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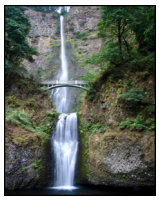

Building attachments to places of settlement: A holistic approach to refugee wellbeing in Nelson, Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Important people-place relationships are often severed during forced displacement, leading many refugees to feel a sense of loss, grief, and disorientation which can negatively impact upon their wellbeing and hinder their resettlement in a new country. Whilst there is an extensive body of literature concerning the negative impact that displacement can have on the lives of individuals and diasporic communities, there has been much less focus on how former refugees might cope with their loss and enhance their wellbeing by building new attachments to places of settlement. Drawing upon a multisensory research project with resettlement practitioners and female former refugees in Nelson, Aotearoa New Zealand, this article explores how local initiatives are familiarising individuals with their social, built, and natural environments, and how they are building attachments to unique places by reducing stress and anxiety and enhancing feelings of safety, autonomy, and belonging.

1. Introduction

Important people-place relationships are often severed during forced displacement, leading many refugees[1] to feel a sense of loss, grief, and disorientation which can negatively impact upon their wellbeing and hinder their resettlement in a new country (Rosbrook & Schweitzer, 2010; Sampson & Gifford, 2010). Rosbrook and Schweitzer (2010) argue that the emotional trauma of being separated from one's land, culture, and ancestral connections, and a desperate longing to return to these places, may cause stress and prevent displaced individuals from participating in their new communities and investing time and energy into developing bonds with new places. Fullilove (2004) also discusses the social, economic, and emotional losses which can trap people in cycles of stress and poverty and compound the initial 'root' trauma of being displaced. Whilst there is an extensive body of literature concerning the negative impact of forced displacement, there has been much less focus on how resettling refugees might cope with their loss and enhance their wellbeing by building new attachments to places of settlement (Bogac, 2009; Coughlan & Hermes, 2016; Sampson & Gifford, 2010).

In a study which drew upon a large representative survey in Poland, Lewicka (2011, p. 218) claimed that

> Place-attached persons, compared to non-attached ones, demonstrated a higher sense of coherence, were more satisfied with their life overall, had a stronger bonding social capital and neighborhood ties, were more interested in their family roots, trusted people more, and were generally less egocentric.

These findings were supported by Scannell and Gifford's (2017) laboratory study with ethnically diverse undergraduate students, which found that becoming attached to a place has the psychological benefits of increased belonging, self-esteem, and meaning. Whilst these studies did not specifically focus on refugees, the benefits of place-attachment could potentially counteract some of the negative feelings and stressors incurred through traumatic experiences of displacement, and provide displaced individuals with the support networks, confidence and

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[1] The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who, "Owing to wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [sic] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [sic] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his [sic] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (UNHCR, 1996). Despite the masculine pronouns, this statement applies to all genders. Individuals who meet this definition are eligible to be selected by the UN to be resettled in a host country which is signatory to the convention.

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meaning needed to enable a brighter future. To understand how resettlement outcomes might be improved through building meaningful relationships with places of settlement, I facilitated a multisensory research project with resettlement practitioners and female Chin and Kayan former refugees[2] in Nelson, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Nelson is a picturesque coastal city situated at the top of the South Island and is home to approximately 51,900 residents (Stats, 2018). The city has accommodated refugees from Asia since the 1970s; however, it was not officially selected as a resettlement location until 2007. There are currently about 700 former refugees living in and around the central business district, from Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Nepal (Asia New Zealand Foundation, 2018). Refugees fleeing from civil war have also recently arrived from Colombia (Bartlet, 2018). Despite having developed a strong network of local organisations to support former refugees, Nelson lacks the specialised mental health facilities that are provided in larger New Zealand resettlement cities (New Zealand Red Cross, 2018; RASNZ, 2018). This lack of services was a particular concern raised by resettlement practitioners in the Nelson Multicultural Council report (2012, p. 3), as there were "increasing numbers of refugee arrivals with high and complex needs and emerging health issues for longer term residents". To address this need, participants in a recent Nelson-based study recommended "the inclusion of alternative therapies in the health system" (Ward, Lescelius, Jack, Naidu, & Weinberg, 2018, p. 23).

In this article, I suggest that place-attachment offers one such 'alternative' approach to health and wellbeing. After a brief introduction to current literature on place-attachment, I draw upon the data obtained through the multisensory research project to explore how local initiatives are familiarising former refugees with their new environments and building place-attachments by reducing stress and anxiety and enhancing feelings of safety, autonomy, and belonging. The aim of this article is not to advocate place-attachment as a substitute for the provision of specialised mental health care in Nelson, but rather to consider how everyday place-based experiences and community processes can contribute towards more positive resettlement outcomes.

