Colombian Refugees’ Stories of Navigating Settlement

by

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Abstract

This study examines Colombian refugees’ stories of navigating settlement and integration over time in the Greater Vancouver Regional District. The research question addressed in this study was: What are stories that Colombian refugees tell about their experiences navigating the settlement and integration process? Seven individuals participated in the study, three women and four men, all of whom had arrived in Canada as Government Assisted Refugees between the years of 2000 and 2007 and had settled immediately in the Greater Vancouver region. Information was collected through semi-structured narrative interviews which aimed to identify significant events in settlement over time. Using a narrative approach to analysis, the thesis first introduces each participant and the key aspects of their settlement journey. Next a number of major themes that appeared across the interviews describing the participants’ settlement journey in Canada are introduced, including the refugee experience, navigating around obstacles, and building community and helping others. Personal qualities and practices that served as key techniques for navigating the unfamiliar terrain of the new social environment in Canada are identified and explored in depth. Stories, language, and metaphors used by the participants challenged the concept of integration as a ‘two-way street’ and demonstrate that participants are active agents in their settlement and integration process, relying primarily on their own efforts to incorporate into the new society. Participants narratives revealed their collective identity as people that move forward, overcoming crisis and moving on to build community in their new context, help others, and plan for the future. The findings of this study are relevant to social workers across fields, social work educators, settlement service providers, and others who work in the refugee service provision sector.
Preface

All procedures of this research were carried out with adherence to the guidelines and ethical grounds for research involving human subjects presented by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Approval was granted under certificate number H12-03036 by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board.
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Glossary

Canadian Source  A program of the Canadian government which allowed for individuals to apply for refuge directly from their country, via a Canadian embassy, rather than applying after fleeing to a neighbouring country. This program operated in Colombia for many years and was the program through which the participants in this study immigrated to Canada. It is no longer in operation.

CASW  Canadian Association of Social Workers

CIC  Citizenship and Immigration Canada

CLBC  Community Living British Columbia

GAR  Government Assisted Refugee

ISSofBC  Immigrant Services Society of BC

MCC  Mennonite Central Committee

MCFD  Ministry of Children and Family Development

MSW  Master of Social Work

NSP  National Settlement Program

Principal  The individual who applies for refuge. Other family members apply for refuge as part of the Principal Applicant’s family.

RAP  Refugee Assistance Program
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<tr>
<td>UBC</td>
<td>University of British Columbia</td>
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<td>WCB</td>
<td>Worker’s Compensation Board</td>
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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the families I worked with in Colombia, whose lives, stories and friendships gave me the inspiration to look further into the stories of Colombian refugees in Canada, and also to the seven individuals who generously shared their stories with me in the course of this study.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Over the past several decades Canada has given refuge to over fifteen thousand Colombians who have fled the ongoing armed conflict in their country (CODHES, 2011). Until its closure in 2011, the Canadian Source Country refugee program in Colombia was the most active in the world, with up to 1,500 refugees being accepted per year directly from Colombia (Riaño Alcalá, Diaz, Osorio & Colorado, 2008). Despite the significant number of Colombians who have come to Canada as refugees, little research has been conducted with this group. In particular, no research exists which focuses expressly on their settlement experiences over time. In this thesis I report the findings from a study conducted under the supervision of Dr. Riaño Alcalá, which explored stories told by Colombian refugees who have been in Canada for seven or more years. It is my hope that this study will result in a better understanding of how refugees navigate settlement and integration over the long term.

Purpose

In this study I have explored stories told by Colombian refugees who have been in Canada seven or more years, to better understand how refugees navigate settlement and integration over the long term. I am interested in this on both a personal and professional level. On a personal level, my past experience in assisting internally displaced Colombians seek refuge in Canada has led me to want to know more about settlement experiences of Colombian refugees in Canada. On an academic level, there is a need to better understand what happens to refugees after initial government funded settlement services end. How do they find the resources they need and navigate the process of rebuilding their lives over time in the Canadian context? There are few existing studies which explore the long term experiences of refugees navigating what can
be a life-long process of settlement and integration into their new community and society. As such, this study contributes to filling that gap in academic - and practical - knowledge.

**Relevance**

The findings from this study are relevant for social workers in the Vancouver region and across Canada who work increasingly with an immigrant and refugee population. Social workers fill a wide range of roles that involve working with refugees, ranging from health care, settlement services, trauma and family counselling, community development, education, child protection, income assistance, advocacy and policy development. As such, social workers should have a vested interest in producing, being familiar with, and building their practice upon research conducted with refugee populations. Understanding the challenges of settlement, the barriers individuals may be facing even after many years in Canada, and the diverse skills, abilities and initiatives possessed by refugees, will help social workers as they build relationships with and seek to support newcomers. As well this study provides potentially useful feedback to immigrant settlement services and refugee service organizations which may be of use in developing policies and programs responsive to the long-term integration needs of refugees.

**Personal Reflection**

Learning more about the settlement experiences of Colombian refugees has been of interest to me for some time now, and the path that led me to develop and conduct this study was a personal one. Between the years of 2007 and 2011, I lived in Bogotá, Colombia, where I worked with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) as an accompaniment worker for people who had been internally displaced by the armed conflict. During those four years many of the families
I worked with came to Canada as refugees. In 2010, as part of my work with MCC, I carried out a series of follow-up interviews with thirteen Colombian refugee families across Canada that I had worked with prior to their departure, to inquire about their early settlement experiences. The conversations revealed numerous settlement challenges that refugees faced across the country, ranging from cultural adjustment issues, isolation and loneliness, family issues, and dealing with memories of fear and threat. These conversations led me to develop a resource for community sponsorship groups that receive Colombian refugees (Wiebe, 2011).

Ultimately it was my interest in deepening my theoretical and practical knowledge in relation to the effects of war and political violence on refugees that brought me back to Canada to pursue an MSW degree at UBC. I was fortunate to be taken on by a faculty supervisor with research and practice interests very similar to my own, Dr. Pilar Riaño Alcalá, who has and continues to conduct extensive research on historical memory, social reconstruction, and the effects of political violence within Colombia and with Colombian refugee populations in multiple countries. It was at her suggestion that I decided to design a study that would look at the long term experiences of settlement and integration of Colombian refugees in the Vancouver area.

Over the course of my MSW education I have had two practicum placements, one in a government funded settlement organization and another in a community organization that offers settlement services and counselling to newcomers. These practicums allowed me to develop an understanding of how settlement is organized in British Columbia. They also provided a glimpse of the challenges that are faced by refugees as they navigate the settlement system and find ways to start their lives again in a new country. My past and present experiences in working with
refugees both prior to their migration journey as well as during the settlement and integration process led me to be concerned about long term settlement and integration issues as well as curious about the ways in which refugees navigate the settlement and integration process. Because of this and at the encouragement of Dr. Riaño Alcalá, I was lead to write a thesis and dedicate it to the topic of Colombian refugees’ stories of settlement and integration in Canada.

Assumptions

There are several assumptions implicit in this study. For one, I assume that refugees are not passive recipients of migration and settlement experiences, even when their migration is forced\textsuperscript{1}. Rather, I see refugees as active agents, who, even in the midst of restricting situations, make choices, have initiative, and take actions that direct the course of their lives. Secondly, I assume that settlement and integration are not simple, linear processes that can be undertaken and accomplished in a matter of a few years. Canadian government settlement services are only provided for three to five years; implicit in this short-term provision of services is the idea that settlement and integration can be achieved in this short period of time. I do not share this assumption and I hope that the findings from this study will help paint a panorama of the long-term nature of settlement and integration for refugees.

A Note on the Use of the Term ‘Refugee’

In this thesis I refer to the participants as ‘refugees.’ Technically, the participants are no longer ‘refugees.’ Prior to or upon arrival in Canada the participants were granted permanent residency, and have since all decided to become citizens of Canada. Under normal circumstances

\textsuperscript{1} Forced migration refers to the migration undertaken by refugees and internally displaced people as a result of armed conflict. This kind of migration is considered forced because migrants have little or no choice in the decision to leave their homes and seek safety and protection elsewhere.
I would not choose to refer to someone who has been in Canada for around a decade as a ‘refugee,’ regardless of their original category of immigration, as that is a limiting and restrictive view of their identity. However, for the purposes of this study I chose to use ‘refugee’ because of the nature of participants’ migration to Canada, as Government Assisted Refugees rather than as economic or family class immigrants. My use of the term refugee is intended to distinguish their particular mode and experience of migration (forced migration), which will be discussed further in the literature review and findings.

**Immigration Policy in Canada**

As part of the introduction it is useful to situate this study in the current political climate of rapid and restrictive changes to immigration policy and an increasingly negative discourse, both in policy and in the media, around refugees. Although changes to policy have affected nearly every category of immigration, from family class to skilled workers, I will focus on changes that have been made recently to policies affecting refugees. Many of these policies, which I examine below, serve to depict refugees as undesirable and seek to restrict their access to Canada. I include this section because it is important to consider the socio-political context in which this study is set. My hope is that this study can serve in some way to counter the negative discourse regarding refugees that Canadians hear on a regular basis in the media.

In their “Year in Review” publication for 2012, The Canadian Council for Refugees (2013) said that the many policy changes in regard to resettled refugees, refugee claimants and other newcomers to Canada “mean that Canada is slipping in its respect for the basic rights of refugee and newcomer families” (p. 1). They note that the negative rhetoric accompanying the changes contributes to making Canada a less welcoming country.
Bill C-31 “Protecting Canada’s Immigration System Act” came into effect in December 2012. The bill shortened timelines for refugee claimants to present their claims and stipulated that refused refugee claimants can not apply for pre-removal risk assessment or humanitarian and compassionate consideration for a year (CCR, 2013). The quick processing times means that many refugee claimants have insufficient time to prepare for their hearings (CCR, 2012). Bill C-31 also includes the creation of a Designated Country of Origin list, which currently contains thirty seven countries which the Canadian government considers ‘safe’ and not known for human rights abuses (CIC, 2013). Applicants from a country on the Designated Country of Origin list are fast tracked and, if rejected, have no right to appeal a decision.

Bill C-31 also allows the Minister of Public Safety to designate groups of two or more people who arrive together as “irregular arrivals.” Individuals designated as irregular arrivals face a mandatory detention of up to six months without judicial review, and even if their asylum claims are accepted they must wait five years before being allowed to apply for permanent residence or to sponsor their family members (CCR, 2013). Recognizing that mandatory detention is a violation of human rights, the UN Committee on Torture has urged Canada to remove mandatory detention from the bill (CAT, 2012).

In June 2012 major policy changes were made to the Interim Federal Health Program. These changes included elimination of extended health care benefits for refugee claimants and the complete removal of health care for rejected claimants. These changes imply that basic care is available for claimants only if the medical concern is “of an urgent or essential nature” (CIC 2012 b). Medications and vaccines are available only to prevent diseases that pose a risk to public health (CIC 2012b). Refugees who are from a designated country of origin or whose
claims have been rejected will receive no health care whatsoever except to treat a disease or condition of public safety concern. Needless to say, these changes are in violation of Canada’s commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, both of which prohibit discrimination on the grounds of national origin and state that health care is a fundamental right. Canada appears to have even violated its own human rights legislation, since Canada’s Human Rights Act, also prohibits discriminatory practices based on national or ethnic origin (Canadian Human Rights Act, 1985).

Other changes include changes to the private sponsorship program, involving limits on numbers of refugees that can be privately sponsored and restrictions on who can be privately sponsored, resulting in the exclusion of some vulnerable or marginalized potential refugees (CCR, 2013). In addition, private sponsors are being asked to participate in blended sponsorships, providing partial support for refugees which the government had already selected and committed to supporting in full (CCR, 2013).

Bhuyan and Smith-Carrier (2010) argue that policy around immigration stigmatizes refugee claimants in Canada with negative language such as illegal or threat to security, words that also commonly appear in the media surrounding refugees and refugee claimants. While many of the policies changes directly affect refugee claimants and the private sponsorship program rather than government sponsored refugees, taken together they provide insight into a system that is increasingly closed to refugees in general. With all of these policy changes, the main impression that emerges is that of a panorama that is not particularly welcoming to or inclusive of refugees, but rather one that casts refugees in a negative light and as less desirable immigrants.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

A number of theories are relevant to this study; these include theories of migration stemming from the field of forced migration, the anthropological theory of social navigation during times of crisis and uncertainty, and socio-political theories of settlement and integration. I drew from these theories in the process of framing and conducting the study as well as in the process of analyzing the data. This literature review will cover relevant aspects of these theories, as well as pertinent studies that have been carried out with immigrant and refugee populations, including previous studies with Colombian refugees in Canada.

Discourse Around Refugees: Pathologized Victim or Active Agent?

Studies with refugee populations have often focused on stories of trauma and victimization. This discourse of trauma results in refugees often being described with negative, pathologizing terminology: broken spirits, scarred for life, vulnerable, damaged, destitute and traumatized (Marlow, 2009). A framework for moving toward a more sophisticated understanding of how people have responded to armed conflict, violence and trauma has been developed by researchers such as Marlow, who invites researchers to reflect on the ramifications of focusing only on the traumatic and negative aspects of a refugees’ stories. Focusing on the ‘extraordinary’ stories of trauma and anguish can often be damaging for refugees, particularly in terms of how they are framed and seen by their host society. Marlow suggests that researchers would do well to focus on the ‘ordinary’ stories: those stories that highlight what sustained the individual and continues to assist them through their experiences. These ordinary responses, skills and knowledges can be traced through family, community and cultural practices.
Research underscoring resilience and resistance in refugees is exemplified by Dennenborough (2005, 2006, 2010), Boucher (2009) and Munoz (2011). Their respective work with and writing about refugees or internally displaced people is guided by the assumption that no matter the degree of trauma or hardship people have experienced, they always respond in some way. Along with documenting experiences and effects of the difficult and traumatic aspects of the refugee journey from flight to resettlement, Boucher and Munoz, in their respective studies, draw out and richly describe the ways in which people have responded to hardship: their accomplishments, what sustains them, and what they want others to know. Of special relevance to this study is Munoz’ study, which explored the ways in which Colombian women war survivors learn and build knowledge throughout their experience of war, displacement and refuge in Canada. Focusing on women’s successes, Munoz looked at how the women used their knowledge to rebuild their lives in Canadian society. Although the women had been exposed to violence, they had all been able to succeed in creating a new home, gaining independence, and re-establishing their lives in the new society.

**Forced Migration Literature**

Literature in the field of forced migration has traditionally fallen into two principal streams. On one hand, much forced migration literature has often examined the structural causes of involuntary migration - how forced migration is produced and how settlement is organized. On the other hand, there is a body of literature looking at life histories, agency and resiliency in migrant populations, as exemplified above (see Marlow, 2009; Munoz, 2011).

Research in the first above mentioned stream of forced migration studies considers experiences which shape the migration process and construct differences among types of
migrants, arguing that people who are forced to migrate experience different migration and integration processes than those who choose to migrate for economic or family reunification motives. People who are forced to migrate because of political violence, armed conflict and fear for their lives experience a combination of profound material, economic and cultural losses in addition to the rupture of social and community networks (Lacroix, 2004; Penz, 2006; Riaño Alcalá, 2008). In the case of Colombians, numerous studies highlight that internally displaced Colombians experience social exclusion, frequent family breakdown, difficulty integrating into job markets, and fear stemming from close and violent encounters with armed actors (Aysa-Lastra, 2011; Builes, 2008; Guevara & Guevara, 2010; Jakobsen, 2011; Sánchez, 2010; Villa et al., 2003).

Yu, Ouellet, and Warmington (2007) drew a link between immigration selection criteria and integration experiences. While ability to establish (this is judged by economic potential or the presence of economic and supports) is the primary selection criterion for skilled worker, business and family class immigrants, the need for protection is the key consideration for refugee selection. They note that refugees are far more likely to have experienced traumatic circumstances surrounding their migration, and as such their integration patterns may be influenced, resulting in settlement and integration experiences that differ from those who choose to migrate for economic or family reasons. Literature from forced migration studies reinforces these claims. Studies carried out by Lacroix (2004) and Riaño Alcalá (2008) highlight that the migration processes of internally displaced and refugee Colombians involves involuntary uprootedness and disconnection from their sense of place, direction, identity and belonging. These researchers also point out that elements of fear, multiple layers of loss, local attitudes
towards refugees, and lack of adequate support for refugees in receiving communities influence the social integration process of refugees, setting it apart from the integration process of other categories of immigrants.

**Social Navigation Theory**

Social navigation theory (Vigh, 2008) offered a useful framework for understanding and interpreting the experiences of navigating the refugee journey and settlement/adaptation process. I found that bringing together theories of social navigation and forced migration allowed me to look at how participants drew upon their agency to navigate the structures of forced migration, effectively bringing together the two separate ‘streams’ of forced migration research (as described above).

Vigh (2008) describes social navigation in a context of crisis. Crisis is typically thought of as something that lasts for a short period of time. The idea of a *context of crisis* refers to situations where crisis is not temporary, but rather an ongoing context in which people live out their lives, such as situations of war and armed conflict. In environments of crisis and uncertainty, such as those lived by refugees, it is relevant to talk about how people *navigate* through difficult, unpredictable environments. Vigh suggests that when crisis as a context becomes normalized or routinized, people still have the capacity to “seek new bearings” (p. 10) and act. He suggests that agency is not a question of capacity but rather of possibility - what can possibly be done in the given context? Vigh describes how situations of crisis involve unpredictability and uncertainty, in other words, a changing social environment. This leads to a change in the ways in which people read their social environment, their positions and horizons within it. Although the socio-political environment in Canada is not that of a *context of crisis*, the
experiences of ongoing uncertainty, unpredictability and change experienced by refugees during their settlement process lend themselves to be understood using the theory of social navigation. I drew upon social navigation theory in framing my research question as well as in the analysis process, as I sought to identify stories of navigating settlement.

**Refugee Settlement in Canada**

Studies, statistical reports and government reviews of Canada’s settlement services shed light on the mechanisms of settlement in Canada as well as the issues regarding the way in which settlement is structured and provided to refugees. Literature on refugees’ experiences with the settlement system as well as on settlement and integration experiences in general provides a helpful context for a study on the settlement and integration experiences of Colombian refugees.

**Settlement & integration services in Canada**

Canada’s settlement program, known as the National Settlement Program (NSP), “provides support and services to assist newcomers in their settlement, and their long-term integration into Canada” (CIC 2012, p. 3). According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the NSP is designed to help newcomers “contribute to the economic, social and cultural development of Canada” (p. 3). The program includes components of orientation for newcomers, language skills training, labour market access programs and community connections (mentoring or buddy-type programs) (Chan, 2012). In reality, all of these settlement programs are designed to facilitate immigrants’ entry into the labour market through a process referred to in policy as integration (Li, 2003). I will comment further on integration below.
In their survey of empirical evidence of refugee integration and existing integration services for refugees across Canada Yu, Ouellet and Warmington (2007) found that only a small number of services or organizations specialize in providing services to refugees. With most refugee services being offered in conjunction with services for immigrants in general, specific and unique needs of refugees are sometimes overlooked. Yu et al., discovered a number of gaps in services for refugees, including the need for specialized language training and mental health and family counselling services. They also found that there is often “spatial mismatch” (p. 27) between service providers, who tend to be concentrated in downtown areas rather than in the areas where refugees tend to settle (the more multi-ethnic, suburb areas).

Riaño Alcalá et al. (2008) highlight several issues regarding the way in which settlement services are structured and provided to refugees in their early settlement period. They found that services for refugees, such as orientation workshops, are delivered in a way that fails to acknowledge the state of disorientation felt by recently arrived refugees and that result in difficulties processing new, complex information. They also explain that funding for settlement programs is allocated in a way that places emphasis on economic efficiency, which means that the most ‘successful’ agencies are those that attend to the most clients within the shortest time. While this type of service provision may guarantee ongoing funding for the agency, Riaño Alcalá et al. note that it “can compromise quality and the humanistic orientation of that service” (p. 60). Riaño Alcalá et al. offer a critique of a settlement system that, by design, marginalizes government sponsored refugees and limits their access to services at a time when they most need support:
It operates with a fragmented short-term vision which does not take into account the dynamics and conditions of those who have been the victims of displacement, war or violence, nor their ability to respond to accumulated information, demands and expectations regarding their future in Canada. (p. 56)

It is also relevant to note that there is a limit of five years from arrival date for most government funded settlement programs that support refugees in their integration process (ISSofBC, 2013, MOSAIC, 2013). Riaño Alcalá et al. (2008) stress that settlement and integration processes are long term and that a three year settlement program fails to recognize and respond the complex, extensive and long term needs of refugees. Munoz (2011) emphasized the need for social workers to build long-term relationships with refugees. However, given the structure of the refugee settlement system, which focuses on short term assistance, this is not common practice.

**Challenges and difficulties in settlement**

Numerous studies carried out on refugee populations in Canada point to considerable challenges and difficulties faced by refugees during their settlement. Research has shown that refugees in Canada experience difficulties finding adequate housing and employment, building networks, and often struggle with serious health issues (Brunner & Friesen 2011; Carter, 2008 & 2009; Chan et al. 2005; Danso 2002; DeVoretz et al. 2004; Zine 2002). Yu et al. (2007) reported that some refugees have had to use funds originally allocated for food and basic needs to cover their cost of rent and utility payments and that refugees sometimes have to put over 50% of their income toward rent. Although refugees’ economic situation tends to improve over time, they continue to fall far below other immigrant categories in terms of income (Yu, Ouellet and
Warmington, 2007). A 2011 evaluation of the Government Assisted Refugee program and the Resettlement Assistance Program stated that the income support refugees receive is less than one half of the calculated Low Income Cut-Off Level in Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2011).

Integration: What Are We Talking About Anyway?

At this point, it is useful to take a closer look at the terms ‘settlement’ and ‘integration’ and define what I mean when I use them. Settlement was defined by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants as “a long-term, dynamic, two-way process through which, ideally, immigrants would achieve full equality and freedom of participation in society, and society would gain access to the full human resource potential in its immigrant communities” (OCASI, 2000, p. 10). In reality, the process of settling into a new country and community can take many years. However, Citizenship and Immigration Canada and organizations which provide settlement services use the term ‘settlement’ to refer to a short term phase which involves “meeting the initial needs of newcomers for the basic needs of life, including housing, food, registering children in school, signing up for language training, generally accessing mainstream services, with the assistance of the service provider, and understanding basic rights and responsibilities” (Goss Gilroy, 2000, p.6). My use of the term ‘settlement’ in this text will reflect the long-term nature of the process; however, when referring to government funded settlement programs or services, I will generally be referring to services offered in the first few years after a refugee’s arrival in Canada.
‘Integration’ is a common sense, moderate sounding term that has been widely embraced, both by the media as well as politicians and policy makers (McPherson, 2010). While seemingly neutral or even positive, the term integration actually carries a strong ideological message.

Although the term is widely used, there it has no universal definition nor is there a ‘measure’ of integration. A central idea to many definitions is the idea that integration involves a ‘two-way street’ in which the immigrant adapts to fit into the new society and the society, in turn, adapts to accommodate the immigrant. This idea can be seen the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ definition of integration, which defines integration as a mutual, dynamic, multifaceted and on-going process. Integration requires preparedness on the part of the refugee or newcomer to adapt to the lifestyle of the host society without having to lose one’s own cultural identity. From the point of view of the host society, it requires a willingness for communities to be welcoming and responsive to refugees and for public institutions to meet the needs of a diverse population (UNHCR, 2002). From the perspective of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and organizations that provide settlement services, integration is understood as:

the ultimate goal of the settlement process, at which point immigrants demonstrate the ability to be fully-functioning members of Canadian society. They, among other things, have found and maintained appropriate employment, participate in mainstream organizations, volunteer their time in the community, associate with Canadian values, and participate in the political process (voting, running for office etc.) (Goss Gilroy, 2000, p. 6).
As can be seen from the similarities in the definitions of settlement and integration presented above, integration is commonly used as a synonym for successful settlement.

From a policy perspective, integration is often claimed to be the middle ground between assimilation and multiculturalism (Ager & Strang, 2008; McPherson, 2010). On the positive side, McPherson notes that the concept of integration engages with the issue of the rights of refugees and migrants (O’Neill, 2001) and recognizes benefits in the expression of cultural difference (Lopex, 2000, p. 57). Ager and Strang support the idea of integration involving a ‘two-way’ approach, but suggest that it is also multi-dimensional, in that it involves forming “relationships across people with multiple and overlapping identities” (p. 602). McPherson, however, demonstrates that integrationism remains concerned with immigrants adapting to local norms in terms of their values, beliefs, language and practices. As such, integration actually has assimilationist roots and remains concerned with outsiders, such as refugees, adapting to local norms. Marston (2004) argues that policies stemming from an integrationist perspective are of social justice concern because of how they represent migrants and refugees as problematic against dominant norms. Refugees are depicted as in need of change, or of being fixed (Marston) or helped. McPherson argues that “the ‘common sense’ of a problem based subject representation directs our gaze towards privileged notions of the charitable fix, rather than towards the strengths, resilience, or diverse perspectives migration policy subjects might bring” (p. 552).

Da Lomba (2010) is more direct in her critique of integration in practice, arguing that it is actually a one-sided process requiring refugees and immigrants to adapt to the host society, with little clarity about the role and responsibilities of the host society in the integration process. Drawing on the example of what immigrants must do to achieve British citizenship, Da Lomba
shows that the burden of integration is carried by refugees and immigrants. If they fail to integrate, it is seen as a failure on the part of the refugee, not on the part of the host society.

Mulvey (2010), writing about integration policies in the UK, suggests that integration as a policy is more similar to assimilation than to multiculturalism. While multicultural policies allowed for and promoted diversity, integrationist policies promote homogenous values and language, reflecting a belief that too much diversity would negatively impact social solidarity. A result of this stance is that inequalities are viewed as socially rather than politically and economically constructed, and, ultimately, that minority communities are blamed for the lack of cohesion as well as for their own inequalities. Meanwhile, the difficulties they face in attempting to integrate are not recognized. Structural inequalities, discriminating discourse, government policy and rhetoric, which are the actual cause of failure to integrate, are not seen as such. While the ‘two-way street’ concept of integration sounds good in theory, Mulvey points out that in practice government policy actually created structural barriers which impeded rather than supported refugees’ capacity to integrate. This critique is relevant for the current Canadian political context, in which increasingly restrictive immigration policy is also currently being put into place.

The Canadian context, in terms of integration policy, is not so different from that of Britain. Li (2003) offers an analysis of what the Canadian government really means when it refers to the integration of newcomers. Li argues that integration implies performing according to the norms set by Canadians in terms of behaviour, earnings values, language and participating in mainstream social activities. Essentially, in order to be “integrated” an immigrant needs to conform as much as possible to the dominant majority (white, native-English speakers),
discarding cultural differences that are “far removed from the Canadian standard” (p. 316) since these are seen as “obstacles to integration” (p. 316). Li suggests an alternative integration model that respects immigrants’ differences and that assesses successful integration by determining how open institutions are, how welcoming communities are to newcomers, and whether individual Canadians treat newcomers as equal partners or intruders.

