

THE EXPERIENCE OF CULTURAL TRANSITION AMONG ADOLESCENT  
NEWCOMERS

by

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to contribute to the literature on migration during adolescence by exploring the phenomenon of cultural transition as experienced by newcomer youth in Canada. The study employed a descriptive phenomenological research approach to answer the following question: “How do adolescents who immigrate or seek refuge in a new country experience cultural transition?” Interviews were conducted with ten adolescent newcomers, ages 15-17, who had migrated to Canada during their adolescent years. Participants represented six different countries of origin, and resided in both Vancouver and Vancouver Island. Using Giorgi’s (2009) psychological phenomenological method, data analysis uncovered eight major structures that captured participants’ experience of cultural transition. These structures included: (a) Pre-migration Experiences/ *“I was excited”*; (b) Post-migration Impressions/ *“A totally new environment”*; (c) Education/ *“I’m always in school”*; (d) Friendships *“Friends is such an important part”*; (e) Family/ *“Changing makes you come closer”*; (f) Language/ *“Sometimes I don’t want to say anything”*; (g) Internal Experiences/ *“I wanted to leave”* and (h) Cultural Identity/ *“A bit of everything”*. This study contributes to a greater understanding of the ways in which adolescents in Canada experience cultural transition, and sheds light on factors that are both challenging and supportive to their integration. Recommendations for further research are made, as well as specific recommendations for counsellors working with newcomer youth and their families.

## **Preface**

This research was approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The certificate number of the ethics certification obtained was H12-00712.

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## Dedication

*“Always you have been told that work is a curse and labour a misfortune. But I say to you that when you work you fulfil a part of earth’s furthest dream, assigned to you when that dream was born, and in keeping yourself with labour you are in truth loving life, and to love through labour is to be intimate with life’s inmost secret...and what is it to work with love?...it is to charge all things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit...work is love made visible”*

– Khalil Gibran

I have been privileged enough to work with many youth over the last five years. These youth have taught me that adolescence is a time of limitless potential, creativity and power. Their openness and courage have inspired my life work and have fuelled this study. This research is dedicated to all of them, and most especially, to the ten inspiring participants who shared their story, and made this study possible.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Research Problem**

In 2011, more than 33,000 of the permanent residents and 8,400 of the refugees in Canada were between the ages of 15-24 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). As a growing segment of the Canadian population, newcomers have attracted a significant amount of scholarly interest, however most of this research has focused on the experiences of adults (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006; McMichael, Gifford & Correa Velez, 2010; Salehi, 2009). While some parallels may be found between the experiences of adults and youth, the stressful demands of migration and cultural transition come at a time of particular developmental importance for adolescents (Ellis, MacDonald, Lincoln, & Cabral, 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In addition to navigating their own sense of identity and autonomy, youth who migrate to a new country must suddenly establish a sense of self and place within the context of an entirely new culture (Ngo, 2009). Oftentimes, the stressors they face both before and after they transition to a new society “may exacerbate difficulties with developmental tasks” (Ellis et al. 2008, p. 185) and may result in a dramatic disruption of the typical developmental trajectory and capacity to succeed within their new environment. As the experiences of adults cannot be directly generalized or transferred to youth, there is a need to investigate and deepen our understanding on the unique process of transition that takes place for adolescents during migration.

Among the studies that have exclusively examined the experiences of newcomer youth, there has been a prominent focus on external patterns of behaviour that are manifested during transition (e.g., academic performance, behavioural issues and support

seeking behaviours), as opposed to the internal meaning-making processes that also take place (Fawzi et al., 2009). Studies that have invited the perspectives of youth have primarily investigated challenges and barriers toward successful settlement and integration into their new society, while ignoring the positive strategies for successful immigration. Moreover, fewer studies have simply invited newcomer youth to talk about the ways in which they make sense of and experience international migration (Salehi, 2009). As such, this research project addressed this gap in the literature by prioritizing the voices of newcomer youth, inviting them to share their lived experiences of their cultural transition to Canada.

### **Rationale**

In a recent study on mental health concerns among newcomer youth, Ellis et al. (2008) explain that:

It is essential for the mental health field to understand how experiences following resettlement, particularly those that are amenable to change, relate to mental health problems. Stressors encountered during resettlement may directly or indirectly contribute to the development of mental illness (p. 185)

Research on the utilization of mental health services among newcomer youth has indicated that despite high rates of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression within this population, there is an underutilization of the mental health services available to them (Ellis, Miller, Baldwin & Abdi, 2011). Given the growing number of youth migrating to Canada on an annual basis, it is imperative for host communities to understand the lived experiences of these newcomers, in order to support their needs (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). To do so, Ngo (2009) suggested turning to the youth themselves, stating, “young immigrants are experts in their own socio-cultural realities and know what services are best for them” (p. 95). Yet, studies

that invite the experiences of newcomer youth are rare, and of those that have explored their psychological adjustment, the majority have utilized a quantitative approach to investigating the impact of migration on their mental health and behaviour patterns. Among the studies that have utilized qualitative methodologies, research questions have been specific, and have consequently limited the personal accounts to the focus of the research question (Fawzi et al., 2009). Some examples include studies that have explored the effect of family on the resettlement process of youth (McMichael et al., 2010); newcomer adolescent's meaning of social support (Stewart et al., 2008); challenges of adaptation (Stodolska, 2008); experiences that pertain specifically to home or school (Li, 2010), and factors influencing their academic success (Wilkinson, 2002). Each study, while important, focused on a particular component of migration, as opposed to the entirety of the experience as viewed by the adolescent newcomer. Additionally, the majority of these studies have taken place in countries outside of Canada, and while certain findings can be transferable, it is important to pay attention to the unique experiences that are shaped by circumstances within Canadian society.

As a means of bridging the gap between our efforts to serve newcomer youth, and our current understanding of their needs, my aim in this study is to take a closer look at the ways in which they internalize their migratory experiences. This can also be considered an exploration of their '*cultural transition*'. Cultural transition is a relatively new term that refers to a process of psychological, sociocultural and linguistic adjustment to a new culture (Sinacore, Mikhail, Kassan & Lerner, 2009). However, the phenomenon of cultural transition has not yet been explored within the adolescent age range. Rather, the majority of the current research on newcomer youth has focused on the specifics of

cultural transitioning (including effects of migration on academics, mental health, family dynamics and financial stability). An in-depth understanding on how these youth experience and make meaning of their transition is needed so as to inform and strengthen the capacity of host communities (and mental health practitioners in particular) in their efforts to support newcomer adolescents with greater awareness, skills and knowledge.

### **Research Question**

My research question is: *How do adolescents who immigrate or seek refuge in a new country experience cultural transition?* The purpose of this question is to explore the lived experiences that participants have had while migrating from one culture to another. Participants will have had a unique set of experiences that have led them to live in their new host culture, and an exploration of their individual story is an entry point into dialogue on how they have internalized their unique migratory journey. A primary investigation of the experiences that surround their immigration provides context to how they have made meaning of cultural transition.

## Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

An examination of current research will provide further rationale for my topic, as well as my chosen methodology. For the purposes of this review, I will also provide working definitions for some key terminology including; immigration, refugee/seeking refuge, newcomer, youth, and cultural transition. I will begin the literature review by exploring the psychology of immigration and acculturation, which are directly linked to the phenomenon of cultural transition. Literature on acculturation postulates that there are two forms of adaptation that take place following migration: socio-cultural and psychological (Berry et al., 2006). Consequently, for the purposes of this review, I have chosen to include studies that represent our current understanding of the socio-cultural and psychological acculturation trends and experiences of immigrant and refugee youth.

### Defining Terminology

Cultural transition takes place when an individual moves from one culture into another culture. Transitioning refers to the process of adjustment on a psychological, socio-cultural and linguistic level (Sinacore et al., 2009). The proposed study will be exploring the ways in which immigrant and refugee youth experience and make meaning of this transitioning process. For the purpose of this literature review, a *youth* will be considered someone between the ages of 15-24 so as to encompass the diverse age range that is represented among the discussed research (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). However, for the purpose of my study, I will be focusing on youth aged 13-18. A *youth who has immigrated*, or an *immigrant*, will be defined as a person who chooses (or whose parents chose) to move to Canada and is selected to live in Canada based on economic and social grounds (Yu, Ouwellet & Warmington, 2007), while a *youth who is*

*seeking refuge*, or a *refugee*, will be defined as someone who is in Canada for protection from life-threatening danger or unjust treatment and persecution in their home country (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). Throughout this study, when I refer to a *newcomer* I will be referring to the category of both immigrants and refugees as newcomers to Canada.

The experiences of youth who immigrate, and those who seek refuge in Canada can be considered different (namely because one leaves his/her home country by force, and the other usually leaves by choice). However, both must navigate through the process of cultural transition and must establish themselves within the framework of an entirely new culture (Khanlou, 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez Orozco, 2001; Yu et al., 2007). In a recent literature review of studies pertaining to health, immigration, and youth, Salehi (2009) echoes this sentiment by explaining that what is common to both youth who immigrate and youth who seek refuge is that they “all leave behind some type of familiar surrounding (family, friends, relatives, home, material belonging, etc.)...” (p. 791). Salehi (2009) goes on to explain that the main differences lie in the journey they must make, and in the implications that their legal statuses have on the resources and lifestyle that wait for them upon arrival. Despite these differences, however, both categories of youth must make their way through a process of cultural transition and can therefore speak to the experiences of loss, change, and adaptation (Berry et al., 2006; Stodolska, 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

The rationale for examining both categories is further understood by incorporating the perspectives of youth themselves. Salehi (2009) points out that despite common terminology and classification criteria used by government officials and service providers

“youth themselves...do not necessarily identify with these definitions and conceptualize the immigration experience in various ways” (p. 789). An example of this can be found in a study put out by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), which invited newcomer youth to discuss their own understanding of common categorizations and terminology such as “immigrant”. According to the participants, an “immigrant” meant a variety of things, including the journey to a new country in search of better opportunities, or the experience of being forced out of one’s country for reasons of safety and survival (Salehi, 2009). The distinction between “immigrant” and “refugee” was irrelevant because for the participating youth, migration simply meant moving from one place to another to start a new life, regardless of the reasons for doing so. Both shared the experience of transition, which was all that mattered to the youth.

### **Acculturation**

*Acculturation* has been defined as “the process of cultural and psychological change that follows intercultural contact” (Berry et al., 2006, p. 305). Cultural transition occurs when one migrates from one cultural context into another cultural context. By definition, therefore, cultural transition involves acculturation, meaning that it results in some form of psychological and cultural change. However, acculturation is a complex process that is as varied at the people who experience it. Berry (2001) explains that there are two primary factors that affect the way in which people acculturate: the degree to which they feel connected to their culture of origin, and the degree to which they connect with the society in which they settle. These two factors result in a bidimensional model of acculturation, leading to four distinct styles that people adopt: assimilation, separation, marginalization and integration. The following section will explore acculturation trends

among newcomer youth and examine the connections between acculturation, adaptation and cultural transition.

**Adaptation and cultural transition.** The four processes of acculturation are defined as follows: assimilation takes place when a person does not want to maintain his/her cultural heritage and would rather affiliate with the dominant culture in which he/she lives; separation, on the other hand, takes place when the individual wants nothing to do with the dominant culture and only wants to affiliate with his/her culture of heritage; integration takes place when individuals both hold on to their culture of origin while participation in the host society is also sought out; and finally, marginalization takes place when the individual is unable to hold on to his/her culture of origin and is disinterested in becoming involved within the new culture of settlement. Research points out, however, that the adopted acculturation style is not often in the hands of those who immigrate. Integration, for example, cannot take place unless the host society is receptive to the concept of cultural diversity, and is inclusive of those who come from different backgrounds (Berry, 2001).

Tied into the concept of acculturation is the process of adaptation. When examining how individuals adapt to their various acculturation processes, Berry et al. (2006) make the distinction between two processes of adaptation: psychological adaptation and socio-cultural adaptation. Psychological adaptation refers to the individual's overall mental health and well-being, while socio-cultural adaptation refers to his/her capacity to perform everyday tasks within his/her new cultural setting. In an effort to explore the relationship between acculturation style and adaptation success, the authors administered questionnaires to 7,997 adolescents from 26 different cultural

backgrounds, living in 13 different countries. Questionnaires were administered mostly in classroom settings and examined: acculturation attitudes, cultural identity, language proficiency and use, ethnic and national peer contact, family relationships, perceived discrimination, psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation. Participant youth included both youth who immigrated and youth originally from the host country. The majority of the participants had either immigrated themselves or had parents who immigrated (Berry et al., 2006).

Consistent with the bidimensional model of acculturation, Berry et al. (2006) discovered that participant youth fell into the four categories of acculturation style, with a majority adopting an approach of integration, and a minority adopting the approach of assimilation. In the middle there was an equal number of youth who either preferred their own culture to that of the host culture to those who felt marginalized and confused. The authors discovered that out of all the acculturation styles, integration was the only one that consistently correlated with both improved experiences of psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Echoing this finding, Yu et al. (2007) point out that majority of the literature implies that successful integration is reliant on both the newcomers and the host society to adapt one to the other. Integration, therefore, is preferable to other models of migration and settlement, namely, one-way assimilation, separation or marginalization.

Research has demonstrated that when migration results in integration, the individual will likely experience a greater sense of psychological well-being and social competence (Berry et al., 2006). Psychological and social adjustments are both key elements of successful cultural transition. Research has indicated successful cultural transition to be dependent on successful adjustment along the following three domains:

linguistic adjustment (the use and comfort with the host language or languages); socio-cultural adjustment (including education, employment and general interactions with community members), and psychological adjustment (referring to the general well-being of the individual) (Sinacore et al., 2009). However, it is often along these three domains that newcomers face the most challenges. Sinacore et al. (2009) investigated the experiences of cultural transitioning among 31 Jewish adult newcomers who had migrated from five different countries. Utilizing a phenomenological method of inquiry, the study found the primary challenges facing newcomers in their study to be “education, occupation and integration with regards to the Jewish community and Canadian society” (p. 171).

To summarize, integration has been defined as the process of embracing a new culture while maintaining one’s own culture. Integration is correlated with an increased capacity to navigate through one’s new social environment, and can result in greater psychological adaptation (Berry et al., 2009). However, integration is also dependent on the host society’s capacity to support and embrace the newcomer (Berry et al., 2009; Sinacore et al., 2009). Inhospitable host environments can thwart the process of integration and the newcomer is left with the option of assimilating, separating, or being marginalized. Consequently, when youth transition from one culture into another, a variety of factors can influence their capacity to succeed within a new society and can impact t sense of psychological well-being. The following is a closer look at studies that have brought these theoretical frameworks to life by examining the current trends and variables that are influencing adolescents’ experiences of cultural transition.

## **Socio-cultural Transition of Newcomer Youth**

When considering the importance of the integration process to the successful adjustment of newcomers, it becomes clear that in order to support newcomer youth we must inform ourselves about the current sociocultural and psychological trends that exist among them. The following two sections will highlight current research that has focused on either socio-cultural patterns of transition or psychological transition. The first section will focus on socio-cultural transition and will include academic transition, family relationships and social engagement. When applicable, research pertaining to adult populations will be highlighted, however majority of the literature will focus on youth.

**Academic and linguistic transition.** For majority newcomer youth, entrance into the school system is their first introduction to mainstream Canadian culture (Wilkinson, 2002). A common challenge however, is that many newcomer youth face both discrimination from their peers as well as limited supportive services from their teachers (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). In one of the few studies that invited the perspectives of immigrant and refugee youth, Stodolska (2008) conducted semi structured in-depth interviews with 16 immigrant students from Korea, Mexico and Poland to explore their experiences of adaptation, and common challenges that they encountered. Of the many challenges that these students faced during the immigration process, three main ones emerged in the interviews, including: problems adjusting to school, re-negotiating family relationships (and the effect this had on school performance) and dealing with discriminatory treatment from schools, peers and teachers. In a narrative study with 12 Chinese immigrant youth ages 13-19 who had been living in Canada for fewer than 10 years, Li (2010) interviewed and collected essays from youth living in the Vancouver

area about their experiences of home and school. These interviews “revealed an ‘inconvenient truth’ about immigrant settlement and minority schooling... its dominant attitude and its ignorance of other cultures have greatly limited its capability in delivering quality service to ethnically and linguistically diverse students” (p.133). Common threads throughout both studies were feelings of injustice and isolation as participants tried to adjust to the new language and social environment.

A key academic challenge for newcomer youth is the establishment of English proficiency. Many newcomers enter the school system with limited English and can take up to 5-7 years to reach the necessary level for academic success, resulting in increased numbers of school drop-out rates (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Since academic performance can have a direct impact on the future employability of newcomer youth, dropping out of high school leaves them with few options for successful employment or social integration. Despite the availability of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in schools, Li (2010) discovered dissatisfaction with the delivery of the program. By separating all ESL students into one class, students felt that they were prevented from being able to practice English with native English speakers. The segregation also solidified a gap between newcomer students and other students in the school, resulting in low self-esteem and at times discrimination and exclusion by ‘regular’ students. Additionally, participants expressed that a lack of standardized assessment across ESL classes resulted in inconsistency regarding which students got to be ‘promoted’ out of the ESL program and into the mainstream classes.

Similarly, Stodolska (2008) discovered that recently arrived newcomer students found it exceedingly difficult to translate pre-existing knowledge about learning material

into English. Knowledge and skills that had been gained in their home country was lost in translation as they tried to keep up within their new academic setting. These language challenges had a direct result on social integration, with one participant commenting that the better one's English, the less teasing they could expect. Furthermore, there was an expressed disappointment among many students regarding the academic standards to which they were suddenly held accountable. In both Stodolska's (2008) and Li's (2010) study, participants expressed that they felt far less academically challenged than they did in their home countries, and that ESL classes held them back greatly. However, Stodolska (2008) observed that some of these findings depended on the cultural background of the students and the school environment from which they had come. Regardless of whether the new curriculum was too challenging or not challenging enough, both studies unearthed an initial period of change that left newcomers, more often than not, unsatisfied and unclear as to the expectations that were imposed upon them.

Added to cultural background and language proficiency, transition into the school system can also be affected by a student's grade placement, as well as ethnic background (Wilkinson, 2002). In a study that conducted structured interviews with 616 people seeking refuge in Alberta, Wilkinson (2002) randomly selected 91 youth ages 15-21 and linked information back to findings derived from interviews with their parents in the larger study sample. The study discovered that academic success was influenced by whether or not adolescents felt that they were placed in a grade level that was appropriate to their learning needs. If overly challenged, youth were at risk of falling behind and dropping out. Furthermore, ethnic background played a role in the success of newcomer students. The authors postulated that youth who came from cultures that were more

“Western”, and who possessed a familiarity with the western school system seemed to do better than students who came from culture’s whose practices, norms and educational systems differed greatly. However, it is possible that this was also due to “institutional forms of racism, systematic discrimination, and the less subtle and more personal forms of racism including polite racism and subliminal racism” (p. 186)

Rositter and Rositter (2009) conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 12 community service workers who had an average of 9.6 years of experience working in either community service agencies, community based groups or within the criminal justice, forensic and mental health service industry. Interviews focused specifically on their experiences of working with at-risk youth who had come into Canada as refugees. When exploring academic success, the authors referred to Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to explain the reasons why youth who migrate are often at risk of struggling to keep up with the day-to-day expectations of life in a new country (including success at school). Maslow’s hierarchy of needs postulates that in order for a person to work toward their goals and dreams, four basic categories of needs must be met. These needs include: physiological needs, safety needs, belonging needs and esteem needs. All four categories can be sources of stress for a newcomer youth. However, for youth who have had stressful pre-migration experiences, the challenge of keeping up with school is compounded by possible Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety (Ellis et al., 2008).

Studies have shown that exposure to traumatic stress prior to immigration results in a decline of academic performance (Ellis et al., 2008; Fawzi et al., 2009). Such a decline can be attributed to the interference with pathways of learning that affect

attention, memory and motivation (Berthold, 2000; Stermac & Dunlap, 2006). In addition to psychological safety, many newcomer parents struggle to find employment and are unable to meet their children's basic needs. Consequently, newcomer youth must supplement family income, which can, ultimately, take precedence over school. When looking back at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it becomes clear that during the migration process both physiological and safety needs may be compromised and this, in turn, may play a role in the academic performance of newcomer students.

**Social transition.** Social networks and social support have been proven to assist in facilitating the adjustment of people who migrate at any age (Brough, Gorman, Ramirez & Westoby, 2003; Fawzi et al., 2009; Simich, Beiser & Mawani, 2003). Conversely, a lack of social support has been shown to have negative impacts on newcomers, including feelings of loneliness, isolation, depression and hopelessness (Simich, Beiser, Stewart & Mwakarimba, 2005). The importance of peer relationships, however, is especially vital for adolescents. Ellis et al. (2008) investigated the correlation between perceived discrimination from peers, and rates of PTSD and depression among Somali youth who migrated to the USA as refugees. Findings indicated a strong correlation between perceived discrimination and rates of depression. As an adolescent "the developmental task of developing a cohesive sense of self may be more difficult for...youths experiencing discrimination related to their ethnicity, religion, or race. Discrimination may contribute to internalized negative self- images" (p.190).

Youth interviewed by Stodolska (2008) affirmed the challenges that are faced when trying to make friends in a new country. Participant youth explained that teasing, excluding and bullying newcomer minorities were frequent occurrences within their

school. The stressful effect of this discriminatory behaviour was further compounded by their incapacity to explain or defend themselves to staff due to linguistic limitations and eventually “led to segregation in and after school, divisions within class, alienation of recent immigrants, and creation of ethnically enclosed groups of students” (p. 216).

However, even within enclosed ethnic groups, youth reported divisions based on levels of assimilation. Youth who had been living in the United States for longer periods of time prided themselves in fitting in and looked down and were embarrassed by newcomers who were of the same ethnic background.

Given that social discrimination and isolation can greatly impede the integration process of newcomers, recent studies have also explored how the reverse experience can contribute to their resilience and strength. Among protective factors during integration are three socially based categories including: strong family ties, positive peer influences and school support (Fawzi, 2009; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Studies show that newcomer youth who are able to receive support from their families (both emotional and financial) were considered less vulnerable (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Furthermore, having a mentor or safe person to talk to can have a buffering effect on depression (Fawzi, 2009). In addition to family, the importance of school support can be understood through the aforementioned challenges that youth report encountering within the school setting. Specifically, programs that provide academic assistance and that encourage community involvement are particularly effective.

The importance of community is further proven through the support seeking patterns displayed within newcomer communities. Despite the under-utilization of mental health services among newcomers, many will turn to friends and people with shared

cultural backgrounds for assistance and advice. In order to explore the significance of social support among people who are refugees, Simich et al. (2003) conducted in-depth interviews with 38 settlement service providers and immigration officials, and in-depth interviews and focus groups with 47 government assisted refugees who decided to migrate a second time after coming to Canada. The authors discovered that the need for social support is often so strong that families who migrate or seek refuge in a new country will undergo the process of re-settlement (to a new province or city) to be closer to distant relatives or friends.

The benefits of strong social networks are high and can be seen in both adults and youth. According to Berthold (2000): “over and above the effects of the control variables and exposure to violence, the more social support the adolescents perceived from family and friends, the less PTSD and depression they experienced” (p. 35). Not only do social relationships provide emotional support, they also provide comforting distractions from the daily stressors of migration, providing an opportunity for relief and relaxation (Simich et al., 2003). Being around others with shared experiences can provide positive affirmation and solidarity. This notion was supported by a qualitative study that invited the perspectives of youth on their experiences of migration and re-settlement. According to a refugee youth from Bosnia, the thing he found most helpful was spending time with his Bosnian friends. Doing so provided him with a platform for discussing anything and everything. He felt a sense of safety and belonging among his peers that he could not find elsewhere (Brough et al., 2003).

The importance of these supportive relationships might be attributed to what Rayle (2006) and Marshall (2001) describe as “mattering to others”. The experience of

matter to others is defined as an experience of receiving attention from others, feeling important to others and feeling relied upon by others (Rayle, 2006). Mattering, as defined here, has been found to be related to higher levels of self-concept, self-significance and psychological and emotional well-being. In their study on the effects of social support on 137 eighth grade newcomer students, Oppedal, Roysam and Sam (2004) concluded that “increased interaction with extra-familial peers and adults within own culture competence becomes increasingly important as a means to gain acceptance and be acknowledged as part of the mainstream society, and to succeed in school and on the future job market” (p. 482).

**Family transition.** The impact of parent-child relationships on the integration process of newcomer youth has been explored in a number of studies (Dwairy & Achoui, 2010; Hutchins, 2011; Li, 2010; McMichael et al., 2010). In a longitudinal study involving 120 participant children and youth ages 11-19, findings showed that among families who arrived as refugees, the process of forced migration and displacement often resulted in a dramatic reconfiguration of family dynamics. The study’s mixed method approach (utilizing a variety of data gathering techniques including surveys, questionnaires, in-depth interviews and journaling) took place over a four-year span and set out to explore the psychosocial processes that facilitated successful transition among newcomer families. Findings indicated that participant youth experienced a variety of challenges that resulted from transition and family reconfiguration. Challenges included: 1) increased parental control; 2) increased levels of household stress resulting in decreased feelings of attachment; 3) discord regarding cultural practices and obligations and 4) recurrent interpersonal conflicts (McMichael et al., 2010). The result of these

family strains was that “the supportive context of family weakens over time, family trust in young people is perceived to decrease, family attachment decreases, modes of discipline are challenged and conflict increases” (McMichael et al., 2010, p. 190).

In a similar vein, Li (2010) found that among Chinese youth in Vancouver, participants reported three common family challenges: pressure to excel in their studies, discrepancies between mainstream culture and family culture, and shouldering increased family responsibilities. Participant youth explained that because academic standards were higher in China, their parents would force them to take on additional reading and studying at home or they would be subjected to punishment. Despite their dissatisfaction with the rules, however, participants also recognized how much their parents had done for them and “largely conformed themselves to parental authority because of deeply felt gratitude to parental altruistic sacrifice” (p. 130). Youth wanted to relieve family pressure by helping out financially, keeping problems to themselves and trying to meet the expectations of their parents.

The importance of self-disclosure, trust and parenting style has been explored by Sabatier and Berry (2008) in a study involving over 1000 newcomer parents and over 700 adolescents born to parents who immigrated to their countries of residence. The study administered questionnaires to adolescents and their parents in both Canada and France with a focus on parents and adolescent’s acculturation orientations and socialization patterns influenced the adaptation experiences of newcomer youth. The authors explain that families can be both a risk-factor and a protective factor throughout the acculturation process. Self-disclosure and the capacity to talk to parents, however, were seen as a protective factor and a contributing mechanism to healthy family functioning and

deviance prevention. However post-migration strain put on the parent-child relationships can often prevent adolescents from feeling able to share the realities of their day-to-day life. One such strain is financial instability, which can weigh heavy on the parents of newcomer youth, and can play a large role in the home environments within which newcomer youth reside. Parents may be focused on sustaining income and coping with the changes of migration which can have adverse effects on their mental health, and consequently put strains on their relationships to their children (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). An example of this can be found in the previously mentioned study on integration barriers by Stodolska (2008) in which participant youth explained that increased workloads and financial stress endured by their parents resulted in them seeming unavailable to the youth.

Faced with the unfamiliarity of a new culture and strained by financial pressure, newcomer parents can sometimes respond with an increased desire to control their home environment (Li, 2010). Pressure to adhere to cultural responsibilities was also discussed among the participants in the study by McMichael et al. (2010). Faced with increased independence, liberty and choice in their host country (Australia), participant youth observed increased incidents of conflict with parents who wanted to “establish continuity following displacement and migration through maintenance and transmission of culture” (McMichael et al., 2010, p. 187). Within this study, participants reported that increased conflict decreased trust and safety and resulted, at times, in physical violence and eventually running away from the family.

Parent-child relationships were further complicated by incidences of staggered family migration. Stodolska (2008) reported that majority of her participants had

experience family separation during the migration process. Prolonged periods of separation resulted in families breaking up and children being passed from one parent into the home of another parent who they had very little familiarity with. In a study involving Filipino families whose mothers had immigrated to Vancouver as live in caregivers, Pratt (2006) conducted in-depth interviews with 23 families to examine the effects of prolonged separation caused by staggered migration. Results showed an average separation span of 5-9 years with stories of what they described the “sheer trauma of loss and separation” (p. 7). In addition to strains on marriage, prolonged periods of separation resulted in children not only feeling abandoned by their parents, but children feeling forced to move to another country to be with a parent of whom they remember very little. In the case of family fleeing countries for safety, staggered migration may be unplanned and undesired. Rousseau, Rufagarib, Bagilishya and Measham (2004) implemented a longitudinal study in which they interviewed twelve Congolese families following family reunification (a portion of whom they were able to interview before and after family reunification). For some participants, the experience of separation and reunification resulted in increased feelings of intimacy and appreciation of one another, however, undergoing the massive change “forces the family to constantly readjust to the new standards that threaten its existence by undermining the structures of authority and respect that govern family relations” (p. 1103).

In conclusion, it becomes clear that the social integration process of newcomer youth is greatly influenced by their experiences at school and within the home. Their capacity to succeed academically and linguistically impacts their future employability and degree of involvement within their new society (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009).

Language proficiency and school environments can also play a role in the social support networks that adolescent newcomers create at school (Stodolska, 2008). These networks are vital to well being and successful transitioning of newcomers, and those that manage to establish strong supportive communities report it to be a source of safety and assistance (Brough et al., 2003). Finally, home environments and parental acculturation styles can either hinder or assist youth as they try to honour their home culture while adapting to new environments at school and among peers (McMichael et al., 2010). What becomes clear is that newcomer youth face many changes and are impacted by the reactions and interactions that other's have to them as they adjust. It stands to reason, therefore, that there is an interplay between their psychological state and sense of identity and the way in which they negotiate change.

