraint to achieve a desired outcome, which is always a risk in structurally unequal sponsorship relationships, but can be reduced when sponsors consciously limit and reflect on their use of power.
- Sponsorship always involves a risk of domination due to structural power imbalances, but when sponsors recognize their power, they are less likely to dominate.
- Awareness helps shift relationships from “power over” to “power with,” supporting more ethical and collaborative outcomes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- Sponsors are more likely to act ethically when they recognize their own power in the relationship; harm often arises when social and economic hierarchies are treated as “natural” rather than constructed, so training should focus on awareness of these dynamics, not just procedures.
- Government oversight and sponsorship safeguards mainly address serious abuse but are less effective at detecting subtle paternalism that quietly limits newcomer autonomy.
- The authors recommend shifting training toward a mutualistic approach where sponsors are seen as supportive resources rather than authority figures, emphasizing shared learning and balanced relationships.
- Mutualistic sponsors tend to achieve better outcomes because they respect newcomer choices and respond to individual needs instead of imposing fixed ideas of “successful” integration.
- Subtle harms often come from good intentions, such as overstepping boundaries, making decisions for newcomers, or discouraging access to benefits, which can gradually undermine independence and long-term integration.