2. Place-attachment

Human geographers and other social scientists first began writing about place-attachment in the late 1970s and early 80s, defining this term as an emotional bond between an individual and a unique place that holds meaning to them (Lewicka, 2011; Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Tuan, 1977). Over the years varied theories have emerged to explain how such attachments are formed and maintained. To synthesise and clarify these ideas, Scannell and Gifford (2010) proposed a tripartite framework of place-attachment which includes dimensions of person, place and process. The 'person' dimension focuses on *who* is attached and considers attachment from individual and collective perspectives. Meanwhile, the 'place' dimension constitutes the object of attachment, concerning the social, built, and natural environments that people are attached to and the different geographic scales at which attachment can occur.

Whilst Scannell and Gifford use the term 'object' when defining place, Ash and Simpson (2016), Larsen and Johnson (2016) and McCormack (2017) have argued that place is not simply a passive background feature waiting to be perceived and adapted or loved by people, but rather plays an active role in shaping human experience. Thus, places are understood to have agency, making place-attachment a dynamic relationship that does not just ebb and flow due to the feelings, thoughts, and actions of people, but also due to changing environments and circumstances beyond human control.

To understand the intricacies of *how* people connect to dynamic places, a third dimension of 'process' is included in the Tripartite Model to explore the roles of affect, cognition, and behaviour. Individuals emotionally connect to different environments through place-based experiences. Being in a setting which makes one feel relaxed, happy, healthy and safe can foster a sense of attachment through positive associations. Likewise, being in a setting that makes one feel vulnerable or upset may lead to negative associations and lessen the attraction (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Tuan, 1974).

These experiences are memorised and categorised into schemata which distinguish between similar and dissimilar place-based characteristics. They can then be drawn upon to make sense of new experiences and places (Damasio, 2000). Cognitive processes of place-attachment thus draw on the past and pave the way for the future, providing continuity for an individual to build up an identity through the way they relate to their surroundings and navigate changing circumstances (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

Place-attachment is also visible through actions and behaviours. Individuals contributing to processes of development may foster attachment as they invest their time, knowledge, and efforts in establishing and maintaining a place. Such involvement can lead to a sense of ownership or entitlement and the perception that more long-term or socially engaged residents have a more authentic claim to belonging than newcomers or short-term dwellers (Hay, 1998; Steadman, 2006). However, researchers exploring short-term relationships with place have claimed that residence time or familiarity is not a reliable indicator of attachment, and that a fleeting impression of a place might be enough to impact an individual's decision to return to or settle in that area, and encourage them to become actively involved in the rhythms of life there (Lewicka, 2011).

Whilst there already exists a wealth of information on the physical, social, and cognitive processes of place-attachment, (Scannell & Gifford, 2010); scholars such as Tuan (1977), Seamon (1980) and Lewicka (2011) have identified a gap in place-attachment research and discussed the significant role of *sensory perception* in developing affective personal and collective relationships with place. Sensory experiences of place and belonging are beginning to be theorised by New Zealand academics (Bartos, 2013; Longhurst, Johnston, & Ho, 2009; Trnka, Dureau, & Park, 2013); however, there are few New Zealand studies exploring how sensory processes of place attachment could inform refugee resettlement outcomes. My research explores this nexus, paying attention to processes of multisensory perception in former refugees' lived experiences of place, and how the senses including sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, but also more kinaesthetic, visceral and interoceptive experiences (Champagne, 2004; and; Steiner, 1981) are being conceptualised by resettlement practitioners in Nelson.

3. The participatory research project

After researching resettlement organisations online and obtaining university ethical approval at the end of May 2018, I travelled to Nelson to invite practitioners from the Red Cross, Nelson Multicultural Council, Victory Community Centre, English Language Partners, Community Art Works, a primary school, and a local Health Board for an interview. The manager or an acting representative from each organisation signed a consent form giving permission for the names of their organisations to be published, and individuals signed consent and confidentiality forms agreeing to be identified through their resettlement role or the organisation they worked for.