### **Psychological Transition and Adaptation of Newcomer Youth**

Having examined the sociocultural trends of cultural transition, the following section will take a closer look at the psychological transition process of newcomer youth. The majority of the literature that has examined the psychological effects of migration has approached the topic through quantitative research methods. Consequently, a great deal of the following research will highlight such topics as rates of depression and PTSD as well as the behaviour patterns that result from the stressors of resettlement. In addition to mental health concerns, a discussion on identity development is warranted.

**Mental health of newcomer youth.** In addition to the immediate integration barriers that newcomer youth face, often they are also dealing with the emotional aftermath of pre-migration stress. An example of this can be found in a study conducted on 168 Haitian immigrant and refugee students between grades 10-12 enrolled in Boston

public high schools (Fawzi et al., 2009). The study utilized a standardized interview that examined self-reports on a range of factors pertaining to such things as: academic performance, social support, negative life events, traumatic events, substance use history and psychiatric symptoms. Diagnoses of PTSD and depression were made using a best estimate diagnosis from the collected information. Of the 168 students, it was noted that 14% manifested symptoms of PTSD, 11.6% were depressed and 7.9% showed concurrent signs of PTSD and depression. Both depression and PTSD were linked with low GPA, a lack of social interaction, and an increase in arguments with family members (Fawzi et al., 2009). While this is only one study, the findings may be representative of the common effects that result from exposure to traumatic stress (Al-Mashat, Amundson, Buchanan & Westwood, 2006). In a recent meta-analysis of refugee health, Steel et al. (2011) examined impact of traumatic stress on the mental health of people seeking refuge worldwide. The meta-analysis included 161 articles that provided diagnostic information derived from surveys involving a total of 81,866 participants from 40 different countries of origin. Out of 161 surveys, 117 reported depression, 145 reported a prevalence of PTSD, and 21% of 84 surveys reported personal experiences of torture.

The implications of these findings are that newcomer youth are often struggling to make sense of their experiences prior to migration, while at the same time trying to navigate and succeed within a foreign cultural setting and dealing with a tremendous amount of loss. The loss of one's home country, cultural values, social structures and sense of identity has been coined 'cultural bereavement' (Douglas, 2010). Cultural bereavement is manifested through an overwhelming sense of guilt for leaving home and a consistent desire to hold on to the past. This is often compounded by feelings of

obligation to those who died in their home country (in the case in of people seeking asylum in a new country), and can result in anxiety, anger and incapacity to move forward.

In an interpretative phenomenological study, Rosbrook and Schweitzer's (2010) interviewed 9 Burmese refugees ages 20-58 regarding their experiences of home, loss of home and sense of self. The loss of home was manifested through three over-arching themes: unbearable isolation, homesickness and feelings of exposure and vulnerability. Papadopolous (2002) proposes a term called "nostalgic disorientation" to describe the depth of disturbance that takes place when one's home has been lost. Unlike any other loss, the ache that accompanies the loss of home is difficult to pinpoint because of its all-encompassing nature. Emotional reactions such as: depression, apathy, panic, suspiciousness and splitting are all common. Yet despite the emotional and psychological struggle that accompanies loss and migration, many newcomers do not access the mental health care system within their new countries (Fawzi et al., 2009).

**The underutilization of mental health care.** Stodolska (2008) recommended that mental health counselling be made accessible to youth who are struggling with family, discrimination, loss and separation. However, the need for counselling services does not result in their automatic utilization. In addition to linguistic and cultural barriers, distrust in authority, stigma surrounding mental health issues and the immediacy of other settlement needs (such as food, shelter and financial stability) can prevent youth from accessing the appropriate services (Ellis et al., 2011). In a study involving 144 Khmer refugee adolescents ages 14-20, Berthold (2000) administered surveys and questionnaires to measure: exposure to violence and war trauma, PTSD, depressive

symptoms, personal risk behaviours, perceived social support and cultural identification scale. Berthold discovered that a third of the sample showed symptoms of PTSD and that “perception of available support had a main effect on the adolescent’s level of PTSD, depression and personal risk behaviour” (p. 38). However, the study reported that many of the youth who were experiencing psychological distress did not seek support from mental health service providers. Furthermore, in the study on immigrant Haitian youth in the US, of 168 youth (14% of who manifested symptoms of PTSD), only 1.8% were seeing a mental health professional at the time of the study. Turning to outside agencies and/or confiding in people they did not know was foreign to youth who normally relied on family and community for support (Fawzi et al, 2009).

Despite the under-use of mental health services, those who did utilize them benefited from the safe and supportive relationships they engaged in. The presence of a confidante or person to talk to was linked, in many cases, with a decrease in PTSD symptoms and depression (Fawzi et al., 2009). These findings imply that providing some type of service is helpful to the emotional well being of immigrant and refugee youth. The problem then is not whether or not to provide services, but rather how to do so in a way that will reach those who need it. The benefits of effective services are not only instrumental in helping newcomer youth adjust to a new culture, but may come to be viewed as preventative measures against the development of mental illnesses (Ellis et al., 2008, p. 191). Thus, considering the various psychological impacts of migration and transition, as well as the benefits of providing support, there is a need to bridge the gap between the needs of newcomer youth and the services that are being offered them.

**Identity formation.** The previously discussed literature has demonstrated that that youth who migrate experience loss, navigate through the norms of a new host society, and re-negotiate family relationships. Moreover, they face these changes during an already complex transitional phase in their lives: adolescence (Reitz, Motti-Stefanidi & Asendorpf, 2013; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). The question then becomes, what role do these various changes have on the development of their internal self-concept and self-identity?

Berry (2001) defines ‘cultural identity’ as the “complex set of beliefs and attitudes that people have about themselves in relation to their culture group membership” (p. 620). He goes on to elaborate that these beliefs and attitudes usually come to the forefront of awareness when one is in contact with a member of someone from another culture, as opposed to within the context of a homogenous cultural setting. Kanlou, Koh and Mill (2008) explain that for youth who immigrate, the notion of one’s identity expands, and is more welcoming to the many ways in which they can identify themselves, “including ancestral, national, hyphenated, racial and migrant identities” (p. 496).

In their study on acculturation and adaptation among newcomer youth living in 13 different countries, Berry et al. (2006) discovered that discrimination from members of the host society results in the likely rejection on behalf of the newcomer youth to interact or become involved in the new culture within which they live. Rather than integrating, these youth will most likely segregate or feel confused and marginalized. Encounters with racism and discrimination have also been shown to impact the development of their self-perception, sense of belonging and cultural identity. In a longitudinal study involving 45 immigrant youth, Khanlou et al. (2008) applied a mixed methodological approach that

involved interviews, focus groups, journal entries and self esteem questionnaires to examine the affect of discrimination on cultural identity. Participants reported that after encountering prejudiced attitudes, they reported a fear of revealing their national background. This fear was further compounded by negative messages that the youth were seeing of Middle Eastern people in the media. The impact of this discrimination is further elaborated in a study that involved 135 Somali refugees living in the United States. Findings showed that aside from exposure to pre-migration trauma, perceived discrimination contributed to the maintenance and/or development of PTSD symptoms. Additionally, perceived discrimination was the highest predictor of depressive symptoms among participants (Ellis et al., 2008).

Paradoxically, however, these Iranian and Afghani youth involved in the study by Khanlou et al. (2008) reported that it was the experience of being discriminated against that pushed them to hold on to their cultural heritage with even more strength and conviction. In a multi-method study using community workshops, surveys on risk and resilience as well as interviews and focus groups, Stuart and Ward (2011) interviewed 25 youth ages 19-27 to investigate the acculturation experiences of Muslim youth in New Zealand. They found that the aim of their participants was to achieve 'balance' between their cultural identities. Using a thematic analysis, the authors discovered that participants wanted to achieve this balance in a way that "could minimize the risks of negotiating their multiple social worlds and meet the variety of expectations that were placed upon them." (p. 263). Balance across the various components of their life (mainstream, religious, cultural) was seen as the key to success within their host society. In order to do this, participant youth reported that they changed their behaviour based on the

environment in which they found themselves. The author argues that this ‘balance’ of social roles does not necessarily indicate an internalization of identities, but rather a way of navigating their social expectations smoothly and keeping worlds separate. As worded by one of the participants: “I’m more than all those (identities), so I say I am any of them, or none at all. If I could (describe myself in a word), I would just use my name. That is me” (as cited in Stuard & Ward, 2011, p. 261).

Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) speak to the aforementioned ways in which the identities of newcomer youth can develop. In their longitudinal mixed method study, titled “The Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation “ (LISA), researchers track the experiences of over 400 recently arrived immigrant children and youth who are enrolled in fifty different schools within Boston and San Francisco. Their findings have indicated three primary modes of identity development, including, ethnic flight, adversarial identities and transcultural identities.

*Ethnic flight* refers to a process of disengagement from one’s culture of origin, as a means of fitting in with mainstream culture. While this usually results in a person’s capacity to fit in and succeed within the dominant culture, it also comes at an emotional and social cost as they experience a disconnection with their culture of heritage and the social structures they once felt connected to. On the other extreme lies *adversarial identities*, which usually develop as a result of extreme marginalization. These individuals often rebel against the dominant culture, and often develop an “adversarial stance towards middle class white society” (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 107). Arguably the most adaptive, and apparently the most common among the three, is the development of *transcultural identities*. These youth find ways of integrating

elements from both cultures, and are capable of navigating their way through each one (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Current literature on acculturation and migration is helpful in providing a framework from which to understand the process of change that takes place when an individual moves from one country to another, and hence goes through cultural transition. Berry (2001) highlights that the two most important components in people's acculturation style are the ties they have to their culture of origin and the ties they build with their host culture. He further elaborates the way in which people acculturate plays a large impact on their capacity to succeed socially and impacts their psychological well-being. Likewise, quantitative studies that have focused on youth have helped paint a picture of the current reactions and interactions that take place among adolescents as they migrate and re-settle. Quantitative studies have exposed high rates of depression and PTSD among youth who are refugees, and have shown depression to be strongly correlated to experiences of perceived discrimination (Ellis et al., 2008). PTSD and depression have also been linked to settlement and integration barriers such as academic success, family relationships and social networking (Fawzi et al., 2009). Additionally, the capacity to sample a large population size across various countries enabled Berry et al. (2006) to uncover general acculturation trends, which demonstrated that majority youth opt to integrate to a new culture, and that this is followed by increased psychological and sociocultural adaptation.

Qualitative studies that have invited newcomer's stories have deepened our awareness regarding the challenges they encounter when trying to build a new life and succeed within a new social and cultural environment. Stodolska (2008) has explored

common integration barriers across youth from different nationalities and has found that common themes include: academic and linguistic challenges at school, shifts in family dynamics and discrimination from peers. Li (2010) echoes these findings with Chinese immigrant students in Vancouver who express a desire to balance life at school with the expectations at home. McMichael et al. (2010) has further explored family reconfiguration, uncovering increased levels of stress, parental control and a weakening of parent-child relationships during the migration process. However, the study also showed that when united, the family could be a protective factor throughout the transition process. Additional findings include the effects of discrimination on cultural identity and the importance of social networks and host community acceptance in the facilitation of successful cultural transition (Khanlou et al., 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

However, there are three problematic aspects within the current literature. First, acculturation theory argues that the most successful form of acculturation is integration. By integration, Berry refers to a process of holding on to one's own culture while adapting to the new culture and participating within the new society (Berry, 2001). Yet, in their study on youth, Berry et al. (2006) examine ideal settlement patterns through quantitative measures. While the use of quantitative research methods is of vital importance when it comes to uncovering similarities, trends, patterns and differences among these youth, if we are to determine what is considered "successful" integration, we must, at the very least, incorporate the definition of integration that newcomer youth consider successful. Yet there has been a paucity of studies that treats newcomer youth as experts of their own experience and keepers of knowledge regarding their own processes.

Second, majority of the current literature examines the experiences of youth through a specific question. For example, research discussed in this review has looked at topics such as: rates of PTSD, depression and perceived discrimination among newcomer youth; academic performance and delinquency among youth seeking refuge; patterns of support seeking behaviour; challenges to adaptation within new social settings; and experiences of staggered migration and family transition. Despite the depth of information that can be revealed when focusing one's research topic, it is the researcher him/herself that steers the question and consequently, determines the prioritized area of study. However, there is a gap in studies that invite newcomer youth to determine for themselves what was important, helpful, challenging, successful or unsuccessful throughout their transition period. By asking the question: "*How do adolescents who immigrate or seek refuge in a new country experience cultural transition?*" the participant is provided a platform from which he/she can discuss their lived experience and the meaning it holds for him/her. In their study on cultural transition among Jewish newcomers, Sinacore et al. (2009) explain that in order to update current counselling theories and approaches, which in many cases are founded on western ideals, "there needs to be increased awareness of alternative worldviews with regard to work, education and...counselling process" (p. 161). An understanding of the meaning and experience of cultural transition among youth can enhance our capacity as counsellors to adapt our strategies to meet them where they are.

Finally, nearly all studies have examined either individuals who leave their country as immigrants or refugees, but rarely both. Provided the differences in legal status (and often the pre-migration experiences), the separation seems justifiable.

However, the titles and distinctions made between “immigrants” and “refugees” are, for the most part, imposed on them, and not chosen by them. By including both youth who immigrate and youth who seek refuge, this study aims to prioritize the human experience of cultural transition, as opposed to the legal terminology that they are often defined by.

It is with these research gaps in mind that I have formulated my research question: what are the experiences of newcomer youth as they transition from one culture into another culture? How do they make meaning of these experiences? The following chapter presents the way in which I have attempted to answer this question.

### **Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

The study implements a phenomenological research design to explore the phenomenon of cultural transition among newcomer youth. This chapter will highlight the philosophical roots upon which phenomenological research is founded, and the specific approach and steps that were employed in this study. A rationale for the applicability of the phenomenological approach to my research question will be described and a detailed breakdown of the research procedure will be presented (including participants, recruitment, data collection, and data analysis). I will also explore the ways in which I managed my subjective stance and implemented measures to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this study. Finally, ethical considerations will be discussed.

#### **Philosophical Context of Phenomenological Inquiry**

Phenomenology was the title given to a philosophical movement that began in the twentieth century by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and that continued to grow (through the work of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) as a dominant philosophical movement in Europe throughout the mid-twentieth century (Langdridge, 2007). At the core of this philosophical movement was a focus on people's perceptions of the world around them and how these perceptions were internalized within their consciousness (Langdridge, 2007). The world was viewed as something lived and experienced by a person, as opposed to a reality that was separate from the person (thereby rejecting the notion of mind-body dualism) (Lavery, 2003). A person's inner world, or "*life world*" (*lebenswelt*) as Husserl termed it, was considered to be their pre-reflective experience of the world around them (Lavery, 2003). This pre-

reflective state, also known as the “natural attitude”, was described as characteristic of human existence in that it was the “most basic way of experiencing the world, with all our taken-for-granted assumptions in operation” (Langdridge, 2007, p. 17).

Phenomenology was aimed at returning to these pre-reflective experiences, and with critical thought, uncovering new or even forgotten meanings (Lavery, 2003).

Husserl’s phenomenological method was composed of three steps, the first of which required one to assume an attitude of phenomenological reduction. There are varied understandings of the reduction, partially because Husserl explained several ways of achieving it (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Nevertheless, the philosophical approach called for the “transcendental phenomenological reduction”, which “means the assumption of an attitude by the researcher whereby the objects and acts of consciousness are considered to belong to any consciousness as such” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 246). The second step was to search for the *essence*, or universal structure, of an *object* (meaning something that is perceived, not necessarily material) through the use of *free imaginative variation*, a process whereby one varies features of the object to determine what is essential for it to appear as a whole (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdridge, 2007). The final step involves describing the essence of the object through its invariant properties (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdridge, 2007). Originally a philosophical approach, this method provided the foundation upon which future psychological research methods were established, particularly descriptive phenomenology.

### **Descriptive Phenomenology**

There is currently no one definition for phenomenological psychology or phenomenological research (Langdridge, 2007). Rather, it is an umbrella term for a series

of approaches that are informed by phenomenological philosophy, but vary depending on the strand of phenomenological philosophy to which they adhere. Different phenomenological research methodologies utilize different techniques in order to elicit rich descriptions of people's experiences. Developed by Amadeo Giorgi and his colleagues in the 1970's, the descriptive phenomenological research approach was the first phenomenological research method to outline clear steps of research, as opposed to simply presenting a conceptual framework from which to investigate psychological phenomena (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

A merging of phenomenological philosophy, psychology and science, Giorgi's (2009) descriptive approach is the most classically Husserlian of the approaches (Langdrige, 2007). However, it differs from Husserl's philosophical approach in a few fundamental ways. First, it derives data obtained through the description of others, as opposed to that of the researcher. Second, the attitude of reduction is that of the psychological phenomenological reduction (as opposed to the transcendental one) whereby the object of experience is reduced only to what has been presented. Third, rather than search for the essence of a phenomenon, the goal is to uncover its underlying *structure*. The difference here is that while an essence seeks to find the universal elements of an object, the structure refers the concrete experience being analyzed (Giorgi, 2009). Giorgi (2009) explains "the structures...are too dependent upon context and specific horizontal factors and are too determined by psychological interests to ever arrive at universal epistemological claims" (p. 101). Finally, the ideal form of investigation takes place with participants that share a common experience, but that vary on as many demographic characteristics as possible. The rationale here is to arrive at the

elements of an experience that are common to all, regardless of individual difference (Langdrige, 2007).

### **Rationale for the Use of Phenomenology**

The phenomenon of interest in this study is ‘cultural transition’. More specifically, my research aims to address the question: *how do adolescents who immigrate or seek refuge in a new country experience cultural transition?* Hays and Wood (2011) state that the purpose of phenomenology “is to describe the depth and meaning of participants' lived experiences. Specifically, phenomenological research seeks to understand the individual and collective internal experiences for a phenomenon of interest” (p. 291). Given the fact that my research question focuses on the lived experiences of newcomer youth, a phenomenological method provides me with the appropriate tools for doing so.

Moreover, much of the available research on the migration experiences of adolescents has collected its data through quantitative research methods. Of the studies that have utilized qualitative methodologies, few have taken a phenomenological approach. Despite the significant contributions that these studies have made, there is a gap in our understanding of the lived day-to-day experiences of newcomer youth in Canada. Phenomenology’s emphasis on the internal experience of participants directly addresses this gap by empowering the participant to determine the most salient components of their experience and by providing context for the patterns of behaviour that quantitative research reveals. Hays and Wood (2011) argue that phenomenology is a method well suited for the counselling profession “because assessing detailed information about client experiences is a natural part of professional practice” (p. 291). Given that this

research takes place within the discipline of counselling psychology, employing a phenomenological approach allows me to draw upon the strengths of the counselling discipline in order to elicit rich descriptions of participant experiences.

Additionally, descriptive phenomenology's method of maximum variation sampling allows for a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, migration journeys and settlement experiences among participants. A majority of the qualitative research on newcomer youth involves participants from specific cultural groups, and exclusively studies either youth who migrate or youth who seek refuge in a new country. However, my study presents a unique opportunity to include a diverse range of participants that can speak to the phenomenon at hand, regardless of their national background and status upon entry to Canada.

### **Researcher's Subjective Stance**

Giorgi (2009) argues that as human beings we view the present world around us through the lens of our past experiences. While this is a natural and adaptive cognitive process, he cautions that "in allowing such a role for past experience we often diminish the present experience by interpreting it as being identical to the past ones, whereas it is more frequently similar rather than identical" (p. 91). Consequently, phenomenological researchers aim to engage in a process that was termed by Edmund Husserl as "*epoché*", also known as "*bracketing*". Through the process of bracketing, one aims to make overt and thus hold at bay, any assumptions or preconceived notions one has regarding the subject under investigation (Langdrige, 2007). At the foundation of epoché is doubt, "not doubt about everything we say we know, but doubt about the natural attitude or the biases of everyday knowledge" (Langdrige, 2007, p. 17). The goal is to bring awareness

to the past experiences that have shaped our assumptions, and then to critically examine our subject of research from multiple perspectives (Langdrige, 2007). According to Giorgi (2009) it is not that we must forget everything we know about the phenomenon, but rather to attempt to put them aside and “not let our past knowledge be *engaged*” (p. 92) while we are assessing the present information before us.

In order for me, as the researcher, to bracket out my own assumptions, it is important to make mention of the experiences that have shaped the ways in which I have come to approach the topic of cultural transition. In order to do so, I will contextualize my worldview with a brief description of the events that have shaped who I am. As a 29 year old, female, bi-racial, tri-lingual immigrant woman, I have been raised with attachments to a variety of cultures. I was born to an American mother, a Persian father, and was raised in Israel as a ‘third culture’ kid, meaning that I spent a significant portion of my developmental years in a country from which neither of my parents came. Unlike children who migrate to a new country, third culture children typically have parents who have chosen to live abroad for temporary work-related reasons. Consequently, they are known to develop an attachment to multiple cultures, without truly feeling a sense of belonging within any of them. As a third culture kid, I grew up navigating my way through one culture at home, and another at school. I would sit in on parent teacher meetings and translate for my parents all through elementary school. I learned all the reasons I should feel patriotic toward Israel, knowing I would never serve in their army. I would study the Torah at school, learn from the Baha’i writings at home, and celebrate Catholic holidays with extended relatives in the United States. Needless to say, culture became a fluid concept, as opposed to a fixed, taken-for-granted set of beliefs. I was

vividly aware of the fact that I could externally fit in among multiple cultural groups, and yet internally, I was not fully attached to any.

I was comfortable juggling these diverse worlds until age 15, when I immigrated to Canada with my family, and was suddenly faced with the added task of transitioning into a new culture. Unlike other immigrant youth who lose access to their country of origin, extended relatives, and first language, I spoke English, had no relatives in Israel, and had no real reasons to ever travel back or consider it my home again. To this day, I have a hard time answering the question “*where are you from?*” With an American/Persian cultural heritage, I do not feel I have the right to call myself Israeli, nor do I truly feel Canadian. Consequently, I have always been most comfortable among diverse groups of people who share a global worldview.

In 2008, my personal life experiences started to align with my professional interests. Following a practicum for a diploma in Intercultural Education and Training at the University of Victoria (UVIC), I was hired by a non-profit organization called the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS). My position was coordinator of the “Enable Program”, a program that encompassed a variety of settlement services for immigrant and refugee children and youth. I suddenly found my previous life experiences serving me in a new way – I felt comfortable among people from many different cultures, I could relate to newcomer youth and the reality they faced of managing a diverse range of cultural expectations, and most of all, I understood why this process was significant during the adolescent stage of life.

During the three years that I worked for VIRCS, I became connected to hundreds of newcomer youth in Victoria. Through the relationships I built, I started to notice a gap

in the services available to them. While a majority of the settlement services aimed to assist newcomers with the external process of settlement and integration, their internal process of transition was less prioritized. It became increasingly apparent to me that there was a gap between the types of services that funders wanted to see delivered, and the types of services that the youth were requesting and needing. These discoveries led me to pursue a Masters in Counselling Psychology, with the objective of one day merging my counselling career with my passion for working with newcomer youth.

Given my personal and professional experience, there is no doubt that I approached this research with a set of assumptions. Primary among them, is the assumption that the experience of cultural transition impacts adolescents differently than other age groups. This is the viewpoint from which my current research question emerged. Additional assumptions include: a) immigration during the time of adolescence presents a unique set of challenges and can impact a person's self perception and world view; b) navigating a diverse range of cultural settings can influence an individual's cultural identity and sense of belonging; c) newcomer youth, while resilient, face many challenges and can benefit from services that support them during this time of transience; d) there is a gap between services offered and the needs of newcomer youth; e) the voices and experiences of youth themselves are crucial to the development of effective services and supportive structures.

### **Analysis of the Researcher's Subjective Stance**

Throughout the study, some of the aforementioned assumptions were observed. Namely, the assumption that cultural transition during adolescence presents unique challenges that can impact their self-perception and worldview, and that navigating a

diverse range of cultural settings could influence their sense of belonging and identity. Among the challenges that participants faced, majority of them took place at school and at home. Since they were adolescents, much of their time was spent at school, and the experiences that branched out of this facet of their life differed from the reality of their parents. Additionally, the fact that they were adolescents presented them with the task of navigating their way between different cultural expectations at home and at school. Parental expectations played a large role in their cultural transition, which is an additional challenge that adult newcomers usually don't have to factor into their integration process. The challenges they faced, both at home and at school, impacted their level of self-confidence, their perception of their own family, and the society in which they live. Furthermore, participants reported a shift in how they viewed the world around them, and explained that after meeting people from other cultures, they felt more open to diversity. This openness further resulted in their desire to integrate various components of their culture of origin and their new cultural surrounding into their own identity.

However, findings that were inconsistent with the aforementioned assumptions were also observed. Primary among them was the assumption that adolescent newcomers would benefit from services that supported them during this time of transience. While many participants reported the benefits of community programs that they were involved in, drawbacks of some of these services were also reported. Furthermore, some participants were able to draw upon resources that had little to do with the community programs. Some such resources included relevant reading material, conversations with peers, and personal aspirations that provided them with hope for the future.

## Managing Researcher's Subjective Stance

Qualitative research is, by nature, subjective (Morrow, 2005). Rooted in a social constructionist worldview, phenomenological research acknowledges the position of a researcher as a co-constructor of meaning (Creswell, 2009 & Morrow, 2005). However, bearing the subjective stance of the researcher in mind, Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) explain that:

The central goal of phenomenology is to approach and deal with any object of our attention in just such a way that it is allowed maximal opportunity to show itself 'as itself'... it is, nonetheless, inevitable that we will fall short of this target, for being a 'person-in-context'...but this should not discourage us from making the attempt (p. 108).

Morrow (2005) proposes a series of techniques for managing the researcher's subjective stance, which I implemented throughout my research process. These techniques include: (a) bracketing; (b) reflexivity; (c) peer debriefing; and (d) *representation*, which is the practice of checking in with participants for accuracy in understanding.

**Bracketing.** As previously mentioned, a standard practice in qualitative research is to 'bracket', or make overt, the researcher's biases and assumptions regarding the subject under study (Giorgi, 2009; Langdrige, 2007; Morrow, 2005). Langdrige (2007) explains that "qualitative approaches to research...seek to recognize the way in which knowledge is always a co-construction, reflecting the choices and questions the researcher makes" (p. 59). The aim of bracketing one's assumptions is to minimize the effect of one's biases on the process and analysis of the research.

Giorgi (2009) further argues that bracketing "means 'holding in suspension', keeping a tension between the past and present in order to discern their respective roles" (p. 93). Having previously contextualized my own position, past experiences and

personal beliefs surrounding the phenomenon of interest, I was better able to recognize them at the onset of the study and attempt to set them aside for the duration of the research.

**Reflexivity.** Although it may not be fully possible to rid oneself of the world-view one carries, stating these views helped me engage in on-going processes of *reflexivity* or self-reflection. Additionally, Langdrige (2007) explains that the aim of bracketing and self-reflection is to try, as best as one can, to “let things appear in our consciousness as if for the first time” (p. 18). In order to approach my research topic as if for the first time, I tried to bracket out previous personal experience, as well as theoretical knowledge and research I had been exposed to. Consequently, I avoided reading any literature on the subject throughout my data gathering and data analysis phase, and only returned to it when my analysis had been completed.

My process of self-reflection was continuous, and I used the act of journaling to keep track of and “hold in suspension” past experiences and assumptions. This was especially useful during points in time when I thought my assumptions might play a larger role than normal (i.e. a participant who came from a similar cultural background as myself). Prior to each interview, I spent time reflecting on my own state of mind, and aimed to approach each interview with openness and curiosity. Following each interview, and prior to the analysis of the interview transcript, I made sure to make note of any biases that were triggered or past experiences that came to mind during the interview itself. I strived to approach the content of the interview without comparing it to my own preconceived ideas regarding the subject.

Throughout the interview, I remained cognizant of any thoughts that were indicative of my own preferences. Noting them, I aimed to identify what it was that made me think of the bias, and then make sure to proceed with caution so as not to seek confirmatory information. For example, during one interview a participant described their involvement in a program for newcomer youth delivered by a non-profit organization. While acknowledging that they enjoyed it, they did not feel it had any special significance. As previously mentioned, I hold the assumption that these types of services are a necessary and supportive service for newcomer youth. In that moment, I became acutely aware of my own bias and made sure not to ask any questions that may have led the participant to answer the question differently.

**Peer debriefing.** The process of peer debriefing makes space for the researcher to reflect on their own point of view, while also considering alternative interpretations. Research supervisors, a research team and/or peers can “serve as a mirror, reflecting the investigator’s responses to the research process” (Morrow, 2005, p. 254) and can also pose opposing viewpoints as a means of expanding the researcher’s perception on the issue. With this in mind, I collaborated with two other students in my Counselling Psychology cohort who acted as auditors in my study. Additionally, checking-in with my research supervisor provided me with the opportunity to receive objective feedback and debrief any biases that could have interfered with the process. Obtaining a second opinion on my interpretations and reactions to the data also provided a space for me to ensure that I was remaining as self-aware as possible throughout the research process.

**Representation.** Morrow (2005) cautions the qualitative researcher on the subject of ‘representation’, which aims to ensure that the participant’s voices are represented, as

opposed to the researcher's interpretations. Member checking, taking the stance of a 'naïve inquirer' and delving deeply into the meaning of their personal accounts are all techniques that the research can utilize to avoid projecting their own interpretation on to the participant's account (Morrow, 2005). Following the analysis of each individual interview, I contacted participants and provided them with the structural summary of their interview. This process ensured that my own interpretations were representative of the participants' experiences. Participants were provided with an opportunity to correct or affirm any conclusions I had reached through my analysis. Follow up conversations are discussed in more detail within the data analysis section of this chapter.

