Critical Sociology

Neoliberal Fatigue: The Effects of Private Refugee Sponsorship on Canadians' Political Consciousness

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Abstract
Private sponsorship has become a primary way that refugees access resettlement to Canada. Key in this program are the private Canadians who volunteer their money, time, and labor to sponsor and support refugees. Drawing on 25 interviews, this article examines the insights that these privileged citizens of the global north gain as they help refugees struggling with the marginalizing consequences of neoliberal austerity in their new hostland. While sponsors learn about the challenges facing working-class racialized newcomers (otherwise obscured to sponsors by their racial, class, and citizenship privileges), the program robs sponsors of the time and mental bandwidth to reflect on the structural nature of these challenges. Consequently, sponsors rarely understand refugees' struggles as public troubles necessitating broader intervention, including modest policy reform. I call this cognitive outcome *neoliberal fatigue*. I conclude by discussing how this fatigue thwarts social change and reinforces neoliberal capitalism.

Keywords
neoliberalism, private refugee sponsorship, political consciousness, family separation, immigration, refugee resettlement, Canada, humanitarianism

Introduction

Since 2015, Canada has permanently resettled more refugees than any other country, mainly through the expansion of a unique program that allows private citizens to sponsor refugees.[1] Indeed, over half of its 44,625 Syrian newcomers since 2015 have been settled by Canadian citizens and permanent residents through the private sponsorship of refugees (PSR) program and the combined public–private blended-visa office-referred (BVOR) program (IRCC, 2021a). These programs shift core responsibilities to small groups of private Canadians who volunteer their

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money, time, labor, and resources to participate in refugee selection, reception, and settlement. Unlike those in the government-assisted refugee (GAR) sponsorship program, privately resettled refugees depend on their sponsors for financial support during their first year in Canada. Sponsors help refugees access housing, transportation, health care, jobs, and language courses, and they assist in navigating everyday life in the refugees' new hostland. These private sponsors can also handpick *who* they want to help resettle, a prerogative that effectively allows citizens to serve as gatekeepers in the Canadian immigration system. For the next 3 years, nearly two-thirds of all refugees admitted to the country will arrive through the PSR scheme (IRCC, 2020a). Given the significance of private resettlement, this article examines how the Canadians who volunteer to become private refugee sponsors understand and experience their responsibilities.

Specifically, the present research investigates the extent to which the PSR program fosters increased political awareness among upper-middle-class white Canadian sponsors as they learn about the struggles that racialized working-class newcomers face in Canada. Some scholars have found that humanitarian volunteer work can prompt participants to recognize systemic injustices and their changeability through collective action (Artero, 2019; Nepstad, 2007). However, others have found that humanitarianism can obscure oppressive structures, inadvertently sustaining, rather than challenging, inequalities (Malkki, 2015). What, then, are the cognitive effects of sponsorship on sponsors? To what extent and in what ways does sustained interpersonal contact with refugees affect citizens' understandings of structural inequalities in Canadian society?

The sponsorship program fostered what I call *neoliberal fatigue*, wherein the labor-intensive and draining nature of the tasks devolved to volunteer participants crowded out their ability and desire to reflect on how social structures affected the trajectories of the people they were trying to help. That is, although sponsors witnessed how refugees faced barriers to social mobility, sponsorship's myriad, time-consuming tasks of reception, and settlement under conditions of neoliberal austerity forced sponsors to treat these politically structured, public issues as logistical, private troubles they had to solve on their own. As a result, sponsors emerged from the experience with fatigue rather than with a critical lens on Canadian society.

The Devolution of Resettlement Services

Ever since it was formalized in 1978, private sponsorship has helped resettle more than 368,000 newcomers, totaling roughly half (48%) of *all* refugees resettled to Canada in the past four decades (Van Haren, 2021). This is an impressive feat, given that the program was introduced as *complementary* to publicly-funded sponsorship. Private sponsorship was supposed to provide Canadian civil society with an opportunity to boost refugee resettlement numbers above the government's annual target levels. However, government officials have variably interpreted this principle of additionality, and, in the past decade, excessively relied on private sponsors to meet Canada's international humanitarian obligations (Hyndman et al., 2016; Labman, 2016, 2019). Between 1995 and 2012, for instance, government sponsorships were approximately double the number of PSRs; however, this proportion began reversing in 2013. By 2019, private resettlement levels were nearly twice those of government (Van Haren, 2021). Canadian officials seem inclined to continue this trend; in October 2020, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) announced that for the next 3 years, it would annually allocate 12,500 spots (34.7%) to government-assisted refugees, 1000 (2.8%) to combined public–private BVOR refugees, and 22,500 (62.5%) to privately sponsored refugees (IRCC, 2021a). No longer a complementary program, PSR is now the chief way that international refugees access resettlement to Canada.

Private sponsorship devolves core responsibilities of refugee management to civil society in four ways. First, private citizens fund refugees either partially (BVOR program) or completely

(PSR program) during their first 12 months in Canada. This private funding mechanism stands in contrast to the GAR program, in which refugees are entirely government-financed. In Toronto, for instance, the minimum amount that a sponsoring group must budget is approximately Can$16,500 (US$13,700) to resettle an individual refugee and Can$28,300 (US$23,500) for a family of four. This minimum amount is roughly equivalent to provincial social assistance levels. However, sponsors usually provide more to meet the actual costs of living (RSTP 2021). Sponsors' monetary support is supposed to meet the costs of rent, utilities, furniture, food, phone and Internet plans, transportation, clothing, and other essential needs. Privately resettled refugees are not eligible for public social assistance until after the 12-month sponsorship period is over.