Eleven hour-long semi-structured interviews were conducted in practitioners' offices. The aim was to explore how Nelson refugee initiatives facilitated place attachment so that I could understand how my research might be informed by, or enhance, local resettlement praxis. The findings from these interviews form the basis of this article, with

[2] The term 'former refugee' is used within this article to acknowledge a change in status from being a refugee to a New Zealand permanent resident upon arrival through official refugee channels. Permanent residency confers the majority of citizenship rights, and citizenship can be applied for after five years in New Zealand (Immigration New Zealand, 2016).

practitioners' claims being supported by comments from twelve Chin and Kayan former-refugee women who participated in a related Nelson-based 'multisensory mapping project' in January and February 2019.

To recruit participants for the multisensory mapping project I disseminated a flyer through my resettlement networks which stated that individuals must be a former refugee from Myanmar; have New Zealand permanent residency or citizenship; live in Nelson; identify as female; and be aged thirteen or over. This outreach resulted in two months of meetings with local residents who eventually put me in touch with Mu Pli, Ruth, Little Ruth, Ngai Ciang Sung, Mai Aye Aye, Ngun, Elizabeth, Iang Chin Sung, Sui Sung, Zai Zai, Jenavi, and Sui Tin Men. (All participants chose to use their own names rather than a pseudonym.) This networking approach was effective as the girls and women were familiar with the individuals approaching them and knew them to be trustworthy.

At the beginning of the project I facilitated meetings and a focus group at participants' homes to share background information about the research and enable participants to sign consent and confidentiality forms. Each individual then selected a time and place to meet me for an hour-long interview in a place to which they felt attached in Nelson (including homes, gardens, and parks). At these sites we sketched their sensory and emotional experiences of Nelson onto maps of streets and bodies.

I later worked with participants in their homes, a school, and a community centre to paint pictures of places to which they felt attached. The paintings, along with other multisensory objects that we collected, were significant in enabling an immersive, embodied way of communicating knowledge, and were publicly exhibited in a local gallery to engage the wider Nelson community in the research. All empirical data was then transcribed, collated, and inductively coded before being analyzed through an 'emplaced' conceptual framework which contextualised my study of embodied multisensory perception within a wider dynamic sociospatial environment (Pink, 2015).

4. Navigating city structures and systems

When discussing the role of place in Nelson resettlement praxis, the first practitioner who I interviewed said, *"There are probably places of need, and places of pleasure, and places of everyday happenstance"*. Subsequent interviews tended to support this categorization, and practitioners agreed that helping newcomers to connect to places of *need*, such as homes, schools, workplaces, hospitals, social services, and shops, was a top priority. Whilst providing shelter was the first step in welcoming former refugees to Nelson, the standard of housing available was a major concern. Maintaining warm dry homes is a nationwide problem; however, it is particularly problematic for families living in lower-socioeconomic neighborhoods (Nelson Marlborough Health, 2016). One practitioner said, "*Our cold houses and the areas in which cheaper housing is available means that they [former refugees] are living in areas in the shade. They can be colder, older houses – that will all impact on their sense of wellbeing*".

Not being used to this type of housing and the New Zealand climate, former refugees may also lack the tips and tricks that local New Zealanders have developed over the years to minimise mold and dampness. Another practitioner said, *"Their houses are cold … they are not necessarily prepared for that with clothing, and don't know about warming and ventilating houses, you know, creating a healthy home"*. Iang Chin Sung supported this claim, saying, "*When we arrived in Nelson it was May … and it was cold in the house and outside. We didn't bring any warm clothes with us, but people helped*".

Whilst the Red Cross and Victory Community Centre offer clothing and heaters to families in need, damp moldy houses have been linked to asthma, respiratory infections, the exacerbation of chronic conditions, and poor mental health (Nelson Marlborough Health, 2016). These environmental conditions and bodily ailments could potentially hinder processes of place-attachment by evoking feelings of insecurity for those who feel the cold, smell the dampness, and have trouble breathing and feeling well in their homes.

To empower former refugees and provide them with a greater sense of safety in places of settlement, Nelson resettlement organisations have focused on familiarising individuals with the day-to-day routines and systems within different environments and encouraging them to alter aspects of place that make them feel uncomfortable. This approach entails a type of 'environmental therapy', whereby individuals are identifying harmful aspects of their environments – like damp housing – and learning how to modulate these settings and their behaviors to treat associated physiological and neurological conditions and improve their quality of life (Randolph, 1987).

