

SOCIAL WORKERS AND THE PROTECTION OF IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE RIGHTS

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Introduction

Immigrant and refugee rights have long been an issue of critical importance for social workers in the United States. Those considered pioneers of the field, such as Jane Addams and Edith and Grace Abbott, developed their expertise while working in settlement houses that served as centers of residence and social services for migrants who had recently arrived in large numbers to work in America (Hansan, 2011). Concurrently, charitable organizations and religious and ethnic associations have long worked to facilitate the wellbeing and integration of migrants and displaced persons.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) recognizes that immigrants and refugees face unique challenges due to immigration policies. These policies are important for social workers to consider, as the legal and social statuses of migrants impact social service provision and community well-being in the United States. The NASW describes this relationship between legislation and social service provision in their 2015 policy statement:

Often, social workers' capacity to assist clients is constrained by immigration policies, especially policies that limit family visitation and family reunification. Immigration policies intervene in social work practice when family offenses become grounds for deportation and thereby impede willingness to report (p.178).

Social workers are particularly constrained when serving immigrant and "mixed-status" families in which members include combinations of citizens and non-citizens (p. 176). For many immigrants, refugees, and children of migrants, reporting issues such as employer exploitation, domestic violence, and child abuse to social service and

law enforcement agencies become potentially deportable offenses rather than opportunities to seek justice and healing. The consequences of reaching out for help from state institutions can be devastating for mixed status families, potentially culminating in the separation of family members.

The NASW policy statement also points to the longstanding economic and national security debates that undergird the trajectory of immigration policy. The NASW maintains that “studies show a positive economic effect” of immigrant and refugee presence in the United States, as they contribute to the economy by paying taxes, investing in small businesses, and reinvigorating the labor supply of the rapidly aging U.S. native-born population (p. 178). Yet the NASW adds the qualifier that some scholars have cautioned that “high rates of immigration may harm low-income Americans” (p. 178). These debates flared up often in the 2016 election cycle and will inevitably continue as the new presidential administration brings about changes in immigration policies. President Trump’s rhetoric of “making America great again” has often accompanied calls to restore American jobs, deport undocumented immigrants, and reduce incentives for companies to issue H1-B visas to foreign workers (Liu, 2016).

Social workers will be working under the dual pressures of potentially regressive policies and the NASW’s call for a “balance between security and human rights” within current immigrant and refugee policies (p. 178). The NASW maintains that such a balance must be considered in policies that define admission criteria into the U.S. for migrants, delineate deportable offenses, and establish grounds for detention and surveillance. It is important to note that the debates regarding the balance between security and human rights has taken a keener edge over the two years since the NASW policy statement was written. The intensification of global terrorism has heightened fears around accepting immigrants and refugees, especially Arabs and Muslims, into host countries such as the United States.

For example, there has been divided opinion over a U.S. humanitarian response to the thousands displaced by the ongoing conflict in Syria (Liu, 2016). While presidential candidate Clinton proposed to accept 65,000 additional refugees to help alleviate the crisis created by the Syrian war, Trump made several declarations regarding the need to scale back the resettlement program (or even enact “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States”) in order to ensure national security (Liu, 2016). Analysts of the refugee resettlement program note that the current screening process for accepting refugees into the United States is already very rigorous, to the

extent that “security reviews have left refugees in dangerous conditions for lengthy periods and prevented the entry of persons who do not pose security risks” (Kerwin, 2012, p. 1).

With Donald Trump as president, the area of immigrant and refugee rights has only become more important. Following his inauguration, he set forth a series of executive orders that attempted to bar people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen from entering the United States; banned refugees; and temporarily halted Syrian refugee admissions (Qiu, 2017). Further, Trump’s administration has issued new enforcement policies directing the Department of Homeland Security to more aggressively find, arrest, and deport those in the country illegally, regardless of whether they have committed serious crimes (Kulish, Dickerson & Nixon, 2017).