In addition to monetary support, newcomers depend on citizen sponsors for help with finding housing, access to health care,[2] employment, language learning, and navigating everyday life in an unfamiliar setting—all their basic needs for a year. Because of variations in size,[3] preparedness, and capacity across sponsoring groups, the amount of settlement support that privately-resettled refugees receive is uneven, unlike the uniform support that their government-assisted counterparts can expect. Sponsors also determine *where* in Canada refugees will settle, further shaping refugees' initial opportunities in their new country of residence.[4]

Finally, the PSR program allows civilians to handpick candidates for sponsorship. In the government-assisted refugee program, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) identifies candidates for resettlement to Canada. If the Canadian government accepts the UNHCR's referral, then overseas Canadian visa officers process the application and determine whether to grant admission to the refugee applicant. In the PSR program, too, the decision to accept or refuse a refugee's application rests with Canadian visa officers. However, rather than the UNHCR, private sponsorship groups are responsible for selecting refugee candidates for resettlement. This privilege allows sponsors to have a significant say in the *composition* of Canada's refugee admissions.

Moreover, although the government sets targets for private resettlement levels, the actual number of sponsorships is ultimately determined by how many people volunteer to become sponsors. At times, therefore, admissions levels reach the government's targets, but, other times, they fall short of them (Labman, 2016). The program thus permits the government to 'withdraw from direct responsibility for admission totals' without appearing to dodge 'domestic pressure to act more humanely' (Dauvergne, 2005: 93).

Recent pandemic-related protocols also illuminate the power sponsors wield over refugees' access to Canada. The IRCC now contacts prospective sponsors before refugee arrival to confirm they have made arrangements for a 2-week quarantine and remain 'ready to welcome' newcomers. If sponsors renege on their commitment at the last minute, the otherwise government-approved refugees in question cannot be resettled in Canada (IRCC, 2021b). The pandemic demonstrates that refugee well-being continues to be privatized (Silvius, 2016); even the ability of a refugee to land in Canada hinges on the will and capacity of private Canadians. How, then, do sponsors make sense of this power and responsibility?

Sponsoring Strangers: Spurring or Deterring Oppositional Consciousness?

This unique resettlement program has enjoyed positive reception at home and abroad. In 2016, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2017) praised Canada's PSR program, in part, for 'provid[ing] an avenue for civil society and local communities to actively contribute to refugee protection'. Scholars, too, express this sentiment, commending Canada for mobilizing civic-minded citizens to address the global refugee crisis (Molloy et al., 2017). Some called on fellow academics to become sponsors (Drolet et al., 2018), and a network of top-tier Canadian universities

mobilized academic staff and students to privately resettle 150 Syrian families (RULSC 2016). At least one scholar posits that, in Canada, the program may have foiled the anti-refugee sentiment that swept other parts of the global north (Lenard, 2016: 305).

More critical researchers have interrogated the ideas reinforced by the PSR program—and the material consequences of those ideas for refugees. For example, Kyriakides et al. (2018) concluded that private sponsorship bolstered 'orientalist scripts of refuge' in which sponsors saw themselves as Canadian saviors of 'their' helpless victim refugees. In another study (Agrawal, 2018: 953), Syrian refugees confirmed that the salience of such Orientalist ideas led their sponsors to infantilize them, doubt their 'capability and skills', and fail to 'offer them sufficient opportunities to become independent'. More recently, Iqbal et al. (2021) reported the frustration of Syrian mothers who felt pressured to perform gratitude even as their skills and worth were 'underestimated' by various actors, including their sponsors.

Perhaps the most damning critique of the PSR program is that private sponsorship *deters* rather than *spurs* sponsors' political transformation. In her study of refugee youth, Ritchie (2018) argued that private refugee sponsorship 'counters the radical potential of building knowledge from displacement (and dispossession)' (p. 672) by localizing consciousness, or concealing the relationship between local suffering and the global political economy. Local consciousness gives the appearance that the sources and solutions to social devastation are strictly local, while obscuring larger social relations, such as those between individuals and society and between Canada and the rest of the world.

Scholarship about the consequences of private resettlement is inconclusive. Sponsorship is framed both as an *opportunity* that spurs participants' awareness about injustices and an *opportunity cost* that reinforces tropes, deters consciousness-raising, and stifles political change. This debate fits with larger discussions about the ways that humanitarian action shapes shared understandings. Studies have pointed to the depoliticizing effect of humanitarianism (Fassin, 2005; Malkki, 1996). By constituting 'the refugee' as a 'pure victim', humanitarian discourse can strengthen tropes, dehistoricize suffering, and ultimately silence refugees (Malkki, 1996). Oriented toward the needs of the 'helper' rather than the 'helped', humanitarianism can also inadvertently sustain, rather than challenge, racial and class hierarchies (Choo, 2017; Elcioglu, 2020; Malkki, 2015).

Drawing on different empirical examples, other scholars report that humanitarian intervention can engender cognitive liberation, or the shared understandings a group needs in order to engage in collective political action. Humanitarianism can raise participants' political awareness (Sinatti, 2019) and even produce 'oppositional consciousness' as privileged individuals come to recognize and oppose the harm inflicted on a subordinate group (Nepstad, 2007). Although oriented to addressing migrants' immediate needs, grassroots humanitarianism is also found to change public discourse and policy, interrupting if not entirely disrupting hostile migration regimes (Artero, 2019; Vandevoordt and Fleischmann, 2021).