In this section I have described integration both in terms of policy as well as its practical implications for refugees and other immigrants. To clarify my own position, I take a critical stance on the use of ‘integration’ to describe a two-way process, given that such a process, in practice, does not exist (Da Lomba, 2010; Li, 3004; McPherson, 2010; Mulvey, 2010). My use of the term integration reflects the meaning described by Goss Gilroy (2010, p. 6), that of integration being the “ultimate goal of the settlement process.” I do not attempt to evaluate the participants’ level of integration in this study, but rather seek to understand how participants experience integration and how they describe what integration has meant to them.

**Previous Studies with Colombian Refugees in Canada**

A relatively small number of studies have been carried out specifically with Colombian refugees in Canada. The literature on Colombian refugees in Canada that I am aware of covers a variety of topics including adoption of immigrant discourse (Pozniak, 2009), physical and economic wellbeing (Ng, Rush, He & Irwin, 2007), resiliency and success (Munoz, 2011), community cohesiveness (Arsenault, 2010), transnationalism (Arsenault, 2009), and memory, fear and migration experiences (Riaño Alcalá, 2008; Riaño Alcalá, Colorado, Diaz & Osorio, 2008). Below I briefly discuss the findings from these studies, according to theme, with a focus on Riaño Alcalá et al.’s research, given that it is especially relevant to this study.
**Immigrant discourse**

Pozniak (2007) examined the ways in which around thirty Colombian newcomers (mostly refugee claimants) in London Ontario negotiated popular Canadian immigration narratives to construct their experiences and identities. Two dominant discourses were identified: an assets and costs narrative, which views immigrants in terms of whether they are an ‘asset’ or a ‘cost’ to Canada, and an immigrant ethic narrative, which distinguishes between ‘good’ or ‘deserving’ immigrants and ‘bad’ or ‘undeserving’ ones. Pozniak found that newly-arrived Colombians quickly learned these discourses and were skillfully able to draw on them to construct their experiences and self-representations in acceptable language.

**Wellbeing: physical, mental and economic**

Several studies have highlighted the fact that many Colombian refugees in Canada find themselves in a situation of precarious physical and economic wellbeing. Ng, Rush, He and Irwin (2007) conducted quantitative research on a sample of seventy seven adult Colombians who had arrived in Canada within the past five years and who had used a food bank in London, Ontario at least once in the past year. It was unclear what percentage of the participants were refugees, however it is likely that refugees or refugee claimants would have participated, perhaps in the majority. Their research revealed that the participants’ incomes fell well below the low income cut-off as defined by Statistics Canada for the year of 2003. 97% of participants received social support despite the fact that 47% had a university education (from Colombia). The authors noted that low socioeconomic status has been associated with poor health and draw the conclusion that Colombian immigrants are a vulnerable group in need of support. They recommend further studies, including longitudinal studies.
Numerous participants in Riaño Alcalá et al.’s study with Colombian refugees in Vancouver (2008) reported physical and mental health concerns, including a wide range of physical pain and ailments as well as depression. Participants’ experiences and insights revealed dissatisfaction with how they were treated in the medical and mental health system. It was found that the mental health system tended to frame the problem of depression in refugees as an individual, medical problem to be treated with medication and psychiatry, rather than approaching the problem as an issue of social suffering experienced by persons who have experienced socio-political violence.

That some Colombian refugees in Canada face economic difficulties was also documented by Arsenault (2009), who examined the movement of money between Colombians in Quebec and family members in Colombia. Although people who supported their family prior to migration still intended to do so from Canada, they often found that their ability to send money to their family diminished or even disappeared once in Canada. As such, most Colombians found themselves sending smaller amounts of money with less frequency. Arsenault found that, in some cases, Colombians in Quebec actually received money from family in Colombia. This points to the dire economic situation faced by some Colombian refugees in Canada.

**Resiliency and success**

Munoz (2011) explored the ways in which Colombian women war survivors learn and build knowledge throughout their experience of war, displacement and refuge in Canada. Focusing on women’s successes, Munoz looked at how seventeen Colombian refugee women in Calgary used their knowledge to restore their lives in Canadian society. Although the women had
been exposed to violence, they had all been able to succeed under those conditions. Munoz described ways in which they achieved success in the armed conflict zones, displacement zones and asylum zones (new country). Successes in the armed conflict zones consisted of being protagonists of their survival by overcoming fear, resisting violence and mobilizing. Successes in the asylum zone (Canada) involved having the capacity to create a new home and re-establish life in the new society, as indicated by gaining access to resources, entitlements, employment, being integrated into the community, and experiencing hope, well-being, family connectedness and security (p. 119).

**Community cohesiveness**

Arsenault (2010) conducted qualitative research with forty two Colombian refugees who had been in Canada for at least five years and who lived in four different cities in Quebec. She found that most Colombians established very few, select relationships with others from their home country once in Canada, and that a transnational community (a common bond or shared consciousness and beliefs), per se, did not exist. Three main barriers that interfered with the establishment of a transnational community among Colombians in Quebec were social pressure (feelings of competition, envy or wanting to avoid contagious defeatism), cultural behaviour or traits such as gossip or intrusion, and the transposition of the Colombian conflict. The most widespread barrier was that of the transposition of mistrust and polarization from Colombian society to relationships between Colombians in Quebec. Findings by Riaño Alcalá et al. (2008) mirror Arsenault’s conclusions: in their research with Colombian refugees in Canada Riaño Alcalá et al. found that upon arrival Colombians often formed temporary networks in order to
share information, however due to distrust and cultural differences these networks did not become long term.

**Memory and fear**

Of particular relevance to this study are studies carried out by Riaño Alcalá who, in much of her research, examines the relationship between fear, memory and forced migration in order to understand how people reconstruct their lives during displacement and change. Riaño Alcalá (2008) explains how Colombian refugees’ experiences of displacement, migration and exile are marked by a continuum of fear. The presence of fear has numerous repercussions for Colombian refugees in their process of settling into Canada and reconstructing their lives. Fear causes some Colombian refugees to seek isolation or anonymity, while for others it negatively influences their ability to learn to navigate new social systems. As a result, during their first years in Canada many Colombian refugees in Canada experienced vulnerability and a limited capacity to establish supportive social networks or organize collectively.

Riaño Alcalá et al. produced a report in 2008 on the forced migration experiences of Colombians in three different cities in Canada. This report was part of a much larger comparative project on fear, historical memory and social representations in Colombia, Ecuador and Canada, which examined the experiences of Colombian refugees/Internally displaced people in three countries to illustrate variations and similarities in the migration and settlement experiences according to the context of exit and reception. In Vancouver thirty nine Colombians participated in the research, including adults and youth. A key finding was that uncertainty, lack of control, disorientation and fear were dominant feelings in the migration journey, spanning from leaving Colombia to arrival in Canada and during the settlement process. These feelings are related to,
among other things, experiences of fear as a result of being victims or witnesses of violent acts in Colombia, the lack of trust in Colombian institutions, and of polarization within Colombian society. As well, their lack of knowledge of the refugee system and Canadian laws and culture and the experience of living in a society which they did not understand contributed to feelings of uncertainty, fear and disorientation. Memory was another salient theme of the study; it was found that participants experienced both the rupture of memories, meaning the inability to recall certain events from their past, as well the invasion of painful memories.

**The metaphor of being reborn**

The complexities of the experience of settling in a new country were highlighted throughout Riaño Alcalá et al.’s research. Many participants likened their experiences to “starting over” or “being born again” (Riaño Alcalá et al., 2008, p. 84-85). One participant used the metaphor of his family as a garden that had new hope of flowering again in Canada, while another described feeling like children in kindergarten, having to learn to speak again and start over from zero. The process of re-birth in Canada implied re-constructing themselves and re-settling in a physical place and re-making a place for themselves as subjects. For professional, middle class, educated Colombians the process of building a new life in Vancouver implied loss, while small scale farmers or rural workers experienced gains. Within the family there were changes in position and family roles - youth took on new responsibilities, women gained new rights while men often experienced crisis as they lose their traditional role in the family as provider. Part of the starting over process included trying to understand and access a complex system of programs and resources. Settlement agencies provided essential help, but also exerted considerable control over their lives. Churches provided a sense of community and a spiritual
place for some participants, while others reported negative experiences with churches acting as businesses and ‘shopping for souls.’ Through all of this, dealing with language difficulties was a constant challenge.

**Future orientation**

Riaño Alcalá et al. found that the future was “still a slippery ground” (p. 85) for most participants, with many participants unable to envision a possible future in Canada. Some reported being able to imagine a future for their children, but not for themselves. At the time of the study, many participants were still in the first years of settlement, struggling with the opposite pulls of “staying behind” (p. 84), longing for the past and “being here” (p. 84), moving ahead into the present and a possible future. While some participants were only able to focus their efforts on surviving in the present, others did speak of future plans, projects and aspirations.

**Challenges Faced by Professional Immigrants**

Many refugees who come to Canada, including the ones highlighted in this study, are highly educated professionals. As such, literature that examines the experiences of immigrants with professional training is also pertinent. Studies have revealed that immigrants face higher unemployment rates than their Canadian-born counterparts (Zeitsma, 2007) and that refugees face even more difficulties than immigrants of other classes, with more likelihood to experience lower wages higher unemployment rates, more jobless spells and a longer time to find their first job that other classes of immigrants (Shields, Phan, Yang, Kelly, Lemoine & Lo, 2010). Research has also revealed employer discrimination against potential employees who speak with an accent.
Conclusions of Literature Review and Research Problem

In terms of practice, Munoz (2011) proposed a number of recommendations for social workers, including that social workers should consider moving from a direct practice focus to a social justice perspective. She suggested the use of a capability approach, which would include building longer term support systems that go beyond offering a package of short term financial and language support. Munoz emphasized the need for social workers to find ways that allow refugees the opportunities to use their knowledge and agency and to become more active participants in their resettlement process. She stressed that a long term relationship - one that is not built on crisis intervention - is needed in order for social workers to see refugee women in their entirety. In light of Munoz’ argument for a long term relationship between social workers and refugees, studies such as this one, which examine long term settlement experiences of refugees in Canada are relevant and may contribute potentially useful information for the development of a settlement system that address the long term needs of refugees.

Yu, Ouellet and Warmington (2007) note that there is a “dearth of evidence” about Canada’s refugee population. They suggest that more research is needed in numerous areas, including on the “meaning, patterns, and causes of socio-cultural integration of refugees” (p. 22). Given this dearth of evidence, it is unsurprising that few studies specific to Colombians in Canada exist. A commonality across the five studies reviewed above is that the great majority of the participants had been in Canada for around five years or less at the point of the study. A knowledge gap remains, however on the long-term settlement and integration experiences of
Colombian refugees. Anthropologist Vigh (2008) observed that more research is needed to shed light on the way that people attune their lives to and navigate through prolonged situations of crisis and uncertainty. Research which explores the stories of refugees who have been in Vancouver for around a decade is important in that it would offer a glimpse into the lived experiences of refugees over time as they settle and integrate into Canadian society - a process that rarely features in the literature and of which little is known. It is my hope that this study will contribute both to filling this gap in the literature and to discussions around meaningful long term settlement support.
Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology I adopted to conduct this study. I begin by introducing my research question and explaining my choice of a research paradigm. Next I describe the sampling approach and the process of recruiting participants, as well as considerations around possible risks, benefits and ethical issues. I provide a description of the data gathering and analysis processes and end with a brief discussion of credibility.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: What are stories that Colombian refugees tell about their experiences navigating the settlement and integration process over time?

Narrative Research Paradigm

This study is qualitative in nature, drawing strongly from a narrative approach. Narrative analysis, as described by Mishler (1986) and Reissman (1993), is an approach to qualitative research that involves understanding stories in themselves, as told by research participants, in order to see how participants make sense of events in their lives, claim identities and construct their lives. The process begins with an interview in which the researcher seeks to render much of the control to the participant, working collaboratively to understand the meaning they ascribe to the stories they share. Mishler asserts that by analyzing naturally occurring stories in their context researchers are able to learn something about the structure of social relationships, the rules governing social status, and to theorize about structure, forms and rules of social action. A researcher seeks to identify what the story is about, how the answer to the research question
emerges from the narrative and what the narrator is revealing about his or her own identity through the story.

In the field of qualitative research, narrative research is often referred to as a method, approach, methodology or subtype of qualitative inquiry. Spector-Mersel (2010) proposed the existence of a narrative paradigm, and outlined six fundamental dimensions: ontology, epistemology, and methodology as well as inquiry aim, inquirer posture and participant/narrator posture. I found Spector-Mersel’s description to be quite useful in the process of envisioning my research methodology and design. I will briefly touch on each of the core elements of a narrative paradigm as described by Spector-Mersel.

A foundational principle and unique characteristic of narrative research is the understanding that narratives do not reflect phenomena but rather construct it. A narrative paradigm is an interpretive-qualitative paradigm, that is, a paradigm that suggests a multi-faceted reality and emphasizes subjectivity in the study of social realities (Spector-Mersel). Narrative researchers tend to “focus on the particular, seeking to expand the understanding of a phenomenon through the individual case” (Spector-Mersel, p.209). In this study I seek to expand the understanding of how Colombian refugees navigate the settlement and integration process over time through the stories participants tell about their settlement and integration experiences.

**Narrative ontology and epistemology**

The ontological assumptions of a narrative paradigm could be described as the belief that social reality is primarily a narrative reality. Spector-Mersel quotes Widdershoven (1993, p. 19) to explain: “...life is both more and less than a story. It is more in that it is the basis of a variety
of stories, and it is less in that it is unfinished and unclear as long as there are no stories told about it” (as cited in Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 211). A narrative paradigm emphasizes that stories have a central place in human existence and conduct.

The epistemological assumptions of a narrative paradigm are centred on the use of stories to shape and interpret reality. Spector-Mersel highlights some central epistemological assumptions about how stories are produced. Firstly, narratives, whether about the past, present or future, are always rooted in and told from the vantage point of the present. Secondly, the stories we tell are composed of a selection of events from our lives. Thirdly, three contexts influence the development of narratives: “the immediate intersubjective relationships in which they are produced, the collective social field in which they evolved and the cultural meta-narratives that give meaning to any particular story” (Spector-Mersel, p. 212). These assumptions were quite relevant to the analysis process, in which I was analyzing stories told in the present about events occurring over a seven to thirteen year period prior to the interviews. In fact, as part of the analysis I looked at how stories evolved over time, and how narratives told during the early years of settlement (in a previous but related study) differed from those told at this later vantage point. I kept in mind that the stories told to me were only a selection of the many possible stories that participants could have told me. It was up to the participants to decide which specific stories to share. I realized that the stories that were told to me were influenced by my presence and identity as the interviewer, by the cultural context from which participants came, by the present reality and location of the participants, and by the socio-political in which they lived, that of Canada at a time of increasingly negative and restrictive government rhetoric and policies toward refugee immigration.
Narrative methodology

Given the ontological assumption that social reality is a narrative reality, it follows that narratives - stories - are the core sources of information and material for analysis of narrative research. In this study I use personal, episodic stories of integration and settlement over time as my source of information and material for analysis. Spector-Mersel identifies two basic principles for the interpretation of stories: 1) stories are the data and must be examined in themselves rather than seen as a channel to the data and 2) narrative analysis is holistic. The holistic nature of narrative analysis implies that stories should not be fragmented into isolated segments but rather they should be treated as a whole unit. For my study, this implied an overall analysis of each story, drawing a ‘story theme,’ with the help of each participant, out of each narrative, and describing each participant and key details of their story individually before describing the common themes that emerged from the data. Themes emerged, not out of the fragmentation of stories through coding but rather out of an analysis of the themes found in each story.

The holistic nature of narrative analysis calls for attention to the contexts that have influenced the story. This was extremely relevant to my research, since it focused on stories arising from a specific context - that of the settlement and integration process in the Vancouver area of British Columbia. The context of the stories I heard in my research consisted of a complex and often confusing network of settlement agencies, community resources, government programs and systems for health, education and employment that are not always easy to access for newcomers.
Inquiry aim

Spector-Mersel notes that there is a debate among narrative researchers as to whether the aim of narrative research should be descriptive or interventionist. That is, does it strive to produce a solid understanding of the phenomenon under study or does it “take a further step by striving for personal, social or political change?” (Spector-Mersel, p. 215). Historically both approaches have been taken by narrative researchers. Those working from an “interventionist” perspective may endeavour to advance their participants’ quality of life by giving voice to marginal populations; others strive to develop narrative-based practices for teaching or therapy. The primary aim of this study was to understand the process of navigating settlement and integration over time through the stories of research participants. However, a secondary aim was to provide a space for the participants to share their stories and to provide feedback and information for settlement service providers and policy makers. As such, this study primarily had a descriptive aim but, secondarily, an interventionist aim as well.

Inquirer posture

When working from a narrative paradigm, as with other interpretive paradigms, it is understood that the researcher is not detached from the phenomena under study. As such, I approached this study with the understanding that I was not a far removed, objective observer. Stories told in narrative research are constructed in and through the interaction between the teller and the listener. Through systemic reflection I made an effort to understand what participants wanted to share with me and the stress of emphasis they put on their stories. Recognizing, rather than denying, my influence on the study, I incorporate my voice into the report by writing in first
person, expressing my subjective voice and reflecting on the ways in which I may have influenced the participants’ stories and interpretations thereof.

**Participant/narrator posture**

In narrative research, the participants are central to the study. They are not seen as informants, but rather as active agents. Like the researcher, the participants are inseparable from the phenomenon under inquiry (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 217). An important practice in narrative research is that of shared control between the research and participants in the construction and development of the analysis. I sought to share control with participants by sharing copies of their transcripts and the initial draft of the findings and analysis with individual participants, in order to check for accuracy and elicit feedback, comments and amendments. Also of importance in narrative research reports is the clear and consistent presence of the participants’ voices. To ensure this I have included substantial quotes of the participants’ own words in the findings and interpretations as well as analysis chapters.

**Sampling and Recruitment**

**Inclusion and exclusion criterion**

I employed a purposeful approach to sampling (Cresswell, 2007), given that the study required a very specific set of participants in order to reach the aim of learning about experiences of Colombian refugees in navigating the settlement and integration process over time. Purposeful sampling was necessary to ensure that the study participants met all of the demographic criteria.

The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: Colombians living in Greater Vancouver who came as Government Sponsored Refugees in or prior to 2006. Inclusion criteria
required participants to be adults who were either the Principal Applicant for refugee protection or the Principal Applicant’s partner/spouse. A number of exclusion criteria were also applied. Individuals of Colombian origin who have been here since or before 2006 but who came as children/youth dependent on their parents were excluded from this study, since, as children/youth and dependents I considered that their experiences would be quite distinct from those of adults and I did not have the ability to extend my study to such a broad scope. As well, individuals of Colombian origin who came as privately sponsored refugees, refugee claimants, or through any other class of immigration such as family class or skilled immigrant class were excluded from the study. Colombian individuals who had been here less than seven years at the time of the study were excluded, since the aim of the study was to look at long-term settlement and integration experiences. Individuals who met the inclusion criteria but who were unable to give informed consent would not have been included in the study had such an instance arisen.

Potential participants who met the recruiting criteria needed to be able to commit to a one to two hour interview as well as a further hour to review the transcripts and draft report and provide any feedback they may wish to provide. I did not restrict the participants to individuals who can speak English, since I was comfortable conducting the interviews in Spanish.

**Strategies for finding participants**

In order to disseminate the advertisement for my study and find participants who met my sample design I sought the assistance of a number of key contacts in the Colombian and Latin American community in Vancouver. These contacts were people in the fields of settlement, health care, affordable housing, as well as in churches and community based organizations and who had among their network a wide range of Colombians living in the Vancouver area. I sent
the advertisement for the study to five such contacts, asking them to share it with their networks, and they all kindly obliged. I had aimed to include a maximum of ten participants in the study, and was pleased with an eventual outcome of seven participants. Although narrative studies often do not require a large number of participants, I was glad to have had the opportunity to interview seven people, as this allowed me to determine whether or not a collective story of navigating settlement emerged from the data.

As part of the process of recruitment and gaining consent I designed an advertisement for the study, as mentioned above, as well as a consent form. Both of these documents complied with UBC’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board guidelines in terms of content and confidentiality. A description of the purpose of the study was provided and the amount of time required of participants, the types of questions I would be asking, the option to withdraw, and the guidelines around confidentiality were clearly explained. These documents were provided in Spanish (and were also available in English), to ensure full transparency and comprehension of participants. English versions of these documents can be seen in the appendices. I provided the consent form to participants via e-mail several days ahead of the interview to ensure that they had sufficient time to consider what involvement in the study would imply and that their decision to participate would be one of informed consent.

In recognition of the valuable contribution of my research participants to the study I provided a $20 gift card to a supermarket as a gesture of appreciation. This was made clear on the advertisement, as was the offer to cover the costs of transportation involved in getting to and from the interview site as well as the cost of child care during the interview as necessary.
Ethical Issues

A number of ethical issues in relation to conducting research with refugee populations have been identified. These ethical issues include vulnerability of participants, informed consent, pressure to participate, research resulting in policies harmful to refugees or placing participants at risk, and participants being used by researchers for unclear purposes that do not relate to refugees’ wellbeing (Hugman, Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2011). In the literature these issues are often associated with research carried out in refugee camps (Hugman et al.), although they are also relevant to consider in studies such as this one. As the participants in this study had immigrated to Canada as refugees they were part of a group of people who had experienced marginalization and deep suffering, and as such it was important to consider ethical implications while designing and conducting this study.

Research with refugee populations is relevant to the field of social work, given that social workers are involved in many aspects of service provision for refugees, including advocacy, health services, trauma counselling, settlement support, social programs, community development and educational programs (Cox & Pawar, 2006, pp. 292-4). Hugman, Pittaway & Bartolomei (2011) argue that as such, social workers must be concerned about research in the refugee field, and must be responsible to produce both methodologically sound and ethically appropriate research. The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics states that “social workers who engage in research minimize risk to participants, ensure informed consent, maintain confidentiality and accurately report the results of their studies” (CASW Code of Ethics, 2005). The CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice cover research ethics in more detail, requiring that “social workers consider carefully the possible consequences for individuals and
society before participating in or engaging in, proposed research and also when publishing research results” (CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice, 2005). The CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice also require social work researchers to ensure participants are protected from harm and have access to appropriate support service. Researchers must also take care to protect the privacy and dignity of research participants and to obtain informed consent, ensure anonymity and confidentiality. In the following sections I will describe how I strove to meet these ethical standards. At this point it is relevant to note that this study was subject to a full ethical review by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board and was successfully approved under the certificate number H12-03036.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality was a key ethical concern shared by myself and most of the participants in this study. It was of special relevance because of the fact that many individuals who participated in the study could still face security concerns in their home country. I have used pseudonyms for each participant as well as any family members or friends whose names happen to appear in the transcript, and have removed any identifying details. The interviews included a question asking participants to tell me how they would like to be described in the study. I was careful to explain that part of the purpose of the question was to allow participants to tell me both how they would like to be described in my study as well as to tell me if there were any aspects of their identity or other parts of their story that they would prefer I not include in my individual descriptions of participants or any other part of the text.
Risks

Although the questions I asked during the interviews did not address the events that led participants to leave Colombia, I was aware that memories of those events might be reactivated as a result of my interview, since settlement in Canada was a direct result of having faced serious life threats in Colombia. In conducting the interviews I aimed to inquire about stories of agency and personal resilience; however, I also anticipated that the settlement experiences participants would share about would include difficult episodes of financial duress, family tensions, loneliness, discrimination and so on. As such, I anticipated that the interviews could bring up emotions of sadness, frustration and memories of loss. To address this I prepared and provided participants with a list of agencies and individual counsellors in the lower mainland who could provide low-cost or free therapeutic support in Spanish and English in response to any of the emotions or memories that may have been evoked during the interviews. I also let participants know that they had the right to not answer any questions that they did not wish to answer, and to stop or take a break at any time during the interview.

Possible benefits

Some authors have suggested that describing one's experiences, even when they are specifically very difficult experiences, may have potential benefits including: validation of one's experiences, recognition of one's own agency in the midst of challenging circumstances, assisting with the identification of one's feelings and emotions that may otherwise have been ignored, alleviating the heavy weight often felt when one stays silent about one's experiences (Riaño Alcalá, Willis Obregón, Bello, & Quintero, 2009). Wingard and Lester (2001) suggest that there are ways to tell stories that make the teller stronger. By seeking and honouring stories
of agency and initiative in the midst of challenging circumstances I aimed to encourage such a way of telling stories. Aware of differences in relative benefit from the study, I constantly sought to be ethical in my interactions with participants, in the way I represented them in the study, and in the manner with which I treated their stories.

**Power and personal gain**

I recognized that as a Master of Social Work student I am bound to benefit greatly from this study: it is my key to obtaining a professional graduate level degree and future opportunities. In reality, I will be the person who reaps the most benefits from this study. As a researcher from UBC and as the one who ultimately analyses and interprets the data, I also had a significant degree of power. In a similar vein, I faced the ethical question of whether an outsider can accurately study minorities. As I grappled with these ethical issues and questions, the best solution I could come to was that of conducting the study in a way that engaged with the participants and the data as ethically as possible, honouring participants’ stories, perspectives, and insights during the interview and analysis stages. Adopting a narrative approach which allowed for participants’ voices and opinions to be heard was, for me, an ethical decision. Member checking was also an ethical choice, so as to ensure that the way I represent participants and translate and interpret their words accurately reflects the meanings they ascribe to their stories. My hope is that in this study the participants’ contributions are clearly visible.

**Data Gathering**

My data gathering approach for this study involved individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. I structured my questions so as to elicit stories, in the narrative tradition. Interviews
lasted between an hour and an hour and a half and took place either in the privacy of the participant’s home or in a private office space that I reserved in my apartment building. All but one were conducted in Spanish.

I began each interview by explaining that I was interested in the story of the participants’ lives in Canada and how they had built a life for themselves here. In my first question I asked participants if they would tell me about some significant moments in their life in Canada. From there stories generally began to flow, and I soon learned that the less I said, the more stories would be told. I used active listening and non-verbal techniques such as encouraging nods and short comments of affirmation or interest to facilitate story-telling. Occasionally I would use prompts such as “how did you know about that?” or “how did you do that?” to keep the conversation flowing and get a better picture of a certain aspect of the story.

My second planned question was “tell me what it has been like for you since you were no longer able to access settlement services. How did you find the support you needed?” however, I noticed that participants often seemed confused by this question, either being unaware of any cut-off date for settlement services or simply not having accessed services other than the initial refugee assistance program during their first year. Stories of finding and accessing resources abounded, but were not often in conjunction with settlement services. As interviews progressed, I modified this question to simply “did you access any settlement services, and if so, could you tell me about them?” I also ensured that I asked participants how they accessed resources if that was not already apparent in the stories they were sharing.

I had initially planned to wind the interview down with an imaginative question, as follows “If you could write a book about the experiences you have had as you settled in Canada -
including but not necessarily limited to the stories you have told me today, what title would you like to give to the book?” This question was well received, and I quickly realized that it often led to a great deal of new stories and insight on settlement and integration experiences, with participants often describing the important chapters they would want to include in such a book. As such, it became more of a middle point in the interviews rather than a way to close the interviews. The insights and patterns that were apparent in the answers to this question helped me define the key themes that emerged from the data during the analysis process.