Immigrant and refugee advocates are thus particularly concerned about the future of programs that admit and grant migrants legal status. These programs include Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA), and the refugee resettlement program (Amos, 2016; Florido, 2017). They are also concerned about the prospect of programs that may target immigrants and refugees, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) workplace raids, a special registration of Muslims, and racially- and ethnically-discriminatory law enforcement practices. While it is unclear how anti-immigrant and anti-refugee programs will be deployed by the Trump administration going forward, immigrant and refugee advocates continue to prepare for further incursion on the rights of refugees and immigrants (Gambino & Kingsley, 2016; Eltagouri, Briscoe & Moreno, 2016).

Since the election results were announced in November 2016, organizations that advocate for and serve immigrants and refugees have produced a substantive collection of online materials. These include public statements denouncing proposed policies that negatively impact immigrants and refugees; fact sheets for immigrants to understand the implications of the potential reversal of DACA and their rights in encounters with ICE officials; and resource guides for cities, schools, townships, and organizations to support local immigrants and refugees. The proliferation of this online content is but one indicator of how organizations plan to try to protect immigrant and refugee rights in this new political era.

To the degree that social workers are positioned within or working beside such organizations, or with immigrants and refugees utilizing services, they too must be prepared. In this article, I argue that social workers can deepen their effective commitment to immigrants and

refugees by engaging social movement strategies and mobilizing resources through non-government organizations and social service agencies. Drawing upon the social movement theories and models described by Deepa Iyer (2015), my analysis seeks to establish the potential for building multi-racial, multi-issue coalitions that connect immigrant and refugee advocates with other racial and social justice groups.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS THEORIES

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* states that social workers must “pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people.” Indeed, while social movements can be broadly conceptualized as a form of collective action with the intention of promoting or inhibiting social change (Abramovitz, 2010), the social movements presented here are defined in terms of their attempts to protect and advance the rights of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups.

New social movement theory (NSM) emerged as a paradigm for understanding the historical development of social movements rooted in issues of identity rather than economic struggle. “Old” social movements focused on “organizing the poor” around class- and labor-related issues (Fisher & Kling, 1997, p. 113). They recall the labor movements of the Progressive and New Deal eras (1900s-1940s), which worked to establish labor unions, increase wages, improve working conditions, decrease unemployment, and expand welfare benefits (Blau, 2010). Meanwhile, the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1950s and 1960s did not fit neatly into analyses of class conflict and economic redistribution (Pichardo, 1997) and thus marked the transition into a post-industrial era of “new” social movements, which are largely organized around issues of identity, exclusion, and oppression (Abramovitz, 2010, p. 213; Fisher & Kling, p. 110). The political goals embedded within new social movements go beyond conflicts between labor and capital to combat “oppressive discrimination, cultural intrusions, bureaucratic domination, unrestrained militarism, and environmental devastation” (Abramovitz, 2010, p. 213). While many issues involved in new social movements cut across multiple identities, recruitment into these movements often involves appeals regarding the issue’s impact on members of particular identity groups.

Some critical scholars and activists refer to new social movements as a potentially divisive “identity politics.” Though the term “identity

politics” is laden with many different meanings, it has generally has come to signify a strategy of gaining political favor by appealing to the narrow interests of particular groups, usually minority groups, as defined by categories of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation (Heyes, 2016). In the 2016 election cycle, critics on the political right and left criticized liberals and Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton’s campaign for relying too heavily on identity politics, and ultimately failing to address broader economic and domestic issues (Judis, 2016; Lilla, 2016).

Yet the collective identities involved in new social movements are not always limited to narrowly defined population categories, such as race and ethnicity. Collective identity can be conceptualized “as an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution,” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285). It implies a perceived sense of relation or shared status, and carries with it positive feelings for others in the group (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Thus, building a movement around collective identity can contain a broad coalition across lines of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and other categories—so long as the collective identity around which the movement is organized remains inclusive. Through this lens, collective action organized around identity can be viewed as an opportunity to build bridges across diverse communities, rather than a mechanism to divide them.

