Chapter Title: A complicated welcome: social workers navigate policy, organisational contexts and sociocultural dynamics following migration to Canada
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Book Title: Transnational social work
Book Subtitle: Opportunities and challenges of a global profession
Book Editor(s): Allen Bartley, Liz Beddoe
Published by: Bristol University Press, Policy Press. (2018)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt20d87w0.11

A complicated welcome: social workers navigate policy, organisational contexts and sociocultural dynamics following migration to Canada[1]

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The context of immigration to Canada

Canada prides itself on a reputation for being a welcoming and inclusive country, promoting collective pride in a multicultural mosaic wherein a diversity of ethnicities, cultures and religions coexist. It is a country that often enjoys positive international assessment, with its reported comfortable standard of living, solid social programmes, mix of urban and rural lifestyles, vast and spectacular natural beauty, and people often considered polite and consensus-driven. It is also a country with a growing density divide between urban growth and rural out-migration, an ageing demographic, and regional variability in population growth (Statistics Canada, 2012). This scenic land of opportunity has evident appeal to immigrants leaving their countries of origin for a variety of social, economic and political reasons.

The Canadian government, reciprocally, views the newcomer to Canada as providing an answer to sustaining the country's demographic and economic growth. Under both Liberal and Conservative Party leadership, the Canadian government has sought to liberalise its labour and trade markets through policies including the North America Free Trade Agreement and programmes such as those designated for

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[1]   Excerpted and reprinted with permission. First published as: Brown, M., Sansfaçon, A.P., Éthier, S. and Fulton, A. (2014) 'A complicated welcome: social workers navigate policy, organizational contexts and socio-cultural dynamics following migration to Canada', *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, 3(1): 58–68.

temporary foreign workers, skilled trade workers and professional immigrants (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2014). These efforts are considered to have been successful. For example, the Migrant Integration Policy Index determined that Canadian immigrant workers and their families benefit from the third-best integration policies in the 31 countries considered, citing specific government efforts towards improving equal access in education and labour (Migrant Integration Policy Index III, 2011). The International Migration Outlook, published in 2013 by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), cites immigration as accounting for two thirds of Canada's population growth of 1.2%, primarily in the age bracket of 20–44 years, which is otherwise in decline. It is this cohort that contributes significantly to the labour force, grows families, buys homes and forms the basis of taxation revenue (OECD, 2013). Canada reached a record high of 281,000 new permanent residents to Canada in 2010, followed by 249,000 new permanent residents to Canada in 2011 (OECD, 2013). Further, employment for foreign-born Canadians in 2012 earned Canada the ranking of third-highest in the OECD (OECD, 2013). This government priority continues.

Internationally educated social workers are included in these trends, through both federal and provincial initiatives. For example, the social work profession is included as one of the 29 eligible occupations on the 'Federal Skilled Worker' recruitment policy list (Healy and Huegler, 2012), and Chapter 7 of the Agreement on Internal Trade – 'Mutual recognition agreement on labour mobility for social workers in Canada' – has been implemented (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, 2007). Further, the government of Quebec has enacted a Mutual Recognition Agreement between Quebec and France for the qualifications of social workers in professional employment (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, 2007). These policies and entities support the mobility of social workers both from overseas to Canada and across the country's provinces and territories.

Given the reach of globalisation and the development of policies and multilateral agreements, labour mobility in social work, both at national and international levels, is increasingly popular. Indeed, this cluster of considerations seems perfect: the idealised Canadian landscape and welcome + a declining and ageing population + the need for demographic and economic input + favourable immigration policies + social worker-specific labour mobility policies + an internationally endorsed set of global standards for the profession. Alluring though this picture may be, research examining the experiences of 44 migrant social

workers who undertook their social work education outside Canada and currently practise social work within Canada suggest significant barriers on the levels of policy, organisational context and sociocultural dynamics. Analyses of findings regarding personal and professional adaptation across borders suggest that the idealised Canadian welcome is a complicated one. From the level of policy, to organisational context, to sociocultural dynamics, migrant social workers experience a tension between a discourse of possibility and opportunity surrounding life and work in Canada, and material constraints in bureaucratic processes and finding a fit in the social work profession in Canada.