### **Participants**

The following section will begin with an outline of criteria for participation, and a rationale for the criteria that was set. This will be followed by a description of the recruitment process, and the way in which this process unfolded. Finally, demographic information collected from all 10 participants will be provided.

**Criteria for participation.** To explore cultural transitioning with newcomer youth, it becomes necessary to directly involve this population. Ngo (2009) points out that by recognizing newcomer youth as the *experts* of their own lived experiences, we can arrive at a more informed understanding of the ways in which they make meaning, which in turn can inform our efforts to provide them with effective support. With this goal in mind, I set out to interview adolescent newcomers between the ages of 13-18 who had either immigrated or come to Canada seeking refuge and who resided in British Columbia.

Regardless of their status upon entry, youth who participated in this study had to self identify as having the intention to stay in Canada permanently. More specifically, participant youth could be citizens, permanent residents, or be living in Canada with temporary status with the intention of applying for permanent residency and living in Canada long term. Sinacore et al. (2009) define cultural transition as a process of adjusting linguistically, socio-culturally and psychologically to a new culture. Consequently, it was important that the participants know they were staying in Canada so that they have reason to attempt transitioning into Canadian culture (regardless of whether they do so successfully or unsuccessfully). Additionally, it was important that they moved to Canada at some point during their teenage years so that their experience of transition occurred during adolescence and not during childhood, as this may have effected the way in which they made meaning of their experiences. In order to ensure that the process of cultural transitioning had begun to take place, it was also important that participants had lived in Canada for a minimum of 6 months. Finally, participants had to speak English with enough proficiency to communicate their experience without translation.

In a review of phenomenological studies, Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005) found that the general trend in phenomenological studies was to recruit 10 participants. Langdrige (2007) has set the average number at 6 or 7, given the labour intensive work that analyzing the data entails. True to phenomenology, however, the aim of my interviews was to arrive at a place of saturation, meaning a redundancy within the findings that indicate the fulfilment of the research goal (Wertz, 2005). However, it is not always possible to know beforehand how many participants are needed to reach a

place of saturation, the only way of truly determining an adequate participant number is through “deliberation and critical reflection considering the research problem, the life-world position of the participant(s), the quality of the data, and the value of emergent findings with regard to research goals” (Wertz, 2005, p. 171). With this in mind, my goal was to recruit and interview 10 participants. The first 8 provided my basic data set, and allowed me to identify salient themes. The final two served to check my data and ensure that I achieved saturation.

**Participant recruitment.** Upon obtaining ethics approval from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB), research participants were recruited through a variety of organizations serving newcomers and through snowball sampling. During the initial stages of recruitment, a letter (see Appendix A) and poster (see Appendix B) were sent out to several organizations that serviced immigrants and refugees, including Immigrant Settlement Services (ISS) of BC, Mosaic Settlement Services, Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture (VAST), North Shore Multicultural Society, The Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) and the Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA). In addition to these organizations, I also contacted Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) throughout Vancouver Island, Vancouver and the surrounding areas, as well as libraries and community centres. Contacts at these various organizations were provided with information on the research project including its significance, contributions, methods, level of involvement required from the research participants and potential outcomes. The various organizations and/or settlement workers were given the choice of forwarding this information to their contacts. Interested participants were asked to contact me directly to find out more about the goals and criteria of the study. During

the recruitment and data collection phase of this study I obtained a separate cell phone and distributed a number that was used only for the purposes of this study.

Eight immigrant and refugee serving organizations, two libraries and several other points of contact (including SWIS workers, youth workers and counsellors) agreed to distribute the poster and information to eligible youth. Additionally, three youth workers from non-profit organizations asked to meet with me to discuss the details of the study. As a follow up to these meetings, I was invited to present the objectives of the study to three separate groups of youth who were attending community programs. Upon obtaining further ethical approval from BREB, I agreed to present the objectives of my research to the youth groups. Following my presentation, potential participants approached me to ask questions. All potential participants were informed that if they wanted to partake in the study it was their choice to contact me by email or phone.

Once potential participants contacted me to indicate their interest, I determined if they met the criteria to participate by asking them some screening questions (see Appendix C) and discussed with them the goal and procedures of the study in more detail. This conversation allowed them the opportunity to ask me any questions they may have had prior to agreeing to participate. Throughout the recruitment process there were a few participants who were not eligible (for reasons including their age upon entry to Canada and the fact that they were international students with the intent of leaving Canada). Additionally, following a more detailed conversation about the study, one potential participant decided to reconsider. Potential participants were also invited to inform any other youth they knew who met the eligibility for participation. It was made clear to them that should they pass along the information about the study to their points

of contact, they were not to provide me with any names of other potential participants. It was up to the potential participant to contact me.

Following my presentations at one specific organization, I was faced with a list of potential participants that were primarily from one cultural group. Given the fact that descriptive phenomenology calls for a wide range of diversity within the sample, also known as “maximum variation sampling” (Langdrige, 2007), I employed a purposive sampling technique as a means of insuring a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, world-views and perspectives within the study.

An additional factor that had to be taken into consideration was the potential recruitment of participants that I had previously known through my work in Victoria. Throughout my recruitment phase, I was contacted by youth that I had worked with in various capacities. After careful consultation with my research supervisor, it was decided that these individuals could participate as long as they met criteria and I had no existing working relationship with them and no intent of working with them in the future. Given the fact that this study positions youth as experts in their own lives, I decided to respect their desire to share their stories, and their ability to determine their own boundaries in doing so. These participants responded on their own to posters, emails from youth workers and word of mouth. Their participation was completely voluntary, and their motivation for involvement was described as a desire to contribute to the topic of research. Related to this consideration, Giorgi (2009) explains that when the researcher is seeking information that may be self-revealing, a relationship greater than that of a “passing acquaintanceship” (p. 123) is desirable.

Once a participant had agreed to partake in the study, and had been deemed eligible, we arranged for a meeting time and place to conduct the interview. In order to ensure that the location of our interview was confidential, quiet and accessible for the participants, I conducted nine interviews in private study rooms at libraries, and one in a privately booked room at a community centre. Bus tickets for travel to and from the interview were provided when necessary. As compensation for their participation, all youth received a \$20 gift certificate to use at a mall in their respective cities. Participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point with no penalty (more specifically, they were free to keep the honoraria).

**Participant demographics.** For the descriptive phenomenological method to work, it is ideal that the researcher seeks out maximum variation in their sample. The principle of maximum variation postulates that the more variation there is (in regards to demographic characteristics) among participants with a common experience, the more possible it becomes to “ascertain those aspects of the experience that are invariant across perception...and those that vary across perception” (Langdrige, 2007, p.87). The following demographic information helps to relay the ways in which maximum variation sampling has been utilized, and support the validity of the general structural description (Langdrige, 2007).

Ten adolescents ranging between the ages of 15 to 17 (mean age = 16.2) volunteered to participate in this study. Countries of origin included Mexico, Iran, Thailand, China, Peru, and the Philippines. Each participant reported speaking two languages. In addition to English, languages included: Spanish, Farsi, Thai, Mandarin, and Tagalog. All 10 participants migrated to Canada as teenagers, and had lived in

Canada between six months to four years (mean time = 3 years). Nine participants arrived as immigrants, and one participant arrived as a refugee. Four participants resided in Greater Vancouver and six resided in Greater Victoria.

Participants included six females and four males. Half of them identified as heterosexuals, while the other half opted to leave the question blank. When asked about their religious or spiritual beliefs, two participants did not respond, two self identified as Christian, one as Catholic, one as Muslim, one as Buddhist, one responded “God and Karma”, and one said “none”. All participants were living with a range of 2-4 family members. Included in the sample was one pair of siblings (a brother and sister). At the time of the interviews, participants were enrolled in high school and represented grades 10 (N=4), 11 (N=2) and 12 (N=4).

All participants were recruited through their involvement in a variety of non-profit organizations that worked with newcomer youth. When asked why they chose to participate, one participant stated that she wanted the experience of being part of a study, two wanted to share their story, six wanted to help other newcomers by sharing their experiences and one hoped for a “change in the attitude of school administrators and counsellors”.

### **Data Collection**

The following section will outline the data collection process in the order that it took place. Beginning with a description of the consent/assent procedures, I will then move on to the collection of demographic information and conclude with a detailed explanation of the interview protocol.

**Consent and assent.** I began my data collection by obtaining consent/assent from the adolescents themselves or from the parents/guardians of the participant youth (see Appendices D and E). As recommended to me by BREB, if a participant youth had been deemed as eligible to provide consent for him/herself, then consent was not sought from the parent/guardian. If, however, a youth was deemed as requiring the consent of their parents/guardians (as may be expected in the case of a younger youth between the ages of 13-15) then consent would have been sought from the parent/guardian and assent would be sought from the participant youth. The capacity to provide consent was determined by the ability of the youth to understand the procedures, risks and benefits of the study. It was furthermore dependant on the adolescent's voluntary participation in the study and knowledge of what participating entailed (Lind, Anderson & Oberle, 2003). A preliminary assessment of their capacity to provide consent took place during the phone screening. In all cases, efforts were made to go over each section of the consent/assent form and make sure that participants and guardians understood it fully.

The rationale for providing an option under which youth could consent rather than assent was twofold. First, in order to obtain parental/guardian consent, the level of English among newcomer parents/guardians must be fluent enough to understand all the contents of a consent form. Since this study was working with individuals who had immigrated to Canada, the dependence on the language competency of the adolescent's parents/guardians could restrict the youth from participating. Furthermore, adolescent consent accounted for refugees who may have migrated to Canada on their own and were not living under the care of a parent/guardian. Secondly, for older adolescents the right to provide consent prioritizes their autonomy and ensures their anonymity. Tigges (2003)

explains that the requirement to obtain parental consent can often involve a complex set of barriers to engagement that result in lower participation rates, and selection bias among those that do participate. This is, according to Tigges (2003), especially true among at-risk or minority adolescent groups whose parents may not be as available and/or have less positive views of academia and school. By providing an option for adolescent consent, rather than assent, this study aimed to reduce selection bias and promote the inclusion of a more diverse range of youth.

Since all the participants in the study were age 15 and above, and all of them demonstrated a capacity to provide consent according to the aforementioned criteria, the default research protocol was to provide them with the choice of involving their parents in the consent process. However, one specific organization through which participants were recruited requested that I obtain consent from the parents/guardians of the participating youth. As parents might contact the agency regarding their child's participation in the study (having been informed of the study from staff at that specific organization), it would be best to involve the family. Potential participants recruited through this organization were informed of this step, and I was able to meet with the legal guardians of these participants. However a choice was given to the participants that were recruited through other organizations. If the participants expressed a desire for their parents/guardians to be involved in the consent process, and their parents/guardians were able and/or willing to be involved, then parents would be invited to partake in the consent process. However, all participants who were given a choice expressed a desire to provide consent on their own.

Upon meeting the participant and/or their parent/guardians, I explained the research procedure and emphasized the voluntary nature of the study, as well as measures to insure confidentiality. Time was provided for any questions or clarifications they may have had. Once I had obtained consent and assent forms, parents/guardians that had accompanied their children were asked to leave so as to insure that participants had privacy. In cases where parents were included in the process, they were notified of this step prior to the meeting so that they were prepared to leave for the duration of the interview.

**Demographic questionnaire.** I began the interview by providing participants with a demographic form (see Appendix G) that collected information about their background. I allowed time for any clarification or questions they had, and explained that they had the choice to leave blank whatever they felt uncomfortable answering. Following the completion of the demographic form I explained to the participants that we would begin the interview, and reminded them that I would be tape recording it and taking notes as necessary.

**The qualitative interview.** The primary data gathering technique in phenomenology is through the use of in-depth qualitative interviews (Langdridge, 2007; Wertz, 2005). For the purpose of this study, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix G) with 10 youth between the ages of 15-17. Interviews ranged from one hour to two hours in length depending on the degree of self-disclosure and sharing that the participant engaged in. The aim of a phenomenological interview is to obtain “as complete a description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 122). When designing one’s interview protocol, Langdridge

(2007) recommends identifying key issues related to the phenomenon, and creating general questions around each one, followed by prompts that can help facilitate further discussion. In order to do so, I went back to the literature and selected key themes that relate to cultural transition, and the migration experiences of newcomer youth. Beginning with general questions, my interview protocol moved slowly into more detailed and personal topics that helped me to obtain a vivid a description of cultural transition. General themes that were touched on included, but were not limited to: (a) warm up questions; (b) main research question; (c) journey to Canada; (d) home life; (e) social life; and (f) school experiences (see Appendix H).

When interviewing a participant that I had known through my previous youth work in Victoria, additional instructions were given. McConnell-Henry, James, Chapman & Francis (2010) note that while there are advantages to researching participants that one knows in some capacity, including an increased sense of rapport, there is also a chance that participants may divulge more information than they otherwise would have. To ensure that participants were comfortable with the information they shared, I reminded them that during our follow up conversation (see “Member Checking” for more details) they would be given the right to remove any pieces of information they were not comfortable with me using. Moreover, I did not use any information that I might have known about the participants or the programs they had been involved in (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010). Prior to the beginning of the interview, I explained to participants that I would only be including information that they shared during the interview, and nothing more. I also stressed that they had the right to speak freely regarding any program that had been run through the organization I used to work for or with, and that,

as with all participants, I would not specify what programs they were referring to, nor would I identify the organizations they had been involved with.

Before moving on to the main research question, I spent time asking participants warm up questions and building up some rapport with them. Giorgi (2009) argues that establishing rapport with participants is a crucial step in the interview process and that “too little time is invested in doing that in contemporary qualitative research” (p. 123). Consequently, I began by discussing participant’s hobbies and interests, future aspirations and current life situations. These topics of conversation resulted in participants sharing low-risk information, and slowly establishing a sense of rapport and trust with me. From there, I shifted into the overarching question of the study, which went as follows: *“I am interested in learning about your overall experience of moving from [insert country of origin] to Canada. Can you tell me about what it’s been like for you?”*

Once participants began describing their experience of migration, I followed their lead and used follow up questions that allowed us to delve deeper into the topics that they brought up. In order to make the most of phenomenological interviews, Langdridge (2007) suggests a balance between consistency and flexibility. Consistency within the interview is achieved through a pre-existing interview schedule that consists of questions and prompts to engage the participant in rich discussion. However, this consistency is matched by a flexibility that makes space for the unique stories and topics that might arise with each individual participant. Giorgi (2009) further cautions the interviewer not to stray off topic by letting the interviewee speak about whatever it is they want. Conversely, the researcher should also abstain from leading the participant to provide answers that they are seeking. Rather, the researcher is encouraged to ensure that the data

collected is relevant to the topic of interest. I attempted to integrate this philosophy into the interviews by making space for the diverse range of stories that came up, all the while gently re-focusing the interview to the phenomenon at hand. If I found that the participant began to discuss unrelated topics (for example, providing back stories about friends and social situations) I would attempt to re-direct the conversation to how they *experienced* the situation, what they were feeling, and how it related to their overall experience of transition.

During times when the interview elicited sensitive material, my training in the Counselling program at the University of British Columbia (UBC), as well as my previous work experience with newcomer youth, equipped me with the necessary skills for handling a participant's story with sensitivity and awareness. Additionally, I pre-arranged to have a licensed counselling psychologist on call during my interviews, should an urgent matter come up. Two counsellors with extensive experience working with newcomer youth volunteered in Victoria, and my supervisor Dr. Anusha Kassin assisted me in Vancouver. Furthermore, when appropriate, I provided participants with local supportive resources, such as counselling centres or newcomer serving organizations (see Appendix I and J). Additionally, participants were given the option of not answering questions that they felt uncomfortable with and also had the right to terminate the interview at any time, and/or withdraw from the study with no penalty.

On two occasions, interviews did touch on sensitive subject matter for participants. When this occurred, I checked in with participants and turned off the recorder to ensure they had ample time to rest, process their emotions, take a break and/or end the interview. Participants and I discussed how they were doing, and in both cases,

participants requested to continue with the interview process. They were given the option of changing subjects, and in both cases we shifted gears into another component of their experience. Following the interview, I checked in with my research supervisor to debrief the interviews and ensure that I had followed proper protocol, and made sure to check back in with participants after the interview to ensure they were doing well.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

The following section will describe the procedures that were implemented to manage and analyze the data. Data analysis followed the steps outlined by Giorgi (2009), and a detailed description of each step will be provided.

**Data management.** All interviews were recorded using a digital audio-recorder, and I took minimal notes as needed. I then personally transcribed each interview, and removed personal information from the transcript, including, but not limited to, the names of participants and or/or people they mentioned, names of their school, and organizations they were involved in. As I typed out the interviews, I also made sure to review the recordings and verify that I had captured each segment accurately. All interviews took place in a quiet private location that was convenient for the participant. Transcripts were kept on my computer with a password lock and recordings were kept in a locked filing cabinet. All consent forms, assent forms, and demographic forms were kept separately in a locked cabinet in my research supervisor's office. Participant names did not appear on any document (with the exception of consent forms) and were replaced with codes and/or pseudonyms so as to maintain confidentiality.

**Data analysis.** Following data collection, I transcribed all the interviews verbatim. Transcriptions were then analyzed according to the detailed procedures of

phenomenological analysis as outlined by Giorgi (2003; 2009). The steps included were: (a) reading the transcript as a whole; (b) identifying meaning units; (c) transforming meaning units into psychologically sensitive expressions; (d) producing individual structural descriptions; and (e) forming the overall structural description of the phenomenon. In addition to the aforementioned steps, I also collaborated with two peer auditors and conducted member checking.

***Reading as a whole.*** I began the analytic process by reading the transcript as a whole. Giorgi (2009) stresses the importance of this step, stating: “meaning within a description can have forward and backward references, and so analyses of the first part of a description without awareness of the last part are too incomplete” (p. 128). Indeed, as I read through transcripts, I recognized the shifting nature of the interview and the ways in which a single topic would come up more than once. By reading the transcript as a whole, I was better prepared to see the overarching picture as I analyzed the interview in more detail.

***Identifying meaning units.*** In the second stage of the data analysis, I went back and re-read the transcript with the aim of identifying “meaning units”. As I read through the transcript, each time I observed a shift in the meaning of the description being made, I made a mark that separated that section from the next. The aim of this process was to break the transcription into manageable pieces that could then be individually assessed (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdridge, 2007). Giorgi (2009) explains that the process of identifying meaning units is somewhat arbitrary, and could result in different meaning units for different researchers. However, given the purpose of this stage (namely, to reduce the description into more manageable pieces) what matters most is the

way in which these units are transformed. Each transcript had approximately 60 to 80 meaning units.

***Transforming meaning units into psychologically sensitive expressions.*** The third stage, according to Giorgi (2009) is the “heart of the method” (p. 130). During this stage, the researcher returns to the individual meaning units and transforms them into psychologically sensitive expressions. The goal here is to “discover and articulate the psychological meanings being lived by the participant that reveal the nature of the phenomenon being researched” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 252). To determine the psychological meaning that lay within individual meaning units, the researcher is instructed to employ a technique termed *free imaginative variation*. The process requires that the researcher consider the description of the phenomenon at hand by using their imagination to vary features of the description in order to determine what is essential to the structure and what is not. If the object under scrutiny “collapses” as a result of changing a feature of the object, then it is determined that it is a vital component of the object (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

Given the labour intensive nature of this phase of analysis, transforming meaning units into psychologically sensitive expressions took time, and careful consideration. The first stage required that I transfer the transcript’s meaning units into a chart with three columns. The first column contained the transcript, and each row housed a meaning unit. In the middle column, the meaning unit was re-written in third person expressions. The goal here is to make it clear that the researcher is doing an analysis for someone else’s experience, as opposed to their own (Giorgi, 2009). This provided me with an opportunity to engage with the material and make sure I understood the content of the

meaning unit, before moving on to the analytic phase. The third column contained the transformed meaning unit, whereby I used the process of free imaginative variation to determine the most salient and important component of the unit, as it pertained to the phenomenon of cultural transition.

***Peer auditing.*** Once the analytic chart had been completed for each participant, they were given to a peer auditor. I collaborated with two fellow graduate students in the Counselling Psychology program at UBC who had experience conducting phenomenological research. I chose to distribute the analyses between two students because of the labour intensive nature of the work involved (with some charts spanning 100 pages). Auditors read the transcript and reviewed the meaning units and the transformations I had written for each participant. They then provided feedback and either confirmed the analysis, or offered new ways of dividing the transcript and alternative meanings that could be found in the units. This feedback gave me the opportunity to consider other points of view, and I was able to integrate their thoughts into the final structural write up.

***Producing individual structural descriptions.*** Following the transformation of meaning units into psychologically sensitive expressions, the units were then used as the basis for describing the underlying structure of the participant's experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Structural summaries were generally between three to five pages in length, and the information within them was presented chronologically (as experienced by participants) and according to topic. The process of imaginative variation took place at this stage as well, as I considered which units were necessary for the overall structure of the participant's experience (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi 2003). This was a

challenging task, and in order to accomplish it I attempted to imagine the participant's description without a specific meaning unit. If the whole description collapsed (or no longer made sense), I realized it was not necessary. For example, one participant discussed his parent's marital problems and his own feelings of frustration on the matter. At a first glance it may appear that this was not directly relevant to his experience of cultural transition. However, the conflict that was taking place at home directly impacted this participant's emotional state and self-confidence, which put a strain on his process of making new friends at school. As a result, without this piece of information the structure appeared less whole, and consequently it was determined that the unit was necessary. However, specific details regarding the marital conflict were omitted because the structure remained in tact without it.

***Member checking.*** Member checking, also known as *participant checks*, refers to the process of verifying with participants to “learn from the interviewee how well the researcher's interpretations reflect the interviewee's meanings” (Morrow, 2005, p. 254). This is especially important when the researcher is very familiar with the phenomenon being researched (Morrow, 2005). Given my experience with cultural transition, on a personal and professional level, it was particularly important to include this step in my research. Consequently, once I had completed the structural summary of each interview, I emailed participants to provide them with a copy and to invite their feedback about the conclusions I had reached. After participants read the summary, we arranged for a time to speak on the phone (see Appendix H). During the conversation, we reviewed: (a) parts of the description that participants felt were most important and least important to them; (b)

elements of the description that they might want to change; and (c) things they might want to add to the overall description.

All ten participants responded to the invitation to provide feedback. During the conversation, I made note of areas they felt were least and most important. A majority of them highlighted the topics surrounding school, family and friends to be most important. In five cases, participants felt that the description was accurate and that there was nothing they wanted to change. For the remaining five participants, the conversation went into more depth. Some participants wanted to add comments about the progress they had made since the interview, and in these cases, I added a paragraph at the end of the summary to describe their new position on certain topics. For example, one participant had felt ashamed of her country of origin, and the political strife that was taking place within it. During our follow up conversation, she noted that it was important to mention that she no longer felt this way, and had shifted her perspective on the issue. Other participants wanted to elaborate on certain components, and in these cases we spent some time talking about the issue, and then I reintegrated it into the summary. For example, one participant wanted to make mention of some of the things that he relied on for strength during difficult times. The conversation provided me with additional context, and I was able to add this information into my final analysis. All ten participants expressed that the experience of reading the summary was an interesting one, and that in some ways it felt surreal to read about their own experience. One participant commented, “I think it’s the best thing I ever read in my life”, because it was about her and it felt “so accurate”.

*Forming the overall structural description of the phenomenon.* Once a structural summary for each participant had been written, summaries were compared horizontally to determine common and unique constituents among them. The goal here was to find elements of the experience that varied among participants, and compare them to the ones that did not (Langdridge, 2007). Giorgi (2009) eloquently defines the general structure as follows:

The structure provides the analogue of a measure of central tendency that is provided by the mean, median, or mode in statistics. After all, each concrete description is chock full of specific, varied meanings, and the question arises as how to communicate in the best possible way what is the common meaning of the phenomenon being researched, given all of the variations in the raw data. The structure of the experience is the answer to that question, and in order to appropriate the majority of variations, it has to be expressed at a higher level. (Giorgi, 2009, p. 100)

Unearthing the general structure of the phenomenon required that I shift back and forth between emerging themes in the summaries and the actual transcripts. As commonalities and differences among participants emerged (through an analysis of their individual structural summaries), I kept track using a chart that allowed me to visually follow the trends among participants. I then returned to their individual transcripts and tracked down specific quotes and examples that helped clarify these emerging themes. This process resulted in eight overarching structures that together formed the constituents of the general structure of the phenomenon. Data is displayed through an exploration of each structure (broken down into sub categories that are either common or unique among participants) and then woven together into a final general structural summary.

### **Rigour and Trustworthiness**

There are many approaches to upholding standards of rigour and trustworthiness within qualitative research, however the procedures implemented within a study should

correspond with the epistemological roots from which it has grown (Morrow, 2005). Within this study, measures of rigour have been derived from the standards proposed within the specific tradition of descriptive phenomenology, and the broader discipline of qualitative research. Arguably the most important measure of validity in descriptive phenomenology lies within the researcher's capacity to be "fully present to the phenomenon being investigated, such that the researcher is able to derive a structural understanding of the experience being described" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 155). This is accomplished first, through a reduction of researcher bias (through bracketing and reflexivity) and second, by adopting an attitude of phenomenological reduction. However, these measures are not enough to elicit the trust of those working outside the practice of phenomenology (Langdridge, 2007). Thus, further attempts were made to uphold standards of rigour and trustworthiness in this study. The following is an exploration of each, including: (a) adopting an attitude of phenomenological reduction (b) credibility and authenticity; (c) criticality and integrity; (d) auditability; and (e) catalytic validity.

**Adopting an attitude of phenomenological reduction.** Assuming the attitude of phenomenological reduction begins with the researcher engaging in a process of self-reflexivity and bracketing. Having already explored these two processes (within the section on managing the researcher's bias) I will move on to the phenomenological reduction. The psychological phenomenological reduction requires that the researcher resist the urge to ascribe meaning and hierarchies within a description, until all elements of the description have been considered (Langdridge, 2007). In other words "everything that presents itself is to be accounted for precisely as it presents itself, it is a strategy

devised to counteract the potentially biasing effects of past experience” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 249). The experience, is therefore, reduced down to what has been described (Giorgi, 2009).

Prior to the analysis of each transcript, I attempted to bracket out any assumptions I had regarding the interview by writing down the reflections and thoughts that had arisen during the interview. The aim here was to ensure that when I read over the transcript, I would not carry over any biases or pre-conceived ideas about what had been meaningful in the participant’s description. Moreover, the detailed steps of descriptive phenomenological analysis ensured that I paid attention to each meaning unit within the transcript. The process of transforming each unit from first person, to third person, allowed me to reflect on every element of the participant’s experience without determining which ones were more or less important. The additional step of transforming third person transformations to psychologically meaningful descriptions ensured that I reviewed the data a third time. Throughout this analytic process, I noticed myself reflecting on points in the interview that I had originally missed when sitting face to face with the participant. Going over the data in such detail provided me with the opportunity to truly take into consideration every component of their description.

**Credibility and authenticity.** Whittemore (2001) argues that credibility and authenticity are primary requirements for validity in qualitative research. Closely linked one to another, credibility is defined as the effort made to ensure that the interpretations made from the data are accurate, while authenticity refers to the presentation of research that reflects the true meaning of the participant’s experience.

Credibility is achieved by ensuring that conclusions reached through data analysis “are trustworthy and reveal some truth external to the investigators’ experience ” (Whittemore, 2001, p. 530). A number of strategies were put in place to ensure credibility, including: regular consultations with my research supervisor, external auditors and member checking. Throughout the research process, I regularly consulted with my research supervisor, which allowed me to be less subjective in my interview approach and interpretations of the data. Following the completion of my first interview, I provided my supervisor with the first transcript and invited her feedback regarding my interviewing style. My supervisor’s comments helped refine my interviewing skills, and I became more self aware throughout the interviewing process, and consequently better able to make space for participants to share their stories. Additionally, two external auditors reviewed all my meaning units and their transformations and provided additional feedback and insight.

Attention to authenticity involves procedures that ensure the study’s interpretations reflect the participant’s meaning (Whittemore, 2001). Throughout the interview process I made sure to use clarifying statements to check my understanding with participants. Additionally, the recruitment of 10 participants led to a state of saturation, whereby I was able to observe repeating patterns and themes emerging (Langdrige, 2007; Morrow, 2005). Finally, prior to my final analysis, all ten participants were able to read the final structure of their experience and verify that it reflected their intended meaning.

**Criticality and integrity.** Criticality and integrity are additional primary requirements for validity in qualitative research (Whittemore, 2001). Criticality calls for

the researcher to be “critical in one’s search for alternative hypotheses, explore negative instances, and examine biases” (Whittemore, 2001, p. 531). Closely tied to the process of criticality is integrity. Integrity refers to the researcher’s awareness of their subjectivity, and their efforts to assure that their interpretations are grounded in the data itself (Whittemore, 2001). Recruiting a diverse sample of participants (which included a range of cultural backgrounds, lengths of time in Canada, cities of residence, etc.) resulted in varying experiences that provided me with the opportunity to pause and reflect, not only on their similarities, but also on the ways in which they varied one from another.

Throughout the data analysis stage, I strived for criticality by repeatedly comparing individual structural summaries and tracking constituents that were similar as well as unique. When individual participants relayed experiences that differed vastly from the majority, I spent time reflecting on these points and attempted to account for them within the presentation of my results. Furthermore, the process of free imaginative variation required that I consider alternative situations by constantly varying features of meaning units and structures to get at the most fundamental components of the experience.