Resource mobilization theory (RM) views formal organizations rather than individuals as central to the analysis of social movements. Abramovitz (2010) describes formal social movement organizations (SMO) as “complex, centralized, formal, highly developed, professional” groups that “articulate the goals of the more general social movement and translate them into political action” (p. 208). Any given social movement may have a number of social movement organizations working toward mobilizing organizations for change, effectively comprising a “social movement industry” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). The organizations involved in resource mobilization serve as rational actors engaging collective action as a strategy for effecting change. They act within the framework of political processes and center their calls for change in relation to the state.

Through the lens of RM, collective action and protest are seen as rational strategies to the extent that they strategically mobilize resources for groups that may have less access to the traditional policymaking process due to structural inequalities (Shefner, 1995). Critiques of RM argue that its emphasis on formal and highly professional organizations diverts analytical attention from “informal, decentralized, less

well-endowed” groups that build social movements through “indigenous leadership, volunteer staff, and mass actions” (Shefner, 1995, p. 209). Such informal grassroots structures are often analyzed through the lens of NSM, given its orientation to mobilizing communities around principles of self-help and self-organization (Huang, 2010).

Resource mobilization (RM) is the theoretical predecessor to new social movement theory, although both remain analytically useful frameworks for studying social movements. RM is often conceptualized as strategy-based and NSM as identity-based. Arguing that a given social movement is either strategy-based or identity-based ignores the extent of interconnection between identity and political strategy (Foweraker, 1995). Identities are often constructed through political struggles and the deployment of political strategy. Meanwhile, political strategies often draw upon the collective identity of social change actors (Hispsher, 1996). This mutually reinforcing relationship between strategy and identity is often made manifest in the “frame” that develops around a given social movement. Frames are “thought organizers” that bring together symbols, images, and arguments into an underlying idea of “what consequences and values are at stake” within a particular movement (Ryan & Gamson, 2006, p. 14). The concept of framing is important to both RM and NSM theories, as it draws upon collective identities to inform the strategy for how a social problem should be defined and addressed.

The RM and NSM theories are also complementary to the extent that they can shed light on different aspects of a given social movement: RM explains how a group mobilizes resources toward effecting the social change they seek, whereas NSM helps explain the emergence of a group’s interest in that particular kind of social change (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Strategies of organizing communities around issues of identity and mobilizing resources through formal advocacy organizations and community-based organizations are not mutually exclusive and can be deployed simultaneously within a social movement.

IYER’S APPROACH TOWARD ORGANIZING AROUND AND ACROSS IDENTITIES

Approaching immigrant and refugee issues from a social movement perspective allows for coalition building across a diverse range of communities and identities. Here, I draw upon the work of Deepa Iyer in her book, *We Too Sing America*. Iyer led South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) for over ten years and during that time came to see immigrant and racial justice as inextricably linked in a greater

pursuit for social justice. In her book, she discusses the successes and challenges of organizing South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh communities in the United States. Iyer focuses on South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh communities because of what they experienced post-9/11. Each of these communities was a target of discriminatory government policies in the name of “national security,” as well as of hate crimes among the general public. Iyer refers to this group of communities as AMEMSA (Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian). This term was deployed by community leaders to build coalitions across lines of ethnicity, national origin, and religion and became part of efforts to name and protect the civil rights of all group members. For Iyer, advocating for the rights of immigrants, refugees, and minorities required social movement organizing that included broader issues of racial and social justice. While she identifies particular issues that disproportionately affect people from certain identity groups, she situates her call for action within an inclusive framework that welcomes people of all identities to work together and advance each other's causes.