A couple of practitioners also highlighted the value of educating newcomers on safety procedures in places of education and work – particularly in regard to fire drills. One practitioner said, *"What I've heard from Burmese people is around fires. When they are living in places in really cramped quarters, and in areas where houses are built really close together … the impact of fire is really traumatic"*. This point was reiterated by another practitioner who had previously worked at the Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT) and said, *"When we had fire practices we had to make sure they [former refugees] knew before it was going to happen and let them know it was just a practice"*. Thus, safety was often coupled with autonomy to ensure that individuals had the knowledge and confidence to protect themselves and their families and enhance their own comfort and wellbeing in everyday life – processes that one practitioner claimed were integral to developing a feeling of belonging.

Knowledge of local structures and systems was also important when it came to navigating healthcare services. A practitioner from the Victory Community Centre said

> *One of the other things which we have done here is antenatal classes for those [for] who[m] English is their second language. With an interpreter … one of the midwives said she had noticed that some of the women were having worse experiences here than they had in the refugee camps because they didn't understand, and it hadn't been explained, how the hospital system works. So, running those antenatal classes has been really important.*

The fact that some women felt more comfortable giving birth in a refugee camp than in a Nelson hospital shows that a lack of understanding around local birthing practices significantly impacted their ability to feel in-control of the intimate situation at hand. Introducing the antenatal classes made a difference to how these women felt being in the hospital and removed some of the anxiety that came with trying to navigate unfamiliar spaces and practices during an already stressful time. However, several former refugee participants mentioned that the hospital was important as it gave them peace-of-mind knowing that their children had access to medical care when needed.

Two other initiatives that helped former refugees to navigate city systems and feel confident engaging with local ways of life were pre-election meetings to discuss how to vote (a right that comes with permanent residency and citizenship), and parenting courses which helped newcomers to feel that they were giving their children the best possible start in their new country. These informative meetings and courses play a significant role in place-attachment as individuals gained confidence in navigating places of need and participating in social and political activities. Such experiences can enhance feelings of safety, autonomy, and belonging, and foster a sense of attachment through positive emotional and spatial associations (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Tuan, 1974).

Yet, courses and meetings which simply *describe* how different processes work do not necessarily address the sensory, emotional experiences that may cause individuals to feel uncomfortable in particular spaces. During the fire drills and birthing practices there were confusing or frightening sensory cues – with alarms sparking memories of past traumatic events and causing panic, and different sounding doctors and

nurses and unfamiliar looking facilities causing stress and anxiety. Understanding how people perceive these 'in-the-moment happenings' may offer important insight into how they interact with, and feel comfortable in, different spaces and places.

One approach to help individuals to cope with uncomfortable stimuli and to feel safe is 'sensory modulation'. Most people modulate or adapt their sensory environment subconsciously; however, individuals suffering from stress or trauma can be less attuned to their sensory needs and responses and may need some form of intervention to help them to identify their sensory preferences (defined as the types of senses that make them feel relaxed, comfortable, or alert), and to create prevention strategies that draw upon these preferences in times of anxiety, stress, or demotivation (Champagne, 2004). Whilst District Health Boards in New Zealand offer sensory modulation as part of their mental health and substance abuse facilities (Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui, 2018), these services are not accessible to former refugees without a referral. Finding a way to incorporate sensory exploration into education on local practices could be a significant way to further enhance a feeling of safety for former refugees trying to navigate unfamiliar structures and systems.

5. Connecting to the nelson community

Resettlement organisations also aimed to enhance a feeling of comfort and safety within the Nelson community. Over the past couple of decades, former refugees have settled into the Victory area in Nelson and established relatively self-sufficient ethnic communities which provide invaluable support for newcomers and foster ongoing social relationships. The Victory Community Centre provides another key avenue of support, offering free healthcare from an on-site nurse, free food and clothing through an open access 'koha' (donation) shed, and space to hold events to encourage social interaction and enhance local knowledge. Whilst these community groups are valuable in welcoming and supporting families, many former refugees are not well integrated with the wider Nelson population. Mu Pli said, *"I don't actually make friends with people from here … I think I feel different"*. Such experiences reflect ongoing tensions within New Zealand around multicultural acceptance and belonging (Kale, 2018; Kale, Kindon, & Stupples, 2018).