My concluding question was initially designed with the intention of replacing any kind of ‘personal data form.’ In consultation with the principal investigator, Dr. Riaño Alcalá, I decided to avoid the use of a standardized form requiring participants to fill out personal data and rather incorporate a question that would give them control over what aspects of their identity they would like described in the study. To do this, I asked participants how they would like to be described in the study and what they felt was important for readers to know about them. I was surprised by how participants answered this question, often reflecting on what they felt their most defining personal qualities rather than statistical information (age, education and so forth). The answers provided to this question enriched the introductions that I wrote for each participant in the findings and interpretations chapter.

Analysis

I audio recorded the interviews on my lap top, which, for security purposes was password protected. After each interview I spent some time taking field notes, writing down any impressions, describing the setting of the interview to enhance my memory of the interview, and making special notes of any key themes, topics or points that had struck me from the interview. I
began the transcription process as soon as I had conducted the first interview. Needless to say, I transcribed the interviews in the language in which they were conducted.

I double spaced the transcripts and created a wide margin for notes on the right hand side of the page. I then printed all of the transcripts, keeping copies for myself and providing a copy of their own transcript to each participant, along with a self-addressed stamped envelope should they wish to return it to me with comments or corrections. One participant provided feedback on their transcript, adding missing information where sentences had ended abruptly and correcting many of the grammatical ‘errors’ that occur in normal, everyday speech.

I began the process of analysis by listening again to each of the interviews while reading through the transcript, beginning the coding process by jotting down words and phrases that came to mind on the margin as I went along. Through this process I not only identified specific types of stories - stories about obstacles or about navigational strategies - for example, but also began to notice similarities in terms of the topics that participants discussed, the major themes that ran through the different interviews, and the common framework within which participants tended to set their stories. I also paid careful attention to the titles of the imaginary books and the chapters that each participant had imagined, as these assisted me in organizing the themes. In addition, I identified metaphors, figures of speech, words and phrases that participants used to describe their experience of settlement and integration, and grouped these together for separate analysis. After going through all of the interviews identifying topics and themes I was left with three pages of notes plastered with lists of topics, themes, words and phrases describing integration and a list of imaginary book titles and chapters.
As I proceeded with the analysis, applying thematic codes to sections of the data, I became aware of themes that appeared time and again both in participants’ narratives as well as in the description of their imaginary book titles and chapters. These became the overarching themes which I present in the findings section below. As many participants described a sequential order of stages of settlement, I chose to follow this pattern for the organization of the themes and sub-themes. I noticed that numerous participants had used creative metaphors to describe their settlement experiences, I included these metaphors in the findings as well.

To proceed with the writing-up of the themes and sub-themes, I first had to organize the data according to these key themes. To do this I colour coded each participant’s transcript by highlighting the entire transcript in a unique colour. I then electronically cut and pasted large sections of each transcript to a document containing an outline of the organized themes and sub-themes. Since there were only seven participants I could easily recall whose words were who’s based on the colour of highlighting. From there I began the process of describing each theme, drawing heavily on quotes from participants. The colour coding primarily served to ensure that I didn’t accidentally credit any quotes to the wrong participant.

As six of seven interviews had taken place in Spanish, I translated the quotes into English one by one as I wrote the findings chapter. I aimed to stay as true as possible to the original meaning, and the reader will notices instances where I comment on the original meanings of words in Spanish that were particularly difficult to translate. Member checking, as discussed below, was an integral part of ensuring that my translations stayed true to the original meaning intended by the participant. I also consulted with my thesis supervisor, Dr. Riaño Alcalá, who is fluent in Spanish, in regard to particular words or terms.
Credibility

Maxwell (2005) identifies two main types of threats to credibility in qualitative research: researcher bias and reactivity. In qualitative research, it is expected and understood that researchers will bring their own values, beliefs, experiences and lens to the study. As such, I cannot avoid having what is commonly referred to as a ‘bias.’ In order to eliminate the negative connotations often associated to the word ‘bias,’ I find it helpful to think of the original meaning of the word bias, as described by any etymological dictionary: a slant, leaning, angle or inclination. I acknowledge that my previous experiences both in Colombia and in conversing with Colombian refugees and service providers in Canada gives me a particular ‘slant’ in terms of my understanding and approach to the topic of this study. This need not be seen as negative, however. My past experiences accompanying and providing support or services to refugees, both in Colombia and Canada, provided me with insight during the research process. At the same time, in conducting the study I aimed to be aware of any pre-conceived notions I held regarding the Colombian refugee experience, settlement, or integration.

‘Reactivity’ refers to the influence that a researcher has on the data produced in the study (Maxwell, 2005). Within a narrative paradigm it is understood that stories are co-constructed by the participant and researcher. Participants tell their stories in different ways - or may even tell different stories all together - depending on their audience. As an academic researcher from UBC and as a white, Canadian-born woman, I was aware that my presence and position would have influenced the stories I was told. As well, the specific questions I formulated to ask influenced the stories. In line with a narrative approach, I sought to ask broad questions and, by interjecting
as little as possible, I sought to leave as much control as possible in the hands of the participants, allowing them to choose which stories to tell me.

To ensure that my transcriptions are correct and that my analysis reflects the meaning intended by participants, I employed member checking (Maxwell, 2005). This involved asking participants to review and give feedback on the findings and discussion chapters. Recognizing my influence on the study, I included my own voice in the report by writing in the first person. I acknowledged that objectivity is neither a goal nor a possibility, given the paradigm from which I worked assumes the subjective, complex and multi-storied nature of life.
Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretations

This chapter introduces the findings and the interpretative analysis of the stories told by the participants. I first introduce each of the study participants and then describe three major themes that emerged during analysis in a section titled ‘The Journey in Canada.’ The three major themes are: the refugee experience, navigating around obstacles, and building community & helping others. This chapter ends with a brief section on what participants told me about their future plans and a final section examining three ‘metaphors for settlement’ that participants drew upon in their narratives.

The Participants

The seven participants in this study were individuals of Colombian origin who had arrived in Canada through the Government Assisted Refugee Program, directly from Colombia, between the years 2000 and 2006. They all settled directly in the Greater Vancouver Regional District and continued to live there up until their participation in the study. At the time of the interviews they had been in Canada between seven and thirteen years. All of the participants were adults at their time of arrival in Canada; incidentally all arrived with families consisting of a spouse and young children. Among the participants were two couples. Three of the participants had previously participated in the 2008 study by Riaño Alcalá et al.

In the following paragraphs I describe each of the participants. Included in the description is each participant’s answer to a question I poised during the interviews, as follows:

“If you could write a book about the experiences you have had as you settled in Canada -

2 As mentioned in the methods chapter, I use pseudonyms in place of participants’ real names, as well as in place of any other names that were mentioned by participants.
including but not necessarily limited to the stories you have told me today, what title would you like to give to the book?” This question usually elicited a smile, followed by a thoughtful pause. Most participants stressed how important it was that the title capture the profound nature of their experience. Several told me they sought to find a way to express a lot using only a few words.

I concluded each interview by asking each participant how they would like to be described in the study. Most participants commented on what they thought were their defining personal qualities. These insightful comments are included in the following descriptions.

**Ivan**

Ivan arrived in Canada in 2001, with his wife and two young children, who are now young adults. At the time of our interview Ivan had been living in the Vancouver area for over 11 years, and both he and his wife were working in professional fields. Ivan described himself as resourceful, persistent and compassionate for others.

When Ivan and his family arrived in Canada, they were sent to Victoria by accident, and found themselves alone in the airport. Ivan recounted this unsettling experience:

> We arrived in Montreal and were well received there: (they said) ‘come here please, here are some jackets and boots to put on.’ . . .³ it was a very good first impression . . . We then went to Vancouver, and there someone received us and told us we were going on to Victoria . . . We arrived in Victoria and nobody was waiting for us. This was our second impression. First - how lovely, people met us in the airport, and later nobody was there to receive us.

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³ I use ellipses to indicate that I have cut out some words - usually either repeated or redundant words or a ‘false start’ sentence. My use of ellipses does not indicate a pause in speech.
Serendipitously a priest arrived at the airport to pick up another refugee family, and offered them a place to stay for the night before they were sent to Vancouver the following day. This major mix-up led Ivan to the conclusion that he couldn’t fully trust the people or organizations that were in place to help new refugees. Because of this, Ivan and his wife immediately set out to research local resources. Together they soon built up a vast “database” of information which allowed them to navigate their settlement process. Ivan was always keen to help connect others to resources that they might benefit from, although at times his efforts to organize within the Colombian community in Vancouver were met with frustration.

As Ivan told me his story, it quickly became apparent that he was a skilful networker. He described how he sought to “make friends, not enemies” as he connected with various local institutions and organizations, and how this approach often allowed meetings and connections to happen more smoothly and quickly. Ivan was also very goal oriented and focused on long term planning. As a systems engineer in Colombia, Ivan decided to return to school several years after arriving in Vancouver, taking a certificate program in database administration at a local technological institute. Although he had to work hard in low-paying jobs at times, since obtaining his certificate he has held numerous positions as a database administrator and currently works with a large company. Ivan’s wife, who only came up briefly in our interview, was a psychologist in Colombia, and also chose to go back to school, obtaining a degree in nursing. I could detect the pride in his voice as he told me that she now works at a local hospital.

An aspect of Ivan’s story that didn’t emerge until after our recorded conversation was the effect of having arrived to Canada with a lot of fear, due to the experiences that led to his need for refuge in Canada. I asked Ivan for permission to share this aspect of his story, even though it
was not recorded. Ivan explained to me that no one - not even their closest friends - actually knows where they live. They do not invite friends to their home, but rather meet with friends in other locations. Ivan considers this a minimal standard of safety that he and his family still abide by.

In response to my question about how he would like to be described, Ivan replied:

I am a social being, a human being, and as a human being I have to give a lot to try to change this world. And to be able to give you have to struggle. . . . If I see someone suffering, I suffer too, believe me. I am a human being who feels for others.

That Ivan was concerned about social issues and interested in helping others was evident in many of the stories he shared with me, which will appear in further detail in the thematic section below.

When I asked Ivan what title he would give to a book written about his experiences in Canada he paused and contemplated for a few seconds before replying confidently “Volver a Nacer” - Being Reborn. He explained, with a sense of satisfaction “In eleven years we are practically again at the same level that we were in Colombia.” Then, with a chuckle, he added “the only thing is I don’t have a company here.” Ivan did not present this information in a way that emphasized having lost time or being behind. Rather, he explained that in eleven years they had managed to accomplish what had previously taken them their whole lives (up until leaving Colombia) to attain. He was clearly emphasizing the great achievements and successes that he and his family had reached in a relatively short time. Almost as an afterthought he added another detail: “We have a three year old child as well, who is Canadian. . . it’s all part of the process.”
believe Ivan was telling me that, despite the losses that come as part of the refugee experience, there had also been gains and new, positive additions to his life in Canada.

Ivan concluded his conversation with me by drawing out the main message he would like to share with anyone who might get to know his story “The conclusion is to always be focused, focused on what you want. I would conclude it (the imaginary book) by saying that yes, you can do it. You can be born again and you can live again.” I asked him if his message was a message of hope, and he agreed that it was.

Flor

Flor arrived in Canada in 2005 with her husband and four children. Gentle and warm, Flor is a gifted gardener and maintains a backyard that her neighbours love to visit and photograph, telling her that it should be featured in gardening magazines. Flor invited me to come back later on in the summer to appreciate it in its full glory. Flor also keeps canaries. Having interviewed Flor in her home, I left with a recording of our interview punctuated with a soundtrack of twitters and chirps in the background.

In Colombia, Flor explained, she and her husband led a busy lifestyle as practicing lawyers. Since Coming to Canada, much had changed for them. They set out a strategic plan for Flor to study English and take a Legal Assistant Program at a local college. She explained that the plan was for her husband to study English and focus on his profession next; however, an unexpected health crisis changed everything.

Just as Flor was beginning to send out her resume and search for work, she began to feel unwell, as though she had a terrible cough. At first doctors passed it off as a cold; however, in
2009 it was discovered that she had an extremely rare disease, which Flor described as a special kind of pneumonia. She was given a prognosis of three years left to live. Flor recalled that period of time and how it affected her and her family:

When they said that I had a short time left to live, everything came crashing down around us. They began a strong treatment. My body began to fall apart, to swell up. The inflammation and the pain, and this illness set off a chain reaction of other problems in my body. It affected by back, my brain, my whole body. Everything hurts. I started with two specialists and I ended up with six.

Flor went on to explain that since then, little by little, she stabilized, although she still lives with serious health challenges. Due to intense ongoing pain and other physical effects of the disease including vision problems, fibromyalgia, and immunological problems, she has not been able to return to work, and now receives income support as a person with a disability. As a result of her illness, her husband was never able to spend time studying. Instead, he has experienced a complete change of careers, and has become a handy-man and carpenter. In our conversation Flor noted that she has now spent half of her life in Canada receiving special medical treatment for her illness.

To my question about the title she would give to a book containing her experiences in Canada, Flor laughed to herself, thought for a few seconds, and suddenly exclaimed “Superando Obstaculos!” - *Overcoming Obstacles!* She explained “because it is a continuous overcoming of obstacles. Some obstacles have fallen in front of us that are still very high for us to overcome. But, life is a continual struggle to survive, to overcome many obstacles. . .” While she
emphasized that she has not been defeated, she did not shy away from sharing how difficult experiencing illness early on in her settlement process had been:

But we have not let ourselves become defeated. Uuuy, yes. It’s complicated - so many dreams - to study. I was rushing to learn English to do something, to help my husband. And now, well, to know that nothing came of it. That is hard. It’s hard. That depresses me tremendously, all the time doing nothing, feeling sick. Ahhh! I had a lot of aspirations. It’s very complicated.

Flor found solace in her faith, explaining to me that in life “things are not what one thinks, but what God has in mind.”

Despite the debilitating and life changing effects of her illness, Flor assured me that she was “strong.” Illness certainly did not dominate our conversation. In fact, much of Flor’s story focused on her efforts to create a sense of community in her neighbourhood as well as an atmosphere of warm welcome to newcomers in her church. Through befriending neighbours, insisting on saying hello to people on the street, and introducing a practice of welcoming newcomers with a hug at church, Flor brought warmth, unity, and a sense of community to those around her. As a result, neighbours now participate in vegetable exchanges with each other and send her flowers and cards when they know she is feeling sick. Although Flor does not have the physical stamina to work professionally, she dedicates her time to ministry through her church, offering spiritual guidance, counsel and prayer for individuals and couples who are ill or struggling. During our conversation she told me that she normally spends time in prayer every morning, but she hadn’t done so yet since I had arrived for the interview.
Luis arrived in Canada in 2000 with his wife and three children. Prior to coming to Canada, Luis and his family had spent a year and a half in a European country, through an Amnesty International protection program. Luis commented how this time in Europe had prepared him and his family for the challenges they would face as they re-rooted themselves in Canada. He described how being in Europe influenced his approach to settlement in Canada:

It gave us the opportunity to think quite a bit about the situation, about what being a refugee signifies. . . . We came with an attitude which was a little more open to overcoming something that happens to all refugees, which is that you are neither here or there. So, you are nowhere. So you don’t put roots in your new place because you are always thinking about everything you left over there. But you can’t go back because you can’t. . . . Don’t believe that we had overcome everything (in Europe), because, in fact, it (depression) happened to us here, but at least we came a little more prepared, with an attitude of ‘we have to move ahead, we have to move ahead one way or the other.’

Shortly after arriving in the Vancouver area Luis put his plan into action by getting in touch with a number of people whose contact information he had brought with him from Colombia. Some of these were people he knew through his network of human rights workers, others were academics. Luis explained how these friendships, with people who were not refugees, and who had “another sort of reality” helped “open up other possible ways of thinking, of looking at things in a different manner.” In particular, these friends helped him understand the importance of studying English, even if it meant initially suffering through the experience of relying on welfare, going to food banks, delivering newspapers, and working in cleaning jobs.
Luis and his wife made a plan. With a degree in philosophy and years of experience in human rights, Luis knew that he would have to find a new career in order to find work in Canada. He remembered enjoying electronics as a young man, and decided this could be his new path. Once his English had reached a sufficient level Luis was able to study at a local college, with the help of a student loan. After two years he attained a diploma as a telecommunications technician and graduated as one of the top students in his class. Shortly thereafter he was hired by a local telephone and internet company, where he has been working as a network technician for the past nine years. Luis shared how, since then, his wife has also gone back to school to pursue an area of great interest to her and has since opened up her own business. He also described how his children faced many crises but eventually reached their dreams, his daughter working as a flight attendant and his son being recognized in the community with an award for his work in multiculturalism.

When I asked him what title he would give to a book about his experiences in Canada Luis let out a chuckle at the question and then turned quite serious. “I’m not sure what to call it. It needs a suggestive title, something really appropriate, that says a lot.” He paused a few more seconds and then shared his title: “Reconstruyendo una Vida” - Rebuilding a Life. He explained “You could write a book like Rebuilding a Life with a profound sense of rebuilding your life, our life. We have been rebuilding. There are lots of disadvantages, because obviously, for example, we feel loneliness.” Luis shared briefly how he and his wife often miss the social and intellectual circles they moved in before leaving Colombia, and how that aspect of their life has been irreplaceable. Despite certain things that simply can’t be rebuilt, Luis evaluated their present situation in life as quite positive:
We have more or less found our place in this city. . . . Economically we are not very, very high but at least we survive. We have what we need to live. We have debt because of the mountain of student loans . . . but we are making an effort to move my wife’s business ahead. This means we have some economic limitations but we have a path, we have a clear path of life here.

To the question about how he would like to be described, Luis responded by telling me that he continues to study, and aims to become certified as a network engineer. “I haven’t gotten to the point of not wanting more (professionally). I want more. . . . I like what I do and I like to study and if it helps me to move up in the company, well, how could I say no!” By this, I believe Luis was highlighting how seriously he takes setting goals and working toward them, and the important role that doing so has played in his family’s journey on their path of life in Canada.

Manuel

Manuel arrived in Canada in 2004 with his wife and two children. Of the seven people who participated in this study, Manuel was the only one who chose to carry out our interview in English. Manuel’s story revealed him to be a person who wasn’t afraid to take risks and who was in charge of his destiny.

When Manuel and his family first touched Canadian soil their final destination was to be Jonquière, Quebec. However, Manuel and his wife had heard from family members already in Canada that the weather in Jonquière would not be good for their children, who suffered badly from asthma. Because of this, they decided they would rather go to Vancouver. Upon arrival in the Montreal airport, Manuel realized he had to act quickly if they were going to change their
Manuel recalled the moment: “we were so afraid, and I said ‘uh oh, how can I tell them that we changed our mind, we’ve changed our plans?’”

Manuel made frequent references to his strong faith, and remembered this giving him courage at the moment of telling the immigration officers of their new plan:

I said ‘Ok God, so here we are, we are in your hands, so please give me a hand again.’
And then I talked to them . . . I said ‘Eh, you know what, sorry, but we changed our minds, so we are not going to Jonquière. We are going to Vancouver, BC.’

The immigration officers let him know that he had the right to go wherever he wanted. Manuel told me he had to buy the onward tickets to Vancouver “from his pockets” and the immigration officers helped him with the paperwork involved in changing his plans.

As I listened to Manuel’s story, it became apparent that he was a man who was not afraid to take a plunge into the unknown. This idea came up numerous times, particularly as Manuel explained how he made the transition from English classes to the work world. Manuel studied English and worked in different ‘survival jobs’ for his first two years in Canada. He recalled the day he decided to take the plunge and move to find work in his field:

The (English) teacher, she told me ‘Your English is not too bad. You can continue here doing our English courses, but, English is not here. English is out there, outside in the street. English is in Superstore, in the bus station, in your workplace.’ And I said ‘yeah, why not? Let’s go.’ I jumped.

Manuel described this as “breaking the (English) barrier.”
In Colombia Manuel was a welder, an occupation which he has been able to carry on quite successfully in Canada. He obtained his welding tickets through a local college and registered with the Canadian Welding Bureau, and has held three separate welding jobs in the Vancouver area. Manuel did not skirt around the challenges: he has been underpaid and faced discrimination because of his status as a newcomer and as a non-native speaker of English. Over time he has grown in the confidence to stand up for himself: “Right now, if I hear something like that of course I raise my hand and I say ‘no, you are wrong. So please, have a little respect.’”

Manuel is content with his current employment: “They say they are happy with me. Hopefully they will keep me for a long time because I’m happy with them, and of course I’m pretty sure they are happy with me. I’m a good worker.”

In our conversation Manuel described himself as a learner, teacher, a man of faith, and a fighter, in a positive “warrior” sense. As an experienced welder, Manuel has begun to mentor a young welder:

In the company I have a pretty young guy. He’s 19 years old... I try to teach him every single day... I mean, why not transfer your knowledge to him? It’s the best treasure in your life. Not money, not nothing, just when you transfer something to somebody, I think it’s the best experience. And when somebody has something to teach me, of course, I have to. I’m a learner, every single day.

To the question about what title he would give a book written about his experiences in Canada, Manuel paused briefly and replied “How God Change Our Life in Canada.” He went on to explain “Because we are Colombians, we are still Colombian. From the bottom to the top,
100%. But now my heart is probably half and half.” I asked him if perhaps his heart got bigger and he replied “Probably! You are right. Or, probably God gave us another extra heart. One is Colombian and the other is a Canadian, 100%. I’m pretty sure of that.”

Monica

Monica arrived in Canada with her husband and two step daughters in 2006. Since their arrival she and her husband have had two daughters of their own. Since coming to Canada Monica’s life has consisted almost entirely of work. She was able to study English for about six months at first, but due to a temporary illness and the need to work she was unable to continue. One of the reasons that Monica has had to work so much is that she and her husband recently sponsored her mother and sister and their families to come to Vancouver as privately sponsored refugees. As such, Monica and her husband were responsible not only for their own living expenses but all of the living expenses of her extended family that arrived.

In Colombia, Monica was a pharmacist and worked in a hospital. She reflected upon how everything changed for her upon coming to Vancouver: “My life makes me laugh because I have done things that I never thought I could do.” In Canada she has held a wide variety of jobs ranging from delivering newspapers, construction work in preparation for the 2010 Olympics, security guarding, and caring for horses at a local race track. Monica shared her dream of one day returning to school to be certified as a pharmacy technician, but at the time of the interview she couldn’t quite imagine how she would have time to do so.

Monica shared how her long hours at work limit her time with her daughters, but also allow her to provide for them:
The role of being a mother is beautiful, although I haven’t enjoyed it very much because I only work and - I believe that the daycare has played the role of mother more than I have. . . . I am always at work. I really miss my daughters. When I arrive they jump up and hug me and say ‘mommy, I missed you so much mommy.’ So, that is what motivates me to work more. I don’t want them to lack anything.

The stress of constant work was not something Monica tried to hide in our conversation. She used the metaphor of a storm to describe how her life had felt.

My husband said ‘this is going to pass, it’s only a storm and later comes the calm.’ And so I said ‘But every day in a storm! When will the calm come?’ And I think that there have to be both things for life to function. The storm and the calm. Because it can’t be calm all of the time.”

I asked her if she had had moments of calm yet, to which she replied “no, not many. . . You have to accept what comes. Be willing to accept whatever life brings.”

Despite the constant hard work, Monica had a gift of always finding the positive in her experiences, and stressed that she had learned a lot from each job. She explained that from her work with horses she had learned to be more confident in herself, to have a strong mentality and to be valiant.

I learned from them that I don’t have to be afraid. I learned how to get rid of the barrier of fear, to lose my fear of doing things. They taught me how to be decisive, to make my own decisions and not have doubts. . . Working with horses is an experience in being positive.
From her work in construction Monica told me she learned that it is never impossible to try new things:

It’s not a question of saying ‘I’m never going to do that,’ rather, you try. You have to try to do things even if you think you can’t. . . Maybe you’ll like it, maybe not. Or it could be a pot of gold! . . . Experiment with a new experience, and if it works, well you continue and if not, well, you decide to leave it.

Monica also commented on her learning from working in security:

In my work, with the people, the customers, the tenants, these are my teachers. My teachers have been my companions at work. . . It is as if I were taking an English class all day long, I learn a lot from just talking to one or two people.

She described how working as a security guard helped her become less timid:

In my work before I was alone with my colleagues and there was no more space for anyone other than me. If anyone came, I would blush - I really didn’t talk to people much. But my work and life here has taught me to be more social - here I have to talk to people even if I don’t want to.

When I asked Monica about what title she would like to give a book written about her experiences she thought a few moments and finally said “I don’t know what name I’d give to the book because there are many things, many, many things that I have done in this time and it could be a lot of details.” She went on to say that the book would have many themes, and that perhaps the most important one would be “como superar las barreras” - *how to overcome barriers*.

Having overcome many barriers herself, Monica told me that she now regularly reached
out to help new immigrants that were new on the job as security guards. “I see when new people arrive from different parts of the world and they also work with the (security) company, and so I help the new ones a lot because I know that when I arrived it was really difficult.”

Juan

Juan arrived in Canada in 2006 with his wife and two daughters. In Colombia his work revolved around health care. He was a nurse, community leader and volunteer with several emergency aid and disaster response organizations and worked primarily in rural areas and with indigenous communities. “I admire myself, how I was able to attend births, do everything that you can imagine with no supervision. . . it’s incredible.” Juan described himself as having a sense of helping others and working in health care as something that runs in his blood; this was something his father did and his eldest daughter aims to become a doctor. Since arriving in Canada he had not been able to return to his original line of work, but hoped to:

Here I haven’t been able to (work as a nurse) because they require English 10 or 12. . . but I hope, yes, that it won’t be very far off. In less than seven or eight years I hope to be working in a hospital or with some organization helping in the area of health.

In the meantime Juan has worked in number of jobs including at the race track and as a security guard. Juan described himself as a resourceful and independent person, someone who was willing to work in all kinds of jobs. He prided himself in always being able to find work and to never being too proud to take any kind of job. He described his philosophy to me:

I believe you have to be willing to do what it takes to survive and to live in peace. . . I go to a place and I find work. I go somewhere else and I find work. I don’t know. Am I just
lucky? I don’t know. I’ve never suffered for employment. Never! Even if it is two, three weeks - there is the money for rent, food, things. We can’t say that the situation here is difficult. It is difficult for people that come from an office and want to look for work in an office here.

When Juan described his different jobs to me, it was clear that he particularly enjoyed his work at the race track. “I’m one of those people that like to work outside. I am at the race track two or three days. They don’t pay much, but I enjoy it, I like it. I feel like I’m in Colombia.” Then he added with a mischievous laugh “I’m sure it’s because I breathe in the smell of muck. I breathe a smell that is like the countryside, like - I feel at home there.” He then contrasted his work with a security company:

When I go to work in security, I feel that that, now that is work. . . . I think that is the hardest job, being there eight hours, often twelve hours, looking after a door where nothing happens! . . . the pain in your legs is traumatizing. So yes, I see that that is truly work.

Juan was pleased to tell me that he had recently been featured in a local newspaper, for his work at the race track. He explained “I’ve never been in the newspaper before, and for me it was a big deal.” He enjoyed being recognized by people who read the story, and took pride in the work he did at the race track.

