Abstract

This study used Participatory Action Research practices to articulate the strategies refugees used to rebuild their livelihoods in Vancouver, British Columbia. Strategies were clustered under eight headings: establishing safety, improving English language fluency, building a social support network, using social services, seeking initial Canadian employment, increasing job satisfaction, accessing training and further education, personal coping strategies. Throughout the interview process, refugee participants also described the problems they confronted while attempting to rebuild. Problems included extreme financial precariousness, low self-efficacy related to refugee status, and systemic barriers to employment. A working group comprised of refugees met to prioritize the problems and suggest recommendations to refugee communities, service providers and policy makers. These recommendations will lead to communicative and exploratory actions in the form of dissemination of information, advocacy, and community building.
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Dedication

To those who survive the journey
with the strength to begin again.

Every now and then
I would wish to seek a homeland
A new homeland... not inhabited
And for a God who does not keep on pursuing me
And a land that will not become my enemy

- Nizar Qabbani
Chapter 1

Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to articulate the livelihood building strategies of a group of refugees who have recently resettled in Vancouver, to highlight the problems these livelihood-building strategies could not resolve and to generate recommendations and action strategies aimed at ameliorating these problems. Participatory Action Research (PAR) procedures were used in this study to generate socially situated, local, useful knowledge about the livelihood rebuilding experiences in the lives of individual refugees, rather than to validate generalized theories about careers. Later in this chapter I will describe my choice to draw from the practice of Participatory Action Research (PAR), while using qualitative research procedures for data collection and analysis. I will also report on the methodological concepts and procedures that were used throughout this project. A discussion of ethical considerations concludes this chapter.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed:

1) What are the strategies refugees use to rebuild their livelihood in the resettlement environment?

2) What are the unresolved problems refugees faced throughout their livelihood rebuilding process?

3) What recommendations and action strategies can be generated to address these problems?
Assumptions

Assumptions implicit in this investigation are a) refugees are not well able to benefit from their human capital (including education, training, past experience) in the process of rebuilding livelihood, b) refugees must devise new survival strategies that may be successful to a greater or lesser extent, c) if strategies can be articulated, useful information may emerge that could be used both to help new arrivals by disseminating the information in a form that is accessible to the refugee community, and also by adding specific, contextual information to the body of vocational knowledge, d) refugee participants are willing and able to work collaboratively to address unresolved problems that emerge throughout the research process.

Research Design

Given that this project is located within my on-going work as a psychosocial counsellor at the Vancouver Association for the Survivors of Torture (VAST), I wanted the research method to be suitable for use in a community psychology framework which is characterized by a “commitment to addressing the needs and issues of marginalized communities, an interest in prevention rather than treating mental health problems, and a desire to work with disempowered communities to help them gain a greater control over resources and institutions that effect their lives” (Banyard and Miller p.486, 1994). Using a Participatory Action Research framework, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews to generate information about refugees’ approaches to livelihood building and the challenges faced throughout this process, and then used focus group techniques to engage participants in further stages of collaborative knowledge creation and problem solving via member checking, generating recommendations and planning action strategies.
Participatory Action Research (PAR) is not a method, per se, but a “dynamic process that develops from the unique needs, challenges and learning experiences specific to a given group. Methods and modes of action are formed over time, through a dialectic movement between action and reflection, and the understanding and change that evolves through PAR occurs as a function of this reflexivity” (Kidd & Kral, 2005). Several crucial elements of PAR, defined in a counselling psychology context by Kral, Burhardt and Kidd (2002), were incorporated into this project: the relationship between the researcher and the participants was interactive; significant time has been spent with participants to develop trust and rapport; respect for the participant group was demonstrated throughout the process; needs and goals of the participant population were incorporated into the design of the project; and, participants were invited to participate in several activities throughout the research process. These activities included the opportunity to informally add to or amend interview responses, offer feedback regarding the analysis generated from the data, generate recommendations to address unresolved problems, take part in ameliorating actions, and suggest means of disseminating the results.

Certain modifications were made to the participatory action model because of the constraints of a master’s thesis project. For example, while I solicited informal input from people who have been engaged with refugee populations as well as from people who have lived refugee experience, the framework and scope of the project was significantly shaped before project participants were recruited. Time limits were established to mark stages of the project, rather than allowing for an open-ended cycle of reflecting, planning, acting and observing. The range of possible actions that might have arisen out of the research process may have been constrained by time factors and limited
resources. Finally, together with my academic advisor, I have retained final authorship and responsibility for the project.