One of the main integration barriers was considered to be language. English Language Partners plays a key role in teaching language skills and preparing former refugees for study and work in Nelson, and practitioners said that several local business owners had reached out to former refugee communities to offer jobs. Yet, speaking English remained problematic for many individuals as their accents or the use of interpreters marked them out as 'different'. A practitioner from Victory Community Centre said

> *Another difficulty is local New Zealanders being uncomfortable with people of other ethnicities and particularly with people who have English as a second language … We have a playgroup here and we invited [the Burmese community] to come and be part of the playgroup, but the local people were finding that uncomfortable and so we had this incredible situation where the Burmese and the Nepali started coming with interpreters, but then the Pākehā [New Zealand European] parents stopped coming.*

Whilst some locals avoided those who they perceived to sound different, a small minority had also directly targeted former refugees, telling them to 'go home' and yelling racist remarks in the streets. One practitioner claimed that, *"A lot of [verbal racism] is by young people. I mean, there is an anti-refugee feeling out there anyway, like 'you're taking our jobs', 'go home', 'we can't house our own' – that sort of stuff"*. When speaking about visiting the local Maitai river, Elizabeth said, *"I go around there and it makes me feel unsafe … Sometimes young people they don't like Asians, so … [I'm] scared"*. These incidents may contribute to minority groups withdrawing from the wider society and establishing ethnic enclaves where they can speak their own language and feel safe from unsolicited harassment.

Foreign looks were also a marker of difference between ethnic groups. Referring to the Colombian community, one practitioner said

> *There were a couple of comments around clothing as well that were very relevant, the color of clothing and the messages it sends … Compared to perhaps the color and the vibrancy that they are used to in their cities and on their billboards, it's a chaos of colors in many places, so I guess that's a big stimulation difference.*

Meanwhile, Ngai claimed that, *"New Zealand is different because men, boy, you know, they not allowed to wear pink. But in Myanmar is okay"*. Whilst each sense alone may appear innocuous – a different accent, different colors, a new feeling of vibrancy or a lack thereof – the combination of differences and their nuanced cultural meanings may be overwhelming and individuals may prefer to withdraw to a more familiar place or community.

Unfortunately, withdrawing from the public sphere leaves former refugees largely 'invisible' to the wider society. One practitioner said, *"You walk down Trafalgar street and you don't see, I mean how many ethnic people do you see? There are the tourists, but you don't see a whole bunch of Burmese or Nepali or Bhutanese or whoever walking down there. People are constantly surprised that we are the third largest diverse town in New Zealand"*. This 'absence' of particular groups in the city centre raises concerns that marginalised communities may miss out on different events and happenings and be cut-off from important social services.

To enable former refugees to feel more confident to engage with the wider Nelson population, resettlement organisations are encouraging cross-cultural interaction and education to deconstruct negative stereotypes and celebrate diversity. A practitioner from the Nelson Multicultural Council said that they hosted Race Unity Day and the Tasman Asian Night Food Fair. *"We also do intercultural awareness courses … So, it's educating the community to try to generate a better understanding"*. Cultural events such as Matariki (New Zealand's indigenous Māori New Year) are also directed at bringing diverse communities together to enhance cross-cultural understanding and build a shared sense of identity, and refugee-background communities often host their own traditional celebrations. A Chin resettlement practitioner said, *"Every year we have a cultural diversity day. And Chin students present their own dance and sharing food"*. These activities are aimed at modulating sensory environments on a larger collective scale – normalising diverse cultural sights and smells and tastes to accommodate an increasingly multicultural population.

Whilst it is important to create spaces for diversity to be showcased, traditional celebrations often take place annually and are not designed to build the intimate relationships that shape the rhythms and routines of everyday life. A practitioner from Victory Community Centre said

> *You can have all the formal structures that you want to help people to feel welcome and a part of a place, but it also needs to happen in that informal way. And it's easy for us to encourage people … to participate in special events, either sharing their food or their dancing, but that's the sort of outward cultural expression and it doesn't necessarily bring people into a comfortable place with each other.*

Several programmes in Nelson are working to overcome these challenges. A practitioner from the Red Cross Pathways to Resettlement Programme claimed that

> *[Through] our staff and volunteers, and other agencies and people from other agencies, that's where their [former refugees] connection to place happens … And that's everything from taking them to the GP, taking them to the shop, having a picnic on the beach. You know, showing them how to cycle.*

These relationships are significant in assisting former refugees to engage with places of need; however, they also centralise places of pleasure and everyday happenstance – breaking down formal barriers and finding ways to 'bring people into a comfortable place with each

other'.

6. Places of pleasure and everyday happenstance

Places of 'pleasure' (commonly referred to as leisure or recreational spaces) can be distinguished from places of need in that they are not crucial for human survival, at least not in the immediate ways that housing and hospitals are. However, enjoying these places can be significant in terms of wellbeing, and feeling well is also central to surviving and thriving in places of settlement. A Red Cross practitioner said, *"We hold a few events per year, that's to bring our volunteers and families together at somewhere to do something. The last one was down at the little train down at Tahunanui, and the next one is going to be down at Nature Land [the local zoo]"*. A practitioner from Nelson Multicultural Council also mentioned that, *"the youth will go down and play volleyball. There is a group now getting together playing soccer, at the Girls College"*.