Such scholarly variation indicates the need for further empirical research. Specifically, this study considers two potential insights sponsors may gain through participation in the private resettlement program. First, like other forms of humanitarian action, sponsorship allows for sustained interpersonal contact between privileged and marginalized groups in ways that everyday life may not. According to one national survey, volunteers who became private sponsors of Syrian refugees arriving in Canada after November 2015 tended to be upper-middle-class, older white women (Macklin et al., 2018). By contrast, most refugees are racialized in Canadian society; in recent years, over half hail from the Middle East and more than third from Africa (Radford and Connor, 2019). And, compared to native-born Canadians and economic immigrants, refugees tend to experience chronic economic precarity even years after arrival (Wilkinson and Garcea, 2017). The

groups' long-term interactions through PSR introduce sponsors to lived experiences very different from their own.

Second, even if sponsors attribute refugees' pre-arrival hardships to the cultural 'backwardness' of Other places, witnessing newcomers' struggles could prompt novel awareness about the barriers to upward social mobility and the neoliberal structures perpetuating inequality in Canada. For instance, a dearth of social housing means that sponsors assist refugees in navigating an expensive private rental housing market (Oudshoorn et al., 2020), while helping them enter the Canadian labor market (Wilkinson and Garcea, 2017) reveals demand-side barriers like a refusal to recognize foreign credentials or expectation of 'Canadian job experience', which foreclose former refugees' ability to find employment relevant to their previous professions (Agrawal, 2018).

In what follows, I show how the sponsorship program produced *neoliberal fatigue* among volunteers. Sponsors witnessed and acknowledged that refugees continued to face hardships even post-'rescue'. And, driven by genuine care and compassion, sponsors worked hard to help their charges navigate barriers to integration. However, the exigencies of the PSR program deterred sponsors from reflecting on the extra-local and systemic nature of the problems they encountered. Three program features in particular—the limited availability of information about refugees before their arrival, the brevity of the sponsorship period, and the imposition of privacy—turned private refugee sponsorship into an all-consuming affair. The program demanded that sponsors rush to find individual, makeshift solutions to systemic social service gaps. As a result, sponsors were left with neither the ability nor the desire to reflect on how social structures affected the trajectories of the people they were trying to help.

Methodology and Sample

I draw on 25 interviews conducted between February and May 2020. Semi-structured interviews are a common approach for gathering data about respondents' biographies, tracing the process by which they arrive at decisions, and investigating their understandings of the social world (Blee and Taylor, 2002; Luker, 2008). Subjective meaning is valuable for examining how people make sense of and justify their behavior—such as the decision to volunteer. Similarly, interviews are well-suited for scrutinizing respondents' 'critiques of the present and projections of the future' (Blee and Taylor, 2002: 95).

Interviews were, therefore, appropriate for a study about sponsors' political consciousness. I interviewed 23 sponsors who had participated in private sponsorship or blended-visa office-referred sponsorship in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Kingston, Ontario. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and explored the following five topics: (1) respondents' backgrounds, (2) how they became sponsors, (3) the difficulties that they experienced, (4) how they made sense of these challenges, and (5) whether sponsorship was an experience they recommended to others and a program they would like to see continued. I invited sponsors to reflect on how their private troubles might be public issues (Mills, 1959) by noting the ubiquity of a problem they mentioned (e.g. the scarcity of affordable housing). By validating the prevalence of a seemingly private trouble, I encouraged respondents to consider how it might be symptomatic of a larger public issue.

In addition, I interviewed the current and past director of Christian Refugee Alliance,[5] a sponsorship agreement holder (SAH) that managed sponsorships undertaken by half of the respondents in the study. The vast majority of private sponsorships in Canada are monitored by SAHs (Van Haren, 2021: Table 3).[6] SAHs are non-profit (and oftentimes religious) social service organizations that facilitate private refugee resettlement by signing agreements with the Canadian government to assume legal liability for the sponsors and refugees under their care. In this role, SAHs

help constituent sponsors identify refugee claimants for private sponsorship and then apply to the government for the claimants' resettlement in Canada. SAHs also work to ensure that the yearlong sponsorship goes smoothly, despite the oftentimes 'fraught' power differences between refugees and sponsors (Hyndman, 2020). At the time of the study, Christian Refugee Alliance was overseeing 80 sponsor groups. Thus, the directors of this SAH were able to provide a bird's-eye view of sponsors' experiences.

Kingston and Toronto were selected as sites of sponsor recruitment in order to explore whether place affects sponsor profiles, motivations, and experiences; however, this comparison yielded surprisingly little difference. Kingston is a mid-sized city with low racial diversity and low newcomer presence (Statistics Canada, 2016a), while nearly half (47%) of the residents in the GTA, Canada's most populous metropolitan area, are foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2016b). In Kingston, resources for immigrants, such as government-funded settlement agencies, are limited in supply. By contrast, Toronto is a hub for immigrant-directed services. Despite these significant differences between the two cities, sponsors were remarkably similar in their backgrounds, and variations in resource availability did not produce discernible differences in their experiences.

My research assistant and I recruited respondents initially through personal social networks and subsequently through snowball sampling, which allowed me to interview multiple members of the same sponsoring committee and facilitated the triangulation of information. Sponsor groups ranged in size from 5–12 people. Sponsor recruitment ended once I reached data saturation (Small, 2009).