Juan was well-known by many of the other workers at the race track. He explained that some of the workers there were temporary workers or undocumented immigrants who sometimes found themselves in complicated situations, even enduring hunger. In response to their need,
Juan described how he would go to a pastor friend who runs a food bank and ask for extra food to give to his co-workers. “I put it in my car and I go and I give it out to everyone, saying ‘look, here’s some bread’ and they are all happy.” By frequently helping his fellow workers Juan became well known at the race track. “There in the race track every knows me. If you arrive there and ask ‘do you know Juan?’ they will answer ‘yes, of course. He’s over there.’”

To my question about a title for a book about his experiences in Canada Juan replied “wow! To tell the truth, I have tried - people have told me that I should write my story because it is a miracle to be here, where I am. . . The loss of family, subsisting in another country.” He pondered the question for a few seconds and then had an idea, which he shared with me in English even though we had been speaking in Spanish for the interview: “New Born From Colombia.” He went on to explain in detail why he would choose this title: “in Colombia you have a different life. . . and your life has been destroyed. And a country opens its doors and offers you help, offers you everything, offers you life, health. I want to leave everything behind. I don’t want to go back. Never. I want to be reborn. I want to be another person and I want, I want - yes, I would like to start a new life.”

Juan evaluated his achievements in Canada in quite positive terms:

I’ve had a fabulous adaptation process, I’m now Canadian, I have many possibilities. We have only received three months of help from welfare, and since then I haven’t had any kind of help from any entity. . . For me it has been very gratifying here. I can’t say that I have no complaints of any kind but yes, it has been very, very nice. My life has been good, for now, up until the present.
Clara

Clara arrived to Canada in 2004, with her husband and two children. The very first thing that Clara told me in our conversation was that she didn’t study English upon her arrival. She explained that this mostly had to do with a health concern her young daughter was dealing with, making it nearly impossible for Clara to leave her daughter in daycare and go to English class. At first she tried to go to class, but at most managed to attend for fifteen days. Clara and her husband knew that one of the two needed to study, and they decided that it would be her husband. She explained that what she does know of English she has learned by ear, and although we spoke in Spanish, she assured me that she could “defend herself” well in English now.

Vivacious and friendly, with a constant smile, frequent laughs and animated way of speaking, Clara often peppered her stories with sound effects.

Clara frequently mentioned having “good chemistry” with people. It was through her first landlord that Clara made her first contact for what would become a successful house cleaning business. Clara’s landlord told Clara about a friend who had just had a baby, and who needed someone to help with house cleaning. “‘Clara, she is looking for someone to clean her house.’ . . . I told her ‘but I don’t speak English.’ She said ‘Go for it.’” At first Clara had to communicate with her client through signs, “but,” she explained to me, “a person knows how to do housework.” A friendship soon formed between Clara and her first client, and even their children became friends. “Her children speak Spanish,” Clara told me with a smile, “they learned with me. And I speak a little bit of Punjabi.”

Her ability to quickly connect with people was evident through many stories. She shared how her landlord had left her children with Clara during a visit to India, even though they had
only known Clara for six months. She cared for their children - teaching them Spanish and introducing them to Colombian food. These first connections began to recommend Clara to others, and over time Clara established a steady clientele. She would bring her business cards along to her son’s soccer games and pass them out to the mothers in attendance. As well, she worked at a local hospital for some time.

It was during her time working at the local hospital that Clara began to form a group of close friends. She explained her and her husband’s experience with the group of friends:

We came with an open mind. . . Here there are a lot of people, Colombians, that don’t want to relate to anyone. . . to Colombians, to Latinos. . . We said ‘no, we can’t. We are alone here. We need to make friendships. We can’t forget where we come from. We come from Colombia, we are Colombians.’

The group grew to include seven families, all Colombian. Clara described how they enjoy getting together frequently for picnics in the park or at a beach, hikes, barbecues, birthday celebrations and more.

Clara was the only participant in this study to have family in Canada before her arrival - her parents and a brother also live in the Vancouver area. She mentioned that initially her family provided a great deal of orientation and support to them, introducing them to church and to their preferred shopping places around the city. Over time, however Clara branched out on her own and eventually became much more socially connected than the rest of her family in Vancouver, who prefer not to participate with her group of friends.
When I asked Clara what title she would like to give a book written about her experiences in Canada she replied “Para Todo Hay Tiempo” - *There is Time for Everything*. She explained:

There is time for working, there is time to smile, there is time to cry, there is time to fight, there is time to content yourself, there is time to be in harmony with everyone, to socialize, which is the most important, what we do most - spending time with others.

The title Clara chose reflects her charismatic nature and approach to life which included both work and socializing with friends, rather than staying isolated and bored. “We like relating to people. We have had very good chemistry with everyone,” she explained.

Clara also spoke about the value she placed on helping others. She recalled feeling overwhelmed when they first arrived and realized that they didn’t have to pay anyone for all of the household goods they received through the refugee program. “It was so beautiful that today if we have something to give, we give it, because we lived that experience.” Her work as a house cleaner placed her in an excellent position to help others. She described to me how her clients, who are quite wealthy, would frequently ask her if she knew someone who could use a piece of furniture.

We had a big garage. I would say to my husband ‘Take the truck and go get it! Someone is going to need it.’ And we have blessed many more people. For example if someone new comes to the church and they don’t have a table - ‘I have a table!’ My husband goes with his truck - *poom choom!* - here you go.
Near the end of the interview, I asked Clara how she would like to be described in the study she responded immediately, almost without a though “Cheerful! Happy!” She summed up her life philosophy for me:

When I get on the sky train I see people and I say to myself ‘they look so sour-faced, just sitting there’ - I am happy all the time. I am happy. People say to me ‘Clarita, how do you do it?’ I say ‘You have to put positive energy into everything you do, just because. . .’

The Journey in Canada

In this section I have gathered common elements from the stories and grouped them into themes which roughly represent the stages participants named as they described their journeys. Some of these themes became clear as participants described the chapters they would like to highlight should they write a book about their experiences. I uncovered a number of other similarities after a process of coding and analyzing the narratives, as described in the methodology section.

In the process of data analysis I recognized that participants had frequently used metaphors evoking the idea of a journey in describing their settlement process: getting around a tree blocking their path, overcoming obstacles in their way, riding a bike over varied terrain, having a clear path, starting from zero and moving forward. They had also described a series of stages through which they had gone, particularly when describing the chapters in their imaginary book. Drawing on the idea of a journey, and the stages that participants outlined, which corresponded closely across interviews, I organized the themes in sequence, with the intention of depicting a journey of settlement over time.
In the first theme, titled ‘the refugee experience’ I look at what participants told me about the essence of the refugee experience - what it meant to them to be a refugee both in terms of leaving their home country and arriving in Canada. I include the metaphor of being reborn which three participants used to describe the experience of starting over from zero and rebuilding their lives in Canada. The second theme ‘navigating around obstacles: finding the best way forward’ is the longest of the themes, containing five sub-themes which I describe in more detail at the beginning of the second theme. In short, the sub themes look at major hurdles, other obstacles on the settlement journey, key navigational strategies, encounters with institutions, and Colombian identity and family in Colombia. Returning now to the main themes, the third theme that emerged was that of ‘building community and helping others,’ related experiences that took place over time and signified a certain sense of belonging and connection.

**The refugee experience**

The significance of being a refugee came up in numerous interviews. This theme was set in two contexts: the context of the home country, Colombia, and the new country, Canada. In the first sub-theme, ‘the experience of being forcibly uprooted,’ I discuss how participants described the experience of becoming a refugee and being forced to leave one’s country. In the second sub-theme, ‘arriving to Canada as refugees’ I share what participants told me about what it was like to arrive as a refugee to Canada. The third sub-theme, ‘being born again - starting from zero’ explores metaphorical language used by three participants to describe the process of starting to re-establish their lives in Canada. This theme sets the scene for the following themes, and serves as a reminder that the type of settlement being discussed in the following pages is that of individuals who were forced to migrate as a result of political violence and personal need for
safety. The participants who commented on the experience of being a refugee offer valuable insight into the essence of the experience, and by extension, they speak to their identity as resilient people with initiative and agency who moved forward despite having lived these experiences.

The experience of being forcibly uprooted

Luis frequently paused to find words to describe the essence of becoming a refugee. Eventually, drawing from his history of working in human rights with campesinos (rural, small-scale farmers), he drew on an agricultural metaphor commonly used by displaced people from rural, agricultural zones in Colombia to explain the essence of becoming a refugee:

I don’t know if it is possible to capture in words what it means to be a refugee, really. It is something very profound and very difficult. It is a very large emptiness. . . . Displaced people use a word that expresses very well what it means - arrancados - to be uprooted. . . . To arrancar is to grab a plant and rip it out of the ground roots and all, it doesn’t matter if it is bruised - bruise it! - but pull it up with its roots from the ground. I think this is like the reality of a refugee. We are roughly ripped up from our land, and this obviously creates deep wounds - something that I believe is very difficult to express with words. And so obviously you arrive with very profound feelings of emptiness.

Juan described his experience of being a refugee in terms of his specific experience and commented on the effect that surviving violence and leaving everything behind had on him:

The majority of my relatives and the community leaders that I worked with were killed. Once I left they went on assassinating my companions . . . The people that I worked with
died one by one. I left there in shock. . . we left Colombia, leaving everything behind, because we had to leave everything behind. . . everything was abandoned there. Only desolation and sadness . . . You have a life there, in Colombia you have a different life, and it has been so brutally destroyed - your psychological and mental life and your self esteem and your life have been destroyed.

These powerful images of being ripped up from one’s place of belonging, of abandoning everything and seeing what you have created in life be destroyed convey a sense of deep loss and pain. The impact of these experiences were mentioned by both men. In discussing the impact, Luis highlighted the forced nature of the refugee experience:

In any case it is a situation that has a real impact on you. It is a total life change and it is something that you are forced to do. It’s not a “free decision” (gesturing with his hands to indicate quotation marks) that you take because you want to look for a better life. No, it is something that you do because you have to, because you have no other option. So of course it has an impact on you.

Juan alluded to the fact that difficult experiences did not necessarily end upon arrival to Canada, where a struggle to survive continues: “The experiences that came with you from Colombia and everything that has happened here is something that has an impact on a lot of people. The loss of family, subsistence in another country.”

The image that perhaps best fits this initial experience of refugeness is that of being forcibly uprooted - bruised in the process - against one’s own will. Juan and Luis described leaving family, dreams, careers, community, and life projects behind, abandoned. They stressed
that being forced to flee and seek refuge abroad under these circumstances influenced the
experience of migration and settlement.

*Initial experiences in Canada as refugees*

As Juan alluded to above by mentioning *subsistence* in a new country, most of the
participants commented on how very difficult their life in Canada was at first. The difficulties
were broad, ranging from financial to social and emotional. Initially, many participants spoke of
not feeling as though they belonged or as though they could possibly fit in or find their place in
Canada.

Manuel recalled thinking during the first week “no, I want to go to Colombia. This is not
my place, this is not my country, this is not my language, this is not my culture. This is not mine
- nothing here is mine.” Luis compared the refugee experience to feeling “in the air.” He
explained:

> You feel lost. You say to yourself ‘this isn’t my place, I don’t have a place..’ So with all
> of those feelings, you feel in the air. You don’t have a place. And in many cases what
> ends up happening is that even after years you don’t end up anywhere. This causes
> profound depressions. . . and you never rebuild your life.

Flor explained how difficult things were at the beginning for her and her family: “Very, very
hard, I believe that the first three years were only tears, suffering and worries.” Luis described
how even seemingly little things can have a profound impact at first:

> . . . that December it snowed, a lot of snow fell in January. . . our experience with the
> snow was quite hard and difficult. I think that is why I don’t like snow. . . . It was hard
because we had to walk and so we didn’t have much experience walking in the snow so we ended up falling down every so often. These are details that people might think are only tiny details - not very significant - but no! For a recently arrived refugee who is trying to find their place all of these little things become extremely important, huge.

Monica, who described feeling very sad at first, recalled the conversations she would have with her husband, who she described as very courageous: “I would say to him ‘no, I don’t want to be here.’ And he would say to me ‘it’s just for now, because we are just beginning.’”

The idea of just beginning and trying to find one’s place highlight the aim of the refugees as they looked toward their future in Canada. Initially they found themselves just beginning to work toward something, an idea which speaks to a starting point with an envisioned trajectory. Trying to find one’s place is an apt description of the goal or destination of such a trajectory or journey. Most of the participants described the starting point - the beginning - as a time of hardship, characterized by difficulties, worries, uncertainty, a sense of not-belonging and where seemingly small but significant details such as new weather caused daily problems as they sought to find their way forward.

**Being reborn - starting from zero**

Directly related to the idea of just beginning, the metaphors of being reborn, starting from zero, or rebuilding one’s life came up numerous times in the interviews. Three of the men in the study selected these metaphors as the titles for the imaginary books about their lives in Canada. Juan chose New Born from Colombia as his title. After describing the effects of the
refugee experience, of having his life in Colombia destroyed, Juan explained what it meant to him to be reborn:

> I want to leave all of that behind. I don’t want to go back. Never. I want to be reborn. I want to be another person and I want - yes, I would like to start a new life. That is to say, a new life, a new birth. Like I said you don’t have English, you don’t know how to speak, you don’t know how to walk, you go out - you get lost. . . . you don’t know how to read, you don’t know anything. You are a new born here.

Ivan, who chose *Being Reborn* as his title, made references to losses in the process of being reborn:

> I had my own business in systems. Everything was lost. But it had to return. . . when we touched down on Canadian soil I said to my wife ‘ here we will be reborn.’ We have to learn the language, we have to learn how to survive, we have to learn how to make friends, we have to return to being a family. These are the big things that happen. And so each of us started.

Luis, whose title was *Reconstructing a Life*, shared his thoughts on starting again, a process he had already gone through once during his year of asylum in Europe.

> At first it is very hard. . . . we had to start from zero, we had to start again, because that is the reality. You have to rebuild your life, after - well, now we weren’t so young. Starting again is not easy. Obviously a person can start as many times as needed.

The challenge of starting over as adults was echoed by Ivan:
Being reborn. Starting from zero, in every sense. The only thing is that we are 40 year old bodies, but totally empty because we don’t have the language, we don’t have friends, we don’t have money, we have absolutely nothing. . . . We are 40 year old bodies that are empty.

With these vivid metaphorical descriptions of starting from zero and being reborn, the men highlighted the reality of being at the beginning of a process of rebuilding their lives. While they provide ample evidence of the challenges implied by starting again, often in middle age, there are also hints of possibility. Luis, having started again once before, affirmed that it is possible to start again as many times as needed. In speaking about the idea of being born again Juan went on to describe what being reborn could imply in the long run: “You arrive here to be reborn, to start to study, to start to grow. . . to learn to volunteer, to volunteer more than you already do. . . and to give what you have to help people who arrive.” In this short statement Juan summed up concisely several major themes that emerged from stories shared by all of the participants, that of beginning from zero and eventually reaching a place where they were able to help others around them.

**Navigating around obstacles: finding the best way forward**

Although I chose to work within a framework of social navigation before interviewing any of my research participants, I found that the idea of navigation fit well with the stories that participants told me. In several instances participants made reference to the idea of having to navigate their way forward, finding the best route through a path that was often strewn with obstacles. Manuel described this as he recalled his family’s arrival to Vancouver: “We said ‘uh oh! Beautiful city’. . . it was like spring. . . ‘Okay, so here we are. Which way is the best way for
us?” Ivan drew upon a saying he had learned in rural Colombia, where he had worked with campesino communities, to describe what it was like to navigate around obstacles in settlement and work toward reaching his goals: “We have a saying in Colombia: ‘you have to go around the tree to reach your destination.’ (hay que darle la comba al palo para llegar a donde es).” He went on to explain the saying to me, gesturing with his hands: “if you want to arrive over there, and right here there is a tree in your way, well, you have to go around it.”

The image of navigating through a path strewn with trees or overgrown with bushes and the idea of finding the best way forward both point to the possibility of understanding settlement over time as a journey that involves thoughtful navigation. The journey has a starting point - starting from zero or a metaphorical new birth. While the journey may or may not have a final planned destination, most participants described it as having several stages and many goals or destinations along the way. The journeys described to me all had some significant obstacles, however, the participants all described themselves as possessing a number of personal qualities and creative navigational strategies that allowed them to find the best way forward, even when obstacles - like large trees - blocked their paths.

Navigation in a literal sense also came up in a few of the interviews. Manuel, for example, classified becoming familiar with the streets and the avenues as one of the first stages he had to go through here, along with learning English and finding work. Luis told a story about looking for his family’s first rental unit in Vancouver: “We didn’t get to see a lot because we didn’t know the city well. . . in one day we could spend all day and only visit two places. We would leave at 7:00 in the morning and return at 8:00 at night. . . But, at any rate we got to know a lot.” With a laugh he added “everything has a positive side, no?”
What follows are five sub-themes related to the idea of navigating around obstacles and finding the best way forward. In the first sub-theme, ‘major hurdles in the journey,’ I highlight stories about some major hurdles: English and finding work. In the second sub-theme, ‘other obstacles on the path,’ I discuss other kinds of obstacles and barriers that the participants reported having to find their way around: disinformation, financial challenges, relationships with other Colombians and Latinos, and the physical location of home. In the third sub-theme, ‘manoeuvring around relationships with institutions,’ I look at how participants reported encounters with institutions and the type of role that institutions such as settlement agencies, foodbanks and churches played - or didn’t - in the settlement journeys of participants. In the fourth sub-theme, ‘finding the path forward’ I describe the diverse navigational strategies that participants employed to find their own path forward, such as planning ahead and building networks. In the fifth and final sub-theme, ‘ties to Colombia,’ I relate what participants told me about how having family in Colombia affected their settlement journeys. All of these sub-themes relate to the idea of finding the best way forward and describe how participants managed to forge a path for themselves in Canada over time.

**Major hurdles**

Two of the women chose titles for their books that made reference to the idea of overcoming obstacles. Flor’s title was *Overcoming Obstacles* while Monica, who couldn’t think of a specific title, said that one of the key themes in her book would be *How to Overcome Barriers*. Both women went on to describe English and work as the first major obstacles or barriers to overcome. This was echoed, in turn, by all of the other participants. In the sections of this sub-theme I will discuss experiences regarding English as an obstacle and a variety of
factors related to finding work: welfare, the process of finding employment, differing perspectives on finding employment, and experiences in the workplace.

*English as the first obstacle*

Without fail each of the participants mentioned English as the first great obstacle. Manuel described English as a “huge, pretty wide wall” while Ivan and Monica described English as a barrier. Monica recalled “for me learning English was a gigantic barrier, it was the first barrier. . . . It was nearly impossible for me. I just cried and said ‘no, this isn’t for me. English wasn’t made for me and I am never going to learn it.’” Juan, using language that fit well with the idea of navigating new territory, referred to English as “the first frontier.” He chuckled as he recounted going to a store to look for a spoon, but having to rely on signs and gestures since they didn’t know how to say spoon: “no matter how many signs we made, we never found a spoon!” Flor also recalled the difficulties that not speaking English implied for daily life: “The first impact when we arrived was the lack of the language. We weren’t prepared for a drastic change. . . The only words we knew were good morning, the colours and the numbers. We couldn’t go to a restaurant because we didn’t know how to order food. We only pointed at what we wanted with our hands.”

Strategies for learning English ranged dramatically. Clara began her interview with me by stating “when we arrived, I didn’t study.” She explained that, at most, she had attended English classes for 15 days, but was unable to continue because of her daughter’s health. Instead, Clara launched into housecleaning work quite quickly, and explained that she has gone on to learn English mainly by ear. Although she said she could “defend herself” well in English, she reported recently experiencing a somewhat unsettling effect of not having been able to study
English: she didn’t pass the written Citizenship exam. To her relief, she was able to take a verbal exam with a judge instead, and did much better, passing the exam.

Monica was able to study English slightly more than Clara, but not a great deal more. Initially Monica and her husband struggled to find a school, since their first home was located in an outlying city some two hours away from the nearest English classes that they could find. (Classes in their city and another nearby were full). Monica, like Clara, reported learning most of her English on the street, on the bus, in stores, and on the job where, as a security guard, she was regularly required to communicate with customers and tenants.

Other participants reported spending a significantly longer time studying English, for some up to two years. For several participants it was important to have a strong foundation in English in order to enter into programs in local colleges that would open up doors to better work. Ivan remembered how he desperately wanted to find work in his field quickly, but was always told to study English first. As a result, he opted to take jobs during the day and study English at night. Manuel recalled his transition from English studies into the world of work as a “jump” from the classroom to the outside world of the street, the store and the workplace. He was encouraged to make the jump by a teacher who told him he could either keep taking higher levels of English or he could go out and face the street or a workplace, where people wouldn’t necessarily have the time to explain things slowly. She encouraged him to work on his listening by spending more time out of the classroom. Manuel recalled making the leap, and shortly thereafter starting his first job as a welder.

Luis could read some English, but couldn’t speak English upon arrival. His older son, however, had spent some time in an English speaking country previously, and could speak a little
English. Luis remembered how his son helped with communication at first. Other participants recalled how their children learned English much faster, and quickly began to function as interpreters in conversations with teachers or landlords.

At the time of our interviews, now seven to thirteen years after arrival, all of the study participants had overcome the English barrier. In all cases doing so had involved time, initiative, dedication and no small degree of courage, often throwing themselves into situations where they had to learn on the spot. Their stories reflected a number of approaches to learning English, and emphasized English as one of the key obstacles to overcome in order to find their way in their journey of settlement.

Welfare: the push to find work

Finding work figured as the second major obstacle faced by the participants. Ivan summed up the importance of finding work succinctly:

Look, believe me, when you find work other things start to change as well. Because one of the problems that breaks marriages is that there isn’t work and you are living on welfare. And the position - that one has in Colombia - is that you have gotten comfortable, that you are living off the government. But it is not like that. What I mean is that if you find work quickly, a job quickly, possibly that situation (marriage breakdown) won’t happen.

With this description Ivan highlighted the intense stress that joblessness can bring into the home, as well as the connection between welfare and finding work. Nearly all of the participants
in the study made reference to income assistance, which they referred to as ‘welfare.’ For many of them, when the initial year of financial support from the government’s Refugee Assistance Program (RAP) came to an end, the adjustment to a period of time on welfare was abrupt and stressful. Several participants noted the fact that the income they received on welfare was less than what they received from RAP and was insufficient to live on. Luis described how changes to the welfare system made it even more difficult for refugees:

Before there were less problems with welfare, but the Liberals here in British Columbia changed the law and they made it so that welfare couldn’t be permanent and it would end after two years and they started counting . . . to force you to find work, unless you really had a disability or some major justifications. What I mean is that they changed it and they made it more complicated, more humiliating.

In most cases participants opted to leave welfare and find any kind of work, while others endured the humiliation of receiving welfare for a period of time in order to facilitate an extended study period. Flor explained how her husband refused to accept welfare:

He wouldn’t accept welfare because he said, one of the things we said was that we didn’t come here to be a burden on the government, because we enjoy good health, above all my husband. It would have been good in the sense that he could have studied, but he didn’t want to. He said ‘I’m going to work and I’m not going to ask anything from the government.’

Juan had a similar experience, which he described to me:

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4 My use of the term ‘welfare’ in the following paragraphs and at any other point in this thesis reflects the meaning intended by the participants, that of government income assistance.
We tried to be on welfare. . . In reality, I didn’t like it because I believe that it is for people who have mental problems. Anyway, the help is very minimal, you can’t survive. . . They called to ask if I was looking for work, what was I doing? Obviously I didn’t like that they were investigating my life. So we renounced that help and I started to look for work.

Shortly thereafter a friend from his English class told Juan about the possibility of finding work at the Race Track, and he went to investigate. He began to work there a few days a week, and continued there up until the time of our interview. At the same time he was already studying for a test to work with a security company, where he was also accepted. He continued to work with the security company at the time of our interview, explaining that between jobs he is quite busy.

Although some participants did opt to receive social assistance for a period of time, they did so as a strategic move, allowing them to focus more intensely on English, as an investment toward improved opportunities for the future. For the most part, however, welfare was experienced as a strong push towards finding employment. Participants reported feeling humiliation, and many used a discourse of not wanting to be a burden on the government. Some understood welfare as something just for those with special problems, but not something for able bodied people such as themselves. In most cases welfare was yet another obstacle to be endured or avoided at all costs.

*The process of finding employment*

Nearly all of the participants began with what is commonly known as ‘survival jobs’ - jobs such as janitorial work, washing cars, delivering newspapers. Ivan recalled being asked time
and again for Canadian education and Canadian experience. Monica, too, recalled being asked for Canadian experience when she applied for a job with a security company:

The first thing they asked me was about my work experience in Canada. So I told them that I had no experience, nothing. They said ‘we need people with work experience.’ So I said ‘but if you give me a chance, I could do it.’ They then said ‘ok then, give it a try.’ And I tried and there I stayed. Now I’ve been working for them for four, five years. I really like it.

In the case of Clara, her first job was house cleaning. She described how she “launched herself” into this line of work quite early, with little command of English. She drew on her charismatic personality and network of contacts to build her clientele, and eventually went on to develop her own personal housecleaning business. I remember admiring the attractive business cards she had on her coffee table during our interview.

Over time, with improved English and in some cases certificates obtained at local colleges, many moved on to other jobs. Ivan, Luis and Flor, who all had pervious university degrees from Colombia, all opted for this path. Luis, formerly a human rights worker, was able to pursue training as an electronics technician while Ivan, a systems engineer, obtained a certificate in database administration. Both men now work in their respective fields. More details of how they achieved this will be discussed further on. It is worthy to note that both of their wives also went back to school and at the time of the interview both worked in the respective fields they chose to study in Canada.
Flor was at the point of applying for jobs as a legal assistant, for which she had taken a program at a local college, when her illness changed her course, preventing her from working. Her husband, who had also been a lawyer in Colombia and who planned to take his turn studying once Flor got a job had to continue working at what was originally going to be a temporary job as a carpenter and handy-man. This work was not without its struggles. Flor described how the cold would often affect him, causing the skin on his hands to crack when he had to work outdoors in the winter. She also hinted at a more internal kind of struggle:

It was a tremendously difficult change for him, and for me to see him in those conditions. But, well, the only thing I could do was ask God that hopefully he would adapt to that change. . . At first he arrived at home tired . . . but he didn’t say anything in order to not make us feel bad.

After five years her husband opened his own business as a handyman, but recently decided to look for steady work with another company again, as it was often difficult to find his own contracts. A few months before our interview he had been hired at a company that Flor had heard about through a contact at church, and he was happy with his new position. To help him secure an interview for the position, Flor was the one to make contact with the company, since she is the one who has a stronger command of English. She concluded “the great blessing, the great happiness that this has given me is that my husband, despite his previous profession, in this moment loves what he is doing. . . . he loves what he is doing with his hands.”

Manuel was the only participant who was able to find work in his previous field, that of welding, without having to take courses. He did, however, have to pass an exam to get his welding ticket through a local technological institute, the fees for which were reimbursed to him.
by the company which had hired him at the time. Since then he has kept his ticket current and reported being quite satisfied with his work as a welder.

**Contrasting priorities regarding working in Canada**

In my conversations, two contrasting priorities in relation to finding work in Canada stood out. Several participants explained their point of view, offering insights on what they perceived as the mistakes other refugees made when it came to finding work. Some emphasized the fact that those who prioritize finding work over learning English see the consequences later, while one participant in particular emphasized the value and dignity he saw in a willingness to do hard, physical labour from the start, with studying coming later as possible.