These activities were important as they offered individuals a chance to escape the pressures of life and to have fun. One of the local Occupational Therapists said

> *I don't think we make nearly enough use of the wonderful natural landscapes that we have here … If people had the opportunity to get down to Rabbit Island in the car and have a picnic with some friends for two or three hours, kicking a football, kids running round, and swimming, that could just be hugely valuable because it connects them with the ground, with the sea, with a place they feel relaxed in and safe in and it's fun.*

Many of the women involved in the multisensory mapping project also spoke about how much they enjoyed visiting Rabbit Island and camping at local scenic spots in the wider Nelson Tasman region. They would spend time fishing, walking, and watching their children paddle in the ocean or play in the mud. When I asked why they enjoyed these places, the overwhelming response was that it made them feel *happy*.

Another fun initiative was a summer activity called 'Lark in the Park'. A practitioner from the Victory Community Centre said, "*That is down at Victory Park. It relies on lots of volunteers to take turns and it's on Friday nights from five o'clock to seven thirty … So that's another way those kids are mixing with other kids"*. Lark in the Park differs from other resettlement initiatives as it does not attempt to foster relationships through organized activities, but through offering a time and space for all-inclusive, unregulated exploration, interaction, and play. Thus, it offers a more organic sense of place-making through 'happenstance' or chance encounters. Several practitioners advocated for more of these open spaces where people could meet one another through everyday happenings and facilitate their own sociospatial interactions events and rhythms (Seamon, 1980).

However, it is important to recognise that individual perceptions of place are nuanced and what one person finds to be fun or pleasurable may be considered dull, frightening, or emotionally overwhelming to someone else (Cresswell, 2004; Tolia-Kelly, 2008). For former refugees, Nelson landscapes often reminded them of their lost homes and evoked feelings of nostalgia. One practitioner spoke about taking a group of Bhutanese seniors on a road trip to Rabbit Island beach, saying

> *They sat in the sand and told stories about their home … about the camps. And bringing them together and sitting by the ocean, there was just a sense of being relaxed, and freedom … Another time when we took them up the hills they were really reminiscing about growing up in Bhutan.*

Zai Zai also discussed nostalgic memories of Myanmar during her interview in a local park. Taking me to a particular tree and picking up two parts of an acorn she said, "*We used to play this game. This is the plate, and we dig out [the acorn] and this is the cup. Then we put something in here, so this is the plate with the food, this is the cup. I really miss this tree!"*

Akhtar (1999) and Volkan (1999) claim that positive nostalgic memories of home can create a nurturing psychic space for refugees to find comfort when they need temporary relief from the unfamiliar and overwhelming places in which they may find themselves. However, nostalgic memories can also make people feel home-sick. A practitioner from the Red Cross said that she had spoken with a man who claimed that, *"If he didn't have children here he would do anything he could to go back to [Myanmar] to be back in that rural life that he grew up in and still dreams of. The pace of life"*. She said, *"You know, we are so time-focused, and this is what we find we struggle with, with many of our clients … is that they are not time-focused and driven"*. These different histories and personal preferences impact how individuals perceive Nelson and the extent to which they feel comfortable engaging with particular places. Thus, it is also important for individuals to seek out their own personal places of pleasure where they can relax.

Whilst individual places of comfort were not often explored by Nelson resettlement practitioners, Sampson and Gifford's (2010) research with refugee-background youth in Melbourne Australia, and Coughlan and Hermes (2016) research with Somali Bantu women in New York, showed that former refugees were actively seeking out therapeutic landscapes and green spaces which they considered to be safe, quiet, clean, beautiful, and conducive to personal and social development. Several of the women in the multisensory mapping project also sought out therapeutic green places. Mu Pli said, *"I'll go out [to ANZAC Park] and just enjoy the day and watch the flowers, watch the clouds. That's what I do. I love that place"*. Meanwhile, Sui Sung claimed that, *"Sometimes I'm sad, I go to my garden … I'm very sad, I'm very worried, pray and my garden, much better"*. Understanding the types of places that former refugees find to be healing or therapeutic is important as it enables practitioners to provide greater access to valued places and enhance feelings of comfort and enjoyment.