For instance, Iyer describes the need to be vigilant about local and statewide policy proposals that call for restrictions on reproductive rights, bans on same-sex marriage, restrictions on the right to vote, anti-immigrant proposals and voter identification requirements (p. 88). Although each of these issues disproportionately affects individuals with particular identities, Iyer relates the issues to each other by pointing to the overarching restriction on civil rights that these policy proposals entail. She highlights research indicating that attacks on the civil rights of one community often accompany attacks on the civil rights of other communities. In this way, Iyer productively works with the tension of organizing particular identity groups around general calls for civil rights and justice:

We must build multi-issue and multiracial coalitions to advance affirmative legislation and be ready to push back against policies that restrict the hard-won civil rights of people of color, immigrants, women, and LGBTQ communities. No longer can we afford to work in silos or only on one issue. As we develop these state and local multiracial and multi-issue coalitions, we must centralize the communities who are being singled out for bigotry (p. 88).

Iyer reflects here the ethos of new social movement organizing by focusing on issues of identity, exclusion, and oppression. Although

she calls for us to pay close attention to communities that have been marginalized, she emphasizes the importance of working across identities and issues. Her orientation toward social movements organized by collective identities does not entail “identity politics” as defined by the narrow interests of particular groups. Rather, she points to the interests and struggles of particular groups and demonstrates how they are related to the interests and struggles of other groups, leveraging this commonality to build broader social movements.

Iyer is concerned about framing strategies not only with respect to organizing social movements around identities, but also in relation to resource mobilization among organizations that serve and represent Arab, Muslim, South Asian, and Sikh communities. For Iyer, as long as Arabs, South Asians, Muslims, and Sikhs are framed and perceived as national security threats, their lives will be rendered disposable and their rights expendable. She tasks AMEMSA organizations and supportive stakeholders with “removing the national security frame” from the experiences of South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh communities and “replacing it with one that evokes racial justice movements” (p. 101). To this end, organizations that serve AMEMSA communities can conduct public outreach and education programs that contextualize the experiences of their constituents within the frame of America’s racial history and the similarly discriminatory treatment of other minorities.

Organizations are key actors in Iyer’s conception of social movements. She points to nonprofit AMEMSA organizations such as South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) and the National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC), which engage in “policy and media advocacy, civic and political empowerment, leadership development, alliance building with other communities, and social service provision” (p. 113). Such activities extend the work of framing, which Ryan and Gamson argue must be integrated with larger movement-building efforts in order to be successful (2006, p. 15). Although the above-mentioned AMEMSA organizations formed after 9/11 to respond to the needs of community members being targeted by programs such as the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), Iyer notes that South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh immigrants and Americans no longer comprise “just post-9/11 communities” (p. 111). Thus, AMEMSA-serving organizations must work to continue combatting hate violence, surveillance, and anti-Muslim rhetoric, while also addressing issues such as “socioeconomic differences, educational barriers, lack of accessible health care, and

limited English proficiency... and internal community divides along class, faith, and gender lines” (p. 111).

Iyer does not ascribe to the notion that organizations participating in social movement are necessarily formal, highly professional, or membership-based. Rather, she points to the importance of supporting the capacity of local nonprofit organizations, which interface directly with community members and provide services. Encouraging service-providing nonprofits to also participate in grassroots organizing and community building can serve as a core strategy to promoting the sustainable well-being of their constituents.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS TO ORGANIZE THROUGH ORGANIZATIONS

Social workers can help facilitate the leadership of people who face individual discrimination and systemic injustice by thinking creatively about the intersection of service provision, advocacy, and community organizing. If social service agencies can integrate organizing strategies in their usual portfolio of programs (Iyer, 2015, p. 113), immigrant and refugee agencies can bring components of community building and political education into English as a Second Language classes, naturalization workshops, and after-school programs. In this way, social workers would be facilitating the gathering of people facing similar challenges in their communities and workplaces and providing them with the space and information to develop their own capacity to create social and political change.