Demographically, respondents resembled the general population of private sponsors of post-November 2015: retired, white middle-class women (Macklin et al., 2018).[7] Sponsors overwhelmingly identified as white (96%), and most were women (65%). With an average age of 62, the vast majority were Baby Boomers, and more than half of the respondents (58%) had been retired for many years. The majority (96%) resided in middle-income households,[8] and all but one respondent had (or still did) work in white-collar professions. (The exception worked as a paramedic before becoming a regional public health administrator). In total, 91% had completed a bachelor's degree, and a third held a graduate degree. The majority (87%) were homeowners. Most were married (74%), and, on average, respondents reported living in two-person households.

For most respondents, sponsorship marked a new level of commitment and civic engagement. All but one were inexperienced in social movements and political causes, though nearly all (91%) had voted in the last two federal elections, and mostly for the centrist-to-center-left Liberal Party. Given this political affinity, it is unsurprising that 65% of respondents had become first-time sponsors in 2015 (or shortly afterward), supporting the Liberal Party's commitment to resettle Syrian refugees in Canada.

Faith-based organizations provide much of the necessary infrastructure for sponsorship, so it is also unsurprising that three-quarters of respondents identified as religious. Nearly half said they attended religious services at least monthly; almost all religious respondents were Christian.

Thus, as a social group, sponsors were economically secure, politically liberal, and moderately religious. For most respondents, sponsorship was markedly different from anything they had ever undertaken.

Navigating Public Issues Privately and Quickly

How did sponsors make sense of the circumstances and challenges that refugees faced in Canada? I find that private sponsorship stifled reflection on the *structural* causes of the challenges. Three features of the program coalesced to produce this neoliberal fatigue: the limited information available to sponsors about newcomers before their arrival, the brevity of the sponsorship period, and the imposition of privacy constraints. These conditions ensured that respondents experienced

sponsorship as a mad rush to solve multiple, complex, ever-arising problems of settlement. Ultimately, sponsors felt too drained to experience sponsorship as a politically-transformative activity.

'Negative Four Hours' Notice': The Information Glut in the Pre-Arrival Period

Sponsors had surprisingly little information about the newcomers they agreed to help resettle—not even their approximate arrival dates in Canada. Some learned of a family's arrival only when they received a phone call from immigration authorities at Toronto's Pearson International Airport. One such sponsor laughed as he recalled how he effectively got 'negative four hours' notice', though he had been assured he would receive 2 weeks' notice. Even those who had advance notice found there were few arrangements they could make before the refugees arrived. For example, sponsors told me that searching for housing too soon could risk depleting the committee's sponsorship funds by paying rent on an empty apartment indefinitely. Others found that apartment supervisors wanted to meet potential tenants in person, refusing to rent to anyone until, as one sponsor put it, they saw 'the whites of their eyes'. Renters might further insist that a church—often the institutional basis of a sponsoring committee—could not sign a lease. Unable to make these basic arrangements in advance, sponsors had to wait until newcomers were physically present in Canada. As a result, a crush of important tasks was packed into the first few months of the sponsorship year. Sponsors reported feeling especially harried and stressed during this initial period.

In addition to unpredictable arrival times, sponsors faced unpredictable needs. For example, a sponsor described how a newcomer arrived at a more advanced stage of pregnancy than the sponsoring group had anticipated. In another case, sponsors found out that a newcomer described as having 'mild depression' was instead severely depressed and suicidal. In these circumstances, sponsors scrambled to find appropriate medical resources, often without any background knowledge about the nature of the need. Making matters worse, sponsors were frequently surprised at how little English newcomers spoke. Many reported attending a pre-arrival orientation, such as a government-funded sponsor training program, but none of my respondents reported learning any phrases in refugees' languages. The linguistic mismatch proved a formidable struggle as my respondents attempted to help refugees settle.

'You've Suddenly Got Four People Standing in Front of You': A Short 12 Months for 'Integration'

If the first few days and weeks felt overwhelming, so, too, did the relatively short length of official sponsorship – just a year. This pressured sponsors to meet the exigencies of settlement as quickly as possible, with little time to spare for anything else, let alone a critique of government policy. The experiences of Nancy, a 66-year-old retiree, exemplified this trend.

Like many respondents, Nancy became a sponsor when she learned about the tragic fate of Alan Kurdi, a 3-year-old Syrian boy who drowned while he and his family were trying to reach the Greek island of Kos from Turkey. Nancy felt compelled to do something, but she also wanted the Canadian government to take action. After all, she explained, the boy's family had risked death because his aunt, living in British Columbia, had been unsuccessful when she pleaded with Canadian officials to bring her nephew and his family to Canada. Alan's death could have been avoided, Nancy said, were it not for the Canadian government.

Nancy voted for the Liberal Party in 2015 precisely because Justin Trudeau pledged to welcome 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada before the year's end; she thought, however, the government

would marshal its own resources to reach this target. When she realized that the newly-elected government fulfilled its campaign promise primarily by mobilizing private citizens, rather than state resources, Nancy became frustrated: 'Canadians thought [Trudeau] was going to go off and bring 25,000 *other* people in. Well, that's not what he did'. It seemed as if the government was taking credit for something it had not done, she declared, while resettling only half the number of refugees it should have.