In an attempt to meet standards of integrity, I observed that some of my original biases (which I made overt when bracketing my assumptions) were reflected in the structures that were emerging in my results. In these cases, I returned to the transcripts themselves to verify my conclusions were grounded in the data, and cross-examined my findings with the help of external auditors. Additionally, I supported my conclusions with direct quotes from participants.

**Auditability.** Auditability is a secondary source of validity (as opposed to a primary one) and refers to the ability to trace back how a researcher analyzed the data,

and reached their conclusions (Whittemore, 2001). The rigorous procedures entailed in descriptive phenomenology ensured that each analysis was traced from its very first step to its very last. The transformation process of each meaning unit can be found in the analytic chart corresponding with each transcript. Transformed meaning units were then grouped according to subject and themes, and then typed out into a structural summary. Structural summaries were compared horizontally with the use of a chart that allowed me to track overarching themes and subcategories. Each theme was then supported with quotes from various transcripts. The entirety of the analytic process has been documented step by step, and final conclusions can be retraced to their origins.

**Catalytic validity.** Catalytic validity refers to the impact that the research has on the participants themselves, in so much as it is able to energize them and shift their perspective (Stiles, 1993). Stiles (1993) describes the process as follows: “when I finally get it right, the reaction is strong- a confirming ‘yes,’ a pause perhaps, and then energetic movement into something new. Something changes, just by getting it right.” (p. 612). Catalytic validity was demonstrated at various points throughout the research process.

An energizing effect on participants was observed within their responses on demographic forms, and their reflections on the interview process. As previously discussed, on the demographic forms six participants indicated a desire to share their experience as a way of helping others, while one expressed a specific desire to influence school administration. At the end of each interview, I asked participants to share with me what their experience of the interview was like. Three participants responded by saying that it felt good to know they might help others by sharing their story and one participant felt pride at the possibility of making an impact in other people’s lives. This sentiment is

evidenced through the words of one participant who said, “It was really interesting because I know future people who are immigrating to Canada will be more comfortable, it can help them. It was the reason that I joined, that it will help some people”. Six participants explained that it was the first time they had ever shared their story, and that by doing so they were able to reflect on how far they had come, and felt a sense of relief at relaying things for the first time. One participant described “it was kind of got it out a lot of my mind and like you told earlier, out of your chest”.

Finally, when checking back in with participants (after they had read through the structural summary of their interview), they relayed that it was a very interesting and reflective experience to read their own story. Two participants communicated a sense of excitement at the possibility of sharing it with their parents, while one was surprised by how accurate the summary was and by how much he had actually had shared. The rest of the participants spoke about how interesting it was to read the stories back, and that it gave them the chance to reflect on their lives in a new way.

### **Ethical Considerations**

It is important to note that many measures were taken throughout the study to ensure the ethical treatment of all participants. In a review on the methodological and ethical issues of conducting research with children and young people, Kirk (2007) discusses the topics of informed consent and confidentiality. It is argued that informed consent is reliant on three factors: that potential participants are provided information in a form that they can understand; that the consent is completely voluntary; and finally, that the participant is both knowledgeable and capable of giving their consent (Kirk, 2007, p. 1254). Within this study participants and their parents/guardians were given full right to

consent/assent to the research, and to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were given ample time to read over the consent forms, and I went through each point on the form with them, and answered any questions they might have had. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point, that their participation was completely voluntary, and that no penalty would happen if they changed their minds. Finally, I implemented a screening process to ensure that participants spoke sufficient English to understand what the study entailed, and what it meant to be a part of it.

Additionally, strict precautions were set in place to ensure confidentiality. Participant names were replaced with codes and pseudonyms, and all forms were stored and locked in a secured cabinet at UBC. In accordance with BREB guidelines, these forms will be kept for up five years and then destroyed. Interview transcripts and data analysis files were kept in a locked folder on my computer. Participants were informed that they had the right to discuss only what they felt comfortable discussing. To ensure that participants had agency in the dissemination of their experience, I invited their feedback on the final analysis of their interview. During our follow up conversations, two participants requested that I take out specific details that they felt could identify them, and these items were removed. Furthermore, Kirk (2007) advises that it is good practice to discuss the limits of confidentiality on consent forms. Prior to each interview, I discussed the limits of confidentiality with all participants, and included it on every consent/assent form.

Kirk (2007) further cautions researchers that they “are seen as having an ethical responsibility to be prepared to contend with any negative emotions that children may experience” (p. 1254). As a counselling student, I have been privileged with the

opportunity to obtain skills that allowed me to create a safe environment within the interview setting, however if participants required additional support, I would have collaborated with a registered psychologist that could provide further counselling to the youth. While these psychologists were not called upon to offer services, they were available had there been a need. Additionally, I had a list of supportive community resources that I provided the youth when it was appropriate. Furthermore, I made sure to empower the participant to let me know how the interview was going for them, and shifted the conversation when I began to sense that we had touched on a topic they would rather not explore. On two occasions participants did request a change in topic, and on two occasions participants asserted their need to keep part of their migration experience private.

Finally, I have made clear to the participants that I will be making my findings available to them, and will be emailing them a copy of my thesis upon completion. Additionally, I have relayed the ways in which they can access these findings on their own if they so choose.

## Chapter Four: Results

This chapter will begin with a breakdown of the eight major structures that emerged with respect to the central phenomenon of cultural transition. Each structure is contextualized with a definition, and subthemes are explored using illustrative quotes. The chapter will conclude with a summary that weaves the structures together into an overall description of the structure of the phenomenon of cultural transition, as experienced by the participants.

### Identification of the Structures

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of cultural transition among newcomer youth. The main research question asked: *How do adolescents who immigrate or seek refuge in a new country experience cultural transition?* To uncover the underlying structure of the phenomenon, data was analyzed according to a series of steps as outlined by Giorgi (2009). According to Langdrige (2007), when one structure is unable to encapsulate the entirety of the phenomenon, it is appropriate to present a series of structures that outline the experience. In this case, data analysis unearthed the following eight structures: (a) Pre-migration Experiences/ *“I was excited”*; (b) Post-migration Impressions/ *“A totally new environment”*; (c) Education/ *“I’m always in school”*; (d) Friendships *“Friends is such an important part”*; (e) Family/ *“Changing makes you come closer”*; (f) Language/ *“Sometimes I don’t want to say anything”*; (g) Internal Experiences/ *“I wanted to leave”* and (h) Cultural Identity/ *“A bit of everything”*.

To protect the anonymity of the participants, they have all been given a pseudonym and any identifying information has been omitted and a clarification inserted

in rounded brackets. Information contained in squared brackets indicates behaviour or sound, while italicized content in rounded brackets indicates a contribution made by the listener.

### **Pre-migration Experiences/ “*I was excited*”**

The days, weeks, and months that preceded the participants’ journeys to Canada were filled with anticipation, excitement, and sometimes worry. All participants spoke about the time period before migration as a significant period of transience. For eight participants, this time spanned over the course of years and was laden with uncertainty. Immigration papers, denied applications, and family sponsorships took longer than they had anticipated and left some participants feeling powerless over the process. For those whose parents had migrated ahead of time, the family sponsorship process often resulted in prolonged periods of separation with no definite end point. Conversely, two participants were given only a few months to prepare and were informed of their departure only after the decision had been finalized. While they did not have to endure long periods of anticipation, their removal from the decision-making process left them feeling disoriented and initially confused. However, regardless of the amount of time participants had to prepare, they all regarded this time period as the starting point of their experience of cultural transition. Within this structure, two prominent sub-themes emerged: (a) the decision to leave, and (b) preparation to leave.

**Decision to leave.** All participants discussed the reasons why their families chose to migrate to Canada and the role they had in that decision. With the exception of one participant whose family sought refuge in Canada (and who did not specify the reasons why), all participants reported that their families chose to come to Canada to pursue

better opportunities for their children. Yet despite the fact that the decision was framed as being in their best interest, majority of the participants did not feel they had much agency in the decision itself. Seven participants felt that they had no choice in the matter, while three felt they were somewhat involved in the decision making process. For the most part, their level of participation in the decision to migrate was not evaluated as a negative or positive facet of their experience. Participants expressed trust in their parent's capacity to make the decision, and even when they did not feel they had a choice, felt it was their responsibility to appreciate the opportunity at hand and regarded it with an open mind. Alex, a 17-year-old male immigrant from Peru, stated: "I was like 'I like the idea', but they didn't ask me if I wanted to." Alex's attitude was a common thread among participants, many of whom "liked the idea" and saw it as an adventure. Some even felt it was an escape from circumstances in their home countries that they did not like (such as bullying, academic pressure and political strife) and wanted a "fresh start". Vivien, a 15-year-old female from China, saw migration as a rare opportunity that was to be appreciated and explained that "it's like a whole new experience and not everyone has the chance to go to another country and live there for your life".

For seven of the participants, their attitude about leaving was intertwined with the reason why their parents had chosen to leave. Common among all of them was the knowledge that this decision had been made to ensure a better future for their children. Participants described an initial sense of surprise that was followed by a recognition that they were moving for something that was presumably better, which resulted in an appreciation of the sacrifice their parents were making. Sohrab, a 17-year-old male from Iran explains:

Yeah didn't do it for themselves, there's nothing for them here. Now my mom has a good job, my dad actually enjoys here...less traffic, the little things, but the main reason we moved here is me. And I forgot that...I forgot that the first few years and once I realized it, it was a big difference.

The knowledge that the decision was made for their own benefit was often something that not only impacted their pre-migration attitude, but the relationships they had with their parents post migration (as discussed in the subcategory "disconnection").

Even in situations where the participants were given very little time to prepare and little to no choice in the matter, they strived to see the benefits of their migration.

Alicia, a 17-year-old female who arrived to Canada as a refugee, explained:

It's um, like new, you know, new country, I thought I'm going to improve my English, I'm going to see snow, I've never seen snow. I thought the positive things you know? I just thought "I'm going to go to school, I'm going to make new friends, like, it's ok I'm going to keep in contact with my friends here but I'll just make more".

Common among all the participants was a sense of hope for something better. Whether the notion of a better life was derived from their parent's stories, from portrayals of North America in the media, or from their own dreams and desires, all the participants hoped that a new life in a new country would lead to something greater than what they already had.

**Preparing to leave.** Following the decision to migrate, many participants began a process of preparation, which not only entailed English classes and research on Canada, but also involved an emotional process of coming to terms with the upcoming change. This process involved a sense of loss at having to leave friends and family that was mixed with anticipation for a new beginning. All 10 participants spoke about this time period, and for the eight participants that had a year or more to prepare, the prospect of migration sometimes shifted forms. In some cases, having time to get used to the idea was

beneficial. It allowed time for life circumstances to change, and for the idea of migration to become more appealing. Milo, a 17 year old from Thailand, explained that during the two years it took to get their visa, his life circumstances moved him from a state of resistance, to a state of anticipation:

Oh...oh I was so afraid, I was like “oh I have friends here, I don’t want to leave Thailand, why would you want to do that?”...but then we re-applied and I couldn’t wait to leave cuz my new school was horrible, cuz I moved school.

Conversely, other participants described the prolonged period of waiting to have the opposite effect. For them, migration felt like a surreal adventure that was far in the future. As the reality of it drew closer, however, they all began to realise that they might lose and became more resistant to the concept of leaving. Catherine, a 15-year-old female from the Philippines waited five years for her mother’s sponsorship of her to be approved. Although she had spent years of her life knowing she would one day move to Canada, she described that: “when I knew that we were already approved and we have the Visa already I feel sad”.

When it came to more logistical preparations, four participants discussed the benefits of preparing themselves with English classes and research on Canada. This practical preparation helped them to feel more in control of a situation that was, otherwise, completely new. When asked what advice she would give future newcomer youth, Vivien, a 15-year-old female from China, explained that the most important thing was preparation. She said:

Yeah, like on the Internet I did some research on what Canadian culture is like and what Canadian people do and what the school is like...so after research and all that stuff I kind of had like a basic idea of what it’s going to be like in Canada, I wasn’t all shocked.

A lack of preparation, on the other hand, was described as a precursor for disappointment and increased difficulty (both linguistically and emotionally). This was especially the case for Alex, a 17-year-old male from Peru who felt that his family had been given false information about what Canada was going to be like. When asked what would have helped, he described the need for pre-migration preparation programs:

It would have been nice if the programs weren't so focus on once you're here because if they...if they help you before you come here then the problems, first of all it would be easier for the government for monetary point of view, and then it would be easier for the person because then they would feel more comfortable because they know where they're going, right?

Indeed, the hope for a better life, combined with a lack of information on “where they’re going” was echoed among participants as a contributing factor to feelings of disappointment during their initial post-migration adjustment.

### **Post-Migration Impressions/ “*A totally new environment*”**

All participants highlighted the time following their arrival into Canada as a significant period of adjustment. This initial phase was described as the meeting of their pre-migratory expectations with the realities of their new environments, and a digestion of its permanence. While some experienced the sudden change as a shock, others took it in gradually. In most cases, their reactions were dependant on the situations that awaited them following their arrival, and the forces that had shaped their initial expectations prior to their departure. Two sub-themes are encompassed within this structure, including; (a) adjusting to new surroundings; and (b) expectations versus reality.

**Adjusting to new surroundings.** Participants described their first few days in Canada to be a time of “landing” and learning. This initial time period was laden with a mixture of feelings, including disorientation, confusion, excitement and disbelief. For

some, the realization that this was their new home was a process that took time. For others, the realization was sudden and felt like a shock. Their internal reaction largely depended on the circumstances into which they arrived. Those that had relatives and friends found comfort in the familiarity of friendly faces and familiar relationships. Likewise, those that had a few months to adjust to the city, without the expectation of starting school, found it easier to adjust to their new surroundings. Four participants, who did not start school right away, described the experience to feel like more of a vacation at first than a fixed living arrangement. For these participants, the first few days felt fun and full of new things to absorb and learn about. Catherine, a 15-year-old female from the Philippines, described this period of time as free from the challenges that she would eventually face. She says:

I feel like I'm just a tourist, cuz yeah...we're...we went in some places in Vancouver, I just...I'm happy, and I...I was...I'm not yet thinking about English, like how...how will I talk to people, how will I communicate?

These participants spent their days exploring the city, navigating their new public transit and, according to Vivien, a 15-year-old female from China, getting “familiar with the whole environment”.

However, this early stage of transition did not feel like a vacation for everyone. For more than half the participants, this time period was described as “lonely”, disorienting, and overwhelming. The reality of their situation felt especially difficult for participants who had to start school shortly after their arrival, and who did not know anyone in their host communities. For example, Alex, a 17-year-old male from Peru, migrated a week before his birthday and described: “I was 13, it was one week before my birthday. It was quite sad, there was no one at my birthday”. Additionally, the

unpredictability of their circumstances often compounded the uncertainty of this time period. This was especially the case for Alicia, a 17-year-old female refugee from Mexico, who had little control over her initial circumstances. She described the experience as follows:

When I first went to Montreal we arrived with nothing, we arrived with nothing, and then we went to, we were like in a refugee um, not camp, I wouldn't say camp, but it's a building, and it was yeah, it was very shocking to me.

Alicia's experience contrasted with those participants who were able to stay with people they knew, and who were given time to explore and enjoy their first few days. Evident among participants was the impact that time and social connections had on their initial adjustment period.

**Expectations versus reality.** For nine of the participants, their early days in Canada were filled with discrepancies between what they had expected things to be like, and what things were actually like. Feelings of disappointment and confusion took over as they realized that what they had imagined was different from the reality that surrounded them. Echoed among them was the notion that the more fixed their expectations had been, the more difficult it became to adjust to the reality of their surroundings. When asked what advice he would give future newcomers, Alex, a 17-year-old male from Peru highlighted the impact that one's expectations have on their transition experience. As someone who had arrived with many ideas of what life would look like, he cautioned future newcomers, saying:

It would be quite helpful, not to expect too much because when you expect too much then you get disappointed more easily and it makes it more difficult. Because when you get disappointed you get angry and then...so just expect...don't expect that it's going to be wonderful, but don't expect that it's going to be terrible, expect something...maybe a little bit worse than what it's

going to be so that way you feel that you're being given more than you were expecting.

Much like Alex, majority of the participants arrived with many expectations that ended up being different from their hopes of what life would look like upon arrival. In fact, only one of the 10 participants felt that her expectations matched the environment she landed into. Vivien, a 15-year-old female from China, spent a lot of time researching what to expect from Canadian life, and when asked if her experience aligned with her research, she said: "It was exactly what I expected Canada to be".

For five of the participants, however, pre-migration expectations were largely shaped by what they had seen in North American movies. Their new environment paled in comparison to the images of urban life and high school culture that had been depicted in movies and TV shows that they had watched in their countries of origin. Sohrab, a 17-year-old male from Iran, felt let down when his school life was not as exciting as the life he had seen on TV. He stated:

P: Even though, I want to step out of my comfort zone, I always have, my expectation, so much different. The movies, seeing the high school musical.

I: So what did you expect it to be like when you came here?

P: Better looking girls...more mature kids, better like school, like...it's not as fun as they show, I haven't been on a single field trip here. I thought that this is all it's about here just going out, doing creative stuff, but it's not like that, it's just the same stuff as Iran kind of.

Likewise, Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran, was expecting "somewhere like New-York" and ended up waking up in Victoria, BC, thinking that she was suddenly "living in a village". Once the surprise of her surroundings wore off, however, Mona was able to gradually accept the positive attributes of her new city. This process was common among

many participants, and over the course of time they were able to let go of their initial ideas and expectations.

### **Education/ “*I’m always in school*”**

Extensively discussed in all 10 interviews was the subject of education and school. Participants highlighted how overwhelming it was to start at a new school, and to absorb the many changes that accompanied that experience. Furthermore, when member checking with participants, majority of them reiterated that school was one of the most important aspects of their transition, because it was the primary world in which they lived. Vivien, a 15-year-old female from China, described school as follows:

Yeah, that’s like pretty much, like my life, it’s all about school. And it’s only like weekends that I’m not in school and all the other time I’m always in school.

Amongst all 10 participants, school was described as the arena in which a vast majority of their lives played out. School was where they first began to interact with Canadians, learn the English language, and pursue “a better education” which is why most of them had to come to Canada. Salient within this structure were four sub-themes: (a) navigating the changes; (b) curriculum; (c) the impact of school staff; and (d) ESL class.

**Navigating changes.** All the participants spoke about the many differences between the schools in their home countries, and the new schools that they enrolled in. As they looked around and took in their new surroundings, participants observed distinctions in the size of school and the look of campus. Furthermore, school norms, including: class schedules, dress codes, homework assignments and behavioural expectations were different from the norms in their countries of origin, and were often left unexplained by those who provided them with their initial orientation. As they

adjusted to these changes, there was a shared sense of vulnerability as they made mistakes and relied on the willingness of others to help them.

The unfamiliarity of their surroundings compounded their own sense of being new to the world around them. Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran, went from a school that was held “in an apartment” to a large campus full of students. Conversely, Malia, a 16-year-old female from Thailand stated:

Yeah, cuz in Thailand it was a campus so there was more buildings and different areas, but there was only one building at my school, and the environment is different the teacher is different, and like I said...language.

Becoming familiar with their new campus, and learning the school culture around them, involved a process of trial and error that was woven throughout the interviews.

Participants described a steep learning curve that involved getting used to lockers, figuring out that they needed to change for PE classes and “getting lost going through all those hallways”.

As they began to navigate the new system around them, half of the participants conveyed feelings of confusion that resulted from a lack of sufficient information. Often they were provided with an orientation on their first day, after which they were left on their own. Navigating the new school system was a daunting task, and many participants felt alone and overwhelmed. Alicia, a 17-year-old female from Mexico was told to look at the calendar to find her classes. Having come from a school where students stayed in one classroom all day, she explained:

Because I was in this class and the bell rang and everybody stood up, and then they leave and then I’m like, you know I said like “what? What should I do” and then you know I asked someone, and he’s like “ok go straight and then turn left, look at the numbers”

Similarly, Milo, a 17-year-old male from Thailand, was unsure of where he should sit during lunch. After walking around for a while, he sat with the grade eight students and had to be “guided back to the grade seven area”. Common among these participants was a sense of frustration at the lack of information that was provided them, and the disadvantageous position that this placed them in.

For the three participants from Iran, one of the biggest changes was attending a co-ed school. In addition to learning the new ways of their campus, and the cultural norms of interaction, they were also faced with the tasks of socializing with peers of the opposite sex, which they were not used to. Ava, a 15-year-old female from Iran described the experience as follows:

I didn't know...how is it...I was like “how does this work? Do they talk to each other? Are they friends? How does this work?” I didn't know “What do they say?” cuz we don't talk that much with boys, and boys and girls talk about different things, like when you are talking to a boy, what do you say? I don't know that stuff.

She went on to explain her dilemma in dance class, when she was suddenly supposed to dance with boys and did not want to. The experience felt foreign to her, and, internally, she felt singled out by her discomfort. On the contrary, Sohrab, a 17-year-old male participant from Iran, “didn't have a problem” going to school with girls, but realized quickly that the way guys and girls were “friendly” in Canada would be very different from what he was used to. He felt humbled by the ways in which his old persona of being a “ladies man” in Iran, no longer served him when he tried to interact with Canadian girls. While disorienting for all three participants, each reported progressively getting used to it over time.

**Curriculum.** Prominent among all 10 interviews was the topic of school curriculum. Given that seven participants came to Canada with hopes of a better education, their academic experiences were important to them. For those that found the transition challenging, the pressure of succeeding academically resulted in increased levels of stress and social withdrawal. However, majority of the participants considered it easier than the academic programs in their home countries, which often impacted their level of engagement in the classroom. The topic of curriculum mattered to majority of the participants; because it was through their academic success that they would go on to accomplish the career goals.

Six of the participants reported that the curriculum felt easier than they had anticipated. Teaching methods were more “hands-on” and less theoretical, and the attitude of teachers seemed more “laid back.” This was surprising for them, and participants reported feeling dissatisfied at first. Explaining his frustration on the subject, Alex, a 17-year-old male from Peru described:

Like math was really really boring. We were doing equations with tiles, I did that in grade 2 with tiles, cuz tiles were supposed to be for kids, like who uses tiles? And so when we had to use tiles it made me angry.

Recognizing this change in curriculum was especially worrying for two participants who felt they would fall behind their friends back home. For example, after talking to her friends in Iran, Ava, a 15-year-old female began to feel anxious. She explained: “I heard from them what they learned and I was not learning those and so it made me kinda nervous at the beginning”. Worrying that they were not learning as much as their peers made them feel that they were at a disadvantage. However, both reported that they

eventually accepted this shift since they would not be returning to their home countries, and felt that they now had an advantage in Canada.

For three participants, the easy nature of the curriculum resulted in decreased motivation and boredom. Sohrab, a 17-year-old male from Iran describes the following:

And even like getting B was bad in my school, you want A, straight A's. But here, you're so independent that I kind of started...at first it was easy because school is harder in Iran and the stuff we were studying math 9 I learned in math 5 in Iran, so it was easy at first but then I stopped practicing because no one was making me. The teachers, honestly don't care here, the teachers don't care here at all.

The repetition of material that Sohrab already learned, coupled with his perception that teachers didn't care reduced his sense of accountability and drive. However, this lack of motivation caught up with Sohrab and the other two participants as the curriculum advanced, and things became more challenging down the road.

For four participants, however, the new academic curriculum was described as challenging, which was, in part, due to linguistic limitations. Malia, a 16-year-old female from Thailand, describes the stress of trying to keep up in school:

I actually got headaches during classes because it was so stressful. I actually got pretty good grades but that made it harder on me, to keep up with my grades. But my mom said "don't worry about it" but I didn't really believe that.

In order to remain at the same level as the rest of the class, these participants felt they needed to double their efforts. Vivien, a 15-year-old female from China explained that while she had never studied the history of Canada before, "students here they grow up here so um, they have like a basic idea of like what the history is like so it's probably easier for them." The stress of keeping up with others often felt unfair, as participants had to spend extra time translating material and learning information they had missed.

In addition to the difficulty level of the curriculum, five participants talked about the many courses that were suddenly available to them and their internal reactions to this wide selection. Three of these participants were excited by the variety of electives they had to choose from. Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran with a passion for art, was pleasantly surprised that she was able to pick her own courses. She said:

They even told me I could chose my own courses, but in my country I had to pass 12 courses, I have to pass them in the time they chose for me. But in Canada they told me “If you like you can have Science, if you like you can have math or art or whatever” in Iran we don’t have art at all.

However, two participants found the wide selection of courses overwhelming. Without enough information on how to pick the right courses, they found themselves nervous of making a mistake, and planning things out incorrectly. Ava, a 15-year-old female participant from Iran felt daunted by the wide array of courses, and was alone in trying to navigate her way through them. She stated:

And then at the end of the year they gave me a different sheet and told me I had to fill this sheet for next year’s courses and I was like “I’ve been here for one month, I don’t know what to chose, I don’t know what to chose” and they said that on the school website, I don’t know somewhere, there are all the codes for the courses and I couldn’t find them so here they use a lot of website, when you go ask for something they give you website “go here go there”.

All five participants spoke to the benefits of support during this process, and the need for additional information on how to plan out their courses appropriately.

**The impact of school staff.** School teachers and counsellors were described by all participants as key players in their experience of cultural transition. Given how important their school lives were, teachers and counsellors were seen as people who were in a position to help. Although many participants felt nervous and resistant to asking for such help, they were expressly appreciative when it was offered to them. Moreover,

participants expressed feelings of disappointment when faced with unsupportive or unavailable school staff.

For five participants, teachers and counsellors were supportive figures that provided them with social support. Specifically, these participants highlighted the role that staff had in connecting them with other students. Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran, decided to move schools after being bullied at her previous high school. On her first day at the new school, she explained the impact the school counsellor had on her integration:

My counsellor come to me and told me “Oh all grade 12’s are sitting in the front, why you are not with them?” “I said that I don’t know any of them and she introduced me to them and they were really nice with me, I’m so happy to see that.

For Mona, the support of this counsellor made all the difference. Having struggled to make friends at her previous school, she felt a sense of hope at her new school counsellor’s welcoming approach. Additionally, some school counsellors were described as advocates and at times, even a refuge. For Catherine, the counsellor’s office represented a space to take a break from the daunting school she was trying to navigate. After noticing that she was sitting alone at lunch, the counsellor offered her a space in her office. Catherine recounted:

P: Yeah, once, when she saw me outside and she asked me...she..

I: The counsellor?

P: Yeah...she told me that I can eat inside their room.

I: She saw you eating alone outside?

P: Yeah, and there was a time when I was so sad and I felt like crying so she saw me and she...she say a lot of like encouraging words to me.

Similar to Catherine, all five participants commented on the effectiveness of staff that approached them and took the time to inquire how they could help.

In addition to social support, helpful teachers and counsellors were described as people who took time out of their day to provide academic assistance. Participants were particularly appreciative of teachers that demonstrated a willingness to meet outside of class, and a desire to ensure that their students were keeping up with the material. This resulted in participants feeling as though they mattered to their teachers, which was encouraging for them. Vivien, a 15-year-old female from China, felt her teachers cared about her when they offered to tutor her outside of class hours. She stated:

They would...she or he, they would use their own time to like give me tutoring. Umm...like in the morning when they're not supposed to be at school, they kind of like, they come to school later like...for example they are supposed to come to school at 8 but they come to school at 7 just to give me like tutoring and stuff.

Vivien went on to relay how nervous she was to have to ask her teachers for help, but how grateful and impressed she felt by their dedication to meet her in the morning.

Likewise, Miguel, a 15-year-old male from Mexico, experienced his teachers as “really nice”, pointing out that when he did not understand things “they slowed down” and took it at his pace. Indeed, when teachers made efforts to meet participants exactly where they were, they were viewed as pivotal sources of support.

The impact of supportive staff was made even more evident when compared to the reactions of participants who felt unsupported by their teachers and counsellors. Five participants expressed frustration at teachers who seemed unaware of their need for support. For two participants, this frustration stemmed from the perception that their teachers didn't really care about them. When Alex, a 17-year old male from Peru, started at his new school, only one teacher introduced him to the class. He recounted:

I wasn't expecting the school to make us play games but I was expecting the teacher to introduce me to the class at least, that was something I was taking for granted.

Likewise, two participants found their teachers to be far removed from the bullying that would take place in their classroom. They felt left alone to deal with what was happening to them, and in some cases, felt betrayed by teachers who inadvertently took the side of the bullies. While supported academically, Miguel, a 15-year-old male from Mexico, did not feel his teachers understood his experience. He said:

The only thing I could think of was that they wouldn't understand what I was going through because like, sometimes they would see people laughing about it and they wouldn't really do anything. Maybe they would think they were laughing with me, even though I wasn't really laughing, maybe that's what I think.

Additionally, one participant found the school counsellor to be discouraging. When Alicia from Mexico, was trying to plan out what courses she would need to apply for medical school, the school counsellor told her that she would most likely fail them and advised her to "be realistic". Alicia explained that while she recognized the value of talking to counsellors, in that moment she lost trust in the counsellor saying: "I don't really feel that she cares."

**ESL class.** All 10 participants reported having been enrolled in an ESL class at one point during their transition into the school system. For eight participants, the ESL class stood apart from other components of their school life. ESL brought together a number of English language learners from a diverse range of backgrounds, and as a result, provided relief from other classes wherein participants were expected to keep up with fluent English language speakers.

Four participants described feeling safe in ESL class as a result of being surrounded by other newcomer and international students. ESL classes brought together those students who were new to the school and to Canada, which normalized feelings participants were experiencing, and helped them to feel less alone. Vivien, a 15-year-old female from China said:

Um...it was just like meeting new people and we could like study together since we're all newcomer and ESL student, we had like more common topics, we had like um, something to talk about like we couldn't talk with the other students like Canadian students and...cuz they, they won't be able to understand like our feelings. So I guess, the ESL students, they, they were able to understand like how I felt, we had...we had like the same feelings.