Methodology

This chapter presents findings from a qualitative study with 44 participants who had completed their social work degrees in Australia, India, Philippines, Colombia, Spain, Liberia, New Zealand, Finland, France, Venezuela, Germany, UK, Romania, USA, Israel, Nigeria, Lebanon, South Africa, Netherlands and Ukraine since 2002. Grounded theory methods guided the analysis of the individual interviews given that this is a largely under-theorised field of study: with the exception of a team of researchers in the UK (see Hussein et al, 2010, 2011) and in New Zealand (see Bartley et al, 2012; Fouché et al, 2014), the experiences of social workers who migrate, their professional adaptation processes and the many changes in perception that they undergo while adapting to new cultural and organisational contexts have not been well conceptualised and theorised in the literature (Pullen Sansfaçon et al, 2012).

Participants were recruited through social work networks, including professional association newsletters, regulatory body list serves and posters in agencies. Three urban sites – Calgary, Montreal and Halifax – were selected, each for their distinct regional trends in the attraction of newcomers; as the study progressed, the pool of potential participants proved limited in Calgary and Halifax, thus the catchment area was extended to Southern Alberta in the west and Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island in the east. Consistent with grounded theory methods, no extant concepts were taken from the literature; the coding structure and team analysis were generated 'from the ground up', directly from the data.

Findings

Canadian immigration policies

The first set of policies with which newcomer social workers grapple are Canadian immigration policies, often researching them from abroad while planning for their move. While detailed with regard to purpose and process on the federal government website (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013), frustrations remain regarding their clarity and user-friendliness. It is clear from these data that finding one's way through the immigration process takes fortitude, self-advocacy, perseverance and patience. This combination is captured in a summary statement by a participant from England, who says: "My experience has been if you come into Canada … then you need to put your helmet on and fasten your seatbelt…. It's not for the faint heart, the process, and you gotta stick with it" (England–2).

Detailing specific aspects of the process, the following participant highlights accessibility:

> "The process of immigration is extremely difficult. The Department of Immigration has a website and an email address. They do not have a phone number, so you can't call anyone and ask questions. Everything you need to know you need to find out off the Internet. And when you email a question to them, it may be several days before you get a response. And then it says, 'Look at the website'." (Australia–1)

Some wonder if the cumbersome process is intended to dissuade newcomers from seeking residence in Canada, like the participant from Spain who said: "Do they even ever want us here?". Indeed, there is a paradox in the approach of the federal government in that a coexisting policy of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) is clear that employers are required to undertake recruitment efforts to hire Canadian citizens and permanent residents before offering a job to 'foreign workers' (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2014). The priorities of the federal government appear to be at a crossroads: trying to manage the tension of hiring Canadian citizens first, which is important in a country where average unemployment is at 6.9%, yet ranges across the provinces from 4.5% in Saskatchewan to 11.8% in Prince Edward Island (Statistics Canada, 2014); and also building

its population and economic base through the attraction of skilled professionals to the country.

Recognition of foreign credentials

Recognition of foreign credentials is the next level of policy navigation for newcomer social workers, a process through which assessment is made regarding the degree of equivalence between an international social work degree and a Canadian one. Given that social work is a regulated profession in Canada, this is required in order to be licensed by the regulatory body for each province. While the recognition of foreign credentials is not under the federal government's mandate, either by law or by the policy of the CIC, the Foreign Credentials Referrals Office was established by the CIC to provide information to immigrants (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013).

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) is the mediating body for the provincial regulatory bodies that do not facilitate the recognition of foreign credentials; only British Columbia and Quebec undertake their own assessment (Pullen Sansfaçon, 2010). Findings from our study suggest that there are inconsistent criteria, lengthy time delays and general frustration with the process of evaluation of one's credentials earned at a university or college outside Canada:

> "I didn't really know where to start. I tried to figure it out, I tried to contact them and figure out what I needed then, if I'd missed something in my education.… But they wouldn't give me any information on what I missed and the message I got at that point … was to register into a BSW [Bachelor of Social Work] program and then see what credits I would get, like that I already have, that I didn't have to retake and then just take whatever was left, kind of thing. And so I tried that. I tried to register at the [university] and they said I couldn't register because I already had a BSW." (Netherlands-1)