Research Context: Refugees in Canada

Only a fraction of the estimated 9.2 million refugees worldwide have the means to reach the industrialized world to seek asylum (UNHCR, 2006). Approximately 25,000 refugees arrived in Canada each year in 2003 and 2004 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2004). Most of the refugees who do reach Canada settle in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver (Ibid.). Unlike immigrants, refugees have not chosen to leave their homes in order to live in Canada; rather, they are fleeing persecution and violence and have a legitimate fear for their lives should they return to their country. Within the context of this research project, it will be helpful for the reader to have a general understanding of the process of attaining legal refugee status.

There are two main processes through which people can attain refugee status in Canada (Canadian Council for Refugees, 1999a). In the first instance, an individual who is residing outside his or her country of origin is interviewed by a representative of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and is determined to be a Convention Refugee under the 1951 Geneva Convention. At this point they are sponsored by the Canadian government and are availed of numerous resources, such as transportation loans to finance their travel to Canada, transition housing and orientation information on their arrival, settlement services usually in their own language, English language classes, health care and financial support (albeit, limited) for up to one year. These support services are provided on arrival and for the first year to ease the highly stressful transition period.

The other way a person can become officially recognized as a refugee is by seeking asylum within the borders of a host country. All countries who are signatories to
the U.N. Convention on refugees are bound by international law to ensure that any
foreign national within their borders who fears persecution and who cannot be assured of
protection from his or her own government has the right to claim asylum. In this second
instance, people who arrive in Canada and make an “inland refugee claim” cannot be
assured of their safety until after the Immigration and Refugee Board hears their case and
determines whether they are found to be convention refugees and will be granted asylum,
or whether they must return to their country. This process takes eight months to one year
(on average), and during this time refugee claimants are in material and psychological
limbo, unable to begin the transition and adaptation process (Coates and Hayward, 2005).
As soon as they initiate their refugee claim they are eligible for work permits, limited
health care and emergency hardship allowance (if necessary). However, refugee
claimants are not entitled to English classes or any other social service until after their
claims are decided.

In both cases, once a person is designated as a Convention refugee they are
eligible for permanent residence in Canada and may sponsor immediate family members
to join them. Depending on the region of origin, the average processing time for family
reunifications is between two and six years.

Definition of Terms

According to the United Nations convention of 1951, a refugee is someone who
has a well-founded fear of persecution; whose fears arise because of race, religion,
nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group; and who must
remain outside or is unwilling to return to his or her homeland because of that fear
Livelihood (re)building, for the purpose of this study, is conceived of as not only work done to provide a source of income but also the activities necessary to become employable and attain employment such as connecting with social services to obtain support and benefits, attending job-search and job-skills programs, and learning about the social and economic environment, and developing social networks. Livelihood expanded in this way takes into account economic, social and psychological needs, and does not carry the ideological connotations of 'career.'

Participatory Action Research is a methodological stance that seeks to focus social science theorizing on actual social problems, places value on emancipation and empowerment, and is based on a joint learning process of researchers and research participants. (Boog, Keune & Tromp, 2003)

Plan of Presentation

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Following this introductory chapter, chapter two contains a review of the literature on refugee mental health, post-migration stressors including employment, vocational theory and participatory action research methodology, in order to provide theoretical background and demonstrate a rationale for the research question and design.

Chapter three describes how my four-phase study proceeded. I will attempt to contextualize the study by locating myself as the researcher and describing the organizational setting. I will then report on the research process as it developed, discussing each phase from the planning, data collection and analysis, the contributions of the working group, and any actions that have been taken. The strategies and problems highlighted in the interviews will be summarized along with their attendant recommendations and actions.
The discussion in chapter four will comprise an evaluation of the PAR process, an interpretation of the findings in the context of relevant literature, and the implications of the project before reaching a conclusion.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

My research question touches on a number of special topics in counselling psychology practice and research. Accordingly, the literature review for this project has had to be broad and somewhat interdisciplinary, encompassing psychiatric contributions in refugee mental health, discourse on refugee resettlement in the fields of sociology, development studies and social geography, and multicultural and vocational theory within counselling psychology. Given the interdisciplinary nature of refugee studies in general and the breadth of the issues that are specifically relevant to this study, the literature review cannot be considered exhaustive but rather it is intended to situate the current project.