Furthermore, if social workers can create programs that promote storytelling and identity exploration among agency clients, they would be facilitating their development of a public narrative of lived experiences. These programs are aligned with an ethos of grassroots organizing, which grounds itself in the “lived experiences and leadership of individuals who face class, gender, immigration, and racial inequities” (Iyer, p. 113). Funding for such programs can be sought through local and national grants from foundations with aligned social missions. Macro-level social workers within foundations can advocate for greater provision of grants for community organizing, and for the development of sensitive and flexible monitoring and evaluation systems that capture the impact of this work, thereby building grounds to justify further funding for community organizing projects.

Another opportunity for social workers to further their commitment to immigrant and refugee communities is through mobilizing the organizations within which they work to participate in

policy advocacy efforts. Mosley (2014) argues that through advocacy, social service organizations “can help procure resources and improve policies by serving as vital information conduits regarding how policy is working on the ground” (p. 107). Here, Mosley points to the strategic positioning of social service organizations as the closest to the people that are directly impacted by government welfare policy decisions.

Yet because social service organizations are “organized primarily to provide services, not to conduct advocacy,” social workers and nonprofit professionals face challenges that prevent them from leveraging their strategic positioning toward advocacy efforts. These challenges include “severe resource constraints, lack of experience and knowledge about policy advocacy, and confusion about what they are legally able to do” (Mosley, 2014, p. 108). A potential solution to these challenges is the intervention of capacity-building nonprofits that focus their energies on training service-providing nonprofits to more effectively meet their missions, such as the National Network for Arab American Communities and South Asian Americans Leading Together. Organizations such as these can provide pro-bono or reduced fee consultation to nonprofits that provide services to immigrants and refugees and advise them on the rules and best practices of nonprofit advocacy.

Nonprofit professionals in the field of refugee resettlement can also participate in advocacy around refugee issues, with executive directors lobbying federal-level and state-level legislators to secure more robust funding or explain the consequences of proposed changes to refugee resettlement policy (Darrow, 2015). Social workers in other agencies serving immigrants, refugees, and minorities in the United States can utilize similar tactics to advocate for the preservation of policies and programs that benefit these communities, such as DACA and admission of refugees, and for the prevention or removal of those that negatively impact them, such as NSEERs and automatic deportation upon reporting of offenses like domestic violence or child abuse and neglect.

The strength of the social movement approach toward immigrant and refugee policy change is that it builds upon many resources that social workers already have access to: social services, the people that utilize them, and the interpersonal communication skills required to help people understand themselves and others as agents of change. A challenge to this approach is that the integration of social services and organizing can prove difficult when immigrant, refugee, and minority clients have urgent needs and service-providing agencies have limited staff and time, as well as limited expertise in community organizing and policy advocacy. In such cases, social service provision will surely take

precedence over organizing and advocacy efforts. With concerted effort and broader commitment to interagency and multi-issue coalitions, service provision and community organization can serve as mutually-reinforcing strategies for social workers to advance socially just policies.

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of immigrant and refugee issues in the United States has been replete with shifts in public attitude and transformations in legislation over the last century. The NASW recognizes that immigrant and refugee policy is driven by competing values within the themes of human rights, humanitarianism, national security, and economics (p. 176). The themes and values that gain ascendancy within any given historical moment shape policies of immigration and refuge, thus affecting individuals and families within and outside of the United States. The current historical moment, marked by the shift from the Obama administration to the Trump administration, has already yielded consequences that constrain the livelihoods of immigrants and refugees.

Social workers have the power to act in ways that combat unjust policies and help shape public values toward the promotion of justice for immigrants and refugees. Social movement strategies can guide our work in building coalitions across identities and mobilizing resources through organizations. We can serve as advocates by organizing diverse communities around issues of migration and racial justice, encouraging foundations to provide greater funding for community organizing initiatives, and speaking in front of political representatives and government officials about policies that impact immigrants and refugees. Such advocacy efforts will demonstrate and deepen social work's commitment to social justice and the interests of the most vulnerable in society.

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