7. Connecting to the land and putting down roots

One of the practitioners also mentioned that it was important for people to get *"their feet on the ground, into the soil"*. Connecting to the ground is a form of environmental therapy commonly referred to as 'grounding' or 'earthing'. This practice is based upon the theory that the human body is electrically conductive, and that, by having direct contact with the earth's surface, the body reacts to the presence of environmental electric fields by absorbing the grounds free electrons (Chevalier, Sinatra, Oschman, Sokal, & Sokal, 2012). Whilst this theory is debated by skeptics (McDuffee, 2016), it has inspired local practices of beach walking. One of the facilitators from a Nelson refugee programme called 'Stress Busters' said, *"We provide mindfulness and muscle relaxation … but we also do beach walking now. And of those, after every course, every time, people rate beach walking over and above, as more effective than anything else"*. Former refugee participant Ngun also claimed that she felt *"happy in the beach … because in Myanmar we don't have a beach, so it is relax[ing]"*. Thus, the simplicity of connecting with the ground should not be overlooked in studies of place-attachment and wellbeing, as regardless of the scientific cause of feeling relaxed, participants expressed a positive emotional outcome.

Practitioners also claimed that activities such as tree planting and gardening are beneficial as they can create meaningful relationships with place through people investing time and energy into cultivating the land. As mentioned in section 2, such investments can lead to a sense of ownership and belonging through the assumption that people have a right to enjoy the product of their labour (Hay, 1998; Steadman, 2006).

Yet, growing plants also involves a sense of care and responsibility. When speaking about a gardening project for former refugees in the UK, one practitioner said, *"A number of [former refugees] described that sensory thing of connecting with the earth and growing crops and looking after them … it really made them feel that they had arrived and they were connected now to the land"*. Gardening was also important for the women in the multisensory mapping project. Not only did this practice connect

them to the land in Nelson, but enabled them to grow familiar food from home. In this manner, gardening helped them to maintain a connection with Myanmar and develop a mixed-identity as Chin or Kayan New Zealanders. Having the opportunity to plant trees and gardens thus encouraged former refugees to literally and symbolically put down roots so that they could continue to grow, flourish, and feel as though they have a place to belong (Coughlan & Hermes, 2016).

These feelings of place-attachment take time to develop. Participants spoke of multiple places they enjoyed in Nelson; yet, proudly chose to show me the gardens they spent months growing and the homes and parks which they regularly frequented. Attachment thus moves beyond a feeling of attraction or an affective physiological response to a proximate environment; and entails the formation of a meaningful sustainable relationship over time (Hay, 1998; Steadman, 2006). An exception to this temporal process may exist when a place holds symbolic meaning for an individual which links them to previous places and elicits a feeling of nostalgia (Akhtar, 1999; Volkan, 1999). In this case, an individual may feel as though they have already invested significant time and energy into a place through their memories of past attachments, as was evident with Zai Zai's immediate connection to the acorn tree that represented her childhood.

8. Conclusion

Whilst this study is specific to Nelson resettlement practitioners and female former refugees from Myanmar, it offers important insight into the centrality of place in wellbeing and the need to consider how everyday multisensory environments impact feelings of safety and happiness for refugees around the world. Nelson resettlement praxis primarily focuses on familiarising newcomers with places of need; however, practitioners also recognise the importance of places of pleasure and everyday happenstance where diverse individuals can encounter one another, have fun, and broaden their sensory palate. The unique mix of educational and fun initiatives discussed in this article are not necessarily designed to foster emotional attachments to place; however, by decreasing stress and anxiety and enhancing feelings of safety, autonomy, and belonging, these interventions have a significant impact on how individuals engage with different places. I argue that the environmental therapies used to minimise harmful substances, modulate sensory environments, and connect people with the earth provide a particularly valuable framework for exploring how former refugees might enhance attachments to places of settlement over time, and how researchers and resettlement practitioners might develop a more holistic approach to recovery, healing, and sustainable wellbeing.