Nancy was partially mistaken: 54% of the nearly 30,000 Syrian refugees settled in Canada in the first 9 months of Trudeau's rein *were* government-assisted, outpacing both private (36%) and blended sponsorship levels (9.5%; IRCC, 2016). Nonetheless, her exasperation with Trudeau is still noteworthy for how quickly it was sidelined by the immediate tasks of sponsorship:

> Yeah, [the government] misled us. [But] in the end, does it really matter to me? No, because we made our decisions [to sponsor] totally outside of that stuff. At the time, we were more focused on raising money. And then we got notice that the family was arriving in two weeks' time. We had nowhere for them to live. We had no furniture, no clothes. *Were we focused on what decisions the government was making? No! We were trying to get things done.* We were running 100 miles an hour because, like it or not, the plane was arriving. [emphasis mine.]

Like many others, Nancy's group received short notice before their charges arrived. Dwelling on how the government had misled Canadians seemed unproductive. There were more pressing tasks.

Others also reported being overwhelmed by the responsibility they shouldered and how, as Claire, a 69-year-old retiree, explained, 'there were just so many little problems to solve'. She continued,

> When you've suddenly got four people standing in front of you, there's a lot to do There are kids who have to go school. Nobody speaks English. Nobody has a job. Nobody knows where to go. 'Where is the doctor? Where is the dentist? Where is the shopping? How do I get around? Where's the bus? Are there buses?' There are a million things you're trying to work through with a new family who's from a completely different culture. And you don't even realize the significant difference in the culture until they're standing there in front of you and you're saying 'well, just, pick it up at the grocery store' and they're looking at you, like, [*puzzled expression*] 'is it safe to go out?'

Sponsors could—and occasionally did—tap into settlement agencies for resources and guidance. But, they quickly learned that they had signed up for a program that effectively required them to solve the problems of resettlement on their own in under a year. Entire governments have failed at less.

Meeting newcomers' housing and employment needs, in particular, were greedy tasks that ate up sponsors' time and energy. Inexperienced sponsors were shocked at the scope of the challenges. More than half mentioned difficulty in finding secure, affordable, and permanent housing. Several reported how, out of desperation, they housed newcomers in their own homes for a period. Landlords were reticent to rent to refugees. They questioned whether refugee families could make rent payments once sponsors' financial and practical assistance ended. Rents were shockingly high relative to the social assistance for newcomers, leading one upper-middle-class sponsor to declare that current welfare benefits 'wouldn't support a cat living in Toronto'. Another sponsor reported that the difficulty of finding affordable accommodation was the 'number one reason' he would not sponsor again. Despite these realizations, however, no respondent articulated a desire for policy changes addressing affordable housing shortages and stagnant social assistance levels.

The majority of respondents also lamented the state of Canada's labor market; once again, though, few considered broader interventions to alleviate these challenges. In some cases, newcomers who had left behind rural lives arrived with skills that were not easily transferable to an urban context. In other cases, newcomers were professionals with university degrees and experience working in an urban economy who struggled to find jobs commensurate with their skills when prospective employers refused to recognize foreign credentials and work experience. Sponsors strategized as best as they could, packaging newcomers' skills and job histories into résumés in the hope that these documents would make refugees legible to Canadian employers. They worked to get foreign credentials recognized. They scoured their networks for potential job leads.

As they recited these multifaceted and time-consuming difficulties, 65% of respondents told me they were either taking a break from sponsorship or not planning to sponsor again in the future. Exhaustion notwithstanding, nearly every sponsor in this study recommended PSR participation for *other* Canadians. Paradoxically, the logistical challenges of settlement had reinforced the program's legitimacy for sponsors—the help they provided was clearly very much needed. To the extent that sponsors suggested a policy change, it was to expand private sponsorship at the expense of its government counterpart.

Peter, a 56-year-old financial project manager, articulated this sentiment in unambiguous terms. Peter had been volunteering to settle refugees in Toronto since the 1980s. Affordable housing, he found, was a persistent and worsening problem in the GTA, and led him to temporarily house newcomers in his own home. When I asked about policy-level changes, however, Peter pivoted from the topic of housing to urging policymakers to raise PSR and reduce government-assisted sponsorship levels:

> Unlike volunteering at a shelter, [sponsorship] is a bigger commitment. [Also,] you don't know what the outcome is going to be. You don't know what the person is going to do. But it is the most meaningful work you can do. So, encourage more private [sponsorship], because the public [sponsorship] doesn't do a great job.

Peter acknowledged the dedication and risk tolerance the program asked of sponsors, proposing, in the same breath, privatizing all government-assisted sponsorship. Yes, sponsorship was taxing for sponsors, but that was precisely what made it 'the most meaningful work you can do'.

The Catch-22 of Private Sponsorship: 'The Privacy Stuff'

In addition to limited pre-arrival information and a short sponsorship period, the imposition of privacy constraints made neoliberal fatigue likely. The program forced sponsors to operate in information silos, relying almost exclusively on their own knowledge and social capital to solve resettlement problems. One group's impressive efforts to develop a lateral network connecting sponsoring groups to each other, highlights how forcibly *private* the private sponsorship program is in practice.

Campbell Church had undertaken sponsorships for many years, but its settlement committee swelled to two dozen members when public interest in Canada's 2015 Syrian resettlement initiative soared. The group decided to develop subcommittees, each specializing in a settlement-related task. For instance, the employment subcommittee developed a job-search protocol, while a housing subcommittee built rapport with neighborhood property managers, hoping that these relationships would pay off when future refugee housing needs arose. With subcommittees, protocols, and even a detailed handbook, the Campbell Church sponsors effectively rationalized the settlement process.