Similar to Vivien, other participants felt that they were better understood by their ESL peers, and could better relate to one another's experiences, which resulted in the formation of friendships.

Additionally, six participants highlighted the role that ESL teachers played in their adjustment to the school, and the larger community. ESL teachers were described as the teachers who best understood their situation, and were consequently seen as safe harbours in a sea of teachers who didn't know them. For Mona and Catherine, their ESL teachers connected them to local organizations that provided them with other services for newcomer youth. For Ava, a 15-year old female from Iran, the ESL counsellor was the one person that she felt she could seek information from:

Basically my ESL counsellor, she likes really helps me, especially in this year, I'm asking her about the courses, many of the IB courses and kind of things, I kind of have a connection with her because I feel like she knows like what my level is. Other teachers and regular counsellors they like look at us all like grade 10 students, but my ESL counsellor knows my ESL level and stuff, so I felt like of connected to her and can talk with her.

Turning to ESL teachers for information and support was common among participants. Since ESL teachers played a role in helping them with their English learning process, they were viewed as more accessible than alternative staff members, including counsellors.

Unlike the other participants, however, one participant relayed feeling segregated by being in ESL as she had to skip her regular class to be part of ESL. Malia, a 16-year-old female from Thailand explained that the experience “wasn’t good” and made her feel like she was “special needs somehow”. Already feeling as though she was different, ESL simply compounded the experience of separation between her and the rest of the students.

**Friendship/ “*Friends is such an important part*”**

All participants discussed the impact that having friends, or not having friends had on their process of cultural transition. For some, the experience of making friends unfolded naturally, while for others, it was a slow process that involved feelings of exclusion and loneliness. Regardless of this experience, all 10 participants described friendships (both within and outside the school setting) to be a catalyst for social integration and feelings of belonging. The importance of friends can be seen through the words of Miguel, a 15-year-old male from Mexico, who described how he felt when he finally had a group of peers to hang out with:

That I could express myself, be myself, had friends to hang out, do my crazy stuff that I always do and then like, not being alone most of the time...that...that fifth one, that’s when I was like “oh ok I’m back home”.

Indeed, friendship was for many equated with a sense of belonging that could not be replaced by any other type of support. Within the structure of friendship four sub-themes were revealed and will be explored in this section: (a) support and information; (b)

exclusion; (c) befriending newcomers and international students; and (d) community involvement.

**Support and information.** Faced with the changes and challenges that accompany the process of migration, all 10 participants found their friends to be primary sources of support. For six participants, even having one friend was transformative to their experience of cultural transition, because it meant that they did not have to face all the changes and challenges alone. In many ways, the companionship of one person increased their resiliency when faced with difficulties. For example, Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran, was bullied in her high school. However, she explained that having one friend in class with her helped her to cope:

It was in my pre-cal too, but because one of my German friends was with me, we were sitting by each other. They used to laugh to her too, because of me I think, they were sitting exactly to back of us and laughing to us, and it get to both of us, but because we were together, and our teacher like us because we had good marks, it wasn't that much hard.

Prevalent among all six participants was the notion that having even a friend alleviated the feeling of loneliness that they had previously experienced. Catherine, a 16-year-old female from the Philippines, would normally eat lunch alone in the counsellor's office, until she found another newcomer student who also ate alone, and texted her to see if they could eat together. Similarly, when asked what was most helpful to her throughout her cultural transition experience, Malia, a 16-year-old female from Thailand replied: "Well having that one friend that was always there for me and stayed by my side, it helps a lot". Knowing that there was someone to walk the halls with, eat lunch with, and talk about their lives with helped them to feel better about their lives in Canada.

Having a single friend was not only beneficial for the emotional comfort it brought, it was also conducive to meeting more friends. When asked about their process of making friends, seven participants explained that it was by making one friend, or a few friends, that their social network would expand. As their social networks expanded, participants felt more at home. Milo, a 17-year-old male from Thailand, knew one student at his school through family friends. He explained that it was through that student that the following happened:

I know this person and then I know the other person who knows this person and they introduced me to this person and they're kind of like really friendly, some of them really friendly, so I just kind of you know go with it...

Having a friend both widened participant's social circles, and gave them courage to meet people outside their existing social network. Malia, a 16-year-old female who had previously described her friend as the most helpful source of support, also explained: "I became more involved with school, I joined band, cuz she was in it, and sports, cuz she was in it."

Friends were also described as supportive, in that they could provide the participants with information about their new environment. They felt safer asking their peers for information than going to teachers. Three participants highlighted the ways in which their friends helped guide them through the school norms that were new to them, and even offered them help with homework. Vivien, a 15-year-old female from China, described one of the ways her friends helped her:

Like for PE I didn't know we had to change for PE cuz we don't really change in China for PE, and I was like I had no idea what it was like in PE here, and so my friends, they really helped me. They had...they told me like "you know you have to go to change room, you know you change and then you go to PE".

Having friends to turn to with questions reduced their sense of vulnerability, and made the change less overwhelming.

**Exclusion.** Although all participants discussed the benefits of having friends, eight of them also described challenges they faced when trying to make friends. Primary among these challenges were feelings of exclusion and invisibility that resulted from being on the outside of existing social circles. Three participants relayed that students at their school did not seem to notice that they were even there. Participants were frustrated and disappointed by the realization that their hopes of making friends would not turn out the way they wanted. Alicia, a 17-year-old female from Mexico, commented on her initial impression of the students at her school:

Well you know it's not like in the movies and they say like 'oh they're not going to like you, and then in the cafeteria is like these people and these people' no...but they just don't care.

When compared to the schools in their countries of origin, participants noted that if a new student had joined their previous school, they would have been welcomed with curiosity and excitement. They were, consequently, surprised by the apathetic response they received by Canadian students.

In addition to feeling unnoticed, four participants felt that the social circles in their schools were not open to new people. Alex, a 17-year-old male from Peru, explained that after nearly four years of going to the same school "it's really difficult still to fit into one group". Alex felt anger at his failed attempts to befriend mainstream Canadian students, and eventually decided to give up and befriend other newcomers and international students instead. According to Sohrab, a 17-year-old male from Iran, one of the reasons why social groups were so closed was that:

Students go from like first grade together till like end of high school because of the...you know if you go to (name of a school) you have to go to (name of a school) because of the location thing if you know what I'm saying. But in Iran it's not like that you go to elementary school everyone is making new friends, everyone's open, yeah everyone's open. But here, everyone knew each other since like they were kids. So it was kind of hard to make friends.

Participants acknowledged that they could not compete with the history that existed between students who had known each other for such long periods of time. For many, this resulted in a sense of powerlessness and an eventual resignation to the impossibility of integrating into the mainstream crowd.

While some participants did receive attention from the students in their class, they were disappointed by the impression that the other students regarded them out of obligation only. Malia, a 16-year-old female from Thailand, recounted how her teacher assigned her to a group on her first day at school. After her initial excitement at having people to talk to, she realized that: "They didn't want to do it, but the teacher asked them. But then a month later they don't talk to me anymore because they have their own group." Likewise, Catherine, a 16-year-old from the Philippines, described how students would be helpful at first, and then go back to their previous social circles. Hurt by the insincerity of their peers, both participants withdrew from the social circles around them, and spent their initial few months spending most of their time alone.

However, not all participants felt unnoticed. For four participants, exclusion took on a more active form and resulted in bullying and discrimination. Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran, described her experience:

Because I'm a kind of person who's studying hard, who's focusing on her study. When, they had problem, like the people who's sitting by me, I was helping them, or I was answering the teacher, and I think they didn't like it and they start talking about me...moving from my place. And after two month I was the only person

who was sitting in front of the chemistry class, and they all moved to the back, and they were talking about me and I heard them what they say.

During this time, Mona described that she consequently entered a state of depression, which eventually led her to switch schools. Likewise, the other three participants often got teased for having an accent and making linguistic mistakes. Participants struggled to defend themselves in English, and felt targeted for not fitting in due to their clothing, their accents and the fact that they were unaware of certain social norms.

For four of the participants, exclusion from school peers resulted in a sense of overall isolation. This was especially the case during the early stages of their transition into the school. Without friends to talk to or eat lunch with Milo, a 17-year-old male from Thailand, found himself spending time alone:

I didn't talk to anybody at all, just like sit there with my head down and you know, pretty nervous, and I find western kids can be like different humour than Thai kids and when I tried to make jokes they just like "what are you talking about?"

Over time, isolation brought with it feelings of fear and anxiety at the thought of initiating conversation, and participants longed for others to approach them. Alex, a 17-year-old from Peru, described the inner turmoil of wanting to make conversation: "I was like 'let's try tomorrow, let's try tomorrow' cuz I was afraid every day... some days I wouldn't even talk to anyone". Echoed among participants was the desire for others to initiate contact and show an interest in them, as the task of approaching groups of people they did not know was overwhelming.

Making friends and fitting in was important to participants, and four of them discussed their awareness that drug use was one possible way to get "in" with various peer groups. However, majority felt strongly opposed to this being used as a means to

gain friends. Frustrated by the reality that if you “really want to roll with them” you needed to “smoke weed”, Alicia, a 17-year-old from Mexico, compared her difficulties with making friends, to another newcomer student who began to do drugs:

He smokes weed and then he like, he has money so he can be with the good amount of weed, you know like this, and people like “oh my god, this boy, like this boy he’s so strong and he smokes so much weed” and...so that really, I think it like “ seriously, like because of that you like someone?”

Alicia’s disdain for drug use as a way to make friends was contrasted with the attitude of Sohrab, a 17-year-old male from Iran, who was able to become popular and hang out with the “cool guys” after smoking marijuana with them. He commented: “I thought if I’m speaking the language I mine as well smoke what they’re smoking”. With time, however, he realized that the only thing he had in common with his newfound friends was doing drugs, and so he chose to distance himself from them. With the exception of Sohrab, however, the other participants chose to withdraw from social interaction altogether, as opposed to engaging in behaviour that clashed with their values.

**Befriending newcomers and international students.** For seven participants, the process of making friends felt more natural with other newcomer students and international students (both within their schools and within the greater community in which they lived). Their shared experience of migration provided common ground and participants felt less intimidated to approach them and initiate friendships. For example, after spending many lunches alone, Catherine, a 16-year-old female from the Philippines, discovered a classroom in which other newcomers would hang out at lunch. Catherine instantly felt more comfortable amongst these students, she explained:

Cuz they also eat rice and I feel like we’re all the same and I don’t know...I’m more comfortable when I’m with international students cuz I know that they’re also learning English and we have the same...almost the same situations.

Much like their experiences within the ESL classroom, spending time with other English language learners felt more comfortable as it reduced the likelihood of judgment and ridicule. Mona, a 17-year-old from Iran, commented:

I think one of the most important reason is their language, they don't speak English really fast, they don't talk...they don't use the word like a thousand times between each sentence and they don't make me confused when they're talking. It was really important for me that... because sometimes Canadians laugh to you when you don't understand them and they never laughed to me.

Shared experiences, combined with the awareness that English was a second language, liberated participants to speak more freely and therefore, be more authentic around other newcomers and international students.

Additionally, participants explained that having friends from the same cultural background, or at least a similar one, was simply easier. Shared values and cultural norms offered comfort and familiarity in an otherwise foreign social system. When Sohrab, a 17-year-old male from Iran, started to befriend Canadian born students, he found that having his Iranian friend with him made him feel more confident. He said: "If I couldn't tell a joke in English I would just tell him and laugh even though we were in a group". Knowing that at least one person would understand his joke was important, and helped him to express himself. Likewise, Ava, a 15-year-old female from Iran, considered that "Asians have kind of closer cultures" and as a result they would "kind of know what we expect from each other, how to behave and stuff".

However, the comfort of spending time with fellow newcomers was not always beneficial in the long run. Three participants discussed the drawbacks of befriending international students who were only at their schools on exchanges from their home-countries. Despite efforts to befriend Canadian born students at their schools, all three

participants felt that the only group of students they could really get “in” with were the international students. Alicia, a 17-year-old female from Mexico who had lived in Canada for four years, felt she couldn’t connect with the Canadian students at her school. Eventually, she gravitated toward other Spanish speaking international students. Yet, the experience proved difficult as she described:

Well in a way it stops me now of really adapting because I just, it’s just temporary. You know I’m used to being with these people and it’s good and everything, but then they leave and it’s the summer (*you have to start all over again*) and yeah exactly, I start again.

Similarly, Alex, a 17-year-old male from Peru, spent his first semester hoping to connect with Canadian born students at his school. Although he was approached by fellow Spanish speaking international students, he explained: “I didn’t want to talk in Spanish cuz it made it more difficult to hang out with the Canadians cuz I wasn’t Canadian right?” However, after a full semester of feeling like he had no friends, Alex eventually befriended the international students, who eventually returned to their home countries. While grateful to have friends, these participants longed to be connected to a peer group that was less transitory, and felt saddened by how difficult this had been to achieve.

**Community involvement.** All participants had been involved in youth programs that were delivered through non-profit organizations servicing immigrants and refugees in their communities. While some learned about these programs through their ESL teachers, majority of the youth had heard about these services through their parents, and initially joined because their parents encouraged them to. Once they joined, however, participants reported feeling a sense of community and belonging. The only drawback was that these connections were not transferable into their school lives.

Three participants found that community youth programs provided respite from the effort it took to try and fit in at school. Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran, explained that she was not really herself at school, but rather tried to be “Canadian”.

When attending these youth programs, she stated:

But in youth programs, I didn’t have to at all, I was myself, and they all I think were kind of themselves and I felt really more comfortable there. I didn’t have to play for them, I wasn’t actress there, I was (participant’s name).

Mona attributed the freedom she felt to the types of activities that were delivered within the youth program she was part of. Much like Mona, other participants expressed an appreciation for activities that encouraged youth to be themselves and form friendships with one another.

Activities delivered within community youth programs were also conducive to the establishment of a community feel, which helped participants open up about their experiences of cultural transition. For Milo, a 17-year-old male from Thailand, the group felt like a family, which allowed him to share his feelings with other youth. He stated: “it was really great, it feels like a family pretty much cuz it’s, everybody is just so nice to each other and we like, go through, share a lot of feelings with each other”. Similarly, Miguel, a 15-year-old male from Mexico, felt that because other youth had been through similar experiences, they would not judge him. He explained that this resulted in feeling “more like open to talking about what’s going on, like within your experience that you’re going through.”

While some participants felt that these programs connected them to the greater communities in which they lived, three participants commented on the fact that they were too insular. Although they provided a sense of relief and comfort, these programs did not

change the experience that participants faced at school, nor did they connect them to other Canadian youth. Alicia, a 17-year-old female from Mexico, commented: “you have a good time, like that is for sure, but, I don’t see where you like getting into the community there, or like into the Canadian community.” For these three participants, the greatest challenges they faced were at school and in the home, and while these programs provided them with a much-needed break, they did not address the issues that were of primary importance to them.

**Family/ “*Changing makes you come closer*”**

For all participants, familial relationships played an important role in their experience of cultural transition. For some, family was the constant amidst the changes around them, while others experienced vast shifts within their households. Participants described their family life to be instrumental to their overall well-being. When participants felt supported within the home, family became a source of strength and comfort. When participants experienced pressure and conflict within the home, however, stress would inevitably spill over into other facets of their lives. The changes that they encountered outside their home both had an effect on, and were effected by, the changes happening within their homes. For example, when participants began to behave differently as a result of the cultural influences around them, their parents often reacted negatively. These negative reactions increased participant stress levels and in turn, impacted the ways in which they behaved at school. Thus family life mattered to the participants, and influenced their experience in a number of different ways. Within this structure, four sub-themes emerged and will be explored: (a) strengthened family

connections; (b) prolonged periods of family separation; (c) family as a source of support or stress and (d) disconnection.

**Strengthened family connections.** All 10 participants experienced a closer relationship with at least one family member post-migration. Having lost connections with their prior communities, extended families, and friends, they found comfort and companionship in the members of their immediate family. Five participants described the experience as one that brought their entire family closer together. As an only child, Vivien, a 15-year old female, moved to Canada from China with her two parents. Her experience was as follows:

Well, the first few months we were actually closer...like changing, makes you come closer, you don't have...it's only you three, maybe you have family friends but the only people you can really rely on it's your close family, so we became closer the first year.

For Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran, her family became a refuge from the bullying she was experiencing at school. She described her mother and brother as “my only real friend. They can understand me really well, I can talk with them, and they want to protect me. They love me.” Common among all five participants was a newfound appreciation for family relationships, and a sense of solidarity with their family members as they experienced the newness of their lives together.

While some felt that migration brought their whole family closer together, others felt that migration had distanced them from their parents, and consequently brought them closer to their siblings. Five participants reported a renewed sense of companionship with siblings who not only understood their experience of cultural transition, but could also relate to the changes that were taking place within their home. Alicia, a 17-year-old female, arrived to Canada as a refugee from Mexico. Although she travelled with her

mother and sister, she had grown up, for the most part, with her grandmother. Living with her mother was new for her, and as a result, her relationship to her sister became the one constant relationship in her life. She explained:

With my sister I'm closer. I always said, if it wasn't because of her, and she said the same, if it wasn't because of me, this would have been 1000 times harder. Because at least I could be with her and then laugh, or, you know, just like come back from the house and just joke about like "oh we're like super losers, no body..." you know just making fun you know?

Indeed, participants who had experienced prolonged periods of separation from their parents reported a sense of closeness and support from the relationship they had with their siblings. In addition to offering companionship, some siblings also stepped into care-giving role. For example, Milo, a 17-year-old male from Thailand observed that after his mother moved away (in order to sponsor her family to come to Canada), he began to comfort his sister through the loss. Additionally, after moving to Canada, he explained that "she has some trouble at school with her friends and I'm 'oh it's ok, you'll find some friends don't worry about it' so you know I had to be more mature".

The value of a sibling relationship was evidenced by Miguel, a 15-year-old male from Mexico, who wished he could have had a sibling during the process of cultural transition. As an only child, Miguel often felt that no one could understand what he was going through. When asked what would have been most helpful for him during his settlement process, Miguel replied: "A brother, definitely. Because I don't think my cousins ever went through that...the loneliness? because they had each other. I'm an only child and that puts me so alone". Miguel's wish was validated through the experiences of those who did have siblings, and who expressed their gratitude for the support of that relationship.

**Prolonged periods of family separation.** Throughout their process of migration, eight participants experienced prolonged periods of time where they were separated from at least one parental figure. Six of these eight participants were separated from one of their parents as a result of staggered migration, wherein one parent would migrate to Canada before the rest (either to sponsor the family, or set things up in preparation for their arrival). Additionally, four participants experienced having one of their parents return to their country of origin for work purposes while the rest of the family remained in Canada. These periods of separation changed the dynamic within participants' households and placed participants in new familial roles. As previously described, some stepped into care-giving roles with siblings, while others felt a sense of obligation to help the remaining parent with household responsibilities.

Prolonged family separation impacted both participants' pre-migration experiences, and post-migration transition. When Malia, a 16-year old female from Thailand, found out that her mother was moving to Canada, the family thought it would only take two months for her to sponsor the rest of them. Unfortunately, the process took nearly two years. As a 12-year-old girl, she was now "the only girl in the house" and "cried for three days" after her mother left. Once reunited, however, her father had to leave Canada and return to Thailand to work for two years. As she tried to adjust to a new school, Malia found herself withdrawing from wanting to socialize, explaining that her "focus was school and family, cuz my dad had to go back to Thailand to do his work. So it was just me and my mom and I was trying to make a connection with her since we had been away". The need to re-establish a connection with their parents was common among participants who had been separated from their parents for a long period of time.

Catherine, a 16-year-old female from the Philippines, had waited nearly 10 years to see her mother. Once reunited, she explained, “the first time that I came here I was not talking, I was so quiet cuz I didn’t know what to say and it’s kind of new to me.” In addition to the many changes that accompanied moving to a new country, these participants had the added task of getting to know their parents again.

Participants whose parents returned to their home countries for work purposes described the experience as one that increased their sense of loneliness. Vivien, a 16-year old female from China, whose father has to split his year between China and Canada, describes the experience as follows:

Um...that I felt really lonely, cuz it’s like, it’s only me and mom living here so we have to do everything on our own when every other kids they have like both their parents here, and when their mom couldn’t do something their dad could do it, but for me just me and my mom.

For these four participants, the changes that they were going through were compounded by the temporary loss of their parent. They described feeling increased familial responsibilities and a tangible loss within the home.

**Family as a source of support or stress.** Seven participants discussed the particular ways in which their families either supported them during their cultural transition, or added additional stress to their overall experience, while some of these participants illustrated ways in which their families did both. Five participants described feeling supported in a variety of ways, including: open and honest dialogue, supporting their future aspirations, encouraging them to join community programs and introducing them to new hobbies and activities that helped them get through difficult times. For Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran, the biggest support came in the form of her mother’s open mindedness to the new culture in which they lived. She explains:

Yeah, because being someone out of home and coming to home, another culture, is kind of hard. You have to be someone else out of home and inside someone else. But when I saw my mom is changing with me I felt really good I understand that I don't have to be someone else at home I can be myself.

As Mona watched her mother adapt to the society around her, it liberated her to do the same. While each of the participants were supported in different ways, they all felt further equipped to deal with the changes in their lives as a result of this support.

Conversely, five participants felt their families were often sources of added pressure during an already stressful time. For them, parental expectations were at the root of the problem. For example, Malia, a 16-year-old female from Thailand, was expected to do well in school while still working at her family's business most weeknights. She described the pressure of keeping up with her responsibilities as follows:

Helping with the restaurant, and like school, and friends. Well, for like now I have a pretty hard semester, I have a lot of homework, but again I can't do a lot of homework until after I've done work, which is around 9, which is really late. I got to school, I go to bed at around 12, I wake up at around 7, that's pretty late but it's not enough sleep for me, I always fall asleep in classes, all the time I do fall asleep

Additionally, parents were described as having "strict" rules that often got in the way of their social transition. Alex, 17-year-old male from Peru, explained how his father was fearful of him going out on his own, or getting involved with organizations in the community. As a result, he was held back from spending time with friends, volunteering in the community and getting involved in local programs for newcomer youth. He describes the experience as follows:

Yes, that was also something that was really difficult to make new friends, my dad, sometimes they would be like "can you come downtown with us?" and then I'd be "Can I go downtown?" and he would be like "No! It's too far away its too dangerous"...like I never went out anywhere cuz he didn't let me so it was really hard making friends.

Alex went on to describe the frustration he felt at being held back from integrating in the community, especially because it was his father who wanted to migrate in the first place. Frustration, anger and annoyance were common feelings among participants who felt restricted by their parent's rules. However, they all reported that these restrictions subsided over time and that the more their parents were able to relax, the easier their integration process became.

**Disconnection.** As time passed, half the participants reported feeling an increased sense of disconnection from family members. Busy schedules and increased responsibilities resulted in less communication and shared time as a family. While they understood the reasons behind this disconnection (namely an increase in parental responsibilities as a result of financial and work obligations) they experienced the situation as something they had very little control over. Participants described this to be a lonely feeling that pushed them to be more self-sufficient. This is exemplified through Milo, a 17-year-old male from Thailand, who explains the ways in which his family changed after buying and operating a restaurant:

We're a bit disconnected now cuz me, my parents are always working 24/7 and I kind...pretty kind of on my own cuz I have to bus and walk everywhere now, so you know feels a bit...I don't know, distant from my parents now, but still, you know I love them and yeah.

Family members were described as having their own "personal bubble" and households felt empty, with everyone attending to their responsibilities. Participants unwillingly resigned to their new realities, as exhibited through Miguel, a 15-year-old male from Mexico, who said:

Like my mom I hardly see her, today, she works just from like 7-2 but she usually works 7-2 then she rests for like an hour while I'm at school and then she goes back to work and I don't see her sometimes for like 4 days.

The unavailability of their parents was saddening for the participants, and at times felt unfair when they compared to the families of their friends from school. However, for the most part, it eventually was received with acceptance. Knowing that their parents had made a sacrifice for them by coming to Canada inhibited them from wanting to complain.

Hand in hand with a sense of disconnection, was a decrease in communication between these participants and their parents. They worried that by confiding in their parents, they would be adding to an already heavy stress load, and would become a burden to their parents. Alex, a 17-year-old male from Peru, explains: “ We didn’t share everything because then everyone, it would be a little bit too heavy a load for my parents if I told them everything”. Additionally, a feeling of guilt presided over the participants as they considered the sacrifices their parents had made in immigrating to Canada. Alicia, a 17-year-old female from Mexico relays the following about her mother:

I mean it’s pretty hard for us to talk about this with her, because I, I, I kind of understand her. She came and she made so many sacrifices and so many things happen, and it’s mostly for us, you know? For us, and...so when she hears me or (sister’s name) that’s my sister, we say “oh I hate Canada, so boring, I wish I could leave” or whatever, or course it impacts her and she’s like “no, but if you were in Mexico, and if I had to send you to a public school you would hate, you would hate it more” which is true, I wouldn’t go to a public school in Mexico (yeah), so that’s why now I don’t really talk to her about this much

The impact on participants was a shift in the way they viewed their parents. Rather than turning to parents for support, they felt their parents were the ones in need of protection. As a result, participants would either internalize their own difficulties in an attempt to work it out on their own, or turn to their siblings and friends.

### **Language/ “*Sometimes I don’t want to say anything*”**

All participants discussed the important role that language played in their cultural transition to Canada. In many ways, language was a thread that was weaved through various components of their experience. Participants described language as they key to moving forward socially, academically, and emotionally. It influenced their capacity to communicate, and therefore impacted their ability to make friends, succeed academically, and feel as though they could get involved in their new community. When they could not speak English, they felt held back from truly expressing themselves or being able to bond with others. This was an isolating experience, and as Miguel, a 15-year-old male from Mexico described, it felt like a “cage”. Being able to speak English, on the other hand, was conducive to an increase in self-confidence. As they became more fluent, participants felt empowered to ask teachers questions, approach other students and navigate the community on their own. Within the structure of language, three sub-categories were found: (a) English proficiency; (b) self-expression; and (c) supportive resources.

**English proficiency.** Participant’s level of English proficiency was described by everyone as impacting their initial and subsequent adjustment processes. The higher the level of proficiency, the more confident they felt navigating their way through their new lives. Among participants, three reported that they received English tutoring prior to migration; five reported knowing some English (through school classes in their home countries and exposure to English in the media) and two reported knowing little to no English upon arrival. Those that had rigorously prepared prior to leaving felt better equipped to form connections with their peers, ask community members questions, and

accomplish academic tasks. Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran, described her process of preparation and the result that ensued:

Yeah, I had a teacher at home and he was a really good teacher. He studied in England...English teacher, so he taught me English a lot, and I love English. I was watching English movie all the time, I was talking with myself in English so when I came to Canada I didn't have that much problems.

While it did not alleviate all their linguistic challenges, pre-migration preparation helped them feel less overwhelmed upon arrival.

Conversely, participants that knew very little English upon arrival felt as though they were shut out from the world around them. Limitations imposed on them by their limited English proficiency resulted in a feeling of internal isolation (as they were unable to express their thoughts to others) and helplessness. Piled on top of the many changes around them, learning a new language became an overwhelming task that felt, in many ways, like starting their lives over. Malia, a 16-year-old female from Thailand transitioned from being a straight A student in Thailand, to feeling unable to complete her homework assignments in Canada. She described the experience as follows:

It took me actually over a year to feel happy and confident and all that. Actually I cried once, at school, because I couldn't read anything, we were given a thin book to read in English, but I couldn't read it at all, I had to come home and get my dad to translate the whole page, pretty much the whole book. And we had to write a summary of the book and that was pretty hard.

Common amongst all participants was the conclusion that the more English they knew upon arrival, the smoother the initial transition was, and the more English they learned with time, the better their experience of living in Canada became.

Yet even among the eight participants that felt somewhat comfortable with English upon arrival, six of them explained that they were still at a disadvantage when it came to the subtle social rules of conversational English, and the strict precise rules of

academic English. Within these arenas, proficiency levels impacted their self-confidence in social settings, and their academic performance in classroom settings. Despite learning English in Mexico, Alicia, a 17-year-old female who felt comfortable conversing, explained her limitations at academic writing:

When you have to write, if I have to write a paragraph or an essay, there is some, like even in Spanish I know what sounds good, I know when there is an error, I can identify it (*yeah*), but in English not really (*right*), and also there are so many words that I, I don't know, you know to make things sound more formal, or like more smoother, or maybe like structures that like, I don't use them.

There was a shared sense of frustration among participants, as they felt held back from performing at their maximum capacity. Catherine, a 16-year-old female from the Philippines, stated that: “some of the lessons I already learned it in the Philippines, but here I can't understand it.” Having to re-learn material, asking for help with homework and seeking additional support from teachers placed some participants in a vulnerable state. However, the longer they had lived in Canada, the more their proficiency increased, and the easier this element of their transition became.

**Self-expression.** For seven participants, difficulties with English proficiency inhibited them from feeling like they were able to express themselves. Of all the challenges that accompanied their linguistic transition, the incapacity to express their thoughts and feelings, ask their questions and tell their jokes was the most crippling. For three participants, the inability to speak resulted in them withdrawing from social interaction, becoming quieter, and feeling “lonely”. Unable to socialize in the way they were used to, they felt cut off from a part of who they were. Miguel, a 15-year-old male from Mexico spoke no English when he arrived to Canada. Normally a talkative and outgoing person, Miguel explains the impact this had on his self-perception:

At the start I always look mad so I was sort of like this [makes serious face]...like with a frown on my face...and people thought I was shy and stuff like that, so it was like, kind of looking in a mirror and being like, “who is this person? That’s not me?”