These difficulties in getting foreign credentials recognised are also echoed by participants from France. While the unique France–Quebec agreement should 'facilitate and accelerate the acquisition by people in France and Québec of a permit to practise a profession' (Gouvernement du Québec, 2013), several participants who established themselves in Montreal after moving from France experienced delays and challenges

in getting their credentials recognised. A participant from France who immigrated to Montreal illustrates this:

> "I did not expect to have to wait six months because I had checked on the [Quebec] professional association of social workers' website and they did not explain at all the way to proceed or that it could take as long. I thought it would be much simpler. I was a little disappointed when I arrived here as I had to work as a [not qualified] social care practitioner." (France)

In addition, frustration was reported when there was a lack of communication, or circularity, between the CASW and the provincial bodies:

> "I spoke with the [provincial body], who said to … have [the degrees] accredited by the Canadian association, so I did that.… When I then applied to register with the [provincial body], they said 'Oh, we need the transcripts and everything' and I said, 'You know, it was really kind of just a bit messy trying to get them from England, could you not get them from the Canadian [Association]?' and they said 'We have no connection with them'. And I was like, 'Hang on, you just told me I couldn't register with you until I was approved by the Canadian [body] … so surely you have, like, one call you could make!'." (England–3)

These data align with the challenges documented in several countries (White, 2006; Bartley et al, 2012; Fang, 2012) that the difficulties faced in obtaining degree recognition are among the first challenges that migrant social workers encounter in a new country. After working through immigration processes and assessing the equivalence of international social work education to Canadian social work education, next comes securing the licence to practise as a registered social worker.

Social work licensing

Securing a licence to practise social work is a rite of passage for social workers seeking to work in the field in Canada. This process is also experienced as cumbersome and lengthy, sometimes with mixed messages regarding what is required for the licence. Given that licensing

is a central requirement for securing social work positions, there were concerns with the amount of time that the process took:

> "I sent my registration package and I was told I would get an answer in five days – an official answer, letter format. Nobody called me so I kept calling after one month, after the second month. I was always told that the registrar was out of her office, she's in the workshop, she's on vacation, she's here and there. I did not hear from them at all so finally I contacted them again. I said if … they want me to do some extra things like courses or approve credentials then I am definitely willing to do whatever it takes. So finally they wrote me back an email saying that I will have to prove some of my courses from Romania, that I took ethics in social work and social organisation courses…. I managed to translate that, to notarise it and then to send it to the [regulatory body]…. They finally came back to me after another long two-month wait. They told me that they would register me provisionally." (Romania)

Issues of clarity, process delays and additional practice hours constitute significant challenges to finding employment in the field of social work because in each province, the profession has been granted protected title under legislation. The findings of this study align with research undertaken in New Zealand that, in addition to the recognition of their skills, candidates need to demonstrate evidence of their qualifications for local practice (Beddoe et al, 2012). Further, studies in the UK substantiate that migrant social workers often need to complete additional unpaid practicum hours, or accept a less-qualified position, in order to acquire local experience (Hussein et al, 2011).

Taken together, these policy-based challenges – immigration, the recognition of foreign credentials and securing a licence to practise – are experienced as impediments to the movement, settlement and integration of migrant social workers. A heavy onus rests on the social worker to verify that they are a worthy new Canadian, that their social work education is rigorous enough for Canadian expectations and that they can be reliably granted the social work title in the country.

Through these accounts, we begin to see the internationally famed Canadian welcome begin to tarnish at the edges. Examining a little more closely, we learn that the percentage of immigrants in social work in 2006 was slightly lower than in all occupations: 9% compared with 12% (Service Canada, 2013). Unemployment rates for social work are

also reportedly low; Service Canada notes that few positions will be filled by unemployed experienced social workers because the jobs are not likely to be available. Auder (2003, p 699) theorises that 'regulatory institutions actively exclude immigrants from the upper segments of the labour market. In particular, professional associations and employers give preference to Canadian born and educated workers and deny immigrants access to the most highly desired occupations'. Creese and Wiebe (2012, p 56) question Canadian immigration policies that 'prioritize the recruitment of well-educated immigrants without also addressing multiple barriers that exist in the work place'. Hence, we turn our attention to the organisational context, and, subsequently, socio-cultural dynamics, to begin to distinguish the discursive from the material in the experiences of migrant social workers.