Campbell's expert sponsors began to wonder whether other sponsors would be interested in learning from their experiences. Mary, a 77-year-old former marketing communications professional, was tasked with surveying other sponsoring groups in the area. The response was a resounding 'yes'. Soon, Mary and her colleagues organized a free, 3-hour workshop about Syrian newcomers' health needs, featuring Campbell sponsors as well as settlement agency workers.

Organizing such events was one thing, but Mary soon found that advertising them was quite another. Citing federal privacy legislation, Campbell committee's SAH refused to share contact information for other sponsors under its jurisdiction. It is unclear whether, as charitable non-profit organizations, SAH agencies were subject to the same privacy standards as commercial, for-profit entities.[9] Whatever the case, the SAH's unwillingness to help Mary is noteworthy: these umbrella organizations are not in the business of facilitating lateral networks *between* sponsoring groups. Their default information-sharing model is hierarchical and unidirectional. Reluctance notwithstanding, the SAH organization acknowledged the potential value of workshops like Campbell's for other sponsors under its care.

Serendipitously, Mary had the marketing savvy to handle this kind of 'privacy stuff'. After some negotiation, the SAH agreed to disseminate her flier among its constituent sponsor groups, and Mary leveraged the various regional offices of her church's denominational district to get it out to other parishes. She also promoted the workshop on social media. Her efforts paid off; almost 100 people attended, and another survey revealed that sponsors were hungry for more. Mary and the 'workshops' subcommittee organized 10 more events on subjects ranging from housing searches to recertification processes. In the meantime, Mary collected sponsors' contact information, generating what she called 'the informal network'.

Next, the Campbell sponsors secured a grant to conduct an independent study about the network's feasibility. Were the workshops addressing a demand? Should they formalize the network into a self-sustaining organization? The study confirmed the group's suspicion; sponsors wanted to be a part of a lateral network. Although government-funded settlement agencies specialized in refugee integration, sponsors told the Campbell group that they were neither knowledgeable about the agencies' services nor comfortable approaching them for assistance. Others pointed out that the length of sponsorship seemed unrealistically short, noting that they often had to help newcomers past the end of the official settlement period—and past their claim to sources of assistance like their SAH. The survey also revealed concerns that refugee-serving organizations could not help sponsors manage, like disagreements between co-sponsors. The feasibility study thus recommended formalizing the informal network in order to fill the informational gaps identified by sponsors. Mary sent the study to the IRCC, and officials subsequently met with Campbell to discuss government funding to transform the network into a self-sustaining organization. At the time of writing, however, the IRCC showed no further interest in formalizing the network.

Arguably, the Campbell sponsor's initial goals were relatively modest: they wanted to invite other sponsors to their workshops and facilitate future knowledge exchange between groups. What they found as they devised a roundabout way to advertise its first workshop was the *forcibly private* nature of private sponsorship. It turned out that the simple act of connecting sponsors was an innovative endeavor.

Private refugee sponsorship forced white, middle-class Canadians to confront the effects of structural inequality that shape immigrant lives. However, the very nature of the sponsorship program ensured neoliberal fatigue among sponsors, deterred them from critically reflecting on how those challenges might be addressed at anything other than the personal level. Faced with the monumental task of addressing newcomers' complex needs within a 'short 12 months', sponsors remained laser-focused on solving these problems quickly and privately. Many reported a sense of personal accomplishment without realizing all these issues might be politically structured and

subject to change. However, as the next section shows, the topic of family separation occasionally disrupted this neoliberal fatigue.

'Seeing' the Extra-Local: The Unanticipated Politics of Family Reunification

For sponsors absorbed in the here and now, 'Other' places and 'distant' pre-Canadian pasts only came into sharp focus when they witnessed newcomers trying to connect with families left behind. Lisa discussed the lingering effects of family separation for the people she had helped bring to Canada:

> The anguish that they all feel about the people they have left behind in danger, and the abject loneliness that Faisal felt—that was hard. Those [feelings] could easily have been predicted. But it's one thing to intellectually understand that those things will happen, versus seeing them.

In hindsight, Lisa realized that Faisal's emotional pain should have been predictable. The 19-year-old boy arrived alone from Iraq, the whereabouts of his parents and siblings unknown. The dominant narrative around refugee 'rescue' implicitly prepares sponsors for unconditionally happy newcomers, no longer concerned with their non-Canadian past but with their Canadian future. The exigencies of resettlement inevitably disrupted this narrative and the parochial orientation of sponsorship. One sponsor suggested not a one-on-one sponsorship, but a chain of help, with 'his' refugees constantly fretting about family members left behind: 'They're all on cellphones with each other. They see that their families are desperate and they want to help'.

For Lisa, the most difficult moment of sponsorship came when the El-Nourys, a young Syrian couple her group sponsored, asked them to sponsor several relatives still living in Syria. Lisa's committee determined the challenges of a named sponsorship[10] were too prohibitive. Unlike the blended public–private BVOR, a named sponsorship would require sponsors to commit to a years-long process with an unpredictable outcome; the Canadian government could just as easily decline as accept the application.[11]

The named-sponsorship process was significantly lengthened by the requirement to acquire a UNHCR convention refugee designation for the applicant. In this case, it would require the El-Nourys' loved ones—including the husband's elderly parents—to leave Syria, possibly further endangering them. Lisa explained, 'There's the whole ridiculous rule that if you're still living in your home country, you're not considered a refugee. People have to place themselves in a more precarious situation than the one they're already in, to be considered a refugee'. She summed it up this way: 'The family reunification stuff is ridiculously hard . . . It seems unnecessary and cruel to make it so difficult for people to bring their families over'.