Participants commented on how they shifted from feeling free to say what they needed, to worrying about making mistakes when they talked. Malia, a 17-year-old female from Thailand who had been in Canada for nearly four years, comments on how she still finds it difficult to fully express herself in social situations. After having miscommunications with her friends in the past, she explained: “I don’t want to say anything cuz I’m scared they won’t understand me, they’ll get annoyed or angry.”

The fear of making a mistake was, for three participants, founded in the reality that they could get teased. Milo, a 17-year-old male from Thailand recounted:

Cuz like you know I would say something wrong and my friends would laugh, so like, I say “milks” “moneys” and they were like “ahhh you’re so Asian you say wrong thing” and it’s like, it’s a good laugh but then you know I was kind of nervous about it when I tried to speak.

The knowledge that they might get teased for speaking with an accent or using the wrong word resulted in participants seeking respite with people who spoke their first language. Catherine, a 16-year-old female from the Philippines, found herself spending more time with her siblings than peers because it was easier to talk to them. She said: “sometimes I just want to stop speaking English...cuz I have to think everytime I speak...I “what’s the English...what’s this and how to say this?” Likewise, Alex, a 17-year-old male from Peru stated:

I felt like it was more easy to express myself when I’m talking in Spanish because that’s what I’ve been doing all my life, kind of. I knew what to say kinda...whereas before when I talked in English, I didn’t know what to say I didn’t know how to engage them, I tried but it didn’t work sometimes.

Participants explained that speaking in their first language was liberating. It allowed them to feel more confident as they didn't have to second-guess the things they said or the way in which they said them.

As participants' English proficiency improved, their stress levels reduced and their confidence increased. The capacity to be more expressive was empowering, and resulted in them feeling more at ease in their environment. Vivien, a 16-year-old female from China described the experience of getting better at English as follows: "Like, it felt more comfortable like talking to others and you're able to understand others better and even like my grades they, like, better grades than before". As their language improved, a space opened up for them to focus on other areas of their lives, such as connecting with peers and advancing academically. Participants explained that an improved level of English proficiency made it possible for them to ask teachers questions, and consequently learn information that had been previously inaccessible. With an improved capacity for self-expression, they felt that they could slowly be themselves again.

**Supportive resources.** All participants talked about the factors that helped them learn and become more comfortable with English. Five participants highlighted practicing with others as the main ingredient and three participants specified talking with Canadian born students as instrumental to learning the subtleties of conversational English. Sohrab, a 17-year-old male from Iran, went out of his way to make English speaking friends in order to learn the language: "talking to Canadians, that's actually one of the main reasons I wanted to hang out with Canadians was learning the language, at first that was the reason."

In general, however, speaking to fluent English speakers was intimidating, and made it less likely for participants to express themselves. While some valued speaking with native English speakers, all participants described an increased level of comfort when speaking English with other newcomers or with international students. Knowing that they were all in the same boat and trying to learn a new language resulted in them feeling less insecure about making mistakes. This experience provided them with the opportunity to practice more frequently and without reservations. Catherine, a 16-year-old female from the Philippines, attended a summer camp for newcomer youth.

Describing her increased comfort at the summer camp, she stated:

Yeah and I don't think about what others...what think about you...like for example, our English, cuz it's...it's ok to...yeah...it's ok but...like...it's ok to say something that they...like your grammar and stuff...and it's ok to ask them if you don't, if I didn't understand what they said.

The feeling that “it’s ok” to make mistakes and ask questions, was shared by the other participants. They reported that watching other youth make mistakes reduced their anxiety, and showed them that it was ok to make mistakes of their own. Participants concluded that their English did not need to be perfect in order to practice.

In addition to practicing the language through conversation, participants also learned through other mediums. For example, Miguel, a 15-year-old male from Mexico, found video games to be useful. Being exposed to English through an activity that he enjoyed, allowed him to learn the language in a relaxed atmosphere. He described it as follows:

Well when I was around that age I used to love Dragon Ball and I had this game in the PS2, of Dragon ball and I knew all the dialogues from like the series and seen the video game how they spell it and stuff, and subtitles, and I was like “oh so that’s how you say that?”

Other helpful ways of learning English included: volunteering in the community, watching English speaking movies and listening to the lyrics of English music. These alternative modes of practice were especially valuable to participants who had a harder time making friends, and who had fewer people to practice with.

### **Internal Experience/ “*I wanted to leave*”**

As participants described their experiences at school, within the home, and out in the community, they also discussed the ways in which they internalized the changes they went through as they immigrated to Canada. More specifically, all participants explored their inner struggles, as well as the manner in which they coped with them. For six participants, the changes linked to migration and cultural transition had serious psychological ramifications. While some struggled with depression, others with dealt with social isolation and heightened levels of anxiety. At times, the experience of starting over in a new society felt like too much, and they longed to return to their home countries. While some turned to external supports, they also relied on their own internal resources and strengths. The struggles they experienced and the resources (both internal and external) that they relied on are explored within the following two sub-categories: (a) internal struggles; and (b) resiliency

**Internal struggles.** Since migrating to Canada, three participants reported struggling, at one point or another, with what they described as feeling “depressed”. An additional two participants described feelings that could be linked with depression, including hopelessness and a lack of enjoyment from their daily lives. These five participants stated that contributing factors included: bullying, family conflict, parental pressure and feeling excluded by the society around them. Alex, a 17-year-old male from

Peru, was struggling to make friends at school by day, and returning to a home that had parental depression and conflict by night. When describing the impact that this combination had, he stated: “I think it made it a little bit more difficult because I was really depressed, I wasn’t like super depressed to the point of suicide, but I was really depressed.” As things progressed, Alex described pulling himself out of this state of depression, however at the time, he did not feel he had anyone to talk to, and this intensified his loneliness.

For Alicia, a 17-year-old female from Mexico, the challenges of integrating socially reduced her sense of enjoyment from life. She explained that after four years in Canada, she still didn’t feel like she belonged or had adapted to the society. In addition to feelings of sadness, she expressed feelings of resentment for lost time that could have been spent elsewhere. She describes her daily life as follows:

P: Me? Like I go to school...like this is the thing that I really don’t like, don’t enjoy...is, I go to school and then I go to my classes and everything, and then I come back and sometimes I feel like, it’s strange, but sometimes I feel like if my brain was here ok? [motions with her hands to indicate her brain is outside her body] Not like...if I was here [motions to her body], and I’m just walking...

I: Like you’re out of body?

P: Yes, I...I don’t, like I don’t enjoy it.

Common among the five participants was an increase in levels of stress as a result of social isolation, family conflict and/or peer bullying that led to a deep state of sadness.

In addition to feelings of sadness, six participants described feelings of loneliness that resulted from difficulties connecting with their peers (as a result of language barriers and/or bullying). For one participant, the feeling of isolation he experienced heightened

his anxiety to the point of panic. Alex, a 17-year-old male from Peru described the following:

And so being afraid made it more difficult to communicate because I got into a panic, I didn't know what to say, I blocked myself, and then I wouldn't say anything, I wouldn't say much and then I wouldn't approach anyone, and then by the end of the day...I used to have, I was like, I guess I was angry cuz it felt like I had a headache, I had headaches and I was kind of nervous and I was like, "ok tomorrow I'll try again" and it was difficult right?

Fear of communicating with others was common throughout the six participants, and three of them explained that, for a period of time, they found themselves feeling like they were on the outskirts watching the world around them.

Despite struggling internally, six participants felt that they couldn't turn to outside sources for support. For three participants, it was an issue of confidentiality. Participants worried that if they confided in an adult (namely a school counsellor) it could result in their parents finding out, which they were worried would cause problems at home. For the others, it came down to the fact that they had no pre-existing relationship with the counsellors in their schools, and they seemed unavailable. However, all six participants expressed a desire to have someone who could understand them, listen to them, and help them feel less alone. Participants explained that they "needed" that release. Milo, a 17-year-old male from Thailand explained that he wanted to talk about the "stress of life" and "this teenager phase I'm going through" but didn't feel his friends or parents would understand. However, he didn't see the counsellors as "available". When asked what would have helped him feel safe to talk to someone, he said:

Well the biggest thing to me is that trust, and the feeling of you know, "I'm going to be safe" and everything like that. So, I would suggest that you really open yourself to the youth and become like buddies with them, and try to understand them the best they could. And you know, some extra support would go a long way, you know. A big hug, a smile, someone to just listen to you, you know.

Supporting this notion, two other participants also mentioned their desire for someone that would approach them, and inquire about their lives.

**Resiliency.** As difficult as their experiences had been, participants also explored their strengths and the ways in which they worked their way through difficult times. Five participants explained that for them, it was about attitude and perspective. Once they were able to change the way they saw their situation, things began to improve. For Sohrab, a 17-year-old male from Iran, this shift took place within the domain of his social life. At first, Sohrab felt Canadians did not want to be friends with him, yet once his perspective changed he began to make friends with many Canadian students at his school. He recounted: “I just decided to...sometimes I thought Canadians are being racist to me, but as soon as I realized I’m thinking that way and the way I think shows...I started being myself.” Echoed among the four other participants, a change in attitude provided them with the necessary courage it took to step outside their comfort zone and put themselves into situations where they could meet more people. For Alex, a 17-year-old male from Peru, a shift in perspective was the key he needed to unlock and let go of feelings of sadness and anger he had been feeling towards Canada (as a result of feeling that he did not fit in). He explained: “I wanted to leave, I didn’t feel at home”. After reading a couple of biographical books that really spoke to him, Alex felt his internal state of mind shifting. He said:

I felt, well it was I, I need to take it within me, I don’t need to leave it behind, it should be, it must be a part of me, but I don’t need to feel like I must go back and be there to feel good. I need to realize every place can be...you can make it home wherever you, any place you can make it home; it’s up to you.

Salient within all five experiences was a process of self-talk that participants engaged in, leading them to become more open minded regarding their circumstances.

In addition to perspective, three participants explained that having future goals and aspirations made their challenges worth enduring. In all three cases, pursuing these goals required that they stay in Canada. For Miguel, a 15-year-old male from Mexico, this came in the form of tennis. Miguel described tennis as something that made him “feel alive” and gave him purpose, even before he had made any friends in Canada. He explains that: “because in Mexico there’s hardly any tennis courts so I’m like ‘if I go back I can’t play tennis.’” Similarly, Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran, recounted how she knew other people who found the transition to Canada too difficult and decided to return to their home countries. When asked what made her want to stay, she explained:

Because I didn’t like back to my country, I would love to stay in Canada, I would like to be at the top of the world. I want to study at a good University, I have lots of dreams, and those dreams make me to have those things.

She went on to explain that other people might not have those dreams, and therefore wouldn’t have anything to hold on to. Dreams and hopes for the future helped give meaning to difficulties that participants encountered, and provided them with motivation to move forward.

### **Identity/ “*A bit of everything*”**

Milo, a 17-year-old male from Thailand, opened up our interview by saying: “I think I’ve changed a lot since I’ve come here”. Echoed by the other nine participants was the notion that moving from their countries of origin, and living in Canada changed things about who they were and how they saw the world. As they were exposed to new values and norms, some began to reflect on the beliefs they had once held to be true,

while others held more firmly to their “roots”. Their identity, as defined by participants, was an amalgamation of their experiences throughout the process of cultural transition. Some felt a stronger connection to one culture over another, but all participants agreed that they had changed, and that it was a positive thing. They felt their understanding of the world had expanded, and knew that they would continue to change with time. Within the structure of identity, two subcategories emerged: (a) a mixture of the two; and (b) being open minded.

**A mixture of the two.** Six participants described their cultural identities as being influenced by both the cultures they had grown up in, and the Canadian culture that they currently lived in. On the one hand, they felt they had the option of taking the best of both cultures, and integrating it into who they were. This was, for some, a liberating and empowering experience that gave them the power of choice. On the other hand, participants also felt confused on how to define their identity, given the fact that they were now connected to more than one culture. Catherine, a 16-year-old female from the Philippines, had been in Canada for six months at the time of our interview. Having been in Canada for a short time, Catherine reflected on the ways in which her self concept was already changing. Although internally she identified herself as Filipino, she recognized that her external behaviour didn’t always adhere to Filipino culture:

I don’t know...sometimes I feel like I’m still a Filipino, but sometimes I’m a Canadian now cuz...everything that I’m doing right now is...is not what I’m doing before...when I’m in the Philippines. And I need to...I need to do some of Canadian culture that I really don’t do in the Philippines

The struggle to pinpoint who they were, and who they wanted to be, was further exhibited through Sohrab’s experience. Sohrab, a 17-year-old male from Iran, spent the first few years of his time in Canada trying to fit in with Canadians. As a result, he felt

that he lost his connection to his Iranian identity. Realizing this, he decided to start spending time with Iranians again in order to find a way to bring the two together. He explains:

I just tried to remember who I used to be and just try to go back to being that person you know? And then once I did I started being like “Ok, now I can have a bit of Canadian stuff going on for me, and have a bit of balance for me”

The desire to find balance between the two was echoed among participants as they spoke about finding a way hold on to both cultures.

Most participants conceptualized the changes they made as choices. However three participants felt that with time, they would inevitably become “more Canadian” and one participant, felt that if he wanted to fit in, he did not really have much choice at all.

Milo, a 17-year-old male from Thailand, shared that he would like to hold on to both parts of his cultural identity, however, without people from his cultural background around him, he wondered how this could be possible. He stated:

I used to think it’s a choice, but as time goes by it’s like “you know what just go with the flow, do what I can”. Cuz I thought I’d be so Thai that I would remain at least more than half Thai but then you know, as time goes by not a lot of people speak Thai and they don’t have the same humour and cultural aspects as I do so I just had to assimilate and go on with it to survive and stuff like that.

Milo’s open attitude and willingness to “go with the flow” was contrasted by that of other participants who felt firm in their desire to hold steadfastly to their “roots”. Although open to certain norms and values in Canadian culture, three participants felt strongly that at the end of the day, they were still defined by the culture they grew up in. Miguel, a 15-year-old male from Mexico stated:

I say I’m Mexican because I love my culture and I also love some of the cultures in Canada but I’m originally from Mexico and that’s what my roots are, and you know how they say “don’t ever forget your roots”, that would be like me saying I forgot who I am, what I stand for.

Regardless of whether or not participants wanted to hold on to their “roots”, “fit-in” with Canadians, or find “balance” between the two, they all relayed an increased awareness regarding the role of culture in their lives, and the impact that culture had on who they were, and who they wanted to be.

**Being open minded.** Half of the participants reported that coming to Canada exposed them, for the first time in their lives, to a diverse range of cultures. Through the people they met at school, and the friendships they formed (both within school and through organizations servicing other newcomers), they began to learn about other ways of life, and began to correct pre-conceived assumptions they held. Mona, a 17-year-old female from Iran, described her first day at school: “an international teacher came to me, bring me to her class, introduce me to many people from many different countries, Brazil, Japan, China...I had never seen people from those countries.” While unfamiliar at first, the new cultures that they were exposed to taught participants about parts of the world that otherwise they would not have known about. Participants felt this exposure instilled a more open mind in them, which they were appreciative of and excited about. Ava, a 15-year-old female participant from Iran, described the change this had on her:

But you know some things have also changed, like some of my beliefs, like in Iran there aren't that much different religions or cultures, so I'm feeling kind of, maybe open minded, so I'm including other cultures in my life too.

Participants expressed excitement at having met people from other countries, and highlighted their newfound open-mindedness as one of the facets of their experience they were most grateful for.

Exposure to other cultures not only opened their minds, it also helped them shed old prejudices. Two participants reflected on the societies they came from, and how they

had grown up learning to discriminate based on culture and class. As they befriended people from diverse backgrounds, they began to question their old ways of thought and felt surprised by the ignorance of their old views. Alicia, a 17-year-old female from Mexico, explained that while she loved Mexico, it “can be very racist too, very classist too”. At first, Alicia dismissed certain people as potential friends, based on the beliefs she had learned in Mexico. After befriending someone she had originally pre-judged, she confided in her sister, and explained:

I remember I told her like ‘how stupid I was of just you know judging him, and not opening and just, you know see how he is, how is the person’ and then I would see like, yeah, if it’s not the person I want to hang out, but at least I tried. And I told her “it was just so stupid, but now I’m giving a chance, he’s such a nice person’.

Overall, participants felt proud of their open mindedness because it represented growth. It was tangible way to identify that they had changed, and that their understanding of the world had expanded.

### **Structure of the Experience of Cultural Transition**

The fourth, and final step in the descriptive phenomenological method is the amalgamation of each participant’s structures into an overall summary that is meant to describe the way in which the central phenomenon is experienced (Giorgi, 2009). Given that eight structures emerged from the data analysis, the following summary aims to weave these structures together into a broad comprehensive description of the phenomenon of cultural transition as experienced by the adolescent newcomers who participated in this study. According to Giorgi (2009), “the structure is the identification of the constituents that are essential for the phenomenon to manifest itself in this particular way as well as an understanding of how the constituents relate to each other”

(p. 200). The researcher is instructed to figure out which constituents are key to the phenomenon by determining whether or not the structure would collapse with its removal. As such, the following section represents a general, holistic depiction of the most salient components of cultural transition, as experienced by the participants in this study.

**Cultural transition.** The experience of cultural transition began the moment participants found out that they were going to be leaving their countries. The time that preceded their migration was filled with anticipation of what was to come. A sense of loss for what they would eventually leave was intertwined with excitement and hope for a better life. Participants did not feel they had much agency in the decision to migrate, but acknowledged that their feelings and futures were taken into account by their parents. Knowing their parents were making sacrifices, participants pushed themselves to embrace the upcoming change.

Pre-migration expectations impacted participant's initial post-migration experience. The higher and more elaborate their expectations and hopes were, the more difficult their initial transition was. As they absorbed the reality of their new surroundings, participants were confused and disappointed by the discrepancies they experienced. The more fixed these expectations had been, the longer it took to let them go and embrace their new life situations.

The permanence of the participant's move was symbolically represented by their enrolment into a new school. The initial transition into school was overwhelming for participants, and a lack of information on what to expect left them feeling vulnerable. Participants sought support from peers and teachers, but for the most part, felt left on

their own to navigate their way through the changes around them. Teachers and school counsellors were considered pivotal to their experience of cultural transition. The ones who took the time to check in with students, advocate on their behalf, and assist them in meeting other students were instrumental in reducing feelings of isolation. Conversely, teachers who demonstrated a lack of awareness and sensitivity to their experience were sources of frustration and additional stress.

Participant's experiences at school were further shaped by their impressions of the school curriculum, their level of English proficiency, and interactions they had with school peers. Presented with a myriad of course subjects, participants felt both excited and overwhelmed by the new options available to them. The task of selecting courses was new, and the laid back nature of teachers was confusing. Participants viewed the curriculum to be behind that of their home countries, yet their reaction to this realization was dependant on their English proficiency level. The easier it was to understand the course material, the more likely their motivation was to decrease during the initial transition period. However, a combination of lower levels of English proficiency and a desire to meet parental expectations would push participants to work harder academically.

Levels of English proficiency also impacted participants' self-expression and self-confidence. Language played a role in how participants viewed themselves, and influenced the ways in which their peers viewed them. Participants with lower levels of proficiency were limited in relaying thoughts and forming social connections. On an emotional level, this reality felt both lonely and depressing. As their proficiency increased, so did their self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Arguably one of the most important factors in their cultural transition to Canada was the process of forming friendships. That is, friends provided emotional support, practical information and a means of meeting more peers. Having even one friend was a protective factor against bullying, isolation and social retreat. The process of forming friendships was largely dependent on the receptiveness of their peers. Close knit social circles were perceived as unwelcoming and intimidating, and resulted in a feeling of exclusion. Making friends was reliant on the welcoming reception of others, and this most often took place within and between groups of fellow newcomers. Participants felt a sense of belonging and safety in ESL classes and community programs for newcomer youth, primarily because it felt like a non-judgmental environment. Common ground and shared difficulties facilitated a sense of belonging, which was of primary importance during a time of transience and dislocation. Additionally, interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds opened up their eyes to the many ways of life around them, and resulted in an increased desire and capacity to accept differences. However, a longing to connect with Canadian born students and “fit in” within the greater society was often a motivating factor to persist and continue to try and forge these bonds.

Participants also faced changes within the home. Specifically, the experience of cultural transition had the capacity to both bring families closer together, as well as push them further apart. The closer the family was, the more supported the youth felt. Feeling supported was reliant on family communication, parental attitudes to the new culture, and the expectations that they held regarding their children. Increased pressure, busy lives and added responsibilities post-migration resulted in a “break down” of family communication, and an increase in participant depression, loneliness and stress.

Participants were aware that their parents were also dealing with their own migration stressors, and did not want to impose their own problems on to their parents. The less participants felt supported by the adults in their lives, the more isolated they became in dealing with the challenges in their every day lives.

The challenges that participants faced at school, among their peers, and within their home had the potential to result in depression and loneliness. Yet, these challenges also had the potential to unlock internal strengths that increased their resilience. Participants found strength in their spiritual beliefs, future aspirations and passions and hobbies. Often a shift in perspective (derived from reading material or a conversation with a peer or parent) created a change of attitude, which led to positive self-talk. Positive self-talk helped participants regain a sense of control over their situation, and they felt empowered to make choices about how they perceived and reacted to their new realities. The capacity to choose their perspective was comforting at a time when they had little control over other variables in their environment.

Finally, moving from one culture to another also resulted in changes to how participants saw themselves. Whether they identified themselves by their affiliation to their countries of origin, or considered themselves to be Canadians, the experience of moving countries resulted in a more fluid understanding of their own cultural identity. As they opened themselves up to other cultural orientations, they began to see their own culture differently. There was a perceived advantage in adopting elements of both cultures, and an acknowledgment that their cultural identity would probably continue to change as the future unfolded.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

Ngo (2009) urges service providers working with newcomer youth populations to “extend their view of immigrant youth as merely recipients of services, and recognize their potential as contributors to the development of culturally responsive and youth-relevant services” (p. 95). Having read this recommendation during the early stages of my research formation, I strived to design a study that provided newcomer youth with a platform from which they could share their experiences. My hope was that through these descriptions a deepened understanding of cultural transition among newcomer youth would emerge. Throughout the course of the study, findings both echoed previous research, and expanded upon it with original and unique contributions. The following chapter will position this study’s findings within the context of the current literature on newcomer youth. Beginning with a summary of the inquiry, I will then move on to a discussion on the eight structures, and the ways in which they interact with, and add to, existing research.

### Summary of Inquiry

The goal of this study was to contribute to the dialogue and literature on cultural transition and migration by inviting the voices of newcomer youth to the table. Using a descriptive phenomenological method of inquiry (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003), the study asked: *How do adolescents who immigrate or seek refuge in a new country experience cultural transition?* Over the course of nine months, ten newcomer youth, from both Vancouver and Vancouver Island, volunteered to share their story. Hoping that their experience would make a difference for others, these ten youth opened up about their school lives, their families, their hopes, their dreams, their challenges, and their

strengths. Participants provided rich and detailed descriptions of what it had been like to move to a new country, the many changes that resulted, and the ways in which they internalized the ever-evolving circumstances around them.

Their vibrant descriptions took on a new life as they were typed out on to pages and analyzed using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Every element of their experience was carefully examined and then compared and contrasted with the other participants until eight structures emerged. These eight structures represented the most salient components of their experience, and together, formed the overarching structure of cultural transition as experienced by these ten youth. The structures included: (a) Pre-migration Experiences/ *"I was excited"*; (b) Post-migration Impressions/ *"A totally new environment"*; (c) Education/ *"I'm always in school"*; (d) Friendships *"Friends is such an important part"*; (e) Family/ *"Changing makes you come closer"*; (f) Language/ *"Sometimes I don't want to say anything"*; (g) Internal Experiences/ *"I wanted to leave"*; and (h) Cultural Identity/ *"A bit of everything"*. The following section explores each of these structures, as well as the overarching structure, and the ways in which they both support previous research and contribute to the literature in the area of migration during adolescence.

### **Contributions to the Literature**

#### **Pre-migration Experiences/ *"I was excited"***

According to participants, the most common reason their parents chose to migrate was the promise of a better future for their children. While this reasoning is well known as a primary force behind migration (Hutchins, 2011; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001), there is little information on youth's involvement in this decision making process

(Hutchins, 2011). Participants in this study began to fill this gap in the literature by describing their degree of involvement and internalization of the decision making process. Hutchins (2011) points out that while parents may have their children's best intentions at heart, they sometimes "compromise the truth and, in the process, disempower their children to the extent that they were not able to form a view or to participate effectively in a decision that was about to change their life forever" (p. 1234). Indeed, within the context of this study, the majority of the participants were informed of the decision ahead of time, but did not feel they had agency in the decision itself. Moreover, some participants were given little to no notice at all, and were informed of the decision only after arrangements had been finalized.

Understanding that the decision was supposedly in their best interest, many participants felt excited by the prospect of a new life with more opportunities, while others felt surprised, disoriented and hesitant. Hutchins (2011) speaks to the complexity of determining what the "best interests" of the child are, and that adults may tend to cloak their own interests under the veil of their child's interests. Her recommendation, instead, is to engage in an honest process of dialogue with children that will allow all perspectives to be heard, and a free flow of information to be shared (p. 1233). The value of this recommendation was apparent within this study, as those who had advance notice regarding their migration felt more included in the decision making process, which tended to result in a more positive outlook about their upcoming migration. Conversely, a lack of preparation and information prior to migration left other participants at a disadvantage upon arrival. Having time to prepare emotionally and linguistically were of

particular importance to the youth, and were noted by some of them as key ingredients to post-migration success.

Given the diverse cultural norms and practices regarding the involvement of children in family decision-making, the facilitation of open dialogue may not always be a possibility. As such, service providers working with newcomer youth in host communities may want to facilitate a space wherein their adolescent clients can express their feelings and thoughts regarding the decision to migrate. An exploration of their sense of agency in the decision itself could provide youth with an outlet for self-expression.

### **Post-migration Impressions/ “*A totally new environment*”**

The early stages of cultural transition were marked by the many environmental and socio-cultural changes that participants encountered. While exciting for some, the steep learning curve was stressful and overwhelming for others. Adjusting to these changes was often daunting, and once the initial excitement had worn off, many participants began to recognize how much work it would take to navigate their way in a new society. Research explains that the stress that accompanies the process of negotiation between what was familiar in one’s home country and one’s new country is often coined *acculturative stress*, and can result in an increased risk of psychological vulnerabilities (Sirin, Ryce, Gupta & Rogers-Sirin, 2012). To learn a new culture is inherently stressful because “without a sense of cultural competence, control and belonging, immigrants are often left with a keen sense of loss and disorientation” (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 73).

Unique to this study, however, was the role that adolescents' pre-migration expectations had on post-migration experiences, and on acculturative stress. Especially significant was the apparent role that North American media played in shaping those expectations. When searching through the literature in the hopes of finding specific information on this facet of cultural transition, one relevant study was found. Negy, Schwartz and Reig-Ferrer (2009) hypothesized that one of the primary contributors to acculturative stress is a phenomenon titled *expectancy violation theory* (EVT), which contends that when people's expectations are unmet, it is usually followed by a negative psychological reaction (p. 256). The authors recruited 113 Hispanic adult immigrants living in Florida, and distributed questionnaires to assess the relationship between pre-migration expectations and post-migration stress. Results confirmed their hypothesis and revealed that immigrants whose expectations were unmet experienced greater acculturative stress, while those whose expectations were exceeded experienced less acculturative stress (p. 260). In a similar vein, Sinacore et al. (2009) found that those participants with high pre-migration expectations regarding their future Jewish community almost inevitably had a more difficult time transitioning than the ones with no expectations at all. While these findings support the descriptions relayed by participant youth, it is important to note that little to no research has been done to investigate this issue among adolescent newcomers. Nevertheless, the idealization of a potential future often brought with it disappointment down the road (particularly when this idealization was not achieved).

Thus, it seems important for newcomer youth to be prepared for the process of cultural transition. The accessibility of accurate and relevant information for youth may

prove beneficial in mitigating feelings of disappointment following their arrival. However, a search through governmental websites on migration to Canada (e.g., Citizenship and Immigration Canada and WelcomeBC) reveal that information is delivered primarily to adult populations. There is a need for further resources that are specifically addressed to youth, and that help them prepare for the facets of cultural transition that are unique to this age range (e.g., school life and extra curricular community programs). Furthermore, there is a need to make space for youth to process disappointment and loss as they adjust to the discrepancies between what they had hoped for and what they encountered.

### **Education/ *“I’m always in school”***

In their longitudinal mixed method study on the adaptation of newcomer children and youth in cities across the United States, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) position school as one of the most important arenas within the lives of newcomer youth. They explain “schools are where immigrant children first come into systemic contact with the new culture...adaptation to school is a significant predictor of a child’s future well-being and contribution to society” (p. 3). Echoed by nearly all the participants within this study, school was described as the primary backdrop against which many of their experiences unfolded. The permanence of their move was solidified by their enrolment in school, where a majority of the academic, linguistic, and social components of their experiences took place. Furthermore, most of them were aware that future opportunities were reliant on academic success, and consequently felt increased pressure to do well.