Organisational context

After the immigration process, the recognition of international education and licensing with the provincial regulatory body, migrant social workers are in a position to secure employment in their professional field. Yet, organisations and agencies have their own layers of explicit and implicit assessment, providing shape to the experience of newcomer social workers seeking work. In the realm of organisational context, we move more into a discursive dimension, where there are as many systemic expectations conveyed through subtle interactions and interpretations as there are formally explicated through the official hiring practices and human resources procedures of particular agencies. The following participants articulate this issue:

> "How do I put forth my skills and tell [them] 'Hey, I'm available; I'm available to volunteer; I'm available to give my resources to you'. How do I do that? That is the biggest block I have." (India–1)

> "it was difficult to get into social work, even though I have social work experience and my degree is recognised. So after that, what did I do is, my wife and I chose, you know what, we need to go back [to the Netherlands] because this is not working in Canada, I can't get a job, proper job, on the level that I had." (Netherlands–2)

The tautological relationship between getting a Canadian job and needing Canadian experience is exemplified here:

> "you end up in this vicious circle of you don't have a local experience, right? And you cannot get any experience here because you don't have a working experience here. Well, how can I get it if I don't have a chance?" (Ukraine)

Like the participant from the Netherlands cited earlier, for many of these social workers, migration is not a one-time, one-way move. Given the systemic and bureaucratic challenges to securing work, people move to, from and within Canada due to cumulative stressors. A participant from the US moved to one of the eastern provinces, returned to the US after six months of searching for a job, then took a one-year-term position in the Yukon, before settling in the eastern province to which he had originally come. Similarly, participants from Finland and Lebanon both went back and forth several times due to financial need, knowing that they could work in their home countries for short periods and earn enough money to then return to Canada again to try to secure long-term social work employment. Their stories align with the following participant, who kept moving to find work:

> "We landed to Quebec City and, as we all know, it's a government city, so I would say all the good jobs were taken by the locals and, you know, although I look like them, I really, really had a hard time finding employment and I was already bilingual French and English at that time. So we moved to Calgary." (Romania)

The struggle to find work led many to theorise what was happening, questioning why they faced barriers. Some came up with concerns about a paradoxical welcome to this new land:

> "Not to blow my own trumpet, but I think I have a really good background…. from age 20, I've worked in social arenas…. I've done a lot of jobs…. I'm quite surprised that I've never even had an interview, no feedback. And the only deduction I can make, which is obviously not a really good one, is that there is some prejudice against being qualified from another country." (England-3)

The following participant theorised the reasons for the challenges she faced in her first Canadian social work job:

"The first one is racism, the second one is fear. I have two masters' degrees and a bachelor's degree and then I have a boss who has a Certificate of Diplomatic Social Work [sic]. So you can imagine what it was like. So I literally lasted one month on that job and I was let go. Yes, because every report I was writing was critically analysed and scrutinised and someone told me they did not like it. I don't think I do anything wrong. I think I was just doing something according to my knowledge and my skills. And perhaps she did not understand and she felt threatened, you know, and so they let me go." (Nigeria)

Organisational contexts structure the realities of employment-seeking in the field of social work in Canada. In the new organisational context, migrant social workers are faced with different types of relations with stakeholders, supervisors, regulators and colleagues. The participants in this study experienced that they need to work harder than their local counterparts to obtain credibility and/or positioning within the organisational context. This has as much to do with unwritten expectations and understanding of the local context as it does with written procedures and site-specific policies and laws.

Sociocultural dynamics

Delving into the discursive domain more deeply, participants talked of the struggle to 'fit in' either while looking for social work employment or after they had secured it. Social relations among colleagues and with clients are a central means through which personal and professional adaptation occurs, not only through the translation of skills and knowledge from one's country of origin, but also through figuring out the spoken and unspoken ways of being that are acceptable in the new setting. The following participant begins with a global statement about Canadians, which she stated "comes out in a lots of ways": "The Canadian lifestyle, it's completely different than German … they're more laid back I would say in Canada. In Germany, we're really strict" (Germany).