On one hand, some participants stressed the importance of taking the time initially to study something that would “open doors.” By this they referred to not only studying English, but taking a program that would certify them for a specific line of work. Luis explained: “This was something we learned - that a better way to insert yourself in society was to. . . study something here and have a paper from here, a certificate or a diploma from here. Because here they don’t recognize . . . the accreditation that you bring from home.” Being able to take the time to study meant certain sacrifices, including staying on welfare for a period of time. Luis explained that it was part of a strategic plan, and that it all came down to attitude:

. . . the attitudes that we - above all in the case of many Colombians, because of the way we are raised - for example we feel uncomfortable putting on second hand clothing. They won’t buy second hand clothes or go to a food bank - no! So these people suffer more. Because they have to overcome this ideological barrier, the ideas that they bring with
them, and eventually they realize that they have to go wear second hand things, because what else can they do? For us this wasn’t such a problem - despite what I said about dignity, which really bothered me, I felt really bad but still went to as many food banks as I could. Because for me the most important thing was to survive while giving myself enough time to learn English.

This strategy did pay off well for Luis, who, after two years of English study entered a local college, earned a diploma in telecommunications and in the meantime found part time work in an electronics laboratory at the college. A month after graduating he received a phone call from the head of the department, informing him that he was being recommended for a position with a local phone and internet service provider company. Within a month, after passing through a rigorous selection process, Luis began work with the company. At the time of our interview he had been working there for nine years and described his position as one that even by Canadian standards would be consider quite desirable.

Luis offered his thoughts on what can result from placing an emphasis on working rather than studying initially:

Some recently arrived people (refugees) go to work in construction or cleaning, or some even go to the countryside, where they don’t need the language. And as they begin to earn a little money they get used to it and later on, as the years pass, they realize that they haven’t progressed, they are stuck there and they finally realize that they neither speak the language well nor do they earn enough money in those jobs. Well, yes, initially it seemed really good but at the end of the story they realize that it is nothing, that it is very little.
A different perspective in terms of finding work was apparent in the narratives of other participants. This perspective emphasized a willingness to find employment as soon as possible in whatever kind of work was available, with less focus on specialized education. This perspective was most eloquently expressed by Juan:

There is a lot of work. What happens is that . . . there are many people who come from office jobs, and so, we think that we’ll arrive here and continue seated in an office. So, for these people life in Canada is disgusting, it’s terrible. . . . I have realized that the people who don’t have work here, the Latinos, it is because they don’t want to do the work. . . . I have taken people to work at the race track - lots of friends. I say ‘come on, there is work!’ They say ‘No! Come from Colombia to cover myself with horse shit? - No! What is wrong with you?! I’m not crazy!’ So I say ‘Ok, very well then, go.’ What I mean is that there is work, but if you are an office person and you want an office job, this isn’t going to work well for you here. We can’t say that the situation here is difficult. It is difficult, like I said, for people who come from an office and want to work in an office.

Juan also maintained that it was a matter of attitude: “You have to come psychologically prepared for what you are going to have to do in a third country. . . . I can’t arrive here and think that I’m going to put on my pretty white or blue uniform and show up at the hospital to work.”

Juan addressed the issue of low pay, describing how he managed:

There are people who say ‘no! How am I going to work for ten dollars, for twelve dollars? No! I’m not going to give myself away!’ because for them it’s a gift. But man, if you have a full time job at twelve dollars you are ok. You can live with that. . . . There are
weeks when I work fifty two hours a week, forty hours, forty eight hours. I’m exhausted by the end of the week. I wish I could say ‘no! I don’t want any more work!’ Right? But then the next week comes and there are no shifts, but I know that I worked last week and that I can use that to pay for the food, for whatever we need.

This approach had worked well for Juan, who held down two jobs and was pleased to tell me he had never suffered from a shortage of work and that he considered himself to have a “fabulous adaptation process.”

These contrasting priorities toward work intrigued me, since participants were quite emphatic about their respective priorities in terms of work and study. The choices they had made in terms of finding work reflected their opinions, and they were all pleased with their successes in regard to employment. Those who had chosen to study initially reported reaching professional positions more quickly. Even Juan, who felt strongly about being willing to work in “any” job, the goal of working one day in his profession, as a nurse, was still strong. He had set a timeline for himself of seven or eight years, and was also exploring other options that might pay better, as he did allude to the fact that money did go quite quickly. It is relevant to note that Juan had been in Canada for a significantly shorter period than Luis, and had contribute financially to sponsoring his wife’s family during that time, a factor that would have influenced his choices regarding work vs. studying as well. Although his priorities differed from those of Luis, Juan was still in the process of reaching his professional goals.
Employment experiences

Many participants reflected upon their experiences in interviews and on the job. Some reported blatant discrimination, while others mostly reported positive experiences. Several reported both good and bad experiences in terms of the way they were treated as immigrants and non-native speakers of English.

Manuel shared his analysis, based on his own experiences and reflections, of how xenophobia functions when Canadians see people from other cultures:

They are a little bit, you know, afraid when you come, and they see you and they say ‘uh oh, look at this guy, he came, and he doesn’t have much English and they are taking our places’ or whatever. And sometimes they feel like they are a little bit, like, you know - sometimes bullying, right? Sometimes using bad words.

He went on to explain that initially it was hard for him to respond, or even feel like he was entitled to respond: “. . . we say ‘ok, we are here in a new country, we don’t know nothing, so how can I say ‘eh, those guys are bullying me or they are pushing me’ right?’” He told me that now he didn’t have any trouble at all confronting discriminatory or unkind remarks and asking people to have respect “because now I can speak a little bit more English, right? But not nine years ago.”

Discrimination in the interview process also came up in the stories I heard. Ivan told me about an interview he had in his ninth year in Canada. The interview was for a professional position as a database administrator - a field for which he was highly qualified and experienced - yet he was only asked two questions and then told he would be contacted later. “I said to myself
‘that was really easy - I made it. Or - was it really easy or really strange?’ Later he received an e-mail from the company informing him that he didn’t fit with the culture of the organization. Recalling the interview he realized that it had been strange rather than easy: “They only asked two questions. There was no logic there. . . the questions were random, like, I don’t remember exactly but they had nothing to do with the position I had applied for - so it seemed to me like something was going on there.”

Flor shared a story about experiences of favouritism, and how this negatively affected her husband’s ability to find sufficient contracts for his handyman business, which he launched in their 5th year in Canada. “He started to look for contracts. . . It wasn’t bad but it wasn’t very good either, because working for yourself. . . having your own company as a non-Canadian, there is a lot of competition. You know that there is a lot of favouritism. You aren’t totally favoured. Looking for a contract is an odyssey!” By using the term ‘odyssey,’ Flor highlighted the interminable, constant struggle of finding contracts in a setting where her husband had to compete with other better connected, non-immigrant contractors.

These stories show that, even over time, the experience of discrimination did not necessarily improve or disappear. What changed, over time and in some circumstances, were the individual’s resources to respond to negative and discriminatory remarks.

Experiences on the job ranged, with some negative experiences and other positive. Monica reported feeling quite content with the treatment she received at the security company where she worked. “It’s a company that really helps immigrants. I think more than 40% of the employees are immigrants. . . They are a very marvellous company . . . They are also very tolerant. . . It is a company that opens its doors to all immigrants.”
Alternatively, Manuel shared a number of stories of discrimination in the work place. The first one had to do with his salary and a series of insulting raises:

When I started, of course I started with the basic salary, the basic wages, like a helper. And one day a person told me ‘no, that’s not right. I mean, you deserve more because you have a lot of experience.’ Even my co-workers at the company said ‘you have a lot of experience and you deserve a little bit more, much better.’ And when I talked to the manager I said ‘hey, you know I’m a family guy, I have a family, wife, kids, and I pay rent, I pay bills, I pay utilities. I need more money please.’ He said ‘no worries! I’ll give you more money.’ The next pay cheque they gave me twenty five cents extra. I mean, it’s money, but - not so much. I waited for another two months and I asked for more money. He said ‘ok, no worries.’ Another extra twenty five cents.”

When Manuel found a job that paid significantly better he quit this job, which had been his first welding job. He reported that his boss reacted angrily, but by then he was able to stand up for himself. He shared the story of their conversation:

When I quit the first company my boss was so mad with me. He said ‘we give you training, we give you...’ I told him ‘Sorry, you are wrong. You’re not teaching me nothing. I’m doing production for this company and I just wanted a little bit more money because I have a family. I started with the minimum wages here and it’s not fair. You are not teaching me nothing at all. You don’t have to teach me how I can do my job, I know how to do my job. Why are you telling me that you gave me training? No, you are wrong. Sorry. I quit.’ And he (the boss) said ‘Nooo! If you need a reference don’t call me back. I don’t want to see you anymore.’ So, I mean, that was probably another bad experience.
Manuel recalled how his co-workers responded: “. . .they all gave me their personal information, phone numbers - ‘If you need anything please call us. . . a letter, whatever you want.’ I said ‘thank you guys, thank you.’”

In his second welding job Manuel had what he described as a bad experience with his manager, who was impatient with Manuel’s command of English. “. . . he tried to explain me something I didn’t understand what he is saying, what he told me. And so many times I said ‘sorry, can you please explain again.’ And of course, he was so mad with me.” This situation, in which his supervisor was often angry or aggressive with Manuel, carried on for six months. Manuel described it as a “nightmare every single day.” It was so stressful that he dreaded hearing the alarm clock in the morning, and recalled how his wife would push him to get out of bed and go to work. Finally, Manuel decided to speak to the owner of the company, who was actually from Spain. Manuel recalled the conversation, which he was able to have in Spanish. He told the company owner: “please, what I need is a little bit more respect. That is the only thing I need. I don’t need somebody behind to yell at me all the time, to push me all the time, eight hours a day, five days a week.” After this conversation Manuel described his supervisor changing like “from the night to the day.” The company owner explained to Manuel that the supervisor was dealing with some personal issues, including being ill with cancer and having recently lost a loved one, and that Manuel should be patient with him. Manuel said he understood, but thought to himself “It’s not an excuse - everybody has problems, but it’s not an excuse - they must show me a little respect.” Thankfully, the situation with the supervisor improved and Manuel explained that they became friends, ending their relationship “on good terms” when the supervisor died from cancer about a year after Manuel started working for the company. Manuel went on to work for the
company for a full five years before having to take time off due to an injury that occurred at his workplace. He described how things improved during those five years, when a colleague who was also a good friend, took charge of the shop and taught him a lot about the policies and rules specific to the welding business in Canada.

After some time away from work while his injury healed, Manuel found a third welding job, where he continued to work at the time of the interview. He shared about a positive interview experience, where the hiring manager told him that he was just the person they were looking for based on his experience and the companies he had previously worked for. Manuel reassured them that they didn’t have to worry about anything if they hired them, telling them “when I start working here in this company I’m not going to give you 70%, 80%, always I’m going to give you 100%.” He was offered a job on the spot, asked for some time to think about it, called back to accept later on in the day, and started the next day. At the time of our interview he had been at that job for over two years, and said he was very happy there.

These experiences, ranging from discrimination to acceptance in the area of employment, reveal a problematic landscape of discrimination as one of the main barriers, in which participants often had to prove themselves as capable, competent and dedicated. Monica was the only one to relay only positive experiences at her job, and it may be notable that her job, in security, is with a company that makes a point of hiring immigrants. In the cases of the other participants, whether they were competing as a business owner facing favouritism or as highly qualified and experienced professionals, discrimination, often based on their status as immigrants and in particular their Spanish accent or the way they spoke English, was a common experience.
Even as a significant amount of time passed, they continued to be faced with discrimination (both Luis and Ivan referred to instances of discrimination as of nine years in Canada).

**Other obstacles on the path**

Along with what most participants classified as the major hurdles of English and work, a number of other obstacles came up in the participants’ stories about settlement over time in Canada. These included disinformation and lack of information, financial challenges, complexity in relationships with other Colombians, and the geographical location of their homes in the Greater Vancouver region. In the sections of this sub-theme I will address each of these topics.

**Disinformation and lack of information**

Disinformation was a word used by Ivan to describe faulty, inaccurate, or unreliable information which only served to confound refugees as they sought the best way forward. Ivan related a number of stories in which he had been given disinformation, including their very first day in Canada where immigration officials had sent them on to Victoria, an incorrect destination. Shortly thereafter he was told by staff at a settlement agency that services for his daughter, who has a disability, would not be available for a full year, a fact that he soon discovered to be entirely false. Trusting instead in a brochure he had been given in the Montreal Airport, Ivan decided to set out on his own to investigate, managing to find his way to the Ministry of Children and Families and, with a phrase written in English, explain his situation, since he couldn’t speak English. A Spanish-speaking worker soon emerged, and “four days later my daughter had services,” recalled Ivan. Reflecting on the presence of what he called *disinformation*, Ivan explained how it affected them at first:
That *disinformation* is something that - we have always said - we keep to ourselves as a family because we don’t know what information is correct and what information is incorrect, because we don’t know who is on our side and who isn’t on our side. Because we come from a situation where there are different armed groups, many armed groups, many situations, many problems, and we are in the middle of it all. And when we came from that situation, where you don’t know if you can trust in your neighbour or not, it is very difficult to start. When you arrive and the things go wrong, then you don’t start to trust (in people here). We said to ourselves ‘no, it is exactly the same.’ That was my thinking. ‘It is the same as in Colombia, we are in the same situation. Here we have to figure out how we are going to move forward, our objectives.’

These instances of disinformation and mistakes made by the very people who were supposed to help orient them to Canada led Ivan and his wife to the conclusion that they would have to look out for themselves and find things out for themselves. Coming from a context of armed conflict, where one could not be certain whether even people in official positions could be trusted, influenced their reaction to some major mistakes and pieces of disinformation they received early on in their time in Canada.

Along the lines of disinformation, a lack of information was also problematic, sometimes leading to missed opportunities or resources. Thinking back to his earlier years in Canada, Luis recalled:

Sometimes you lost opportunities because you didn’t have the information. Because you didn’t have the information you missed opportunities to get something good - or
subsidies, things like that. . . . at that time there were a lot of things, but they were
disperse and the information was not easy to come by.

Between a lack of information and unreliable information provided by settlement service
organizations, participants found themselves realizing that they would have to depend on
themselves and a network of other refugees and recent immigrants to gather the information they
needed. At this stage of their settlement process, settlement organizations would have been
expected to provide information about community resources, educational programs and so on.
Despite this fact, participants mainly reported relying on themselves and their informal networks
for information. As Ivan said, referring to his experience of receiving disinformation regarding
services for his daughter, “one of the big lessons we took from that experience was that, from
that moment forward, we started asking questions. ‘Why this? Why that?’ And that has really
helped us advance.” More will be said on these navigational strategies in the upcoming section
on networking and information gathering.

*Financial challenges*

Nearly all of the participants cited facing financial challenges, both past and present. All
of the participants started out with government income assistance through the Refugee
Assistance Program, which was slightly more than income assistance. Most transferred on to
income assistance, but, as discussed above, few received income assistance long. Even when
they were receiving these income supports, it wasn’t enough, and participants noted having to go
to food banks and to take odd jobs to supplement the government support. However, the financial
difficulties did not occur only at the beginning, but often were ongoing or periodic. Participants
reported a variety of ways of coping with financially difficult moments, ranging from having to
pay their rent in instalments, receiving support from local churches, asking family in Colombia for temporary assistance, or taking out a loan. Participants spoke about how it felt to be in a position of receiving assistance when in need, and one shared a story of being taken advantage of at a time of need.

Flor recalled a time when her husband was struggling to find contracts for his business:

There was a time when there wasn’t work. In those times, while he looked for work, there was no other income for us. It was very complicated, our time here. There were times where we stopped paying for two, three months. There were months where I had to ask for help from my family. There were times when the church community helped us. There were really critical moments.

Manuel described the year he was injured and received equivalent of 70% of his prior wages via the Workers’ Compensation Board. “We had a pretty bad situation. Not enough money for the rent, for food. I had to pay (the rent) in two amounts while waiting for my pay cheque from WBC. It was a very bad experience for one year.”

Both of the above scenarios took place well after the participants’ arrivals in Canada - Flor’s husband had already established his own business and Manuel was already in his second job. These were not just initial struggles, but ones that occurred after some time.

Ivan remembered how it felt to receive food baskets from a group of Catholic Sisters, at what would have been an early point in his settlement:

For us it was huge, but it hurt me, to not be able to do anything more. But it was very, very beautiful that they would give you your food basket. Even though I’m not one of the
people who beg for handouts I felt that way. But they (the Sisters) didn’t do it as though they were giving handouts - no. But I felt that way.

Recalling a more recent time, having been laid off after working for five years in a good job in computer systems, Ivan talked about having to “do anything, because my family had to eat.” This period, which he described as a time of “suffering” lasted for over a year. “There are ups and downs” Ivan explained, indicating that the settlement journey is not necessarily a smooth, upward trajectory. Rather, to use a nautical metaphor (of my own), the settlement journey consists of times of relative smooth sailing, when life and finances seems to have reached a certain stability, and other times of rough seas, when jobs are lost and a person finds themself struggling to find work and forced to take any job that comes up in order to stay afloat.

Luis told me that one of the most significant moments during his settlement was when, upon entering college, he was granted a student loan and was able to leave welfare. Clapping his hands, as though washing them of something unwanted, Luis explained the significance of that day:

The day that I left welfare, which was after being here for two years, was a very significant day for me. Because it had really affected my dignity, I’m no good at living off the government, no, no, no, it was unbearable for us. . . . The total loan amount that I was assigned for my study period was higher than what we were receiving from welfare. So, of course, for us it was a really beautiful thing, a very important day, to not have to go back to welfare. I stopped going to the food banks.
The loan would see Luis through his study period, during which he and his wife supplemented their income with other jobs such as a part time job at a laboratory at the college where Luis studied. Later on, once he graduated and became employed, his wife took her turn at studying, taking out another student loan. Their strategy of taking out loans did leave them with significant debt, something Luis explained they were still dealing with at the time of our interview. The loans, however, also allowed them to study and find satisfying and well-paying jobs or, in Luis’ wife’s case, to start her own business, which, Luis admitted, was not totally “buoyant” yet.

In some cases participants also faced pressure to help their families back in Colombia. Juan described how he had been the “right hand” of his family in Colombia:

I was the one who always organized things, who helped them. When I arrived here everything was difficult because the money - even though you earn in dollars, here you spend as much as you earn. If I were to have an income in dollars in Colombia I could have it all and help everyone in Colombia! But it’s very different, it is very difficult.

Juan also shared a story about being taken advantage of by a potential landlady at a time when money was already very scarce. They had to leave the home where they were living and had applied for BC Housing but hadn’t heard any news, so they decided to try to rent another house. Before they moved in they found out that a unit through BC Housing had opened up for them, so then went back to the owner of the home to tell her that they wouldn’t be taking her house. Juan described what happened next:
She robbed the money from us - five hundred dollars. She said ‘no, you already paid me, I am not going to lose my time with you.’ She robbed us of the five hundred dollars.

People told us that she couldn’t do that, but never, never - so, we lost it.

Not knowing how to respond or where to find help, Juan felt that he had no other option than to move along, and lost his deposit.

Monica’s story revealed a unique situation that implied a huge financial burden for her and her husband: with the assistance of a local organization, Monica sponsored six members of her family from Colombia to immigrate to Canada as privately sponsored refugees. They had arrived approximately a year before our interview took place. Monica explained that as their sponsor she had to be financially responsible for them, covering the cost of their rent, food, transportation and any other need.

While I was working in preparation for the Olympics and everything I did before was to help support them when they arrived . . . the security company gave us extra hours of work . . . I saved my money to support them when they arrived. And I was really happy because it had been a long time since I had seen them and so it didn’t matter how much I would have to save to see them again.

Sponsoring her family likely had an impact on more than just her and her husband’s financial situation. Knowing that they would be financially responsible for six people would have also influenced their choices around working versus taking time to pursue English classes or taking courses to obtain Canadian credentials. Taking time to study full time, as some other participants had done, would not likely have been a possible consideration for Monica and her
husband. That Monica and her husband had managed to find a way to cover their own expenses
and those of an extra six people was truly remarkable to me, and showed significant
resourcefulness and determination of spirit.

Juan and Monica, who work as security guards and at the Race Track, both commented
on the realities of living with relatively low incomes, and their respective hopes and dreams.

When your T4 arrives and you look at it and ask yourself . . . ‘Where is the money?!’ And we go to look, and we can’t figure it out. It turns into smoke. The rent, the bills, the internet . . . that’s where the money goes . . . One day we’ll have the opportunity to have some more studies and be able to earn a bit more. Because the amount that I earn on a part time or full time shift you can make in less than two hours when you have studies. . .
(Juan)

I’d like to take some holidays, to go somewhere, because it’s a lot of work but little money. And everything is really expensive. But at least there is tranquility, which is what a person most wants. It doesn’t matter what you have to pay, there is tranquility. (Monica)

Monica used the Spanish word tranquilidad, which I have translated as ‘tranquility.’ Often in Spanish, tranquilidad refers to an absence of anxiety and stress - not having to worry that something harmful could happen to you. In using this term Monica was describing a sense of relief from fear and threat to personal safety. The feeling of tranquility Monica sensed in Canada was related to the socio-political context; the absence of armed conflict in Canada allowed her to feel a sense of inner calm or that she did not have in Colombia.
Financial challenges marked the settlement journeys of all of the study participants. The stories they told about experiences in surviving without enough money shed light on different aspects of the obstacle of finances, from its causes to the survival strategies used by participants. Financial struggles essentially started at the beginning, with low levels of income support from the government refugee sponsorship program, even lower levels of support on welfare, and then the reality of low-paying jobs, periods without work, the desire to help family at home, extra expenses, or worse, being taken advantage of financially. To find their way through this difficult obstacle participants reported having to access food banks, receive assistance from churches, ask family in Colombia for money, and accept work in low paying jobs, either for the short or long term. The strategy of taking a loan worked well for one participant, but the long term reality of student debt remains very real for him. There was no ‘perfect path’ forward out of financial difficulties, and while financial difficulties often seemed the most acute at the beginning, they could occur at any time. What I did notice was that at the time of the interview each participant indicated that their financial situation was adequate, liveable at the least. Some aim for greater stability, but none presented themselves in a desperate or destitute situation, by any means.

*Complexity in relationships with other Colombians and Latinos*

Another obstacle that complicated the settlement journey of some participants was that of complexity and ambiguity of feelings regarding relationships with other Colombians and Latinos. While some participants described feelings of distrust toward other Colombians, others described friendships and positive connections with other Colombians. I will comment further on the friendships in an upcoming section.
The complexities and ambiguities in feelings toward relationships with other Colombians and Latinos was a significant ‘bump in the road’ for several participants. In his first year in Canada Ivan reported trying to assist other recently arrived Colombian refugees, having gathered a lot of information about local resources and organizations that he wished to share. In retrospect, he evaluated his attempt to get involved as “a mistake” and told me what he learned through the experience.

Colombians always expect something in return. If (a Colombian) gives another (Colombian) something he says ‘there is something behind this.’ It turns out I was doing it honestly, I said ‘look, here there is this, there is this service, there’s the other.’ So they started to say ‘Ok, who is this guy? He’s a paramilitary, a guerrilla, a drug dealer, a who-knows-what.’ When I started to hear everything they were saying I said ‘you know what, tranquilo, I’ll just stay quiet.’ That was as far as my help to the Colombian community went. It ended. Why? Because the same people complicate things.

Ivan related an event that sealed his belief that he would have to be very careful in choosing which Colombians he could personally trust. Some years ago he had hosted a barbecue, during which a guest revealed some information that stunned Ivan and confirmed the need to be selective in who he associated with. Ivan recounted that after a couple shots (of alcohol) a Colombian man who was married to a friend of Ivan’s wife told Ivan that he was from the Colombian army and that he had been stationed here, via the embassy, to investigate Colombian refugees in Canada. Ivan recalled the shock he felt, and telling himself “uh oh! . . . I have to stay quiet and see who my neighbour is, who are the Colombians with whom I can get involved.”
Juan too, spoke of being wary of getting closely involved with other Colombians or Latinos. He told me how a Latino man tried to abuse one of his daughters, attempting to embrace her. “Because of that, I don’t have friends in the Latino community. My daughter, she had never been embraced like that, ever! I told that man that I never wanted to see him again in my life.” Although this was just a single instance, it was enough to make Juan quite wary. He also mentioned his history of having “problems” as a result of getting involved in a Latino group during a one-year asylum period in a different country, prior to coming to Canada, as something that made him wary of getting too closely involved with other Latinos here.

These stories show the complexity of relationships and the ambiguity of feelings regarding relationships with other Colombians and Latinos experienced by some participants. Both Ivan and Juan had been quite socially active in Colombia, and being unable or unwilling to connect with other Colombians or Latinos was a significant change for both of them. While both of these participants also spoke of having close, supportive and trusting relationships with a select group of other Colombians, (a theme which will be addressed later), they had also experienced complicated, negative interchanges that marked their settlement experience, rising as unexpected obstacles in their path.

*Location of home*

The location of home was an obstacle in the path of settlement noted by several participants, especially those whose first home in Canada was quite far away from the centre of Vancouver. In most cases participants found their first home with the help of the settlement agency that had the government contract for settling Government Assisted Refugees. While some participants’ first homes were located in Vancouver proper, others reported that their first homes
were located in suburb cities, some distance from the city of Vancouver itself. While the cities they lived in are still considered part of Greater Vancouver, in reality it can take several hours on public transportation to travel into Vancouver, depending on how close one lives to public transit and the frequency of the service. Luis explained why being close to Vancouver was so relevant for recently arrived refugees:

In general it is better initially for refugees to be in Vancouver, close to Vancouver, because that is where everything happens and everything is close. If you live farther away, you don’t have a car, you don’t know the city, you don’t speak the language and if you live really far away it’s a tremendous problem. For us the fact that we initially lived near New Westminster, in a zone where the buses only came every half an hour - if you missed the bus you were in trouble. All the services, the majority of them are concentrated in Vancouver. Including the Mennonites - we went there a lot. You can imagine it felt like an eternity! It was very difficult and problematic for us.

Luis offered another reason why living in Vancouver was also particularly good for Latino refugees: “Vancouver and East Vancouver is much more multicultural and friendly for a person who isn’t White, who doesn’t speak English or whose English has a strong accent. . . . It’s a more friendly place for you, really.”

After about a year and a half Luis and his family determined that they had to move closer to Vancouver, and with the help of a friend were able to find a new home. Around that time Luis also began college, got his student loan and left welfare. “All of these are factors that were very important for us. It seemed like our life began to change a bit. We began to feel a little better.”
Juan explained what it was like to live in Delta as recently arrived refugees:

When we arrived they (the settlement agency) sent us to live in Delta, they found us a place to live there. There was no communication, no hospital, there was nothing. I didn’t find work there and we couldn’t find a place to study there. We had to go to New Westminster, but there was no space in the classes so we found English classes in a college in Vancouver. So we came and we went. . . We didn’t know anything about money, so we paid nine hundred and fifty dollars a month for a basement with two bedrooms. . . later we learned about the Mennonite church and it took us almost two hours just to get there. . . Later we got talking to other people and began to make friendships. We came to Vancouver to look for a place to rent.