In line with previous research, many of the participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the school curriculum. In a narrative study on adolescent Chinese immigrant students in Vancouver, Li (2010) found that participants felt an overwhelming sense of shock at how advanced their schools at home had been in comparison to the Canadian curriculum. Similarly, Stodolska (2008) found some of her participants expressing disdain at being treated as though they were incompetent. The author quotes one of her participants saying “they gave us candy for every correct answer! Can you imagine—they were giving us candy...they treated us like we were in the kindergarten!” (p. 207). The frustration evident in this statement runs parallel to descriptions of the participants in this study who felt that the learning material was far less advanced than what they were used to, and were often insulted by the elementary nature of the teaching methods they were presented with. Previous research explains that failing to draw upon the existing knowledge base newcomer students bring with them can result in a disengagement from the classroom, and a sense of boredom on behalf of the student (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010). This was evident among participants in this study who reported a decline in academic performance due to being under challenged and bored.

One of the unique contributions of this study was the description of the ESL class as somewhat of a safe haven from other school settings and classes. Current literature relays that for many newcomer students, ESL further alienates them from the rest of the school (Li, 2010; Stodolska, 2008). Yet only one of the 10 participants in this study indicated this to be her experience. Despite feeling an increased sense of comfort, however, participants did confirm previous literature by expressing a general

dissatisfaction with the ESL curriculum (Cohen, 2012; Li, 2010; Stodolska, 2008; Suarez Orozco & Suarez Orozco, 2001). However, when discussing their experiences in ESL, participants focused less on curriculum and more on how they *felt* in the classroom. The safety and warmth of the ESL classroom contrasted with the rest of the school, which was indicative of a potential problem in the larger school environment. Participants described ESL teachers as available and willing to help, and explained that the activities in the classroom (e.g. games to help students get to know one another better) helped to facilitate friendships. These findings are valuable in that they present a possibility for schools to learn from some of the practices with the ESL class, and ideally, strive to replicate a welcoming and safe culture within the rest of the school.

### **Friendships/ “*Friends is such an important part*”**

In her review of the current literature pertaining to the health of newcomer youth in Canada, Salehi (2009) argues, “our health and well-being is ultimately related to the degree to which we feel connected to our friends, neighbours, neighbourhood, and community organizations” (p. 792). From a developmental perspective, peer relationships gain more importance during adolescence as increased amounts of time are spent either alone, or with friends. Moreover the peer group can influence one’s academic performance, as well as pro-social and anti-social behaviours (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Indeed, the importance of social connections was evident across all participants in this study. Having lost their former social networks, participants longed to make new friends and establish themselves among a group of peers. In line with current research, friendships were seen as a source of emotional support and an important link to their new environment. Studies have argued that the establishment of friendships can act as a

protective factor against depression (Fawzi et al., 2009), provide an outlet for youth to share their experiences of migration (Kim et al., 2012), increase access to community resources (Tsai, 2006), and establish a sense of connection that contributes to a desire to stay in one's host country (Chow, 2007). Most of all, friendships cultivate a newcomer youth's sense of belonging within their new community (Borrero, Li & Padilla, 2013; Chow, 2007; Salehi, 2009).

The need to belong was especially salient among participants in this study, and was one of the reasons that they primarily befriended other newcomer youth, and youth from similar cultural backgrounds. The majority described international students, students in ESL classes, and newcomers in community youth groups as safe, accepting, and non-judgmental friends with whom they felt a shared sense of history, belonging, and "family". This was especially the case within the context of community organizations that provided a sort of refuge from the stressors of school, and helped normalize the range of challenges associated with transition and migration. The gravitational pull of newcomer youth to other newcomer youth has been discussed in the literature (Chow, 2007; Kim et al., 2012; Li, 2010; Stodolska, 2008; Tsai, 2006) and has been widely considered to be a protective factor against mental health concerns (Fawzi et al., 2009).

However, a unique point of divergence among participants in this study was that they both validated the importance of community groups, and also critiqued their effectiveness in connecting them to mainstream Canadian youth. Participants valued the community they found among these organizations, but recognized that it did little to change their circumstances at school and at home. Within the context of school, Li (2010) cautions that "forming friendships exclusively along ethnic lines or immigrant status

could lead to feelings of alienation and degradation, resulting in low self-esteem and high social anxiety” (p. 131). Participants within this study both confirmed and expanded upon this argument, explaining that it was their lack of choice in the matter that resulted in feelings of alienation and social exclusion. Despite their efforts, many participants did not feel they could connect with mainstream youth.

Bullying, teasing, exclusion, and a general lack of interest were among the leading reasons why many participants felt they could not connect with Canadian born youth, and have been recognized in the literature as common barriers to social engagement (Li, 2010; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Stdolska, 2008). These challenges were especially difficult for students who attended schools with a small population of newcomer students, as it limited the options of people they could befriend. One of the unique findings in this study was the impact of befriending international students. For participants who felt limited in their choice of friends, international students presented a safe and supportive group of peers with whom they could relate. However, the eventual loss that ensued after their friends returned home prevented them from feeling a sense of permanence in their community and school.

These findings point to a gap in services that help newcomer youth integrate with mainstream Canadian peers. While individual and group efforts that focus solely on newcomer youth are helpful, they are not sufficient in alleviating the challenges that newcomer youth face. As such, it may be necessary to go beyond traditional models of therapy and service delivery and examine ways of creating a more inclusive, less intimidating school environment. Indeed, Ngo (2009) points out that integration is a two way process that is, in part, dependent on the receptiveness of host communities. He

recommends programs that help increase dialogue between newcomer youth and community members and that “help the receiving community to adapt and change in response to new socio-cultural realities” (p. 94).

**Family/ “*Changing makes you come closer*”**

The changing dynamic within participants’ families was described as an ongoing process that continuously influenced other facets of their lives. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2001) describe the family as “a basic structural unit, the most significant emotional foundation in the lives of individuals...especially so for immigrants, who may not have other social networks immediately available to them” (p. 81-82). This sentiment is supported by numerous other studies, all of which speak to the strengthening of familial bonds post-migration (McMichael et al., 2010; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sabatier & Berry, 2008). Participants within this study expressed how important family became, especially when facing so much change and unfamiliarity. Furthermore, those who felt supported by their families (through open dialogue, an openness to cultural change and a strong presence in the participant’s lives) found that this support gave them the strength to face challenges with more resilience. The role of the family as a protective factor during transition has long been supported by research on migration, and has been affiliated with positive outcomes such as: academic success (Suarez-Orozco et al, 2010), reduced vulnerability (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009), and a decrease in depression and anxiety (Suarez-Orozco, Ban & Kim, 2011).

Yet, the very importance of family also resulted in additional stress for participants who experienced parental pressure, disconnection, prolonged periods of family separation, and conflict within the home. In line with current literature on family

migration, participants struggled to navigate between different expectations at home and at school, and felt pressure to keep up with parental expectations (Li, 2010; McMichael et al., 2010). Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2001) refer to the increase of parental expectations as a reaction to the overwhelming changes around them, and a fear of losing their children to new cultural values and behaviours. Research has shown that over time, parental pressure and the increasingly busy lives of newcomer families can reduce the level of attachment youth feel toward their parents (Li, 2010; McMichael et al., 2010). Coupled with the reduced attachment is a sense of guilt at the thought of adding stress to their parents' lives, resulting in diminished communication and further disconnection from parents (Li, 2010; McMichael et al., 2010; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

A noteworthy contribution of this study, however, was the obvious impact of open-mindedness among parents. Participants who did not feel pressure to choose between cultures, and who watched their own parents embrace the changes of living in a new culture, were able to determine for themselves what kind of lifestyle they wanted to adopt, and felt closer to their parents. It would appear, therefore, that the very fear of losing their children sometimes resulted in a disconnection and eventual loss of the relationship. Conversely, openness to the inevitable changes of migration resulted in the overall well-being of participants, and strengthened bonds between parents and their children.

Interestingly, majority of the participants in this study had to separate from family members for prolonged periods of time. This further complicated their initial transition as they not only had to get used to their new environment, but were also faced with rebuilding a familial relationship and overcoming the loss of caretakers in their home

countries (such as grandparents). As the prevalence of staggered migration rises, researchers are becoming increasingly aware of the impact that this separation and subsequent reunification can have on the transition experience of adolescents (McMichael et al. 2010; Pratt, 2006; Pratt, 2010; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). As illustrated both within this study and within the literature, staggered migration patterns and prolonged periods away from parental figures can result in emotional turmoil for adolescents, as they must first grapple with the loss, and then try to reconnect with their parents (McMichael et al. 2010; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco).

It appears that the experiences of cultural transition among youth are inevitably linked to that of their families. Thus, in order to understand and help newcomer youth, it may be necessary to take into account and perhaps even involve families in their process of integration. An awareness of the complex impact that migration has on family dynamics can assist those working with newcomer youth to better understand their lived realities. Furthermore, educational programs for newcomer parents, and services that help increase the dialogue between newcomer youth and their parents may act as protective factors against family disconnection and feelings of depression and isolation.

### **Language/ *“Sometimes I don’t want to say anything”***

Participants’ proficiency level in English shaped the way in which their academic and social transition unfolded, which in turn impacted their self-esteem and self-perception. Prevalent among all participants was the importance of language to their academic success. This has been widely supported within the literature on the academic transition of newcomer youth (Li, 2010; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Stodolska, 2008;

Suarez-Orozco et al. 2010; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). It has been argued that a student's language skill is not only vital to their detection of social nuances, but can also be used as a predictor of their academic success because "the ability to perform well on multiple-choice tests, to extract meaning from written text, and to argue a point both orally and in writing are essential skills for high levels of academic attainment." (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010, p. 604). The importance of these skills was well recognized by the participants who felt held back and frustrated by their inability to complete academic tasks without the assistance of others. In addition to English tutoring and support from teachers, participants noted the importance of practicing English (ideally with English speakers) as a vital, yet inaccessible way of learning the language. Findings within this study, and within other studies, point to a gap in environments that can facilitate language learning through safe dialogue between Canadian born and newcomer youth (Li, 2010; Stodolska, 2008).

Many participants described low levels of English proficiency as being one of the hardest challenges they faced, both because of its academic importance, as well as its accompanying social implications. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) encapsulate the role of language in the following statement: "while on the surface language is about communication, it is also a marker of identity and an instrument of power" (p. 135). Its use as an instrument of power is noted within the literature, and within participant stories of bullying and discrimination that take place as a result of low language proficiency (Li, 2010; Stodolska, 2008). Moreover, for these participants, language not only 'marked' their identity, it began to shape it. Fear of making mistakes, the potential of being made fun of, and an awareness of their limited vocabulary, stopped participants from freely

expressing themselves. One of the unique contributions of this study is the depth to which some participants described the impact that limited self-expression had on their own self-perception. The initial inability to speak freely was a tremendous loss, as it inhibited them from being fully congruent with their internal desires for self-expression. Having already lost access to many of the important relationships in their lives, losing their ability to communicate was experienced as a loss of self. Not surprisingly, this contributed to the external behaviour patterns discussed in the literature, including social isolation (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009), anxiety (Sirin et al., 2010), depression (Ellis et al., 2011; Fawzi et al., 2009), and low self-esteem (Fawzi et al., 2009).

Given how important the process of identity development is during the adolescent years, this kind of negative experience could have harmful repercussions. As Steinberg and Morris (2001) point out, adolescence is a time “when individuals begin to explore and examine psychological characteristics of the self in order to discover who they really are, and how they fit in the social world in which they live” (p. 91). According to the participants in this study, low levels of English proficiency limited their capacity to interact with the social world around them, therefore diminishing their ability to figure out how they might fit into it. Finding ways to support language learning among newcomer youth, and/or encouraging alternative ways for self expression (e.g. art or music) may not only increase their self-efficacy, but also assist in the healthy development of their self-conception.

### **Internal Experiences/ *“I wanted to leave”***

The many changes entailed in cultural transition have been known to result in acculturative stress, which can contribute to mental health concerns among newcomer

youth (Ellis et al., 2011; Fawzi et al., 2009; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2009).

Among the participants of this study, primary mental health concerns included: depression, social isolation, hopelessness, and a lack of enjoyment from life. Yet, much of the research has focused on the overt behaviours that often garner the most attention, such as aggression and “delinquent behaviour”, otherwise known as *externalizing symptoms* (Fawzi et al., 2009; Sirin et al., 2012). There is a paucity of research on the impact of acculturative stress on their *internalizing symptoms*, which refers to the ways in which they internalize the stress of migration (Fawzi et al., 2009; Sirin et al., 2012). One of the contributions of this study was that it provided youth with the opportunity to describe their internal process in more detail, which in turn shed light on the interrelatedness of social isolation and depression. The more inhibited they felt from being able to connect with their new environment (be it through language barriers, familial pressure, or peer exclusion) the more that symptoms of depression manifested (including hopelessness and a lack of joy). Conversely, participants that felt supported by family, school staff, and friends, felt better able to tackle the changes around them.

However, social support was not the only source of strength for participants. Some were able to get themselves through difficult times by focusing on their future dreams, engaging in positive self-talk, and turning to their spiritual or religious beliefs. While many studies have focused on the risk factors that contribute to mental health concerns among newcomer youth (Hersi, 2011; Salehi, 2009), there is a growing interest in uncovering protective factors and coping mechanisms (Borrero, Lee & Padilla, 2013; Hersi, 2011; Kim, Suh, Kim & Goplam, 2012; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Protective factors are defined as “qualities of a person or context that predict better outcomes among

struggling youth” (Borrero et al., 2013, p. 102) and can offset risk factors. Some protective factors reported by participants mirror those found in the literature, and include: engagement in meaningful activities (Kim et al., 2012), hope for the future (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001), positive self-talk and positive emotions (Kim et al., 2012). Moreover, these internal protective factors are more likely to manifest when one has supportive family relationships (Borrero et al., 2013; Hersi, 2011) and supportive school contexts (Borrero et al., 2013; Hersi, 2011). Within the context of this study, additional factors that helped facilitate resiliency included: strong sense of self-efficacy cultivated through prior life experiences; firm career goals and passions; exposure to relevant and inspiring reading material, and relationships with other youth who had been through similar challenges.

Not surprisingly, majority of the participants did not turn to external sources of support (such as teachers or counsellors), paralleling the literature on the underutilization of mental health services among newcomer youth (Ellis et al., 2011; Fawzi et al., 2009). In line with previous studies, some of the reasons included: distrust in the parameters of confidentiality (Ellis et al., 2011) and a lack of information regarding available services (Garcia et al., 2010). However, unlike prior findings in the literature, participants did not mention the stigma of mental illness, cultural differences, or language barriers as part of their reasoning for not accessing support (Ellis et al., 2011; Garcia et al., 2010). For many, it came down to the unavailable demeanour of school counsellors; a desire to be approached, rather than have to approach staff for support; and the lack of a pre-existing relationship with the counsellor. These findings are noteworthy because they suggest that these participants wanted external support, but were unclear on how to access it safely.

As a result, they turned to their peers, who seemed less intimidating and more emotionally available. While the support of peers is important, studies have argued that adult mentors and confidants can greatly contribute to the well-being of newcomer youth (Hersi, 2011; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

The perspectives of these participants provide insight on how to better bridge the gap between those in positions to help, and the youth who need it. Given the importance of family support, peer connections and adult mentorship, it becomes evident that newcomer youth would benefit from strong social networks, and that services that can help strengthen such networks would prove beneficial. Coupled with the importance of increasing the accessibility and relevancy of mental health support for newcomer youth, is the need for further information on how to build on their strength and resiliency.

### **Cultural Identity/ “*A bit of everything*”**

Majority of the participants in this study exhibited what has been termed a “transcultural identity” (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). They expressed a desire to adapt to the cultural environment around them, while still maintaining a connection to their cultural heritage. This process of adaptation has been described in the literature as a desire to find “balance” (Stuart & Ward, 2011), an openness to multiple forms of identification (Kanlou et al., 2008), and “a dynamic person-environment construct, as demanded by the constant switching between school, home, and social lives” (Bauer, Loomis & Akkari, 2012, p. 64). Indeed, an integration of multiple cultural values, norms and practices that allows youth to engage in both cultures simultaneously has been argued to result in the most adaptive success (Berry et al., 2006; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Even those participants who expressed a desire to cling to their cultural roots relayed a need to behave differently when surrounded by people from the mainstream culture. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez Orozco (2001) differentiate between “instrumental” and “expressive” culture. *Instrumental culture* refers to the “skills, competencies, and social behaviours that are required to successfully make a living and contribute to society” (p. 156). *Expressive culture*, on the other hand, refers to a person’s values, worldviews and personal relationships that blend together to “give meaning and sustain the sense of self” (p. 156). The balancing act between instrumental and expressive culture was evidenced among many participants who explained that the way in which they behaved at home differed from the way they behaved at school. While the priority at home was to fulfil their parent’s expectations, at school the main objective was to “fit in”.

Unique to this study, however, is the topic of open-mindedness and cultural ambivalence. Participants explained that living within such a multicultural community exposed them, not only to the mainstream culture, but also to a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. For most participants, this was the first time they had ever met people from different countries and cultures, which resulted in a more open mind and a shedding of old prejudices. The process of cultural transition resulted in a positive shift in attitude that expanded both their perception of the world and their role within it.

Additionally, participants who felt excluded by mainstream culture seemed to develop a sense of ambivalence and detachment toward Canadian culture. Current research postulates that marginalization generally results in an adversarial identity (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) or cultural separation (Berry, 2001). Yet the reactions described by participants in this study were less extreme, and were manifested

as disinterest and at times, disapproval of mainstream culture. Detachment and apathy seemed to serve as a type of protective mechanism against feelings of alienation.

Participants who did not feel a sense of connection with the mainstream culture were comforted by the idea that they could one day leave, and start over somewhere else. This finding points to the important role that host societies play in the long-term integration of newcomer youth, and the potential benefit that community involvement and civic participation could have in the life of a newcomer youth. Programs that help to validate the important role of newcomers, and engage youth in the community may help to foster a sense of belonging and place within their new society.

### **The Overarching Structure of Cultural Transition**

Each of the aforementioned eight structures has provided further insight on different facets of cultural transition as experienced by newcomer youth. However, one of this study's unique contributions is its integration of these eight structures into an overarching structural summary. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study with youth that employs a phenomenological research approach to the study of cultural transition as a whole. When comparing this study to phenomenological research that specifically studied cultural transition among adults in Canada (Sinacore et al., 2009), a few noteworthy similarities and differences emerge.

First among the similarities between adults and adolescents is that they both comment on the challenges they face when trying to integrate into Canadian society. While adults feel frustrated by the difficulty of forming connections with Canadians in the greater community, adolescents in this study report resistance within school settings. Second, both adults and youth discuss expectations they had prior to migrating, and the

impact this had on their post-migration adjustment. However, adolescent newcomers place greater emphasis on the role that media has in forming these expectations. Third, both adults and youth emphasize the role of language in their social adjustment. Regardless of age, low levels of proficiency in the dominant language seem to elicit discrimination from people around them (Sinacore et al., 2009).

Key differences between the two age groups emerge with respect to their reason for migration and their sense of identity. When asked about their reasons for migrating to Canada, adult participants discuss their own desire to pursue new opportunities for themselves and their families. However, despite their openness to migration, the adolescents in this study demonstrated little to no choice in the matter. Furthermore, when compared to adults, youth participants in this study expressed a much stronger desire to incorporate both elements of Canadian culture and their culture of origin (Sinacore et al., 2009). This could be due to the fact that, developmentally, they are actively forming their self-concept and may be more open to the environmental influences around them (Steinber & Morris, 2001).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

As illustrated within the literature review, majority of the available research on newcomer youth have used quantitative and mixed method approaches to explore the experiences of adolescent migration. Of the studies that have employed qualitative methodologies, most have focused on a specific facet of their participant's experience (e.g. school life, family, peer relations etc.) and have recruited participants based on their status upon entry in Canada (i.e. immigrant or refugee) and/or their shared cultural background. This study begins to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on the

phenomenon of cultural transition a whole, and allowing newcomer youth themselves to determine the most salient components of their experience. Moreover, its inclusion of newcomer youth from multiple cultural backgrounds, regardless of their status upon entry, unearthed the constituents of their experience that transcended the cultural differences between them.

The use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews provided a space for participant youth to delve deeply into topics, which helped shed further light on patterns of behaviour that previous studies have discussed. Additionally, descriptive phenomenology's rigorous method of data analysis ensured that each component of the data was taken into careful consideration. Finally, multiple means of ensuring rigour and trustworthiness were employed, including external auditors and member checking with each participant of the study.

While this study was able to provide further insight into the phenomenon of cultural transition among newcomer youth, it was not without its limitations. Among them was its recruitment of newcomer youth through local non-profit organizations. Although attempts were made to inform and invite newcomer youth within the greater community, all ten participants had been involved, in some capacity, with an organization that provided services for newcomers. Consequently, the sample did not include newcomer youth who had transitioned without access to these supports, and as a result, lacks the voices of youth who may be dealing with different settlement barriers.

The original intention of this study was to involve both youth who immigrated and youth who sought refuge in Canada. The hope was that by including both groups of newcomers, the study would be able to uncover the similarities and differences in their

experiences. In the end, however, only one refugee participant responded to the study. The final structure is, therefore, more of a representation of cultural transition as experienced by immigrant youth as well as the similar aspects of that of the refugee participant's experiences.

While this study was inclusive of participants with many different cultural backgrounds, none of them migrated from English speaking countries, nor did any of them identify themselves as being able to visibly “blend-in”. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) make note of the fact that those who are less visible are subjected to less stereotypes, and consequently faced with fewer challenges in their host communities. However, newcomers who are less visible may also be deemed as less in need, and consequently face barriers when wanting to access supportive services. It is noteworthy then, that while experiences faced by this sub-category of newcomer youth may differ, they are not represented within this description of cultural transition.

In their study on cultural transitioning among Jewish newcomers in Quebec, Sinacore et al. (2009) found that “while immigrants may represent a single religious identity, they face challenges specific to their ethnicity, nationality, and the stream of religion they practice.” (p. 173). This study recruited youth from a diverse range of ethnic, national and religious backgrounds, with the aim of shedding light on the underlying structure of the phenomenon of cultural transition. However, by focusing on a single central phenomenon, this study may have lost some of the intersection of identities that newcomer youth experience and face

Finally, all the participants spoke about the challenges of learning English, and the barriers they sometimes faced when trying to express themselves in a language that

was not their mother tongue. Given that this study required that they speak English to tell their stories, there may have been limitations to how much they felt they could express. Had they been able to describe things in the language of their choosing, it is possible that additional elements of their experience would have surfaced. Furthermore, participants with low levels of English proficiency were unable to participate, and as a result, their voices and experiences are missing.

### **Implications for Counselling Training and Practice**

The learning derived from this study offers many new perspectives and implications for counsellors working with newcomer youth and families in the community, and most especially, those working within school settings. Both the literature and the participants in this study have highlighted school to be the initial introduction to their new cultural surroundings, and the world within which they spend majority of their time (Stodolska, 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). School counsellors are, therefore, in a unique position to act as first points of contact, sources of information, and providers of emotional support. However, given the fact that few participants actually turned to their school counsellors, it is important to pay attention to the reasons why, and make note of the places that they did turn to instead.

Concerns regarding confidentiality, a lack of a prior relationship and the counsellor's seemingly unavailable demeanour were all listed as reasons why participants did not seek counsellors out. Conversely, participants appreciated counsellors that reached out to them, and made an effort to help them meet friends at school. Additionally, they felt comfortable confiding in peers, and felt especially safe in ESL classes with fellow peers that understood their experiences of transition. These findings

bear several implications for school counsellors. First, there is a need for further information and education regarding the parameters of confidentiality and potential role a counsellor can play in the life of a newcomer youth. Second, the seemingly unavailable demeanour and unfamiliarity of the school counsellor could be counteracted through collaboration between ESL teachers and counsellors.

One possibility is for school counsellors to capitalize on the safety that students feel in the ESL classroom by using it as a setting through which they can disseminate information about their new school system, the process of cultural transition, and possible coping strategies to help them get through. Additionally, counsellors could work with ESL teachers to engage the students through culturally relevant learning material that can help them in their transition. For example, one participant in this study derived a great deal of clarity and perspective from a book titled “Keeper’n Me”, which told the story of a young First Nation boy and his journey of displacement and identity formation. Providing newcomer youth with relevant and engaging learning material can serve to keep them academically engaged (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez- Orozco, 2001), and equip them with tools that can help them face the challenges of transition. Moreover, the desire expressed by participants to engage with Canadian born students is also valuable information for counsellors and ESL teachers. Rather than connecting new students to other students that do not really want to be their friend, one participant recommended the formation of a school “welcoming club” where students who genuinely wanted to help newcomers could buddy up with new students and teach them about cultural norms and the school environment. The delivery of such programs, coupled with thoughtful ways of

bridging the gap between Canadian youth and newcomer youth in the classroom, could go a long way in ensuring the well-being of newcomer students.

Findings presented in this study also bear several implications for counsellors who work within community contexts. Foremost among them is the invaluable role of supportive peer connections and social networks (Chow, 2007; Fawzi et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2012; Salehi, 2009; Tsai, 2006). All participants reported feeling safe and understood by community youth groups that brought together newcomer youth from different backgrounds. When asked who participants talked to about their problems, none of them mentioned school counsellors or community counsellors, however all of the participants listed peers (both in Canada and in their home countries) as one of their main supports. This finding provides valuable insight for counsellors in the community who want to access newcomer youth. One possibility is for counsellors and non-profit organizations working with youth to collaborate and deliver group-based services that facilitate a therapeutic space for youth to talk to each other about the challenges they face. The delivery of programs that run under the supervision of a trained counsellor can make space for youth to explore their experiences with a more therapeutic focus, while still meeting their need for peer connection and belonging.

For counsellors who find themselves working in one-on-one contexts with newcomer youth, this study helps shed light on some of the most salient issues their clients could be facing. Foremost among them is the role of family life in the transition of newcomer youth. The changing dynamic of family relationships, coupled with the increasing rate of prolonged family separation are both important issues for counsellors to be aware of (McMichael et al. 2010; Pratt, 2006; Pratt, 2010; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011).

Additionally, counsellors might consider working with family units as a whole to help restore communication, and bridge the gap between parental expectations and the needs of their children. One possibility is to deliver family support groups that help parents navigate their way through the tasks of parenting their children within a new cultural setting.

Additionally, the resilient traits demonstrated by participants in this study provide clues on ways that counsellors working with newcomer youth can tap into their client's strengths. As eloquently put by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) "immigrant's initial positive attitude are a remarkable resource that must be cultivated. As a society we would be best served by harnessing those energies" (p. 2). Counsellors can draw upon their client's initial hopes and dreams as sources of strength, and utilize their passions and hobbies as tools for emotional regulation. Furthermore, inviting the client to talk about the things that once brought them joy and meaning may prove helpful in connecting them with ways in which they can engage in meaningful activities, and begin to establish a sense of belonging and home.

With respect to the overall mental health and well-being of newcomer youth, it is important to note that symptoms of depression and anxiety are occurring within the context of immigration (Ellis et al., 2011; Fawzi et al., 2009), and were present amongst the participants of this study. Yet, treating the symptoms may not be sufficient when working with newcomer youth, as it may not take into account the complexity of their situation. Counsellors who are working with this demographic must understand the barriers these youth face within their schools, within their home and within the community. As such, it would be helpful for programs that are training future counsellors

to educate their students on the impact migration can have on an adolescent's well-being and identity development. Moreover, given the important role that family plays, training future counsellors on various ways to engage parents within the therapeutic process could help increase the adolescent newcomer's support system.

### **Directions for Future Research**

While this study begins to address the paucity of qualitative research that works *with* newcomer youth (as opposed to research *about* newcomer youth) (Salehi, 2009), there are still several areas of importance that could be further investigated. First among them is the role of youth in the decision making process that leads to their migration, and the implications that their level of involvement in this decision has on their future transition process (Hutchins, 2011). This is of particular importance in instances of staggered migration, where one parent migrates before the rest of the family. There is a lack of research that looks at issues of agency and control that youth feel (or do not feel) when their parent leaves, and the ways in which they make sense of this loss (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). Moreover, further research on the reunification of families, and ways in which counsellors can support youth to reconnect with their parents would be important contributions to the field of counselling and the literature on staggered migration.

Given the impact of pre-migration expectations on post-migration experiences, it would be beneficial to explore how these expectations are shaped, particularly among youth. While studies have looked at this facet of transition among adults (Negy et al., 2009), it is possible that youth base their expectations on different sources, such as social media or descriptions relayed by parents. A closer look at the role these expectations play

might provide insight on how to help newcomer youth navigate their way through this initial phase of their transition. Additionally, the role of expectations may differ in cases of youth who come to Canada seeking refuge. Those youth who arrive as refugees may arrive with different sets of hopes, and may not have been afforded the time to cultivate too many expectations on what was to come. Future studies that incorporate the voices of both immigrant and refugee youth could help shed further light on the commonalities and differences latent between the two groups.

Finally, very few studies approach the topic of migration from the perspective of resilience and strength (Salehi, 2009). While many studies explore the role of risk factors on the psychological well-being and adjustment of newcomer youth, there is a need for literature that can help counsellors tap into the strengths and internal resources that youth already possess. One possible direction would be to recruit youth that consider themselves well adjusted, and explore the resources (both internal and external) that they found most useful. For example, participants in this study expressed a desire to connect with Canadian born peers that was left unsatisfied as a result of numerous barriers. One approach may be to talk to youth that have managed to connect with Canadians, and uncover the ways in which they were able to do so. Learning from the strengths, coping mechanisms and protective factors that already work for youth can equip counsellors with further insight on the things that help newcomer youth through cultural transition.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

#### Recruitment Letter to Community Organizations

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Anusha Kassan, Assistant Professor, Ph.D., Department of Psychology of the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia (UBC)

**Co-Investigator:** Negin Marie Naraghi, MA student, UBC

**School:** Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, University of British Columbia

**Project Title:** Cultural Transitioning Among Adolescent Newcomers

**Research Funding:** Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Dear [insert name of person/organization]:

My name is Negin and I'm a second year Masters student in the Community Counselling Program at the University of British Columbia (UBC). As part of my requirements for a degree in a Masters of Arts, I am **conducting a research study on the experiences of cultural transition and migration among adolescents** who have moved from one country to another.