Proficiency in the primary language of Canada, English, is another area of focus for both personal and professional adaptation, on the professional side, likely because social work's central method for intervention relies on the spoken word:

> "It was a real, real challenge because my language skills were very poor.… I didn't feel confident to even start the process of applying for a real job because I was so afraid that I wouldn't be able to communicate…. I think it took two years to feel that I can really apply for a job with confidence, applying for a job." (Israel)

For others, proficiency in the language was reportedly fine; however, use or tone of the language, or its delivery, was a notable area for attention:

> "in my culture, we talk fast and loud and here if you do that, people find you aggressive and I try to watch how I talk, how I behave. Sometimes maybe my humour is different. I notice sometimes they don't really understand my jokes, so I was like, 'OK, that is not the way how you do it with your co-workers!'." (Romania)

In the complexity of adapting the practice of social work to new local contexts, the matter of racism bears particular mention. In this study, social workers of colour face discrimination and Caucasian social workers experience the white privilege that upholds discrimination:

> "I have to say, just as a comment, and I know it's very sad that I'm saying that, but … I was lucky that I'm Caucasian. It's very sad for me to tell this. I know that that's a factor in the ability to get a job. It's unfortunate." (Israel)

> "In Canada, discrimination is a huge challenge if you're black from another country." (India–3)

Following a difficult exchange with a co-worker, the following participant from Nigeria discussed her impressions with her manager: "I said, 'It's unfair. I feel unfairly treated. At this point I feel targeted and I feel discriminated against because I'm the only person of colour here and I don't think you're giving me the support'" (Nigeria).

A participant from Lebanon explains that while being from a foreign country may not have stopped her getting into a management job, she nevertheless felt that she had to go above and beyond to prove her competence. In a meeting, she explains that:

"People were asking tough questions, and were tough in the way they were asking questions. I felt my anxiety levels going up and at some point, I had to [tell] myself that I knew well my caseload, and that whatever questions they ask me, I knew my caseload…. At the end of the meeting, people were positively impressed by my level of preparation … and it is like they were telling me, "This one, the Lebanese, she is not too bad" – like if people who come from elsewhere, they were not necessary, good or able, not necessarily competent … and that we only employ them because we are trying to get a certain level of equity … in the number of employees [from an minority ethnic group]." (Lebanon)

Findings of discrimination and racism have been substantiated elsewhere. In the UK, studies have shown that migrant social workers can be perceived as a less desirable option in recruitment (Simpson, 2009; Hussein et al, 2011). Further, a study conducted in New Zealand reported that more than half of the participants had experienced discrimination in the workplace. This discrimination took many forms, such as hostility, humiliation, verbal abuse, sabotage and devaluation. These realities and the ensuing feeling of exclusion can cause distress, and have been related to the inability to use skills acquired internationally (Fouché et al, 2014). Moreover, in her study about professional identity in overseas-born social workers in Australia, Harrison (2013, p 8) discovered that migrant social workers can perceive a 'glass ceiling effect', experiencing that they are 'confined to an "ethnic sector" due to their identity'.

Discussion

Qualitative analysis asks researchers to continuously ask the question 'What is happening here?', exploring the social processes in which the participants are engaged and striving to make meaning of these processes. In this chapter, we hone in on the material and discursive barriers experienced in the migration of social workers to Canada, which is an expression of the global movement of people and products, trade and technology. Thus, we continue to theorise, expanding upon the notion that processes of adaptation and acculturation can be explained 'as an interactional process among one's notions of identity, including professional identity, which involves one's experiences in various social work roles and interventions and the sociocultural and professional environments' (Pullen Sansfaçon et al, 2012, p 44).

Specifically, here, we develop our theorising to include Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital as a foundation of social life and the basis for one's station in the social order.