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Ethical approval

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Disclosure statement

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Fieldwork schedule, Nelson 2018–2019

Time/Date	Activity	Place	Number of participants
June 2018	*Practitioner interviews*	*Nelson City*	*(11 total)*
Wednesday 13th 10–11am	Consent & confidentiality forms/Interview with practitioner from English Language Partners	Office, CBD	1
Thursday 14th 11–12am	Consent & confidentiality forms/Interview with practitioner from Victory Community Centre	Office, Victory	1
Friday 15th 11–12am	Consent & confidentiality forms/Interview with practitioner from a local primary school	Office, Victory	1
Wednesday 20th 1–2pm	Consent & confidentiality forms/Interview with practitioners from Nelson Multicultural Centre	Office, CBD	2
Thursday 21st 1–2pm	Consent & confidentiality forms/Interview with practitioners from a local health board	Office, CBD	2
Wednesday 27th 2–3pm	Consent & confidentiality forms/Interview with practitioner from a local health board	Office, Tahunanui	1
Thursday 28th 10–11am	Consent & confidentiality forms/Interview with practitioner from Community Artworks	Office, CBD	1
1–2pm	Consent & confidentiality forms/Interview with practitioner from the Red Cross	Office, Tahunanui	1
2–3pm	Consent & confidentiality forms/Interview with practitioner from the Red Cross	Office, Tahunanui	1
January 2019	***Multisensory mapping project***	***Nelson City***	***(12 total)***
Thursday 24th 1–3pm	Consent & confidentiality forms/interview/mapping activities Mu Pli	ANZAC Park, CBD	1
Tuesday 29th 3–5pm	Consent & confidentiality forms/interview/mapping activities	Ruth & Little Ruth's living room, Stoke	2
Thursday 31st 3:30–5:30pm	Painting workshop Ruth & Little Ruth	Art room Nayland College, Stoke	2
February 2019			
Friday 1st 11:30–1:30pm	Painting workshop Mu Pli	Meeting room, Victory Community Centre, Victory	1
Thursday 7th 1–2pm	Focus group: Consent & confidentiality forms	Ngai Ciang Sung's living room, Victory	9
2–3pm	Interview/mapping activities	Ngai Ciang Sung's living room, Victory	1
3–4pm	Interview/mapping activities	Mai Aye's kitchen, Victory	1
Friday 8th 11:30–1:30pm	Painting workshop Mu Pli	Meeting room, Victory Community Centre, Victory	1

Saturday 9th 2–3:30pm	Interview/mapping activities	Ngun's garden, Victory	1
Monday 11th 10–11:30am	Interview/mapping activities	Sui Sung's garden, Victory	1
11:30 – 1pm	Interview/mapping activities	Iang Chin Sung's kitchen, Victory	1
Tuesday 12th 10–11:30am	Interview/mapping activities	Elizabeth's garden, Victory	1
Wednesday 13th 10–11:30am	Interview/mapping activities Zai Zai	Broads Field, Victory	1
11:30 – 1pm	Interview/mapping activities	Jenavi's garden, Victory	1
1pm–2:30pm	Interview/mapping activities	Sui Tin Men's garden, Whakatu	1
Friday 15th 11:30–1:30pm	Painting workshop	Whare, Victory Community Centre, Victory	8
Tuesday 19th 11am −12:30pm	Painting workshop	Sui Sung's living room, Victory	1
Friday 22nd 11–12:30pm	Painting workshop	Sui Sung's living room, Victory	1
March 2019			
Monday 18th	Set up exhibition	G-Space Gallery NMIT, Nelson CBD	
Tuesday 19th	Set up exhibition	G-Space Gallery NMIT, Nelson CBD	
Wednesday 20th	Exhibition opening night	G-Space Gallery NMIT, Nelson CBD	Open to the public
Thursday 21st	Exhibition seminar	G-Space Gallery NMIT, Nelson CBD	Open to the public
Thursday 28th	Take down exhibition		

Key findings

1. Finding a way to incorporate sensory exploration into education on local practices could be a significant way to further enhance a feeling of safety for former refugees trying to navigate unfamiliar structures and systems.
2. Traditional celebrations of cultural diversity in Nelson often take place annually and are not designed to build the intimate relationships that shape the rhythms and routines of everyday life. Communities also need to break down formal barriers and find ways to 'bring people into a comfortable place with each other.'
3. Practices which helped former refugees to build connections to the land (such as beach walking and gardening) were important in enabling them to feel relaxed, happy, and emotionally invested in places of settlement, and to develop a sense of belonging.
4. Nelson resettlement initiatives are not necessarily designed to foster emotional attachments to place; however, by decreasing stress and anxiety and enhancing feelings of safety, autonomy, and belonging, these interventions have a significant impact on how individuals engage with different places.
5. Environmental therapies used to minimise harmful substances, modulate sensory environments, and connect people with the earth provide a valuable framework for exploring how former refugees might enhance attachments to places of settlement, and how researchers and resettlement practitioners might develop a more holistic approach to recovery, healing, and sustainable wellbeing.

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