Another sponsor in Lisa's group, Kenneth, contrasted the government's lofty rhetoric to its actual immigration laws:

> It just seemed as if the government claimed that they were much more open [to refugees] than they actually were. There were more restrictions than it seemed there should have been based on what the prime minister was saying about 'come to Canada'.

Sharon suggested that easing family reunification could be a sound economic policy. She reasoned that not only was the resettlement of named-sponsorship newcomers easier, because they already had family in Canada who could help them, but the original sponsored family was better off when there were more relatives around to ease economic burdens like childcare:

On the whole, the named-sponsorship people have been successful because they've had the support of whoever is here. Or, the people who are here now have had the support of grandma who has come to do the childcare in order to free mum and dad up to go to work, to do their thing here to get established. Grandma's not going to get established here, but she'll look after the childcare, which is huge!

For Sharon, family reunification was not a costly humanitarian obligation that should be discouraged. Echoing critical scholars,[12] she argued for the economic desirability of a more expansive family reunification policy.

Buying Out of Private Sponsorship

For one sponsor, family reunification actually undermined the legitimacy of private sponsorship. Kate, a 43-year-old professional working in television programming, helped sponsor a family from Syria. Another Toronto-based committee sponsored the family's relatives, and so the two groups of sponsors worked together to ensure they found homes for the two families that were close to each other.

Not long after the sponsorship year ended, the family approached Kate: Would she help sponsor their elderly mother who had fled to Egypt? The pandemic had abruptly halted government-assisted sponsorship, and the woman was not a designated convention refugee. The woman's best chance was private sponsorship—a fact that prompted Kate to reflect on Canada's strange immigration policy. How could an ordinary Canadian be empowered to make such a life-changing decision for a person on the other side of the world? 'It feels like the government has', she paused, 'sloughed off responsibility'.

Kate kept circling back to the 'oddity' of private sponsorship. In government-assisted sponsorship, there was public oversight. Not so with private resettlement. Kate had heard the stories of private sponsors abandoning 'their' newcomers. 'And so for that family, who do they complain to?' she asked,

As the sponsorship group, you have an inordinate amount of power. You basically hold their entire life in your hands. I don't even know if I had a police check. I must have at some point. But like, literally, when they arrived at the airport, I was handed a piece of paper from the government and I signed it. And then, I took this family! It was kind of bananas! There's a weirdness, as a private citizen, being handed a refugee family.

Given her background, Kate could have normalized the PSR program. She had helped resettle newcomers three times, her parents and sister were longtime sponsors, and she was ready to sponsor again. But when 'her' newcomers turned to her to help reunite family, it triggered key questions and made Kate wonder: *Why should she be trusted with so much power?*

Neoliberal fatigue is not impenetrable. The problem of family separation created an unanticipated opening for critique among sponsors, whose occasionally Pollyannaish conceptions of Canadian immigration were disrupted by witnessing its harsh restrictions on reunification. As they came to grasp the pains of separation and the obstacles to reconnecting refugee families, sponsors began acknowledging the Canadian state's coercive side.

Conclusion

As one scholar writes, it is 'an uncomfortable task' to criticize the program of private sponsorship (Labman, 2019: 82). In a global context of growing anti-migrant sentiment, the PSR scheme stands out for linking Canadian nationalism to a politics of tolerance. At the time of writing, this reality

still holds true; as asylum-seekers at the Belarus-European Union border experience pushbacks and overt abuse at the hands of border guards (Roth, 2021), the Trudeau government has agreed to resettle 40,000 Afghan refugees in Canada through the PSR program (Gladstone and Austen, 2021). The program is so internationally acclaimed that, with the support of the UNHCR, the Canadian government is working to 'export' the PSR program to other countries (Smith, 2020). Indeed, in October 2021, the Biden Administration announced a US initiative to mirror the Canadian PSR program, allowing private citizens to sponsor and resettle Afghan evacuees in their communities (Montoya-Galvez, 2021). Yet precisely because of the program's respectability, we must apply critical scrutiny to private sponsorship and, more generally, the global trend of relying on the humanitarian impulses of privileged strata for migrant welfare, inclusion, and justice.

This study shows how the program of refugee sponsorship reinforced the idea that the *local* was the only domain of intervention and *a private, logistical, and problem-solving orientation* was the only method of intervention. Rarely did sponsors understand newcomers' struggles—from the competitiveness of the rental market to the incongruity of welfare benefits and the cost of living—as *public troubles* necessitating broader intervention, including modest policy reform. Indeed, ruminating on how social structures affected refugee trajectories in Canada, seemed distracting and frivolous to sponsors. I refer to this outcome as neoliberal fatigue.

Although both pose a challenge to the sustainability of humanitarian volunteerism, neoliberal fatigue is not the same as compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is the indifference that develops when people are overexposed to suffering elsewhere, often through the media (Vestergaard, 2008). But neoliberal fatigue is not a form of indifference to others' misfortune. Rather, it is a political lassitude stemming from a particular policy environment. *Neoliberal* fatigue develops during the hustle to help others find individual and makeshift solutions to systemic social service gaps. The program of private refugee resettlement does not just responsibilize citizens with integrating refugees; it also gives citizens the Sisyphean task of helping newcomers adapt to life without adequate social provision. In the process, sponsors did not become numb to newcomers' struggles. However, in the rush to mitigate these hardships, sponsors were left with neither the time nor the mental bandwidth to reflect on the structural causes of the difficulties they encountered.