Luis and Juan both shared stories of how starting out in homes that were far away from organizations that offered support to refugees made their initial experiences of settlement more difficult. They had to learn to navigate vast expanses of territory just to reach settlement services, such as a food bank and English classes at a Mennonite church. Settlement agencies were even further away. Participants felt disconnected from the centre of activity and information “where everything happens,” as Luis put it. New to the country, Juan found himself paying high rent for a small suite that was extremely far away from essential services. The distance from key resources functioned as an obstacle in the path for these participants, keeping them from accessing services and creating a sense of isolation from potential supports. For both men and their families, making the move back to Vancouver took time - first they needed to find their bearings and build networks that could help them find a place on their own. In both cases, the
move was pivotal in improving their lives. Luis considered the move to have been one of the key factors in helping him and his family start to feel better about their lives in Canada.

**Manoeuvring through relationships with institutions**

In their narratives participants described their relationships and encounters with settlement agencies, food banks, and churches. In many cases, though not all, these encounters were ones of frustration or even humiliation and resulted in limited assistance. In the sections of this sub-theme I will examine what participants told me about their interactions with each of the three institutions.

**Settlement agencies**

Various levels of engagement with settlement agencies were reported by participants. All of the participants had initial contact with one major settlement agency that held the government contract for the Refugee Assistance Program. After this initial contact some had neither sought nor received any further services while others had. Some participants reported that they were initially unclear about the different services that settlement services offered newcomers.

Thinking back to his initial contact with the settlement agency, now around twelve years ago, Luis revealed disappointment with the service he received:

They were supposed to help us look for a house, but really the help they gave us was very little in that regard. So we got ahold of a map of the city, bus routes, and went out to look for a place to live on our own. . . . It’s one of the things we’ve talked about a lot. The settlement agency has staff that are supposedly there to help new refugees - they should be more prepared, and have information about resources and give it to the refugees. In
that moment, the staff there were, from our point of view, of very bad quality. So we had to find out information from other refugees: ‘hey, how are you, look - over there in Salvation Army they are giving this out, go on such and such a day.’

Monica told me that she had taken a class for immigrant women through a settlement agency. Through the class she received support to prepare for the test she would have to take to qualify to work for the security company:

There was a teacher who asked everyone if we had any project for our lives, and that we should bring it and she would help us. So I said I wanted to go into security. . . she asked me if I had the material . . . and she helped me a lot and explained everything in the book. It helped a lot. . . After that I took the test and passed it and got my security license.

“I came to know about resources such as employment programs offered through settlement organizations only after already being here for three years,” Ivan told me. He remembered his initial conceptions of several major settlement agencies:

As far as I was concerned MOSAIC was for doing translations. I had a completely different concept of MOSAIC. I thought that Immigrant Service Society was only focused on helping you find housing, school and giving some general information. I didn’t know about their employment programs.

Several years later Ivan did participate in an employment program through the Immigrant Service Society which he said helped him refine his resume, cover letter and job search. He also reported returning relatively recently to a settlement agency during a period of unemployment, but found that the assistance they offered did not go far enough:
They told me I had to make various resumes. I said ‘look, here are ten different resumes. What do you need?’ They replied ‘Oh, then you are ok.’ I said ‘Yes’ What I need is not to make more resumes, I already know how to do that. I need contacts. And that is another thing that is important for people - contacts to be able to start working. There are some good programs that didn’t accept me in 2010 because I had been here so long and they are only for new immigrants.

Ivan went on to describe a program he had heard of in a neighbouring city that helped new immigrants with particular professions or backgrounds make connections with local businesses. He emphasized how important it would be to make this kind of program available in Vancouver. He described how it functioned: “They recruit businesses and ask ‘What kind of people do you need. We will bring you new immigrants with skills.’ It would be like a liaison with businesses - it could be done by a social worker. . .” I could see the database administrator in Ivan as he continued: “What I mean is what is needed is two databases, one with businesses and their needs and the other with new immigrants, refugees, and their abilities. That way you could make contact between the two. It would really help both sides.” Ivan described this approach as “breaking barriers at a high level.” That is, the responsibility to remove obstacles blocking the path of professional immigrants would lie in the hands of those in power - business owners, policy makers - those who have the ability to create obstacles for immigrants or remove them, making access to employment less fraught with barriers for professionally trained refugees and immigrants.

Juan shared his thoughts regarding settlement agencies with me, revealing an element of disillusion with the services they offered and how the settlement system operated in general. He
told me about a time that he had asked at a settlement agency what would happen if he didn’t have any documents to prove his immigration status, and drew a connection to his frustrations with settlement services in general:

I asked them ‘what if I didn’t have documents?’ They said ‘you would be losing your time here, you’d have to leave.’ So, that seemed outrageous to me. It isn’t fair because many people are looking for different kinds of help, but if you don’t have documents, then they can’t help you. But why is it that they need your documents? Because they charge the government. From the money from the government, which is for the immigrants, they take the majority of that money. That is what I don’t agree with. . . . I took some friends that I was trying to help to MOSAIC and they only gave them a bus ticket but ‘sign! Sign here! We need your signature on this document! Sign here!’ But what did they give them? - Nothing! A bus ticket.

As far as Juan was concerned, settlement service organizations siphoned off government funds meant for refugees and immigrants. He explained how he saw it:

The assistance that should be given is being diverted. . . . maybe there is a lot of administrative costs in the different organizations in order to pay the staff, but in reality, us, the immigrants, don’t receive all the assistance . . . If you need something and you go to a immigrant settlement agency, they will help you, but you have to sign, you have to give your documents, your information, so that they can charge the government. And they take advantage of the money that should belong to the immigrant, it stays in their hands.
When I asked Juan if his experiences with settlement organizations had been frustrating, he replied that they had not been of help at all, providing a new example:

It’s not helpful. When we arrived they told us that they were going to have a person that would help us, guide us. We signed a document. We never got anyone. Finally they called us and gave us a Mexican woman. That was at about four or five months. The lady - we knew more than she did! So we said ‘no, well, thank you but we already know that.’

In Juan’s opinion it was much more effective to go directly to the government, through programs such as social assistance. “Since social assistance comes directly from the government, you get the complete amount, there aren’t any problems. But if the assistance goes through anyone else’s hands, believe me that the amount that is supposed to arrive won’t get there.”

The different perspectives offered by participants on settlement service organizations and their experiences therein shed light on the role the organizations played in the process of navigating settlement. I was surprised to discover a relatively low level of engagement with settlement agencies and, in some cases, a confusion or unawareness regarding types of services available or frustration with the level of support received. Several participants found workshops or programs offered by settlement agencies to be of assistance in navigating obstacles such as finding employment or housing. Others indicated no contact with settlement agencies, while others referred to settlement agencies more in terms of nuisances or obstacles in themselves, demanding signatures and documents in return for poor quality services or limited assistance.
Food banks

Many of the participants referenced initially needing to draw on the support of food banks, since the government support they received was not enough to live off of. “The government subsidy wasn’t sufficient. You had to help yourself by going to the food bank in order to complement the government support,” explained Luis.

Participants found food banks to serve both as an asset and as an obstacle in terms of navigating the early stages of settlement. Food banks helped participants navigate the obstacle of scarce resources. At the same time, the system of food banks was often confounding itself, with numerous food banks operated by organizations and churches, some of which recipients were not supposed to benefit from at the same time, others of which had no such restrictions. One participant recalled a time when staff at one food bank realized he had been receiving food from another one, and then refused to give him anything. Food banks also presented another obstacle - that of humiliation. Dignity and basic human respect - and the lack thereof - was closely tied to the experience of being on welfare and going to food banks. Luis offered some insight to what it was like to be a professional suddenly in a position of receiving assistance from a food bank or social assistance (welfare):

A person is there not because you are dying of hunger and so you are looking for something to eat, because you are a beggar. No! It is because of another completely different reality. Many of us were professional, we even had better standards of living than what we did initially here, a better quality of life. Some people had properties and other things. It is a different situation, but often times the people who work in the food bank or the government social workers or the people at welfare think that because you are
there asking for help you get a hand out, and therefore you are poor devil. Really? Or is it that you are a person without dignity? At least for me in particular the dignity, like that - no, it didn’t work . . . that was a very difficult time from an emotional point of view.

Luis emphasized how going to food banks affected his dignity, struggling to find the right word to describe how the workers at the food banks treated recipients:

They treat you as though you were - they abuse your dignity . . . they treat you as if you were - I can’t find the right word . . . I felt really bad when I went to those food banks and there were people yelling, volunteers yelling at each other . . . No one is going to yell at me - no! One time someone said something like that to me and I said ‘do me a favour and show me some respect.’ I saw people treating people really badly, and that really affected me. I said ‘no, one’s dignity is greatly affected.’ But, well, necessity is stronger than dignity in the end, no?

For many of the participants, going to food banks was a humiliating experience, one that took determination and inner strength to endure. Food banks presented a paradox, serving both as an important source of support and an obstacle, requiring participants to go through humiliation in the process of accessing assistance. Participants with professional backgrounds were particularly sensitive to being lumped together with other food bank recipients who were there under different circumstances, and sensed that they, too, were seen as beggars or people without dignity.
Churches

Participants presented two very different kinds of experiences with churches in Canada. For some, churches were an essential part of building community, receiving orientation, finding a sense of belonging, and creating important networks. One participant, however, found the presence of churches, and in particular the actions of churches, to be a major obstacle.

Flor described the sense of peace she and her husband felt when they arrived at a particular church, where they still attend. After the service they spoke with the pastor, who was fluent in Spanish. “What a beautiful thing to hear someone speak your own language when you don’t know the other language,” recalled Flor, with a laugh. She went on to describe the role that the church has played in their lives in Canada:

From there we started, we introduced ourselves in the church. We got to know really lovely people. Later they asked if anyone in the church wanted to prepare to be baptized. So we decided to get baptized, since we felt really good, supported spiritually and in prayer, in all aspects . . . we continue with the church . . . For us it is really important to be surrounded by good people from the church community, to dialogue with people. To be in a place where you are heard.

Manuel recalled how the Spanish speaking church that his in-laws attended gave them a huge welcome on their first Sunday. “We are still there,” he told me, and went on to explain the positive benefits of belonging to a church community:

It’s a huge community because there are people from many countries there . . . . It’s a pretty good experience, actually, when we share with other people . . . we speak the same
language, but we have so many different things, even the food. But it’s good . . . when you share your life with other people you learn from them. What I say is that people don’t need anything from us, we need the people for us, right?

Flor and Manuel emphasized the rewards of belonging to a supportive community where they could be heard and where they could belong and learn from others. For them, church was a part of daily life and a source of friendships. As mentioned earlier, Manuel and Flor had both found work through church friends (in Flor’s case it was her husband who found work). These stories show how for some participants, church helped with the process of navigating settlement by being a place of resources, support and offering a sense of community.

Luis offered a contrasting encounter with church, which he stressed was a very significant experience in his settlement journey. This experience took place very early on, in their first days in Canada, while Luis and his family were still staying at the reception apartments for refugees at a local settlement agency. Luis described what happened:

At the time there were different churches who paid close attention to newcomers who arrived at the Welcome House . . . They were constantly watching for new arrivals and they would come to offer help and so on . . . There was one in particular, a man of Mexican origin who spoke Spanish well and he was offering us things. Once he offered . . . to take us to look for a house. So we accepted, but not more, just one time . . . But they offered to help us with the move, once we had found a place to live . . . So, yes, since a relationship had been established there. Obviously the churches do that because, well, nothing in life is free - they hope that in return you will at least attend their celebrations, their religious services. From the beginning I talked to them seriously and I
said ‘we don’t believe in that, we have a lot of respect, we value it. So, don’t expect anything from us, absolutely nothing.’ They said ‘ok.’

In the end, after receiving the help from church and after much insistence from the church, Luis decided to attend a service with his eldest son. “We only went to one . . . we felt like we had to go - and there in the service yes we felt pressure. So we said ‘no, no, no.’ And we left and we never saw them again. We cut off contact.”

For Luis, it was clear what the church was doing: they were taking advantage of recently arrived refugees to boost their numbers. He didn’t mince his words as he explained his analysis:

Obviously you (as a refugee) arrive with a profound sense of emptiness. So whatever help you can have is valued, it’s really valued. . . . I think that the churches are there because they know that the people are going to value, appreciate it a lot, and so they are going to get more faithful (people) for their parish. And so, at the end of the story it’s a business, no? It’s a business. . . . It is like they are there, looking out for who they can fish. Fishing for souls, I’d say, fishing for souls in difficult situations, in a great turbulence where the fish are abundant, ready to be easily caught.

This early experience did not prevent Luis from connecting with helpful settlement services offered by other churches, and, like several other participants, he did speak positively of experiences with the English classes and food bank run by a local Mennonite church.

I was struck by the contrasts in the stories and perspectives that participants offered about their experiences with church in Canada. Most participants referenced certain churches as places to find resources or support, as some local churches provided English classes or had food banks
for refugees. For some, church was more than that: it was a central, positive presence in their lives, assisting in many aspects of navigating the best way forward as they settled into life in Canada. For Luis, however, an early experience with a church that seemed to be blatantly “fishing for souls” developed into a challenging relationship around which to manoeuvre as a recently arrived and emotionally vulnerable refugee. In the end, while the church did provide useful assistance to Luis, it also added a great deal of unnecessary stress and pressure to their lives at a time when they were still getting their bearings.

**Key navigational strategies**

Participants revealed a range of navigational strategies that they employed in order to successfully find their way forward over time as they settled in Canada. Some of these key strategies included having a plan, setting goals, finding things out on their own, building networks, and “making friends, not enemies.” I will discuss these strategies in the following sections of this sub-theme. Employing the following strategies, participants were able to navigate their way through the metaphorical forest on the terrain of settlement.

While each of these strategies will be covered in further detail, I begin with Ivan’s story of gaining entrance to the certificate program in database administration at a local college, which demonstrates numerous of these strategies. It was through a fellow Latino resident at his housing co-op that he first heard about a Guatemalan career counsellor at the college. The next day he went to the college, and managed to talk to the counsellor despite not having an appointment. Based on the advice he received, he registered for two courses in systems engineering, with the aim of eventually applying to get into the certificate program. He explained how he did in the two initial courses:
I got 96% and 98%. After I got those marks - boom! - I was accepted to the certificate program in database administration. They couldn’t say that I didn’t understand, even though my English was still intermediate at that time. . . . We have a saying in Colombia: *hay que darle la comba al palo para llegar a donde es.*

The saying that Ivan shared was the saying that I explained earlier: If there is a tree in your way, you have to find a way around it in order to arrive at your destination. The expression speaks to finding the manner or way to achieve something. What follows is a description of the different ways that participants found their own ways around obstacles in their path.

*Planning ahead and having goals*

Having a plan and a clear goal was frequently cited as the most important factor to successfully navigate settlement. I would call it the overarching navigational strategy used by all of the study participants. Planning and goal setting can be clearly seen in all of the participants’ stories, through their strategic choices of educational programs and decisions around studying English (occasionally taking turns between spouses, with one working and the other studying), the positions that many are now in, and their hopes for the future. Ivan explained how, from the very beginning, he was set on working in his field, as a systems engineer: “I went to school at night and during the day I searched for work in my profession - I was stubborn. I said ‘I can do anything’ - and I have done it - ‘but I want my profession and my goal is my profession.’” Reflecting on how he had managed to secure work in systems, first in a basic position, but later, moving up as his skills were taken note of, Ivan shared his philosophy with me: “I always say if you have objectives, if you have a target, if you have goals - stick them in your head, concentrate on them, and you will see that you will realize them, they will come true.”
Luis recalled the plan he and his wife made at first:

Yes, we made a plan - we are going to concentrate on studying English. And we concentrated on studying English. For the first two years our objective number one was to study English. . . . And, obviously, the support we received from RAP wasn’t sufficient, so we had to study English, go to the food banks, and do little jobs like cleaning . . . I worked in construction. Really hard, heavy work. I delivered newspapers for nearly a year. That was really hard because I had to get up at 2:30 in the morning every day, and I had to go to North Vancouver snow, thunder or whatever. . . . That was how we survived, but we had to study full time . . . That was the first thing.

Manuel also recalled his plan, which he rehearsed to himself at when he first arrived:

‘Listen Manuel, you are here so you must open your eyes, open your mind, and just try to get involved in the community and labours or standards, and of course English. Study and take some English. When you have the base you can go, you can start.’. . . And it helped me a lot when I took the three levels, English courses.

Although the idea of plans and goals could be likened to a map and a destination, my reading of their narratives suggests that Ivan and the other participants were not referring to having a ‘map’ with a clearly defined rout or a ‘destination’ when they talked about having a plan and setting goals. Rather, I argue that they were referring to strategic planning: making decisions that took into account not only the short term, but also their long term goals and objectives. Their goals and objectives were like destination points along the way, but not necessarily final destination points. Once one goal was achieved, another would be set. Luis, for example, told me
that he was still studying and aiming for further and better positions at work. Numerous participants talked about their hopes for their children’s lives and futures, telling me that they taught their children to set their own goals and work towards them. Several were pleased to tell me their children planned to become doctors. Luis shared how his own children were already reaching some of their objectives, with his daughter achieving her dream job with an airline and his son receiving recognition for his work in multiculturalism in Vancouver. These sorts of goals and achievements were like shining beacons along the path, not indicating the end, but rather indicating a successful arrival at a port along the way.

“Building a database of information:” Figuring out things on your own or from other refugees

When I asked participants how they found out about resources, the resounding reply was on our own. “More than anything, you had to find our own information,” explained Luis.

“Really, you got ahold of information in the street, with other refugees, going to different food banks.” Ivan offered an example of how this worked, describing a time he started talking to another man in a lineup at a college where he had gone to inquire about English classes:

That day I met another Colombian, who I didn’t know, who happened to be in the same lineup. A nice person, he said to me ‘look, here there are these things, this thing is called a bursary, this thing is called a grant and you can study without paying if you get good grades.’ He also told me about other resources like social assistance, the food bank and so on . . . He told me how to access resources, and I took notes.
Juan told me that he had had one Colombian friend, an older man who had been in Vancouver for some time, who helped him and his wife to “find different paths.” It was through this man that Juan found his first job washing cars, for example.

Wary of disinformation, Ivan was careful to double check what he was told for himself. When a settlement agency told him that English classes wouldn’t be available for several months, he went on his own to find out whether or not that was actually the case. Ivan and his wife, initially, set out to gather information wherever they could. “I started to ask questions. Every person I met, I got whatever information I could from them. . . . In two or three years together my wife and I had created, I believe, the best database of information that anyone had at the time . . . we gathered it all by our own efforts.”

I was surprised that none of the participants told me that they had received information about resources from settlement agencies, but, in fact, none of them mentioned settlement agencies as a source of useful information. I will further comment on what they did say about settlement agencies in a following section. Rather, participants stressed that information about resources was scattered, and that they had to find it out on their own, by talking to other refugees or immigrants they happened to meet. Some adopted the strategy of going directly to certain organizations or institutions to ask for information directly, so as to ensure they had the correct information. These stories show how resourceful and skillful the participants were at navigating relatively uncharted territory. With little information to guide them initially, they had to learn the lay of the land themselves, drawing on skills of inquiry, persistence, investigation and networking, which brings us to the following section.
Building networks

As noted above, local contacts and friends, often from within refugee circles, were an important source of information and a key strategy for navigating settlement. Closely connected to the idea of finding information out from other refugees, building networks was a key element of successfully finding out about resources and opportunities. Networking not only took place with other refugees, but with non-refugee friends and in locations such as church or in the classroom.

In Manuel’s case, as with others, he found his second job through a contact at church. Manuel explained how he successfully networked with a friend to find a better job:

We went to the same church - she knew me, I knew her, but she didn’t know I was a welder and I never knew that she was working in a welding company. After three years, by accident, we had a BBQ with friends and someone asked me ‘hey, have you seen Amanda? . . . she is working in a welding company.’ ‘Sorry, what?! What?!’ That was on Friday, and the next Sunday at church I found her and said ‘Amanda, Amanda! I need a favour from you. Can I give you my resume, can you give the resume to your - ?’ ‘Of course, give me your resume.’ I gave the resume on Monday and she called me and said ‘Ok Manuel, you have an interview this Wednesday.’

One participant emphasized how important having network of contacts and friends who were not refugees was in his process of navigating settlement. Luis explained that because of his involvement in human rights work in Colombia he had met a number of academics and
international human rights workers who lived in Vancouver. These people were to play a significant role in how he went about navigating settlement. Luis explained:

This circle of people had a point of view, a different panorama of what it is to be here, and this helped a lot. Because when you are - this is another significant detail - when you are only with refugees, where everyone is depressed, this casts a shadow on everything, it absorbs you, and so then you get even more depressed. But if you have the possibility to have a breath of fresh air with another kind of people, who do have anything to do with refugees . . . that have another kind of connection with society here, I think that that really helped open our minds to other ideas and other possibilities.

Luis noted that it was at the advice of these friends that he and his wife decided to focus so seriously on English at first, even though it required them to suffer with few resources and endure some time on social assistance. The perspective that these friends brought was a refreshing one, as opposed to the sombre perspective Luis felt when surrounded only by other refugees. These contacts also offered practical support, helping Luis and his wife find temporary contracts for work in research and translation, and even helping them find a new place to rent at one point.

Building a network, however, wasn’t easy for the participants, since they had to start from scratch; most of them knew no one upon arrival. Luis explained the disadvantage of not having a network at a time when he was trying to gain access to a college course:

It turns out that a college was offering a course for people who were on welfare, in conjunction with an NGO. So, I found out about it and talked to my social worker at the
time: ‘I need you to help me get in.’ So she called - that was a real fight - they weren’t
going to accept me because of all that - like we say in Colombia rosca (inside
connections). There are always privileged networks, the bad thing is not being in them.
There are always networks of people who are better connected than you, and those are the
ones that go first. It’s not by merit, it’s based on who has the best relationship. It’s what
they call network. And obviously, as a refugee here you don’t have any networks. . . .

Well anyway, I was finally able to get in, but not without a fight.

Luis was able to go on from the initial course, building a relationship with his professor who
recognized his ability and who spoke on his behalf to the department of electronics and wrote
Luis a letter of recommendation. This led to an interview, which resulted in Luis being accepted
into the program.

Building networks was a key navigational strategy for participants, and one that took time
and effort to achieve. Through connections they made in the community with other refugees,
people at church, professors at college and non-refugee contacts participants were able to find
information, access resources, obtain employment, enter college programs, and even relocate.
Starting to build a network in a context where the majority of people your age - adults - were
already well connected was no small undertaking. Nonetheless, many of the study participants
reported quite successful experiences in networking, and described how the contacts they made
assisted them in navigating their journey of settlement.
“Making friends, not enemies”

Ivan shared several stories that exemplified not only planning ahead and networking, but something that he described as “making friends, not enemies” with key contacts in agencies and organizations.

Ivan described an important episode in his family’s life which involved considerable planning ahead in order to secure ongoing services for his daughter as she made the transition from the support of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) to that of Community Living BC (CLBC):

My daughter’s process has not been easy. They (CLBC) know my wife and I well, for advocating for her . . . We belonged to different networks for parents with children with special needs, and we went to all the meetings for parents, and we learned a lot of things. At some point they said ‘you have to make a plan regarding the wait lists, so that when she turns nineteen she will be able to transition without any wait.’ . . . Well, since she turned fourteen we began to make a plan with CLBC. We fought and pushed with one thing or another until our plan was made. When she was fourteen and a half the plan was in place for when she would turn eighteen. . . .She had her (nineteenth) birthday on February 23, and on March 1st she had all of the services. . . . This isn’t typical. Many people - Canadians - have children of twenty one, twenty two, twenty three years and they still don’t have services.

Ivan explained that this notable achievement had a lot to do with how one manages relationships with key contacts: “You have to be a little bit political. We haven’t made any
enemies, more than anything we’ve made friends in all the entities. . . If you have a political friend, they will collaborate with you.” On the other hand, he explained, if you put up a fight you might get “Ok” for an answer “but who knows when you’ll actually get the service.” With a certain sense of achievement and pride, Ivan told me “and my daughter has all the services.” The idea of making friends, not enemies, has to do with being political in your friendships, savvy with how you manage situations.

As Ivan described how he made contacts at different educational institutions he explained:

Smiling at the secretary, bringing her a chocolate, can open doors. Unfortunately, if you ‘make enemies’ with the secretary that will close doors and your appointment will be very distant . . . I always talk to people and tell them a joke or something like that. It relaxes the situation. It’s important.

Ties to Colombia

Nearly all of the study participants talked about having strong ties to Colombia and a deep Colombian identity, particularly in relation to connections with family members still living there. In this final sub-theme of theme two, I will share what participants told me about how having family that remained in Colombia influenced their settlement experience in Canada.

Having family in Colombia not only contributed to participants’ love and sense of connection to their country, but also at times was a source of mixed emotions and stress.

“Colombia is beautiful. I love my country. Oh! I miss my country every single day, of course,” said Manuel. “We are Colombians, we are still Colombian, from the bottom to the top, 100%,”
he stated, as he described how he had grown to love Canada but that this hadn’t implied losing his Colombian identity. He went on: “I love my country, ‘cause my family, they are still there. My mom, brothers, sister, they are still there. For me it was the hardest part.” Luis expressed similar sentiments:

Obviously we continue having our very deep Latino roots, of which we feel proud, to be Latinos. That isn’t going to disappear, it’s a pride for us to be Latinos. And we have some really strong connections with Colombia. . . . We have a lot of family there, so obviously our connection with the Colombian reality is very strong, it’s still very strong.

Clara explained how having family in Colombia created a difficult situation for her: “you are also thinking about your family in Colombia, because I have five brothers in Colombia. . . . So that isn’t easy either. They want to come, this, that, the other thing. I ask myself ‘why me, and not them?’”

Juan, too, struggled knowing that his family in Colombia still faced risks:

I can’t go back to Colombia, I haven’t thought about going back, even though I would like to visit my parents, my mother, my brother. . . . I have looked for different ways to be able to bring them here or help them to be safe, but it has been really difficult. . . . With what I do here I try to help my mother and brother in Colombia. And I am trying to see what I can do so that they don’t lose hope.

Having a strong Colombian identity, experiencing love and longing for their country, and struggling with the reality that they still had family in Colombia (who couldn’t come to Canada) were not described as obstacles, but rather simply as factors that marked their settlement
experiences. Even after more than a decade in Canada participants maintained a strong sense of
Colombian identity which was a source of strength and pride.

Building community and helping others

The third major theme that emerged from the interviews was that of building community,
establishing friendships, and helping others. Building community was not something that
happened easily, quickly or automatically. Rather, effort and time had to be put into finding a
group of trusted people with whom participants could find a sense of belonging. Feeling part of a
community was not only related to the time shared with friends, but also had to do with
exercising solidarity to others. Through contributing to others, participants demonstrated that
they now belonged to their new community and the broader society. I discuss the two related
themes of building community and helping others in the following sections.

Building community

Nearly all of the participants spoke about their experiences in building a sense of
community through forming friendships. For some the community they built consisted of mainly
or all Colombian friends, for others it was mixed or markedly non-Colombian.