I am contacting you to see if (organization) is interested in helping me recruit participants for this research project. I am hoping to interview a minimum of 10 adolescents between the ages of 13-18 who came to Canada as either immigrants or refugees during their teenage years, and who are currently Permanent Residents. All participants will be compensated for their time with a \$20 gift certificate to the mall.

If you would like to hear more about my research, I would be happy to meet with you in person and I have a complete project proposal, which I am also happy to show you. The following is a bit more background on who I am, why I am passionate about this research topic and why I think it is important and valuable for the participating youth. Finally, I have also outlined what participation in the research will entail. Please feel free to read the entire document or contact me directly for more information.

#### **What is this Study About and Why it is Important**

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences of adolescents as they transition into a new country and culture. In order for counsellors and mental health practitioners to support our newcomer youth, it is important that we have a good understanding of what their experiences are. Up until now majority of the academic research has focused on the experiences of adults, and those that have focused on youth have invited their perspectives through surveys and questionnaires. This study, on the other hand, will allow them the freedom to talk about their experiences, share their point of view and determine which parts of their experiences have been most significant. The aim of this study is to give them a chance to share their stories so that we can find out what their lived experience is and how we can better support them.

### **Who is conducting this Study?**

I will be the primary researcher in this study, and I will be working under the supervision of Dr. Anusha Kassan at UBC. I'm currently a second year MA student in Counselling Psychology, with a bachelor's degree in Psychology and a diploma in Intercultural Education and Training. In addition to my academic training, I have personally experienced immigrating to Canada as a teenager, and have extensive experience working with youth. More specifically, I have 3 years of experience coordinating settlement services for immigrant and refugee children, youth and families. I have lived and worked in multiple cultural settings (including Israel and Tonga) and have a passion for inviting the voices of newcomer youth to the table and empowering them to become involved in their new communities.

### **What is Involved and Methods:**

Interested youth can reach me at the contact information included below. Once they contact me I will do a preliminary phone screening to make sure that they are eligible for the project and that they have a clear understanding of what it entails. If we both agree to move forward then they will be invited to meet with me at UBC and I will give him/her a demographic form to fill out which I am happy to help them do. Once this is done I will engage them in an interview which will have a very open ended format and which will allow them to share as much about their experiences of moving to Canada as they feel comfortable doing. This interview will last anywhere from one hour to two hours depending on how much she/he would like to share. **All participants will receive a \$20 gift certificate to be used at the mall** as well as bus tickets to and from the interview.

### **Dissemination of Information, Consent and the Right to Withdraw:**

The information I gather will be included in my final thesis and possibly in additional articles that may be published in academic journals. I am also happy to forward a copy of my final findings to your organization. **The identities of all participants will be kept strictly confidential** and will not be revealed on any document. Consent to be part of this research is completely voluntary and participants can stop an interview at any time or not answer an interview questions. Participants are also free to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation.

### **Contact Information:**

Your assistance and support in recruiting participants would be greatly appreciated. If you have any questions, concerns or would like to speak to me further about the possibility of helping me you can reach me at: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx or xxx-xxx-xxxx

## Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

### Recruitment Poster



# Did You Move to Canada from Another Country?

- Are you between the ages of 13-18?
- Did you move to Canada as a teenager?
- Have you lived in Canada for over 6 months?
- Would you like to share your point of view?
- Would you like to earn a **\$20 gift certificate** to use at the mall?



If you said YES to these questions then you might be eligible to participate in a study on teenagers who moved to a new country.

### What Will I Have To Do If I Participate?

We want to learn more about what it's like to move to a new country. If you participate we will interview you to learn more about your experiences. Your identity will be kept confidential.

### Why Should I Participate?

You will get a **\$20 gift card** to use at the mall! Also, by sharing your experiences you are helping people like teachers, counsellors and community members support new teens that come to Canada. **This is your chance to share your experience and point of view!**

## Interested in learning more?

Contact Negin Naraghi, MA Candidate at the University of British Columbia

[Redacted] or email [Redacted]

## Appendix C: Screening Questions

### Participant Screening Questions

If potential participants contact me I will begin by thanking them for taking the time and explaining that in order to participate in the study, it's important I ask them a few questions to determine their eligibility. All callers will be reminded that all information shared on the phone, and throughout the study will remain anonymous. With their permission, I will ask the following questions:

- 1) How did you hear about the study?
- 2) How old are you?
- 3) When did you come to Canada?
- 4) Where did you move to Canada from?
- 5) How old were you when you moved to Canada?
- 6) How long have you lived in Canada?
- 7) Do you live in British Columbia? If so, what area?
- 8) Did you come to Canada as an immigrant or a refugee?
- 9) If you are not already a citizen/permanent resident, is it your intention to apply for permanent status and live in Canada long term or will you be returning to your country of origin?
- 10) Would you feel comfortable sharing your ideas and experiences in the English language?
- 11) Would you feel comfortable talking about your experiences of coming to Canada and what it's been like for you as you have adjusted to life here?
- 12) Are you currently experiencing anything stressful that might make it tough to talk about what's going on in your life?
- 13) Interviews will range from one hour to two hours depending on how much you would like to share. I will also be contacting for a follow up short discussion once I have finished analyzing our interview. Is this ok with you?
- 14) To participate in this study I will need the consent of your legal guardian, will it be possible for one of them to meet with me the day we do our interview?
- 15) Why do you want to participate in this study?
- 16) Do you have any questions for me?

## Appendix D: Consent Form



Department of Educational and  
Counselling Psychology, and Special  
Education  
The University of British Columbia

**Title of Study:** Experiences of Cultural Transitioning Among Adolescent Newcomers

### (Parental or Guardian Consent Form)

**Principle Investigator:** Dr. Anusha Kassan, Visiting Assistant Professor, Ph.D.,  
Department of Counselling Psychology of the Faculty of Education at the University of  
British Columbia (UBC).

**Co-Investigator:** Negin Marie Naraghi, M.A. (Candidate), Department of Counselling  
Psychology of the Faculty of Education at UBC. This research is part of Negin's thesis  
requirement for completing a Master's of Arts (M.A.) in the Counselling Psychology  
Program. Upon completion, the thesis will be a public document that can be viewed  
through the UBC library. Contact Information: xxx-xxx-xxxx or email:  
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

**Sponsor:** This research is funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research  
Council of Canada (SSHRC)

**Why we are doing this research?** We are doing this study to learn more about the  
experiences of teenagers as they move into a new country and culture. We want to learn  
more about the lives and experiences of newcomer teens so that people who work with  
newcomer youth, such as teachers, community organizations and counsellors, can better  
support them. There is not much research right now that actually invites the youth  
themselves to talk about their experiences. This study, however, will give newcomer  
teens a chance to share their stories, opinions and points of view.

**What happens if you say yes?** If you agree to have your son/daughter be part of this  
study, then your child will be invited to meet with me (Negin) at the University of British  
Columbia, or at a location that is closer to you, such as a community centre, university  
campus or library. It is important that we chose a place that can give us privacy and quiet.  
During this meeting I will give them a demographics form to fill out, and then I will ask  
them to tell me about their experience of moving to Canada. I will be taping this  
interview using a digital recorder so that I can analyze it later. I might ask some more  
questions about their experience so that I can understand as much as possible about their  
point of view. We might talk about topics such as: going to a new school, learning a new  
language, making new friends and more. The interview will last for one to two hours  
depending on how much they would like to talk. After this first interview I will write  
down what I have learned, and then I will make a second appointment with your

son/daughter to talk about what I found and make sure they think it's correct. I will make this appointment by email or by phone. This will be a much shorter meeting and can take place over the phone if it is more convenient.

**What will be done with the Study Results?** The information that your son/daughter shares during the interview will be analyzed and used for a final research project that is part of my program at UBC. I may also share this information at meetings and conferences, and it may be published in academic journals or magazines for other people to read. However, the name of your son/daughter will not be mentioned in any of these essays, articles or presentations.

**Potential Risks:** We do not think that there is anything in this study that could harm your son/daughter or be bad for him/her. There might be some questions or topics that they might feel uncomfortable talking about, so we will make sure that they know they don't have to talk about anything they don't want to. Also, they are free to end the interview at anytime. If something comes up during our interview that they need more support with, we will connect them to a licensed psychologist, and we will also give them a list of community resources that they can turn to for support.

**Potential Benefits:** By being part of this study, your son/daughter will get the chance to talk about their experiences in a safe environment. They will also get the chance to have their opinions heard, which will help people working with newcomer youth better understand and help other youth. Research shows that being given the opportunity to talk about things can result in feelings of relief and increased self-awareness.

**Confidentiality:** All the information that we collect in this study that is related to the identity of your son/daughter will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone without getting your permission first. All the audio recordings and written documents that relate to the interview will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the UBC Department of Education and Counselling Psychology and Special Education. We will be writing out the interviews that take place, and these written documents will be saved on a computer that is protected by a password. Only the two researchers mentioned above will have access to this password. Your son/daughter's name will not be written on these documents. Instead we will replace their name with a number and/or a pseudonym. The information that we get during the interview will not be accessible to anyone else to read, including parents and family members. It is UBC's policy that after five years, all data will be destroyed.

There are three exceptional circumstances under which confidentiality cannot be maintained: 1) If there is reason to suspect physical, mental or sexual child abuse; 2) If there is serious risk of suicide and/or self harm and 3) If the participant presents a clear and imminent threat to someone else or society at large. If at any point we assess participant's self-disclosure to indicate any one of these three situations, we will have to take steps to ensure the safety of participants. This might include, but is not exclusive to: contacting parents/guardians, emergency services, the Ministry of Child and Family Development and counselling support services. Participants will always be informed of

the precautions that are being taken and will be given the option of accessing these services themselves with the support of the investigator.

**Compensation for Participating in the Study:** In return for the time spent participating in this study, your son/daughter will receive a \$20 gift certificate to spend at the mall and bus tickets for travel to and from the interview.

**Contact for Information about the Study:** If at any point before, during or after the study you have questions about the study, please feel free to contact the principal investigator or co-investigator. Their contact information is on the first page of this document.

**Contact for Concerns about the Rights of Research Participants:** If at any point you have questions or concerns about your rights and/or the rights of your son/daughter as a research participant, please feel free to contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

**Consent and the Right to Withdraw:** Consent to be part of this research study is completely voluntary, which means that you have the choice to decide if you want your son/daughter to be part of it or not. People who agree to be part of this research can also choose to withdraw or end their involvement at any time with no explanation and with no consequences. Your son/daughter also has the right not to answer any questions that they do not want to answer. They can also choose to take a break at any time during the interview. Finally, the researcher (Negin) also has the right to withdraw your son/daughter from the study if circumstances warrant that it is necessary.

**Signature of Parent/Guardian:**

I understand the information provided for the study *Cultural Transitioning Among Adolescent Newcomers* as described in this consent form. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

“I consent/I do not consent (circle one) to my child’s participation in this study.”

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Parent/Guardian

☐ Check box if you are interested in receiving a summary of the research findings.

**Signature of Investigator:** These are the terms under which I will conduct research

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix E: Adolescent Consent Form



Department of Educational and  
Counselling Psychology, and Special  
Education  
The University of British Columbia

**Title of Study:** Experiences of Cultural Transitioning Among Adolescent Newcomers

### (Adolescent Participant Consent Form)

**Principle Investigator:** Dr. Anusha Kassan, Visiting Assistant Professor, Ph.D.,  
Department of Counselling Psychology of the Faculty of Education at the University of  
British Columbia (UBC).

**Co-Investigator:** Negin Marie Naraghi, M.A. (Candidate), Department of Counselling  
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new friends and more. The interview will last for one to two hours depending on how  
much you would like to talk. After this first interview I will write down what I have  
learned, and then I will make a second appointment with you to talk about what I found

and make sure you think this is correct. I will make this appointment by email or by phone. This will be a much shorter meeting and can take place over the phone if it is easier for you.

**What will be done with the Study Results?** The information that you share during the interview will be analyzed and used for a final research project that is part of my program at UBC. I may also share this information at meetings and conferences, and it may be published in academic journals or magazines for other people to read. However, your name will not be mentioned in any of these essays, articles or presentations.

**Potential Risks:** We do not think that there is anything in this study that could harm you or be bad for you. There might be some questions or topics that you might feel uncomfortable talking about, so it is important you know that you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to. Also, you are free to end the interview at anytime. If something comes up during our interview that you need more support with, we will connect you to a licensed psychologist, and we will also give you a list of community resources that you can turn to for support.

**Potential Benefits:** By being part of this study, you will get the chance to talk about your experiences in a safe environment. You will also get the chance to have your opinions heard, which will help people working with newcomer youth better understand and help other youth. Research shows that being given the opportunity to talk about things can result in feelings of relief and increased self-awareness.

**Confidentiality:** All the information that we collect in this study that is related to the your identity will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone without getting your permission first. All the audio recordings and written documents that relate to the interview will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the UBC Department of Education and Counselling Psychology and Special Education. We will be writing out the interviews that take place, and these written documents will be saved on a computer that is protected by a password. Only the two researchers mentioned above will have access to this password. Your name will not be written on these documents. Instead we will replace your name with a number and/or a pseudonym. The information that we get during the interview will not be accessible to anyone else to read, including parents and family members. It is UBC's policy that after five years, all data will be destroyed.

There are three exceptional circumstances under which confidentiality cannot be maintained: 1) If there is reason to suspect physical, mental or sexual child abuse; 2) If there is serious risk of suicide and/or self harm and 3) If a participant presents a clear and imminent threat to someone else or society at large. If at any point we assess participant's self-disclosure to indicate any one of these three situations, we will have to take steps to ensure the safety of participants. This might include, but is not exclusive to: contacting parents/guardians, emergency services, the Ministry of Child and Family Development and counselling support services. Participants will always be informed of the precautions that are being taken and will be given the option of accessing these services themselves with the support of the investigator.

**Compensation for Participating in the Study:** In return for the time spent participating in this study, you will receive a \$20 gift certificate to spend at the mall and bus tickets for travel to and from the interview.

**Contact for Information about the Study:** If at any point before, during or after the study you have questions about the study, please feel free to contact the principal investigator or co-investigator. Their contact information is on the first page of this document.

**Contact for Concerns about the Rights of Research Participants:** If at any point you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please feel free to contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

**Consent and the Right to Withdraw:** Consent to be part of this research study is completely voluntary, which means that you have the choice to decide if you want to be part of it or not. People who agree to be part of this research can also chose to withdraw or end their involvement at any time with no explanation and with no consequences. You also have the right not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You can also choose to take a break at any time during the interview. Finally, the researcher (Negin) also has the right to withdraw you from the study if circumstances warrant that it is necessary.

**Signature of Parent/Guardian:**

I understand the information provided for the study *Cultural Transitioning Among Adolescent Newcomers* as described in this consent form. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

“I consent/I do not consent (circle one) to my child’s participation in this study.”

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

☐ Check box if you are interested in receiving a summary of the research findings.

**Signature of Investigator:** These are the terms under which I will conduct research

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix F: Assent Form



Department of Educational and  
Counselling Psychology, and Special  
Education  
The University of British Columbia

**Title of Study:** Experiences of Cultural Transitioning Among Adolescent Newcomers

### (Adolescent Participant Assent Form)

**Principle Investigator:** Dr. Anusha Kassan, Visiting Assistant Professor, Ph.D.,  
Department of Counselling Psychology of the Faculty of Education at the University of  
British Columbia (UBC).

**Co-Investigator:** Negin Marie Naraghi, M.A. (Candidate), Department of Counselling  
Psychology of the Faculty of Education at UBC. This research is part of Negin's thesis  
requirement for completing a Master's of Arts (M.A.) in the Counselling Psychology  
Program. Upon completion, the thesis will be a public document that can be viewed  
through the UBC library. Contact Information: xxx-xxx-xxxx or email:

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

**Sponsor:** This research is funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research  
Council of Canada (SSHRC)

**Why we are doing this research?** We are doing this study to learn more about the  
experiences of teenagers as they move into a new country and culture. We want to learn  
more about the lives and experiences of newcomer teens so that people who work with  
newcomer youth, such as teachers, community organizations and counsellors, can better  
support them. There is not much research right now that actually invites the youth  
themselves to talk about their experiences. This study, however, will give newcomer  
teens a chance to share their stories, opinions and points of view.

**What happens if you say yes?** If you agree to be part of this study, then you will be  
invited to meet with me (Negin) at the University of British Columbia, or at a location  
that is closer to you, such as a community centre, university campus or library. It is  
important that we chose a place that can give us privacy and quiet. During this meeting I  
will give you a demographics form to fill out, and then I will ask you to tell me about  
your experience of moving to Canada. I will be taping this interview using a digital  
recorder so that I can analyze it later. I might ask some more questions about your  
experience so that I can understand as much as possible about your point of view. We  
might talk about topics such as: going to a new school, learning a new language, making  
new friends and more. The interview will last for one to two hours depending on how  
much you would like to talk. After this first interview I will write down what I have  
learned, and then I will make a second appointment with you to talk about what I found

and make sure you think this is correct. I will make this appointment by email or by phone. This will be a much shorter meeting and can take place over the phone if it is easier for you.

**What will be done with the Study Results?** The information that you share during the interview will be analyzed and used for a final research project that is part of my program at UBC. I may also share this information at meetings and conferences, and it may be published in academic journals or magazines for other people to read. However, your name will not be mentioned in any of these essays, articles or presentations.

**Potential Risks:** We do not think that there is anything in this study that could harm you or be bad for you. There might be some questions or topics that you might feel uncomfortable talking about, so it is important you know that you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to. Also, you are free to end the interview at any time. If something comes up during our interview that you need more support with, we will connect you to a licensed psychologist, and we will also give you a list of community resources that you can turn to for support.

**Potential Benefits:** By being part of this study, you will get the chance to talk about your experiences in a safe environment. You will also get the chance to have your opinions heard, which will help people working with newcomer youth better understand and help other youth. Research shows that being given the opportunity to talk about things can result in feelings of relief and increased self-awareness.

**Confidentiality:** All the information that we collect in this study that is related to the your identity will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone without getting your permission first. All the audio recordings and written documents that relate to the interview will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the UBC Department of Education and Counselling Psychology and Special Education. We will be writing out the interviews that take place, and these written documents will be saved on a computer that is protected by a password. Only the two researchers mentioned above will have access to this password. Your name will not be written on these documents. Instead we will replace your name with a number and/or a pseudonym. The information that we get during the interview will not be accessible to anyone else to read, including parents and family members. It is UBC's policy that after five years, all data will be destroyed.

There are three exceptional circumstances under which confidentiality cannot be maintained: 1) If there is reason to suspect physical, mental or sexual child abuse; 2) If there is serious risk of suicide and/or self harm and 3) If a participant presents a clear and imminent threat to someone else or society at large. If at any point we assess participant's self-disclosure to indicate any one of these three situations, we will have to take steps to ensure the safety of participants. This might include, but is not exclusive to: contacting parents/guardians, emergency services, the Ministry of Child and Family Development and counselling support services. Participants will always be informed of the precautions that are being taken and will be given the option of accessing these services themselves with the support of the investigator.

**Compensation for Participating in the Study:** In return for the time spent participating in this study, you will receive a \$20 gift certificate to spend at the mall and bus tickets for travel to and from the interview.

**Contact for Information about the Study:** If at any point before, during or after the study you have questions about the study, please feel free to contact the principal investigator or co-investigator. Their contact information is on the first page of this document.

**Contact for Concerns about the Rights of Research Participants:** If at any point you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please feel free to contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

**Consent and the Right to Withdraw:** Consent to be part of this research study is completely voluntary, which means that you have the choice to decide if you want to be part of it or not. People who agree to be part of this research can also chose to withdraw or end their involvement at any time with no explanation and with no consequences. You also have the right not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You can also choose to take a break at any time during the interview. Finally, the researcher (Negin) also has the right to withdraw you from the study if circumstances warrant that it is necessary.

**Signature of Parent/Guardian:**

I understand the information provided for the study *Cultural Transitioning Among Adolescent Newcomers* as described in this consent form. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

“I consent/I do not consent (circle one) to my child’s participation in this study.”

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

☐ Check box if you are interested in receiving a summary of the research findings.

**Signature of Investigator:** These are the terms under which I will conduct research

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix G: Demographics Form

### Demographics Form

#### Participant Demographics Form

Please answer the following questions by filling in the blank sections and circling answers where appropriate. If you need any help, please feel free to ask the researcher. If there are any questions that you feel uncomfortable answer, you have the right to leave them blank. **All information provided will be kept strictly confidential.** Thank you so much for participating!

- 
1. Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_
  2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
  3. Gender: a) Male    b) Female    c) Other
  4. Religion/Spiritual Belief System \_\_\_\_\_
  5. Sexual Orientation: \_\_\_\_\_
  6. Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_
  7. Length of time you have lived in Canada: \_\_\_\_\_
  8. Area of Canada that you live in: \_\_\_\_\_
  9. Number of family members you live with (if none, please specify who you live with without giving names): \_\_\_\_\_
  10. City you live in: \_\_\_\_\_
  11. Ethnic Background: \_\_\_\_\_
  12. Languages spoken: \_\_\_\_\_
  13. If you're in school, what grade are you in? \_\_\_\_\_
  14. How did you hear about this study?  
\_\_\_\_\_
  15. What do you hope to get from this study?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix H: Interview Protocol

### Interview Protocol

*The following is a list of interview questions that have been derived off the main themes in the literature regarding the process of psychological and sociocultural transition among newcomer youth. Cultural transition has been defined as the adjustment process of newcomers along psychological, sociocultural and linguistic domains. Each of these categories has been represented in the following questions and prompts have been included in each category. If I find that participants are struggling to answer the question, or I need clarification on what they have said, I may use some of the prompts that have been included. However, I will allow participants to determine what is most pertinent to their experience and what they would most like to discuss as the interview unfolds.*

#### Topic A: Open Ended Warm up Questions

*Intention:* Gain a sense of who they are and begin to establish rapport.

- 1) Can you tell me a bit about yourself? What would you like me to know before we begin?
  - a. Do you attend school or work? What school/job do you have?
  - b. What are some things you really enjoy doing? Hobbies?
  - c. What are some future aspirations that you have?

#### Topic B: Cultural Transition, Acculturation and Adaptation

*Intention:* Begin the interview with the overarching question to provide them the opportunity to focus on whatever is most important and salient to them.

- 1) I am interested in learning about your overall experience of moving from [insert country of origin] to Canada. Can you tell me about what it's been like for you?
  - a. What do you remember about your journey from [insert country] to Canada?
  - b. What were your first few weeks/months like?
  - c. What was the hardest part about moving here? What was the easiest or best part?

#### Topic C: Linguistic Transition

*Intention:* Move into some of the more detailed aspects of their experience by focusing on the pertinent themes in the literature. Of the three themes linguistic transition is the most neutral and is potentially a good entry point into other subjects such as school.

- 1) If English was a new language for you, what was your experience of having to learn English?
  - a. How much English did you know when you came here?

- b. Did you face any challenges learning a new language?
- c. Did you experience any benefits of learning English?
- d. How did language affect you at school or in the community?
- e. What was it like to be part of a society with a different dominant language than your own?
- f. Do other members of your family speak English? How does that affect your life?

### **Topic D: Socio-cultural Transition**

***Intention:*** Explore the ways in which they have transitioned within the school system both academically and socially. As rapport is increased, we will move into the transitional experiences of their family and the potential impact this has had.

#### **School**

- 1) If you have gone to school in Canada, then what was your experience of going to a Canadian school?
  - a. Can you tell me about what it was like to start out at a new school?
  - b. What was your experience of the Canadian curriculum?
  - c. What was your experience of the Canadian teachers at school?
  - d. What was helpful and what was challenging about your new school?

#### **Social Networks**

- 2) What was your experience like of making friends in Canada?
  - a. Have you made friends since moving to Canada?
  - b. Are your friends from the same culture as you or from a different culture?
  - c. How did you decide whom you wanted to be friends with?
  - d. What's the difference between your friends back home and your friends in Canada?
  - e. Have you become involved in any community organizations or after school activities?

#### **Family**

- 3) What was the experience like for you to move here with your family/without your family?
  - a. Can you tell me about your relationships with the other people in your family?
  - b. Have these relationships changed since moving to Canada? If yes, how so?
  - c. Do you have other people outside your family that you consider yourself close to?
  - d. What role does your family play in your every day life?

### **Topic E: Psychological Transition**

***Intention:*** Provide an opportunity to discuss the psychological and emotional experience of cultural transition. I will also invite them to share how they have internalized the cultural change and its affect on their identity.

- 4) Moving to a new country can be a big change; can you tell me more about how all the change you experienced made you feel?
  - a. If you could divide your experience of moving into chapters, what would you call them?
  - b. What has been the most difficult part of moving to Canada?
  - c. What was helpful for you during this time in your life?
  - d. What would have been supportive or helpful for you during this time of transition?
- 5) How would you describe your culture? (Not necessarily the culture from which you came, but your own personal culture)
  - a. What culture do you feel a stronger connection to, your culture of origin or Canadian culture, and why?
  - b. If you could live your life any way you wanted, how would you live it?
  - c. What would you like to do with your future?

### **Topic E: Additional Information**

***Intention:*** To provide participants with the opportunity to add any additional information and give feedback regarding the experience of being interviewed.

- 1) Do you have anything to add to what we have discussed today?
- 2) What was this interview like for you?

## **Appendix I: List of Resources for Newcomer Youth in Vancouver**

### List of Resources for Newcomer Youth in Vancouver

#### **Newcomer Services:**

##### **ISS of BC Head Office - Terminal Street, Vancouver**

#501 – 333 Terminal Avenue,  
Vancouver, BC V6A 2L7  
Phone: 604-684-2561 / Fax: 604-684-2266  
iss@issbc.org

##### **North Shore Multicultural Society**

207-123 East 15th Street North Vancouver,  
BC V7L 2P7  
Tel: 604-988-2931  
Fax: 604-988-2960  
General Inquiries: office@nsms.ca

##### **MOSAIC 1720 Grant St.,**

2nd floor Vancouver, B.C. Canada  
V5L 2Y7  
Phone: 604 254 9626  
Fax: 604 254 3932  
Email: mosaic@mosaicbc.com

##### **Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture (VAST)**

2618 East Hastings Street, Vancouver, BC V5K 1Z6  
Phone: 604-299-353

#### **Free/Subsidized Counselling Services:**

##### **Family Services of the North Shore**

I hope family centre – West 1st location  
101-255 West 1st Street North Vancouver, BC V7M 3G8  
Tel: 604-988-5281 fax: 604-988-3961  
email: family@familyservices.bc.ca

##### **Family Services of Greater Vancouver - Main Office**

301 - 1638 E Broadway Vancouver BC V5N 1W1  
Phone: 604-731-4951  
Fax: 604-733-7009

#### **Emotional Support for FREE over phone/online:**

Greater Vancouver: 604-872-3311  
Online support for youth: [www.youthinbc.com](http://www.youthinbc.com)  
Suicide Prevention for all of BC: 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)

## **Appendix J: List of Resources for Newcomer Youth in/or near Victoria, BC**

### List of Resources for Newcomer Youth in/or near Victoria, BC

#### **Newcomer Services:**

##### **The Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA)**

Main Office: 250-388-4728  
 Fax Number: 250-386-4395  
 930 Balmoral Road Map  
 Victoria BC, V8T 1A8, Canada  
 At Quadra Street,  
 in the basement of the  
 First Metropolitan United Church.

##### **The Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS)**

637 Bay St., 3rd Floor,  
 Victoria, BC V8T 5L2  
 Hours of Operation:  
 9am to 5pm Monday through Friday  
 Phone: (250) 361-9433  
 Fax: (250) 361-1914  
 Email: [info@vircs.bc.ca](mailto:info@vircs.bc.ca)

#### **Free/Subsidized Counselling Services:**

##### **Citizens Counselling Centre**

10 AM to 2 PM, Monday - Friday  
 Call us at: 250-384-9934  
 E-mail us at: [info@citizenscounselling.com](mailto:info@citizenscounselling.com)  
 You'll find us at:  
 941 Kings Road  
 Victoria, BC, V8T 1W7

##### **Victoria Island Crisis Line**

Available 24/7  
 1-888-494-3888  
 Also available for online chat at <http://www.vicrisis.ca>

##### **YouthSpace Chat/Text Support**

Text: 778\_783\_0177  
 Chat: <http://youthspace.ca/chat>

##### **Pacific Centre Family Services Association**

Counselling for individuals, families, couples, children, youths, and groups  
 Telephone: 250-478-8357 or 1-866-478-8357  
[www.pacificcentrefamilyservices.org](http://www.pacificcentrefamilyservices.org)

## **Appendix K: Member Checking Protocol**

### **Member Checking Protocol**

Following the analysis of each individual participant's interview, I will be contacting him or her to review the themes I found in the description of their experience. My aim will be to provide them with the opportunity to give input on whether or not my findings feel true to them and are reflective of their experience. Conversations will happen by phone or in person, depending on the preference of the participant. The following questions will be asked:

- 1) I have had the chance to analyze the interview you provided, and have written a description of what I understood to be the most important parts of your experience. Once I share it with you, I would like your feedback regarding how accurately it reflects your experience. This is what I found: [describe findings & share structural analysis].
- 2) Which sections of this description do you consider important to your experience of cultural transitioning?
- 3) Which sections of this description are less important or irrelevant to your experience of cultural transitioning?
- 4) Which parts would you change?
- 5) Is there anything that I did not include in this description that you would like me to add?