Neoliberal fatigue, however, is neither inevitable nor impermeable, and this finding fits with scholars' variegated conclusions about the political potential of humanitarianism. In this study, the brutal fact of family separation organically led some sponsors to 'see' social relations previously obscured to them. Realizing that family separation impeded newcomers' 'integration', sponsors came to understand that what happened elsewhere continued to affect people here, post-'rescue'. Abstract homelands suddenly gained focus, as did their enduring links to Canada. Similarly, the fact of family separation prompted sponsors to 'see' the Canadian state's coercive side. The sponsorship program typically gave the impression that the state's main preoccupation was with the welfare of Canadians at home and, in a show of global humanitarian concern, rescuing non-Canadians from abroad. However, as sponsors came to realize the difficulty, sometimes the impossibility of helping reunify newcomers with their loved ones, they began questioning the stringency of Canada's immigration admissions policies.

I do not want to overstate the political potential of these insights. Even when they were overwhelmed with the work of settlement and did not plan to sponsor again, respondents did not express a desire for more load-sharing and collective approaches to managing newcomers. Instead, most sponsors wanted to see private settlement levels increase relative to their government counterparts. The program's burdensome nature actually *strengthened* the appeal of downloading refugee management to private citizens. Overcoming the challenges of sponsorship, at times, gave participants a sense of personal accomplishment. This reasoning is indicative of how neoliberal fatigue fortifies the cultural imperative of individual responsibility, and concomitantly, the material status quo. Within this ideological context, humanitarianism is unlikely to stay sustainable, let alone foster social change.

Future research might consider whether neoliberal fatigue characterizes the cognitive effects of other types of humanitarian volunteer work, civic engagement, and even social movement mobilization that aim to help less privileged groups cope with social service gaps. And, in these other contexts, what are the specific mechanisms leading to or disrupting this political weariness? The relationship between neoliberal fatigue and state approval also remains unclear. Although the PSR program represents a state-sanctioned effort, many humanitarian initiatives and other collective endeavors are not officially approved and sometimes even actively discouraged by authorities. To what extent does the absence of state approval and any resulting oppositional culture thwart the onset of neoliberal fatigue? The answers to these questions can illuminate how social issues get disassociated from political critique and what can be done to disrupt this worrisome outcome.

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Notes

1. Turkey currently *hosts* the largest number of refugees, but permanent resettlement refers to providing admitted refugees with a pathway to citizenship, as in Canada (UNHCR, 2017, 2019).
2. Provincial healthcare insurance covers many healthcare costs; however, signing up for the plan requires paperwork and in-person registration. Sponsors help newcomers with this cumbersome process.
3. According to one conservative estimate, the average group has about eight members (Macklin et al., 2018: footnote 11).
4. If, during their first year, privately resettled refugees move away from the city where their sponsors reside in Canada, then the sponsorship is terminated, along with sponsors' invaluable financial support. For this reason, refugees often stay in the cities and towns that their sponsors live.
5. This name is a pseudonym.
6. It is possible to sponsor someone without the backing of a sponsorship agreement holder (SAH), through small ad hoc groups of five people or through 'community organizations', such as a firm or a hospital. However, only through an SAH can sponsors apply on behalf of a claimant who does not already have official refugee status conferred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or another country. Given this limitation on who groups of five and community organizations can sponsor, 70%–90% of sponsorships from 2015 to 2019 were overseen by SAHs (Van Haren, 2021: Table 3).
7. However, as Macklin et al. (2018: 38) note, there is no publicly available data about the national population of private sponsors, and it is certainly possible that the authors' own sample was affected by self-selection bias. However, given the significant financial burden of private sponsorship, it is not unlikely that, on average, sponsors have class privilege—an attribute that significantly correlates with white privilege in Canada (Block et al., 2019). The amount of time that sponsorship requires also suggests that retired volunteers are more likely to undertake such an endeavor than their working counterparts.
8. In Toronto, middle-income households earned between Can$80,000 and Can$214,000 in 2019 (based on 75%–200% of the city's household median income before taxes) (Statistics Canada, 2021). All except one Toronto-based respondent reported a household income that fell into this range. The most recent

household income data about Kingston is from 2015 and may be too dated for this study (Statistics Canada, 2017). However, in 2019, middle-income households in Ontario – the province in which Kingston is located – earned between Can$76,000 and Can$204,000 (Statistics Canada, 2021). All respondents from Kingston reported income within this range.

9. See OPCC (2019). A director of Christian Refugee Alliance (CRA), another SAH, reported that they would also be reluctant to share contact information of sponsors across their constituent groups.

10. A 'named sponsorship' is a type of private sponsorship where the sponsors' name or identify the candidate that they will sponsor. Candidates for a named sponsorship must be designated a convention refugee by the UNHCR and vetted by Canadian visa officers. In the cases outlined here, family reunification requires named sponsorship.

11. Between 2006 and 2010, the government only approved 57% of named-sponsorship requests (Labman, 2019: 104).

12. See, for instance, Aggarwal and Das Gupta (2013).

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