Ivan described getting together with a select group of a few close friends as a way to
‘find a little bit of there (Colombia) over here:’

I have found some Colombian friends . . . about three people, and we see each other
every couple months and we have a beer and we visit. We talk about politics because we
are very similar in our way of thinking about many things. It is like that relax of finding a
little bit of there over here. Every two or three months we get together, and it has been
something constant in our lives for at least six years. We had the same process and arrived here at nearly the same time.

A small group of like-minded friends who had gone through a similar process and had similar perspectives on political themes brought Ivan a sense of familiarity and continuity from life in Colombia.

Luis described challenges of building community in Canada, highlighting the impossibility of duplicating the kind of community he and his wife had in Colombia:

We have been rebuilding our lives. Doing so has a lot of disadvantages because, obviously, for example, we feel lonely, even today. We feel very lonely. . . . Well, we have good friendships with a circle of people here that have a different perspective. As well, we have a good relationship with a family that arrived in the same period as us, refugees as well. We had some other friends, but they moved away. They were really close to us, so we feel really lonely. . . . Because you build a mountain of relationships in a lifetime, right? You don’t build them from one day to the next. We have friends - it’s not that we don’t have friends, sometimes we see each other and such. But it is that we had a very, very, very ample social life in Colombia. More than anything we really miss those spaces where we could converse about particular themes to a certain profundity. Here we don’t have that. We were people that liked to read a lot, we wrote essays for magazines, articles. We moved in the world of human rights, but at the same time in an intellectual world that allowed us to have a circle of friends in Colombia with whom we would get together on a Friday night, have some drinks and talk about philosophy, history, a ton of things that was really entertaining. Here we don’t have that option, that possibility. It
hasn’t been possible. Sometimes we feel a kind of solitude here. I say that that no, no, no - that is just how it is going to be. We can’t resolve that easily, at least until now it hasn’t been easy. We have been here almost thirteen years and people might say ‘huy! So much time!’ But it’s that for many of those years we were fighting to survive, so you don’t have much time to make a social life, to be spending much time having a beer with friends. You don’t have time because you are trying to survive and look for life here.

Luis emphasized that building a social life was not something that happened quickly, nor was it something they even had time to focus on at first. A social life takes time and effort, and was not one of the first things that he and his wife could focus on at first. Rather, it was something that was built over time. And even as it was built it suffered losses, as several close friends had moved away. Finding like-minded friends was a challenge, and Luis was resigned to the fact that they would never be able to recreate the rich intellectual community that he had belonged to in Colombia.

Juan, who had been in Canada some five years less than Luis at the time of our interviews, described having a more limited social group. Several factors influenced this, including time and previous experiences with Latino groups:

We don’t really belong to an atmosphere of a lot of socializing, well, we don’t have time. But there are people who call us to let us know about an organization, a party or that sort of thing. The truth is that we try not to integrate ourselves (into the Latino community) very much. We like friendships - very little. But not very close friendships because when we were in another country (for temporary asylum) we had huge problems with migration because of the meetings of Latinos and we almost had to leave. So, we have Canadian
friendships. My boss is Canadian, the other bosses are Canadian, some are Indian. We don’t have problems with anyone.

It wasn’t entirely clear to me if Juan considered his bosses to be his friends, or if he was referring to other Canadian friends. Either way, Juan was one of the participants who had intentionally chosen not to build community with other Latinos. This decision was also partially informed because of an instance in which a Latino man had attempted to sexually harass his daughter. He explained to me that that event, as well as his previous negative experiences with Latinos groups while abroad, had influenced his decision to not foster friendships with Latinos. Despite this, Juan reported having one close Colombian friend, someone who had been in Vancouver for a long time and who he described as being like a ‘grandfather’ to his daughters.

Manuel described having a diverse social group, with friends from Chile, Mexico, Bolivia, Canada and India. He loved the multicultural aspect of living in Canada, and enjoyed making friends from other countries. He told me about a day that he realized he was having lunch at work with a table of co-workers from twelve different countries.

I said ‘oh my God, thank you, thank you so much!’ I never had lunch with twelve different people from twelve different nations. My God! I don’t know when it will happen again. . . . Probably all of us, we don’t have the best English, but we try to communicate and the feelings - you don’t need a language to have a relationship with somebody. You don’t need it.

Building community was a central theme in Clara’s interview. She talked extensively about the group of friends that she had built. The group consisted of Colombian families with
children. She had met them through church and work and little by little the group had grown to include seven families. She described their activities and included the kinds of conversations they would sometimes have:

We like to talk, we like to be together . . . There is a very nice friendship between all seven families. If there is a birthday, we get together, I bring something, the others bring something to share. We have a really fun time together. . . . We go to Stanley Park, to the beach. They ask me:

‘Clara, what are we going to do?’

‘Let’s make a lunch’

‘Ok - lunch’

And they all bring food and we share. We make arepas, we make empanadas . . . If someone introduces someone to me, then we include them in the group. If someone says ‘Oh Clarita, I don’t have anything to do’ I say ‘Well, let’s go everyone, let’s go do something!’ When we started the group we said ‘we are Colombians.’ And the group only talks in Spanish. We get together and talk in Spanish only. Sometimes we get together to listen to old music, ballads.

‘What do you want to listen to?’

‘I like this.’

‘No, but you like old music!’

‘No, we like ballads, you like vallenato.’

We have different tastes - it’s great!
When I told Clara that I was surprised to hear what an active social life she had, as it was the first time that any of the participants had mentioned having such a busy and involved group of Colombian friends, she explained her perspective:

We came with an open mind. Here there are a lot of people, including Colombians who don’t want to relate to anyone. Alone. No, no, no! In particular, my brother. He says that when he arrived here he didn’t want to relate with Colombians, with Latinos. We said ‘no, we can’t do that. We are alone here, we need to make friends, We can’t forget where we come from. We came from Colombia, we are Colombian.’ And so we like to relate with people. We have had good chemistry with everyone. . . . We came with an open mind and a desire to socialize, because if you isolate yourself you get depressed here. There are people who get depressed, they feel bored because they are alone, closed in their own world, they don’t want to socialize with anyone. On the other hand - we say ‘let’s go!’ It’s wonderful. A lot of people say ‘Vancouver is boring, there is nothing to do.’ But it’s because of just that that they are alone. We always have something to do.

With her bubbly and energetic personality, I wasn’t surprised that Clara was the founder and coordinator of the group. For Clara, being lonely or bored in Canada was a personal choice that had a lot to do with one’s attitude or mindset. Clara and her husband embraced the idea of building friendships in the Colombian community, and the group of families they had formed was of central importance to their happiness in Canada.

Flor also spoke extensively about her experience building community, with an emphasis on the actual work of building a sense of community between neighbours on her street. She was
pleased to tell me how she employed some of her best Colombian qualities to build a sense of community in her neighbourhood:

We always greet the people we meet on the street. ‘Good morning, good morning.’ It doesn’t matter if they don’t answer us. We started going out and all our neighbours were serious. . . . We started to say ‘good morning, good afternoon, hi, how are you doing?’ And nobody answered us, nobody. My husband said ‘aye, my love, why doesn’t anyone answer us?’ ‘Maybe it’s because they don’t know us,’ I said. We continued greeting everyone. ‘One day they will answer us,’ we said. We told our children ‘you have to say hello, even if they don’t respond, it doesn’t matter, you have to keep saying hello.’ One day they started to respond to our greeting. And so we went about helping our landlords (who lived above us) get closer to the neighbours. They started to greet each other and interchange vegetables from their gardens. Those kinds of beautiful things. . . . They started to get to know each other and relate to each other, work with the neighbours, to relate socially, all of that is important. We say hello to everyone. Warmth is important. . . . When we have a barbecue we invite our neighbours to the back yard because integration is important, communication, being with your neighbours. . . . Now our neighbours are Indians, and the lady over there is Aboriginal, and the other is Canadian. We have three kinds of neighbours, and the others are Chinese. And they are all very friendly, very happy with us, because we talk to everyone. For us it is very important to have relationships with people. . . . And, for example, the neighbours bring me flowers, they bring me things from the garden, because they know that I love to garden. And all the
neighbours are like that. They bring me vegetables and things. They send me cards now for my health condition, which they know about.

For Flor, building community was an intentional undertaking that required persistence but paid off over time. She explained to me that as a Colombian, she felt it was important to always greet those she met on the street. To describe this quality she used the Spanish adverb *saludable*, which does not have an English equivalent but could be creatively translated as “‘greeting-ly’ (similar to how a person who makes friends is friend-ly and a person who has good health is health-y). It was her sense of greeting people as the right thing to do that led her and her family to connect with their neighbours and build a sense of community and neighbourliness around them. They had done this in several different locations, starting again each time they moved.

Based on the stories participants shared with me, I gathered that having built a sense of community was an indication of having reached a certain level or stage in settlement. As participants described their respective communities and social networks of friends, it was evident that they were no longer disconnected or struggling with feelings of being neither here nor there. Rather, they talked about belonging and having friends. Building community could be conceptualized as a second stage of settlement, following an initial stage where energy had to be committed almost solely to meeting survival needs, as Luis described. The degree of socialization or the size of the social group varied, depending on the personalities and perspectives of each participant, but despite the size or frequency of social activities, it was notable that each participant was satisfied, or at least reasonably so, with their sense of community and the friendships they had formed. Having built a sense of community, participants
were grounded; they were beginning the process of ‘re-rooting,’ to refer back to the metaphor of ‘uprootedness’ used by Luis to describe the essence of being a refugee.

**Helping others**

Over the course of the interviews, one by one, each and every participant talked - sometimes at great length - about helping others. The ways in which they helped others were varied and unique; some did so at work, others at church, others in the community. In many cases participants told stories of showing solidarity to other newcomers; while others told stories about assisting neighbours and colleagues. Contributing to the lives of others was a natural extension of building and pertaining to a community. By ‘community’ I refer both to the idea of a community of friends as well as a socio-political and geographical community. As participants became familiar with the ‘lay of the land’ they were increasingly able to reach out and help others who were still finding their way, both as newcomers to Canada or less experienced colleagues at work.

Manuel and Monica both discussed helping others at their workplaces. In Manuel’s case this took the form of mentoring a young welder. “I’m trying to share my experience,” explained Manuel, “I’m trying to share all my knowledge to other people. Actually, in the company I have a pretty young guy. He’s 19 years old . . . I try to teach him every single day.” Monica told me she always helps new employees at the security company. “I see when new people from different parts of the world arrive to work with the company, and so I help the new ones a lot because I know that when I came it was very difficult. I couldn’t do anything with security, I didn’t know anything,” remembered Monica. Now that she had reached a stage of being quite confident and
knowledgeable about her job she made a point of taking new employees, who were usually new immigrants as well, under her wing and helping them get used to the job.

Juan told me he supported organizations where he had once received help himself. Referring to a Mennonite organization that helped refugees, he explained:

If they open the door you have support. And you support those organizations. For example, they have asked me to help with some people - if a person arrives with problems - they have come to stay here. I’ve always tried to help people in whatever way I can. I told them (the church refugee organization) ‘if you need anything, tell me. I will help you with whatever you need.’

Juan also told me that when he hears of colleagues at the race track that are in need he asks a pastor for food, loads up his car and takes it to the race track to share with everyone. “I paid attention to the people who needed help, in whatever way, and I tried to collaborate.”

Clara also helped newcomers, primarily by helping them obtain furniture and household items that they needed, which she sourced through her housecleaning business, obtaining items that clients no longer needed. Clara told me that they had recently moved and had given a lot of their old furniture to a friend who had recently arrived from Colombia. She explained:

You have to give to receive . . . We say ‘we were blessed, we have to bless others.’ And we have done so a lot of times because the people I work with are very rich. And they change their things frequently. They say ‘Clara, take this table.’ . . . Those ladies give a lot . . . and we have blessed many more people that way.
Flor recounted several stories about helping others, in particular her neighbours. Her first story focused on the way they had helped one of the families they had rented from.

In Colombia we have something called familiarity, something called union. We always share with others. We try to teach our nice traditions to others. We arrived to a house where the landlords were Vietnamese and Chinese . . . and something very nice happened there. They were very isolated, very independent, they didn’t talk to anyone . . . And we started being the way we are - when there was a birthday we celebrated it as a family. We ate together as a family, we prayed. We began to make our special meals and invite them to participate. . . . My mother always taught me to share with the neighbours. . . . they admired the way we were as a family, and said that they had never celebrated a birthday, they had never eaten together as a family. So they began to introduce these practices in their family . . . We had a lot of barbecues outside and we invited people from church, and them too. They thought it was really nice to spend time together. Then they asked us where we went every Sunday morning, and we told them we went to church. They started to ask us questions about church. So we told them that we felt very good there - the peace, the songs, the worship, reading the Bible. And every Sunday they would ask us ‘how did it go?’ Then one day they told us they wanted to go with us. Since then they began to attend our church. After two years they learned about a church in their own language, and they moved over there. But we were very content because they are congregating. It was a great achievement for us that they started to spend more time together as a family, those and other changes that took place in that family.
Flor also mentioned how her husband would always help their elderly neighbours in the winter, when it snowed. She described how he would faithfully shovel their sidewalks, and how one day he rescued a neighbour who had fallen in her backyard due to the snow. “He has always looked out for the neighbours, the elderly ones, to help them, and we also share things with them.” In addition, she told me that her husband fixed up the deck, stairway and fence of the home they were renting, even though the landlord had not requested that he make any such improvements. “He did it because he wanted to,” she explained, “we rent, but we take care of the house as though it were ours. My husband painted the house, he made it look new. . . the landlords are extremely pleased.”

In reaching a place in their settlement that they could turn around and give to others - often, but not always, giving to other, more recently arrived newcomers - I suggest the participants were showing that they had reached yet another stage of settlement; a stage where they were sufficiently rooted that they could now provide help and assistance to others. This is not to say that they had reached the end of their settlement journeys, a destination to which they were anchored as a beacon of assistance or direction for others. This is not what the stories indicated. Settlement was still an ongoing process of ups and downs and new ways forward to be found. Helping others was more of an indication that they had reached a certain state of stability from which they could reach out to others in need of help. For some, remembering what it was like to be newly arrived prompted them to offer guidance, support or resources to others who were at an earlier stage in their own journeys. Others helped a variety of people from young colleagues to vulnerable elderly neighbours, even landlords who hadn’t requested help. In any case, participants’ stories of helping others and making their communities a better place revealed
much about the kind of people that they were: kind, concerned, giving, interested in improving the lives of others even when their own lives were far from perfect. The participants presented themselves as good people, with desirable qualities as individuals and families. In some stories participants served as role models or mentors for others, examples to be followed of successful settlement or positive ways of living and warm ways of interacting with others. In describing themselves in such a way to me, I believe the participants were telling me that they were so much more than refugees who had to be helped. Rather, they were competent, intelligent, strong individuals who went above and beyond simple survival. They had overcome great challenges and arrived at a stage where they could help others in need and bring positive changes to the communities they now belonged to.

**Future Plans**

Although I didn’t ask any questions specific to future plans, several participants made brief references to future ideas and hopes. These comments were noteworthy not only because of their content, but also because of the extent to which they contrasted with the narratives participants had reported from their early settlement days.

Manuel had just told me how much he missed Colombia when he mused:

But at the same time I say ‘un oh, I don’t know if we decide in the future to move back to Colombia - I don’t know.’ It’s hard decision. Probably for my retirement plans - probably but I don’t know what my wife would say now. Probably she want to stay here all the time. For holidays, for vacation plans it’s ok - Colombia.
Luis too made mention of the future, in the context of describing how he was pursuing further training to become a network engineer:

I think that in the future, including thinking about when I retire, I could continue being a consultant, even here or in my country. I said ‘I can go there and be a consultant and well, I’m going to have a pension from here and help over there.

Juan also spoke of the future, although not in terms of retirement plans:

If one day I can go back to work (as a nurse). . . I could continue helping, I don’t know, in Africa or in many places, many places are in need. I’d like to continue in that way, working with a Canadian entity or one from Spain or Europe. I’m not sure, but I know they exist.

These brief mentions of future plans revealed that participants were now thinking of the future, setting goals and entertaining dreams. Even Juan, who worked long hours to provide for his family was now at a place of sufficient stability to think ahead and dream of a future in which he would continue to be of service to others. In a similar vein, Luis’ retirement dreams also involved helping others. In his case he was contemplating the possibility of returning to Colombia as a telecommunications consultant. Manuel indicated that he wouldn’t mind the idea of going back to Colombia, but only when he retired, and even then he wasn’t very confident that his wife would be up for the idea. These narratives gave the impression that they were significantly rooted in Canada.

A comparison of the initial narratives that participants reported to these future oriented narratives reveals how far they had come in their settlement journey. When describing their
initial experiences in Canada as refugees, participants’ narratives were ones of not belonging, feeling out of place, feeling as though Canada was not their country and that English was not their language; some even remembered feeling as though settlement here would be impossible and reported desires to return to Colombia (see theme The Refugee Experience for more details). The narrative apparent in their references to future plans and ideas was a completely different narrative - a narrative of belonging, of having found their place and settled in, a narrative of being in a place from which they might like embark on other journeys or to return to Colombia one day, but under very different conditions. The desire to return to Colombia was evident, but it was no longer because participants felt they didn’t belong in Canada. Rather, participants referred to returning to Colombia at some point in the future, for visits, holidays, possible retirement, or stints as a consultant when retired. Juan did not discuss returning to Colombia in his future plans, yet he also spoke of being interested in going elsewhere, with hopes to follow his calling of serving in a medical capacity. Their narratives had changed significantly, no longer were they narratives of survival, but rather narratives of people who were thriving and who now afforded the possibility to dream about the future in fairly ‘normal’ ways. That is to say, the narratives were no longer ‘refugee-like’ narratives of feeling lost or in the air and struggling to cope. Rather, the narratives speak to the stability and sense of establishment that the participants now experienced.

Metaphors for Settlement

I end the findings chapter with an examination of three metaphors for settlement that three participants spontaneously used in their interviews. These metaphors, with their vivid imagery, capture some essential meanings, from the participants’ perspectives, about what their
settlement journey has been like. Several of these metaphors, along with the book titles, were influential in my decision to frame the findings as a journey with stages.

**Riding a bike**

Manuel drew upon the metaphor of riding a bike to describe the ups and downs of settlement in Canada, as well as the constant effort it required:

> We have so many difficulties. It’s like you are riding a bike. It’s good when you are riding a bike on flat land, no hills, nothing. ‘Oh yeah! It’s nice! Nice weather, it’s sunny!’ But what happens when you start the hill? And you start going up, and then the rain starts, and you are still riding - you need to ride your bike, you must go on. You cannot stop. Raining, shining, whatever - you have to, you are still riding a bike very single day. Then you go down the hill again and ‘ahhh!’ you feel like a little bit more ‘ahhh!’ - I have a little bit of rest. Rest, then another hill - the same.

I asked Manuel if what he had just described to me was a metaphor of his life in Canada. He replied:

> Yeah, it’s like ups and downs, ups and downs. When the road is flat - nice! When you go down, sometimes ‘ohhh, I’m going down again - I have to start going up again.’ It’s hard, but when you have God in your life it’s pretty much easier, believe me. Sometimes we have bad days. Sometimes we have like a ‘uh oh, I don’t know, I’m quit. No more. I want to go back.’

For Manuel, settlement in Canada was like riding a bike through varied terrain. There were tough hills and rain storms - difficult experiences and challenges that at times made him
want to go home or give up. As with riding a bike, he described having to go on, no matter how adverse the conditions or difficult the terrain. Then, there were other times of smooth sailing, with the sun on your face and flat land or even a hill going down. Those moments described easier, more pleasant times during settlement, when life didn’t seem so difficult but was, to the contrary, most enjoyable.

**The book of life**

Referring to the metaphor of being reborn that figured in his and other book titles, Ivan likened the settlement experience of his family as one of attending their own birth and going through the stages of life.

It’s like the stages of life, I think that it comes in stages. How was the birth? How difficult was the labour? My birth was difficult because I arrived in Victoria, in the wrong place, with a whole lot of complications, which were my family beside me. . . . Then, how we developed and how we ourselves became the physicians that dealt with the situation. And we began to find solutions and make our own medicines. . . . After that comes the process of maturing in English . . . between zero and three years you are learning to listen and learning the words. Later, it’s like getting to know the world, knowing who are going to be your parents, who are your siblings. It’s like the book of life - being reborn and doing all that in a short period of time.

For Ivan, settlement in Canada was like being reborn, but not only that, he was both the new born as well as the physician that attended the birth, paradoxically caring for himself and his family, responding to complications with his own medicines and treatments. This creative image
of being both the newborn and the doctor reveals the extent to which Ivan had to navigate
settlement by drawing on his own skills and capacities. Ivan described several stages of
settlement, from arrival to language learning to getting to know others and the world around you,
a stage of belonging.

Learning to live

Monica described settlement in Canada as *learning to live*, no matter how difficult the
circumstances.

Coming to Canada - being a migrant - is very nice, despite the many things that you have
to overcome. Time and the circumstances that you live through teach you to live. It’s not
like you are, as they say, masochistic, but you learn to live. You learn to live with the
situations and the experiences. Life is not a training, it is a profession. There are many
experiences and you learn from the experiences.

I don’t believe that Monica meant to infer that she hadn’t fully known to live earlier, but
rather that a person learns to live with the challenges and obstacles that they are faced with
during settlement. Over time, it becomes a process of learning to live, a process which Monica
described as a *profession*, not a *training*. So, as one learns to live with whatever experience that
arises, they become adept, a professional at life, not just a trainee. Using this kind of language, I
believe Monica was telling me how successful she had been at navigating her own settlement
journey.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

Major Findings in Relation to Existing Literature

Returning to the research question

I begin the discussion of findings by returning to the research question that guided this study, as well as the study objectives, to comment on how the participants’ stories answered the question and what the data reveals in relation to the study objectives.

The research question was: What are stories that Colombian refugees tell about their experiences navigating the settlement and integration process over time? Participants shared stories rich in detail and diverse in nature regarding their experiences navigating settlement and integration over time. They shared stories about initial experiences in Vancouver, obstacles and barriers they faced along the way, strategies they employed to navigate around or break through barriers, as well as their plans, hopes and dreams for the future. Many stories focused on factors that influenced settlement, such as family, friends, faith, illness and the experience of migrating under forced conditions. Through their stories participants revealed personal qualities as well as practices that served as key techniques for navigating the uncertain, unpredictable, and unfamiliar terrain of their new social environment. The experiences and strategies they described are examples of social navigation as described by social navigation theory (Vigh, 2008). Over the course of their stories, all of the participants demonstrated the ability to “seek new bearings” (Vigh, p. 10) and act in the midst of an unpredictable new environment. The stories participants told demonstrated that navigating settlement was not just about ‘finding their way through the forest’ of obstacles but also about building community, helping others, giving back
and dreaming of and planning for the future. All of these stories revealed a process of ‘finding the best way forward,’ from an initial time of crisis and survival to a time of living more fully, constructing a rich and complex sense of belonging, and, in many cases, thriving.

**Participants’ identity**

The first major finding of this study reveals participants’ collective identity as capable, active agents in their settlement process. Throughout their narratives, participants revealed a great deal about their identities, both individual and collective. Stories participants told about their unique approaches to overcoming obstacles, accessing resources, planning ahead, achieving their goals, helping others, creating community, maintaining family unity, and raising their children spoke volumes to how they envisioned themselves. Since I have commented on some of the individual characteristics of the participants in the introduction to each participant in the preceding chapter, my comments here will primarily be of a collective nature.

Although participants were interviewed individually, a collective description spanning stories emerged from the interviews. Participants depicted themselves as active, determined, ambitious, resourceful, focused, hard working and ethical. They drew on these characteristics, in combination with their own unique personality traits such as friendliness, stubbornness, persistence, honesty, hospitality, warmth, caring, social consciousness, cheerfulness, an openness to learning and new experiences, and intellectuality, as they skillfully navigated the uncertain terrain of settlement in Canada.

Participants collectively described themselves as *people that move forward.* Very active in their own settlement process, participants took initiative to find their own best way forward, in
most cases receiving relatively little support or assistance from settlement agencies. Stories replete with acts of agency, choice, and personal initiative challenge the idea of refugees as passive victims of their circumstances and contextual forces beyond their control. Participants’ stories did refer to “mountains of crises” and many structural forces that stood as obstacles, including discrimination and barriers in employment practices, humiliation from social assistance organizations, and situations of being financially taken advantage of by unscrupulous landlords and employers because of their newcomer status. The challenges and obstacles that participants revealed facing coincide with those noted in previous research with refugee populations, including financial challenges, difficulties finding adequate housing and employment, building networks and struggling with health issues (Arsenault, 2009; Brunner & Friesen, 2011; Carter, 2008 & 2009; Chan et al., 2005; Danso 2002; DeVoretz et al. 2004; Yu et al., 2007; Zine 2002). It is notable, however, that in none of these circumstances did they depict themselves as passive victims, unable to respond or react. Rather, participants described how, drawing upon their special navigational skills and personal abilities and characteristics, they found their way around each obstacle or broke through each barrier and moved on in their journey.

As an example, Manuel described how he “broke the English barrier” by “jumping” from the relative comfort of English classes to the challenges of surviving “on the street” and on the job. He endured a workplace where his supervisor was often impatient and unkind toward him because of his command of English, but he persisted. Manuel had told me that when he first arrived to Canada he initially felt that nothing in Canada was his, including the English language. He said “This is not my place, this is not my country, this is not my language, this is not my
culture . . . nothing here is mine.” At the time of our interview, some nine years after having those initial thoughts, Manuel firmly insisted that he would prefer to do the interview in English. In doing so, I believe that he was showing me that English was now his. He had broken through the barrier and claimed the language as an additional language that now belonged to him and over which he had full command.

This finding stands in contrast to the dominant representation of refugees as passive victims, instead complementing the body of literature that seeks to describe the resilience and agency of refugees by richly describing how refugees have responded to hardship (Boucher, 2009; Dennenborough 2005, 2006, 2010; Munoz, 2011). By presenting the unique skills, qualities and initiatives that participants drew upon to navigate the challenges they encountered I have attempted to add to the necessary and growing body of literature that seeks to present a more sophisticated understanding of refugees’ lives, highlighting agency, resilience and resistance (Boucher, 2009; Marlow, 2009; Munoz 2011).

**Describing integration**

Participants used a variety of words to describe integration, which led to a second significant finding indicating how integration was experienced by participants. Unlike the popular idea the integration is a ‘two way street’ (Ager & Strang, 2008; UNHCR, 2002), the words participants used to describe their experiences of integration revealed a mostly one-sided process which required a great deal of effort from their side.

I did not specifically ask participants to describe integration. Rather, these words appeared throughout the data, and during the analysis process I realized they were terms
participants used to refer to the idea of integration, defining it according to their own experiences and insight. Interestingly, not one participant actually referred to “integration.” I will present the words as a list and then comment on what they may reveal about the participants’ own concepts and experiences of integration:

*Insertarse a la sociedad* - inserting oneself into society

*Incorporarse a la sociedad* - incorporating oneself into society

*Involucrarse en la sociedad* - getting oneself involved in the society

*Ubicarse en la ciudad* - to locate oneself in the city, in the sense of “finding one’s place”

*Proceso de adaptación* - adaptation process

*Tener vínculos con la sociedad* - having links or connections with society

*Tener un proyecto de vida* - having a life plan

*Tener caminos claros de la vida* - having a clear path in life

Quite a few of these words are action verbs or phrases built upon action verbs. Taken together, these phrases indicate that for the participants, integration was a process in which they *took action*, and in which they practiced agency. Grammatically speaking, one exception is that of “adaptation process,” which was used by Juan when he was telling me he considered himself to have had a “fabulous adaptation process” in Canada. For Juan, settlement and integration was a process of adaptation. It is noteworthy that ‘adaptation’ is actually a noun that is derived from an action verb (adapt), and describes an action in which the subject makes an effort to adapt
themself to a new context. Implied in the concept of adaptation is that one necessarily changes in
order to fit into a new context.