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital takes the definition beyond the economic to the cultural, differentiating institutionalised, embodied and objectified forms as the means and ends through which people have greater or lesser access to a particular social class and its privileges of membership (Bourdieu, 1986). In this study, we can see both institutionalised and embodied cultural capital at work. Institutionalised capital is accrued through immigration status, the recognition of academic credentials and being granted a licence to practise social work. These represent the formalised acknowledgement that one's citizenship, education and practice experience have value and accrue authority in the social order, and they reflect the neoliberal priority on optimising personal productivity in the marketplace. Embodied capital is the cluster of less tangible aspects required to gain entry to the desired social class of the social work practitioner: one's dress, accent, skills, mannerisms and the more subtle ways in which people demonstrate that they have the resources to meet the expectations to practise in the field. These forms of capital facilitate mobility by enabling access to the opportunities and tools to acquire status and entry to a particular class, that of the social work practitioner in Canada, and thus contribute equally in the construction of the neoliberal subject who is ready – and responsible – to maximise competitive advantage.

Like economic capital, cultural capital requires an investment and, through a complicated calculation, may promise a profit on that investment (Bourdieu, 1986). This is the negotiation that we hear the participants in this study detailing: the ways in which they have invested their time, energy and intellect in their educational pursuits, in their migration and in their efforts to practise social work in Canada, and are seeking a return on that investment. Just as financial markets fluctuate based on the decisions of worldwide economic agreements and agents, so, too, does value in the *social* market vary and shift based on similarly constructed measures of worth. In other words, there is no inherent and static value system to cultural capital, just as there is not for economic capital: the dominant actors of the (social or financial) market assign the worth of currency, and material and discursive processes scaffold this deliberate decision-making. Through the processes of social construction and the hierarchising of worth, there is differential value placed on some investments and resources more than others, and inequalities in access and opportunity are experienced as a result. Participants in this study are thoroughly concerned about access and

opportunity, questioning systems and processes that are promoted as available yet experienced as rife with impediments.

The concept of cultural capital helps explain what is happening for the social workers in this study in a way that simultaneously focuses on individuals while holding to account the social and cultural systems in place that differentially advantage individuals. Thus, it has an embedded critique of neoliberalism's full weight of responsibility resting upon individual success and triumph: what is experienced as an individualised, personalised and barrier-ridden journey can be unpacked to its socially constructed roots, and avenues for advocacy and change emerge. This is important analysis to bring to the current data and the literature on adaptation and acculturation, so often conveyed in individualised ways.

Given this analysis, for example, nation-based standards of accreditation for social work degree programmes can be questioned. Specifically, built upon the partnership of the International Association of Schools of Social Work and International Federation of Social Work, and the jointly developed 'Global standards' document (International Association of Social Work, 2012), could educational accreditation be pursued at the international level, thus eliminating the need for each country to undertake credential recognition? Further, taken from the model of collaboration among these two bodies, perhaps the CASW and provincial regulators could design a single-stop service that would both recognise credentials and grant social work licensing. This possibility seems all the more likely in light of Canadian government policy designed to reduce the barriers to interprovincial labour mobility; it could be an extension to international mobility of that intent. On the level of sociocultural and organisational dynamics, we have tools within the profession of social work – analyses of privilege, oppression, exclusion and domination embedded in systems and visited upon individuals, along with a focus on inherent strengths, resilience and capacity for change – on which to draw in the effort to strive for congruence between the personal, professional and political. These are future directions illuminated by the analyses of this research.

Conclusion

This chapter has reported on the experiences of 44 social workers who undertook their social work education outside Canada and migrated to Canada intent on continuing to practise social work. Data from this study suggest that migrant social workers are reflecting upon the cultural capital of their ethnic background, social work education and

experience, and personal and professional identity, and comparing it with those desirable in the Canadian market, both economic and social. Their experiences tell stories of a complicated welcome to Canada, challenging the construction upheld by Canadians and others across the world that this is an unequivocal land of opportunity and possibility. Ultimately, these data substantiate the inextricable relationship among personal and professional adaptation, and the ascribed value in institutional and embodied capital, as articulated well by this participant:

> "When I start working, I start feeling that I am starting to adapt and to adjust only when I start working. Up until then, I was … I knew I didn't want to go back to Israel, but I never felt that Canada is the place for me. So I was really unhappy. But when I start working and being engaged in intellectual aspects of life and with work and being able to perform my skills and to feel valued, I guess, that's where I said 'Okay, yeah, Canada is the place I can stay'. So, really, getting the job in social work, that's what made the difference and just helped me settle in. And I started building my life." (Israel)

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