Four of the verbs used were reflexive verbs in their Spanish form. Reflexive verbs are
verbs whose acting agent and patient (the subject and object) are the same, indicating something
that one does to oneself, as opposed to something that is done to oneself by someone else. For
example, participants spoke of inserting and incorporating themselves into society, they
described getting themselves involved in society and ‘locating themselves’ (finding their own
place) in their new city and society. The use of these kinds of verb phrases emphasizes the
agency that participants exercised in the integration process as well as the effort that was
required on their part. They inserted or involved themselves, it was not done to them by others or
it was not something that ‘happened’ to them. They were active, not passive, participants in their
integration process, carrying most of the responsibility of integration singlehandedly.

To place some of these phrases in context I will briefly describe several. As one
participant was describing his son’s accomplishments he said “my son has achieved locating
himself, and that results in not having depression, because you are projecting toward the future.”
Another, perhaps smoother translation of the first part would have been “my son has managed to
find his place” however, the verb ‘managed,’ which implies just barely getting something done,
does not do justice to the original meaning of achieving something. As such, I wanted to present
the first translation, which is a more direct translation of the specific words used by the
participant. The use of the word lograr (achieve) before the word ubicarse (to locate oneself or
to find one’s place) is significant. The participant was expressing that his son had not just found
his place, but he had achieved finding his place, which emphasizes the personal effort involved.
The result of this achievement, which the participant related to projecting one’s life - having purpose and meaning to life, was that one was no longer depressed with life.

A participant evaluated his entire family’s current state in terms of their integration, saying:

As a family we have achieved inserting ourselves into this society more than well, one way or another. We now have some links with the society. They aren’t as profound as those of the people who were born and raised here, but we have established some links with the society, for sure.

I again use the literal translation of the verb *lograr* (achieve) to emphasize the effort and agency of the participant and his family, who evaluate themselves as having *achieved inserting themselves* into Canadian society and having links or connections with the society.

The last three phrases are built on possessive verbs. Having links or connections was mentioned above; the last two and refer to having a life plan or project and having a clear path in life. These two phrases refer to similar concepts - the idea of having a vision for the future, a path forward, a plan for what one hopes to do in life, a meaningful purpose or project for life. This speaks to having found or created a sense of meaning and a hopeful future, where one would belong, contribute, and have something worth while to live for and work toward. This idea of successful integration expands upon the commonly used measures of economic, social or civic integration (Goss Gilroy, 2000). It speaks not only to how the immigrant acts in the new context (do they have a job, speak the language, participant in political or civic events?) but also to how they see their lives and futures in the new context.
The action verbs or phrases discussed above to describe how participants experienced and conceptualized integration challenge the ‘two way street’ concept of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; UNHCR, 2002). The words participants used to describe integration present a concept of integration that primarily requires effort, adaptation, flexibility and change on the part of the refugee or immigrant, and resonates with the arguments put forth in the literature by Da Lomba (2010), Li (2003), and McPherson (2010), who suggest that integration, in practice, requires the immigrant or refugee to change and adapt to Canadian society and norms. In participants’ stories, effort on the part of Canadian society or institutions to ‘adapt’ or ‘change’ as per the ‘two way street’ ideal of integration was not particularly apparent. Despite this, in some cases participants felt they could impact or change the dynamics of social relations, as demonstrated by the case of Flor, who introduced the practice of sharing garden produce between neighbours on her street. Certainly, participants held jobs and now felt that they were part of their respective communities (neighbourhood, church, social groups), but this did not mean that workplaces and communities had received participants with open arms. In most cases, participants stories revealed that a great deal of personal effort was required of them in order to overcome structural barriers to finding employment or in the workplace and in building community. These experiences reflect Mulvey’s (2010) critique of the ‘two way street’ discourse around integration, in which structural inequalities and discrimination actually present challenges to integration. In conclusion, it was not evident that the ‘two way street’ model of integration was experienced by the participants. Rather, they saw themselves as incorporating themselves into the new society, mainly depending on their own efforts.
A framework of success

A third major finding from this study is that of the frame within which participants collectively set their narratives. In conducting this study and analyzing the data, I was interested not only in the specific stories about navigating settlement that participants told, but also about the overarching framework in which they set their stories. Overwhelmingly, all of the stories were framed in *success*. They were success narratives - success stories. Participants did not tell me stories about becoming stuck, unable to help themselves or move forward. Without diminishing the emotional, mental and practical difficulties of being a refugee and navigating settlement, each participant shared the obstacles they faced, and told me how they overcame them. Each participant’s story revealed significant success: academic and professional achievements, starting businesses, creating community, mastering the language, sponsoring extended family. Even Flor’s story, marked by a devastating illness, was still framed in a context of hope, achievements as a family, and great success in making her church community and neighbourhood a better place. This finding resonates with findings from Munoz’ (2011) study with Colombian women in Calgary. Munoz found that the women were able to be “relatively successful despite the challenges and enormous changes they have gone through in the asylum zone” (p. 183). Much like participants in this study, the participants in Munoz’ study showed determination and capacity to take action, make choices, overcome barriers and to have the ability and knowledge to re-establish their lives in a new society (p. 183).

The framework of success stands in contrast to the initial narratives that participants reported having upon arrival: narratives of struggle, ‘tears, suffering and worries,’ and feeling out of place. These initial narratives that participants recalled in our conversation were comparable
to those reported by participants in Riaño Alcalá et al.’s study (2008). At zero to five years in
Canada, participants in Riaño Alcalá et al.’s study reported feeling uncertainty, disorientation and
fear. In comparison to the initial narratives reported both by participants in this study and those
in Riaño Alcalá et al.’s earlier study, a notable change in narratives occurs. In this study, seven to
nearly thirteen years after arrival, participants were no longer framing their stories in struggle,
loss or disorientation. Rather, they were telling success stories. Over time their stories moved
from stories about struggling to survive to stories about success in living in Canada, reaching
goals, and even thriving.

The metaphor of “being reborn” to describe the reconstruction of their life plans upon
arriving in Canada was used by participants both in this study as well as in Riaño Alcalá et al.’s
study. The stance from which participants described the metaphors had changed, however. In
Riaño Alcalá et al.’s study participants were speaking from an earlier point in their settlement, in
which many were still focused on survival and struggled with envisioning a future in Canada.
From this stage, the hardships of being reborn were highlighted in their stories. While three
participants in this study did draw on the metaphor of being reborn, starting from zero, or
rebuilding one’s life, they now framed the metaphor within a different overall narrative, and this
was reflected in the general tone and focus on their stories. Participants described how they had
started from zero, but they were now framing their stories in success and achievement; some
even spoke of future plans and ideas. The initial struggles of survival, of “being neither here nor
there” (Luis) and grappling with transitoriness (Riaño Alcalá et al.) were also mentioned by
participants, however they were spoken of as experiences from the past, which had been
overcome.
A gendered perspective

A fourth finding from this study is that of the presence of a gender difference in terms of how men and women framed their settlement experiences. Participants’ answers to the question about the title they would give to an imaginary book written about their experiences in Canada varied, yet there were distinct similarities among titles chosen by men, as were there among titles chosen by women. To illustrate, the titles chosen by participants were as follows:

**Women:**

Flor: *Superando Obstaculos* - Overcoming Obstacles  
Monica: *Como Superar las Barreras* - How to Overcome Barriers⁵  
Clara: *Para Todo Hay Tiempo* - There is Time for Everything

**Men:**

Ivan: *Volver a Nacer* - Being Reborn  
Luis: *Reconstruyendo Una Vida* - Rebuilding a Life  
Manuel: How God Changed Our Life in Canada⁶  
Jorge: New Born from Colombia

While recognizing that this sample is far too small to draw generalizations, it is still relevant to pay attention to variations, differences and commonalities such as those that occur in the titles and the respective meanings prescribed to the titles by the participants.

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⁵ Monica initially told me it would be too difficult to think of a title, but shortly thereafter said that the main theme of her book would be ‘how to overcome barriers,’ so I have used this in place of her title here.  
⁶ Manuel and Jorge gave me their titles only in English.
Of the three women in the study, two chose quite similar titles, with a focus on overcoming obstacles or barriers. Both Flor and Monica explained that overcoming obstacles had been a major aspect of their lives in Canada. Clara emphasized through her title that there was time in life for a variety of things, which she explained included work and socializing with friends/building community. I argue that through choosing these titles the women were revealing their forward looking attitudes and their determination to ‘make it’ - even having a good and balanced life - in spite of the challenges. The attitude of determination, of being able to overcome challenges, and to look forward demonstrated by the women in this study is quite similar to what women reported in Riaño Alcalá et al.’s study (2008). Even at an earlier stage of settlement, women explained that their responsibilities towards their children and supportive relationship to their husbands meant they had to be “all right” (Riaño Alcalá et al., p. 92). Women appeared to have great strength, to be the ones to cheer others on, and took on life in Canada as a personal challenge that they could overcome.

The four men in this study overwhelmingly focused on starting again from zero, choosing titles that allude to feeling like a newborn or rebuilding one’s life. Manuel’s title reflects his strong faith while emphasizing the major life changes he experienced as he settled in Canada. Taken together, it appears that the men in this study tended to focus on the element of loss and change, through their emphasis on rebuilding life and starting out as a newborn, metaphors which dramatically depict the total loss of what one has built in life and a starting again from ‘zero.’ Riaño et al. (2008) found that at an early stage in settlement, men expressed greater worry than women about their families and about their children’s futures. Men in Riaño Alcalá et al.’s study responded critically to moving to a place where they were unable to sustain the privileges
they previously had and where they often found themselves losing their roles and identity as the male provider for the family. The worries and expressions reported in by men in Riaño Alcalá et al.’s study are quite comparable to those of men in this study, with a emphasis on loss of status and privilege and a sense of worry about their families’ futures.

Taken together, it appears that the women, both in this study as well as in Riaño et al.’s (2008) study focused on the aspect of navigating around and overcoming obstacles and the possibility of achieving a good life in Canada while men tended to emphasize the aspect of loss and change in status and the great difficulties of starting again from zero. The similarities between findings from this study and that of Riaño Alcalá et al. in relation to gendered differences in experiences of settlement indicates that this is an area that merits further exploration.

Other relevant connections to existing literature

*Struggles as professional refugees*

A number of the participants in this study arrived to Canada with university degrees and professional experience in law, engineering, nursing and pharmacy. While the circumstances which led to their departure from Colombia would have been very different from those experienced by a people who immigrated to Canada through the skilled worker category, some aspects of their stories related directly to issues that are commonly noted in literature on settlement and integration of professional immigrants. Participants named English language ability as the first barrier - initially a barrier to communicating in with those around them and later a barrier to finding employment. As participants worked toward his goal of finding
employment in their respective fields they faced employers requesting Canadian education and experience and even outright discrimination in interviews and in the workplace. These same issues have been regularly documented in studies with immigrants with professional training (Gillian & Kambere, 2003; Oreoloulos, 2009; Shields et al., 2010; Zeitsma, 2007).

**Complexities in relationships between Colombians in Vancouver**

Previous research has found that relations within the Colombian diaspora are often complicated and fraught with distrust or a lack of sense of community (Arsenault, 2010; Riaño Alcalá et al., 2008). This was reflected in several of the participants' narratives, but notably, not all. In fact, even those participants who shared stories of distrust and distancing from other Colombians in Canada still reported having a small but close and trusted group of Colombian friends. Other participants spoke of having a large and welcoming group of Colombian friends. These findings lead to the conclusion that, while a strong sense of a ‘Colombian community’ in Vancouver does not exist, it would be incorrect to generalize that relationships between Colombian refugees are only characterized by distrust or a lack of sense of community.

**Methodological Reflections**

The use of qualitative methodology, drawing heavily on Spector-Mersel’s (2010) conceptualization of a narrative paradigm allowed me to collect rich data during the interviews, in which participants thickly described a range of experiences that they considered significant in the process of re-constructing their lives in Canada.

As part of the study design I sought ‘ordinary stories’ (Marlow, 2009) that would enable participants to share their personal narratives of navigating settlement over time and what
sustained them over the course of the settlement journey. This approach resulted in participants describing a range of characteristics, skills, knowledges and initiatives that clearly revealed a collective identity of the participants as capable, active agents in their settlement journey.

One of the aspects of the methodology that I grappled with the most was that of designing the interview questions. At one point I had planned to request participants to bring a significant object from their lives in Canada to the interview and to tell me about it and what it meant to them. At the same time I was planning to include a question about their significant moments and memories in Canada, a question about the title they would give to a book written about their lives in Canada, and the chapters they would include in such a book. In total, at one point in the planning process, I had eight questions. In retrospect, I now realize that eight questions would have been far too much, and would not have been compatible with a narrative style interview. Reissman (1993) suggests asking relatively few, broad questions and approaching interviews as conversations. In the end, I believe that I achieved this.

Thanks to feedback from my thesis committee I realized that as my questions were, there were too many and they were ‘jumping around,’ first focusing on an object, next asking participants to do a structural/logical exercise of organizing book chapters and later seeking stories about important moments, memories or people. I decided to drop the question about the object, among others, re-arrange the remaining questions, and simply start with a very broad and open question, as per Reissman’s (1993) suggestion, asking participants to share about significant moments in their lives in Canada. This successfully led to a conversation style dialogue, albeit with my contribution to the conversation relatively small, mostly listening and asking questions of clarification between major questions.
I found the question about a hypothetical book title and the follow up question about the chapters to be included in the book to be particularly effective in eliciting rich narratives about the stages of settlement as well as metaphors depicting settlement experiences. This was the most ‘creative’ question and the one that I was initially most unsure about including. In retrospect I realized it was the question that participants found most engaging and that resulted in some of the most descriptive material for analysis.

Narratives reveal how participants interpret their experiences, and as such served as powerful conduits to reveal participants’ perspectives on the settlement process. Reissman (1993) argues that because a narrative approach to analysis gives priority to human agency and imagination, it is well suited to studies of subjectivity and identity (p. 5). Personal narratives are especially valued by narrative researchers “because of their subjectivity - their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, in their perspective-ridden character” (Personal Narratives Group, 1989b, p. 263 - 264, as cited in Reissman, 1993, p. 5). The narratives shared with me in this study, rooted in a time frame of seven to thirteen years in Canada, the location of Greater Vancouver, and the personal experiences of each participant as a Government Sponsored Refugee revealed the participants’ subjective experiences and perspectives on settlement over time and also told me a great deal about their personal and collective identities.

Scope and Cautions

The findings of this study are limited to reflecting the stories of the seven individuals who participated in the study. The stories shared in this document are unique, personal narratives. I cannot know to what extent these stories may apply to the experiences of other refugees. My hope is, nonetheless, that the stories and findings might resonate with the experiences of readers,
whether they be refugees who have shared similar journeys and experiences or social workers and service providers who seek to provide assistance along the path for refugees as they navigate their own trajectory of settlement and integration over time.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The stories of the participants and the study findings are relevant for social workers and refugee settlement service providers on several levels. For one, it is important for social workers and settlement service providers to be aware of stories such as these. By this I mean stories that are illustrative of a different kind of ‘refugee narrative’ - a narrative of resilience, persistence, capability, agency and success rather than one of victimization, helplessness and despair. Stories such as those contained in this thesis invite settlement service providers to question the pervasive image of the refugee as a passive victim or traumatized body. It is critical for settlement workers, service providers, and social workers to have a broader image of the refugee experience and an awareness of the skills and knowledges refugees have in navigating the challenging terrain of settlement and integration. Canadian social workers work within a political context of integration, in which settlement policies and programs are created based on the logic that migrants are problematic and need to change. Stories such as those shared by the participants in this study provide an alternative perspective of refugees not as problematic but rather as full of potential. As McPherson (2010) argued, “we must engage with migrants and refugees as current and prospective citizens of potential, rather than responding to ‘our’ privileged constitution of them as ‘problematic’” (p. 565). These stories also invite settlement workers and service providers to consider that refugees are not currently experiencing integration as a ‘two-way street,’ and beckon a consideration of what can be done to work toward such a model in practice.
Findings relevant to settlement service providers highlight the importance of providing refugees with accurate information, so as not to inadvertently provide additional obstacles for refugees to navigate through. While keeping in mind that many of the stories shared by participants in relation to settlement services reflected experiences that occurred some years ago, the findings should still be useful to those in the settlement service sector. Some participants voiced disappointment in and frustration with the quality of service received, expressing a lack of useful information or resources. Others seemed almost unaware of what sorts of different services were available to them through settlement organizations, and rarely, if ever, sought services. This highlights the need to ensure that clear information about available resources be provided to refugees, not just at the beginning, but over time.

Some participants reported being assisted through employment workshops offered at settlement organizations, and one participant stressed the need to go beyond assistance with cover letters and resumes to helping refugees and other immigrants form connections with potential employers. Programs could be developed that would address the unique needs of refugees who arrive with specialized skills and training, helping connect them to potential employers and helping educate potential employers about the talented and capable workforce of refugees willing and ready to contribute their skills and knowledge. Contained in the stories of participants is a call to go beyond just planning more programs, however. Implicit in the findings is an invitation for policy makers, settlement service providers and Canadian society in general to challenge themselves to engage in integration as a real two-way street in practice, not just in word.
Findings from this study demonstrate that settlement and integration truly is a long-term process, one that cannot be considered complete in just three to five years. Participants’ stories revealed that challenges of learning English, becoming financially stable and finding work are challenges that extend for many years. Manuel’s metaphor of riding a bike and Monica’s description of life in Canada as mostly ‘storms’ with little calm in between show that for these participants, life in Canada was not a simple trajectory of an initial settlement stage in which immediate needs were met and a quick move forward to full integration into society. As such, it would be relevant for settlement services to respond to the long-term nature of settlement and integration of refugees. For example, English classes and specialized assistance in finding employment could be available to refugees for longer than the initial five years.

This study is relevant for social work education. All Canadian social workers will support and build relationships with refugees, regardless of their field of practice. As a researcher and social work student I would like to see courses on refugee issues offered as mandatory program requirements in schools of social work across Canada. Dominant societal discourse in politics, the media, and even academia regarding refugees often presents refugees in a negative light, as traumatized, passive victims or, worse, as illegal, bogus or potential terrorists. It is because of this that courses specifically examining refugee issues and allowing social work students to construct an alternative perspective on refugees are necessary. Studies, such as this one, which highlight personal agency and success of refugees while challenging students to create a practice framework that involves an authentic ‘two-way street’ way of working with refugees would be a valuable contribution to the curriculum of such courses. In a similar vein, this study would also make a relevant contribution to curriculum for training settlement workers.
Directions for Future Studies

Further research examining the long-term settlement and integration experiences of refugees from diverse source countries is necessary in order to continue to gain an understanding of how refugees experience settlement and integration over time and an appreciation of the skills, knowledges and qualities they possess that help them reconstruct their lives over time. Studies which explore long-term settlement and integration experiences are also necessary in order to reveal whether integration is experienced by refugees as a ‘one-way street’ or a ‘two-way street,’ and to propose changes in policy and practice that could move more authentically towards an actual two-way model. This study is a small scale study and can only contribute in a limited way to this necessary body of knowledge.

Gender and generational differences in relation to the experience of settlement and integration over time merit further study. While findings from this study could not be generalized, in conjunction with findings from Riaño Alcalá et al. (2008) they pointed to a possible gender difference in the subjective experience of settlement, and future studies along this line would be valuable. In the process of designing this study I assumed that experiences of individuals who came as children would be significantly different from those of individuals who came as adults. Further study would be beneficial to better understand the nature of the differences - or similarities - in terms of settlement and integration experiences.

Qualitative studies in which participants’ voices are highlighted, allow for an alternative discourse around refugees and their role in Canadian society to be formed. In this era of increasingly negative and xenophobic rhetoric around refugees in the media and politics, it is all the more important for social work researchers and practitioners to be contributing to a strong
alternative dialogue, in collaboration with refugees themselves, that raises a different and more positive discourse around refugees: who they are, their resilience and agency and ultimately their success.

**Concluding Remarks**

In a personal way, researching for and writing this thesis has been a very rewarding endeavour. When I registered for the Master of Social Work degree at UBC I had hoped to make many connections between my course work and my previous experience accompanying internally displaced people in Bogota, Colombia. Although I focused as many assignments as I could on themes related to refugee issues, I did not find as strong of a connection as I had envisioned between my work in Colombia and my studies at UBC. It was through this thesis that I was able to come ‘full circle,’ returning to an issue and a population very dear to my heart: individuals who had come to Canada as refugees from Colombia. I am grateful for each participant and the generosity they showed by willingly gifting me with their stories and, in many cases, sharing their time to review my findings. I am honoured and humbled to have been entrusted with these stories, and it is my hope that the practice of social workers and others who work with refugees who read this document will be enriched through these stories.
References


Appendix A: Advertisement for the Study

**THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**

**School of Social Work**  
2080 West Mall  
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z2  
Tel: (604) 822-2255  
Fax: (604) 822-8656  
www.socialwork.ubc.ca

**Colombian Refugees’ Stories of Settlement in Canada**

- **Are you a person of Colombian origin that immigrated to Canada through the Government Assisted Refugee program?**
- **Did you move to Canada before or during 2006?**
- **Were you the principal applicant or partner/spouse of the principal applicant?**

If you answered yes to all of the above questions, I am interested in hearing from you. As part of my research as a student in the Master of Social Work program at UBC I would like to interview people who fit this criteria.

**The purpose of this study is:**

- to explore the long-term settlement and integration experiences of individuals who came to Canada as refugees from Colombia.
- to identify barriers to settlement as well as personal initiatives and sources of support that influence long-term settlement and integration processes.
- to provide knowledge potentially useful to immigrant settlement services and refugee service organizations in developing policies and programs responsive to the long-term integration needs of refugees.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and your identity will be kept confidential. The interview will take approximately an hour and will take place at a location of your choosing and time convenient to you. There will be a possibility of a follow up interview of up to another hour, for a total of two hours. You will have the right to withdraw from the study at any point, including after reviewing the draft of the report. The cost of any transportation involved, child care during the interview, and a gift card for a supermarket will be provided to you in appreciation for your participation.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact Shalom Wiebe:

Principal Investigator: Dr. Pilar Riaño Alcalá. Associate Professor, School of Social Work.  
Co-investigator: Shalom Wiebe, Master of Social Work student.
Consent Form

Colombian Refugees' Stories of Settlement in Canada

Principal Investigator: Dr. Pilar Riaño Alcalá. Associate Professor, School of Social Work.


This research is for the purpose of a graduate degree. The information shared by study participants during interviews will be used in a report for a class project as well as in a thesis for a Master of Social Work degree. The data collected during interviews will accessible only to the Co-Investigator and Principal Investigator.

Purpose of the study

You are being invited to participate in this study because you immigrated to the Vancouver area from Colombia through the Government Assisted Refugee program in or before 2006 as a principal applicant or partner/spouse of a principal applicant.

The goals of this study are:

• to explore the long-term settlement and integration experiences of individuals who came to Canada as refugees from Colombia.
• to identify barriers and challenges as well as personal initiatives and sources of support that influence long-term settlement and integration processes.
• to provide knowledge potentially useful to immigrant settlement services and refugee service organizations in developing policies and programs responsive to the long-term integration needs of refugees.

**Study Procedures**

Participation in the study will involve:

- An individual interview of approximately 1 hour
- Topics to be discussed:
  - Your experiences of building your life in Canada, especially stories of settlement and integration in Canada over time.
  - Your experiences in finding the resources and services that you needed after your first five years in Canada when government settlement supports had ended.
- Identifying your gender, age, education, date of arrival in Canada, length of time in BC, and city or neighbourhood of current residence.
- You may decline to answer any questions.
- The interview will be recorded, transcribed, and translated by the interviewer or a typist.
- You will receive a copy of the transcript of your interview and have an opportunity to change it if you wish, which could take about half an hour.
- You may be invited to a follow-up interview of approximately 30 minutes to clarify issues from the initial interview.
- Receipt of a draft of the report and an opportunity to comment on it which also could take about half an hour.
- Notes regarding my observations during the interview will be written.
- You may withdraw from the study at any point, including after review of the draft of the report. In case of withdrawal all material related to your interview will be destroyed.

**Potential Risks**

It is not expected that there will be any risk to those interviewed; however, there is a possibility that the discussion of settlement and integration experiences might cause participants to recall memories of their displacement and refugee experiences or difficult experiences during settlement. If you feel any discomfort, the interviewer will check with you to see if you would like to take a break, to stop and postpone the interview, or to withdraw from this research. The interviewer will also check with you at the end to see how you are feeling. A list of community and professional resources available in Spanish and English will be provided to all participants in case they feel the need for follow-up support to deal with memories or issues that arose during the interview.

**Potential Benefits**
The knowledge gained in this study may help settlement service providers, policy makers and community organizations become more responsive to the long-term settlement and integration needs of refugees. In order to receive a copy of the findings of the study, please provide your address and e-mail below.

Confidentiality

- Your identity will be kept strictly confidential and you will not be named in reports of the study unless you request such disclosure as indicated below.
- You have the right to withhold names of individuals during the interview and also the right to ask that potentially identifying events be removed from the report.
- The co-investigator will transcribe your interview, and will substitute a code number or pseudonym for your name if it occurs during the interview; your name will not be in the transcript.
- The Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator will have access to the data.
- Documents will be identified only by code number/pseudonym and kept in a locked filing cabinet; computer data will be password protected.

Contact for information about the study:

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Principal Investigator Pilar Riaño Alcalá or Co-Investigator Shalom Wiebe.

Contact for information about the rights of research subjects:

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail to RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

Consent:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.
I have voluntarily agreed and requested that my full name be used in this research.
Appendix C: Interview Guide

Interview Guide: Colombian Refugees’ Stories of Settlement in Canada

Introduction: As you know from the flyer and the consent form, I’m particularly interested in hearing stories about what your life in Canada has been like over time. By that I mean not just what it was like for you at the beginning, but what it continues to be like today and over the last few years. I’m hoping to learn about how you experienced or continue to experience the process of making a new home and life in Canada over time, right until now.

1) I’m interested in the story of your life in Canada. Could you tell me about some significant moments since you came to Canada. (Who was there, who helped you, who supported you in those moments?)

2) Are there any people that stand out in your memories since you came to Canada? Would you tell me about them? When did you meet them and what made them significant.

3) What it has been like for you since you were no longer able to access settlement services. Could you tell me about the supports you encountered?

4) If we were to put the stories you just told me into a book, what would you title it? What would be the chapters in that book? (can draw on a paper)

5) I’d like to know how you would like to be described in the write up of the study. What is important for readers to know about who you are today? (For example, a person might wish to be described as a 43 year old mother and an artist or as a grandfather from Burnaby in his 60s who volunteers at the neighbourhood garden. How would you like to be described?)