Refugee Mental Health

A review of twelve published articles pertaining to mental health status of refugees concluded that negative mental health outcomes are prevalent in refugee populations (Keyes, 2000). A significant body of research on the mental health of refugees documents high levels of exposure to organized violence, torture and other major traumatic events, and finds high rates of major depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among refugees resettled in developed nations (Agger & Jensen, 1996; Allodi, 1991; Amnesty International, 1996, 2003; Gorman, 2001; Herman, 1992; Keynes, 2000; Kinzie, 2001; Sinnerbrink & Silove, 1997; Somnier, & Genefke, 1986; Van der Veer, 1992). Miller (2001) states that most of this research has emphasized the assessment of psychiatric symptoms through the use of symptom checklists and structured clinical interviews, but he believes that this captures only part of the picture.
In his own review of the literature, Miller corroborates Keynes' findings of clinically significant levels of trauma and depression in both community and clinical settings. Additionally, he points out that the few studies that include a follow-up component or that studied refugees several years after arriving in the host country consistently found that painful symptoms of trauma and depression often persist over periods of many years, raising questions about whether ongoing stressors in the resettlement environment might be contributing to the persistence of symptoms. He suggests that while the quantitative, clinical approach has played an important role in documenting the psychological sequelae of pre-migration experiences, it has limited our understanding of the range of stressors inherent in the experience of exile.

Post-migration stressors have been flagged as an important area for research (Keyes, 2000). Several researchers have begun to pay attention to these factors and their effects on vulnerable refugee populations (Behnia, 2001; Miller, 1999; Miller, 2001; Pernice & Brook, 1996; Silove & Elblad, 2002; Sinnerbrink & Silove, 1997; Tomlinson & Egan, 2002; Uba & Chung, 1991; Williams & Berry, 1991). Acknowledging that experiences of forced migration and resettlement are stressful in themselves, several post-migration stressors are highlighted in the literature, including fear of repatriation, separation from family members, the stress of going through the refugee determination process (Sinnerbrink & Silove, 1997), the loss of important life projects, changes in socio-economic status and related concerns about economic survival, the loss of meaningful structure and activity in daily life, and the loss of meaningful social roles (Miller, 1999).
Employment-related Factors in Refugee Mental Health

Employment-related factors were listed as significant stressors by a number of researchers (Barudy, 1989; Bennia, 2001; Miller, 1999; Pernice & Brook, 1996; Sinnerbrink & Silove, 1997; Silove et al, 2002; Tomlinson & Egan, 2002; Uba & Chung, 1991; Williams & Berry, 1991). Within an analysis of acculturative stress, Williams and Berry (1991) discuss the nature of employment as a form of cross-cultural contact with potential protective or exasperating consequences for the mental health of refugees. Behnia (2001) offers descriptive information about the effects that unemployment, living in poverty, and interactions with social services have on refugees. He states “unemployment, poverty and being a welfare recipient were sources of humiliation and frustration among participants. ... Unemployment and poverty disrupted the marriage of some refugees and resulted in their isolation. ... Participants stressed that social assistance did not cover basic expenses” (p.7). Barudy states that elaboration and resolution of trauma is only possible when refugee clients are able to “achieve an adequate level of integration in society” (p. 726), and that a major indicator of integration is the acquisition and maintenance of stable work. These authors indicate that employment related experience can be a stress factor in itself and can exasperate trauma symptomology, but can also have positive effects if employment leads to greater social integration and stability.

In their study on Southeast Asian refugees resettled in Vancouver, Beiser, Johnson and Turner (1993) investigated the psychological meaning of employment by focusing on the financial strain and loss of self-esteem resulting from under-employment and unemployment. These authors found a reciprocal relationship between unemployment and depressive affect, and noted that increased risk of depression made it more difficult to become and stay employed.
Tomlinson and Egan’s (2002) paper explores the discursive constructs of refugee identity in the U.K. On the assumption that the current ‘empowerment’ discourse emphasizes social participation and self-reliance, the authors interviewed both service providers and refugees in order to assess the helpfulness of employment-related services in preparing refugees to adapt to the job market. These authors argue that refugee identities are re-built through their interactions with the host culture, and that the main site of interaction is in the refugees attempts to make a living (that is, through job-readiness programs, job seeking, on the job, or in interactions with the social assistance system). Their findings indicate that barriers to employment for refugees in the U.K. straddle structural, institutional, and personal factors including unfamiliarity with the labour market and job-seeking processes, employers perceptions of refugees, unrecognized qualifications and prior experience, and language barriers.

Behnia (2001) reports that friends and caring professionals are very important in the adjustment of survivors of war and torture to their new environment. His findings indicate that friends in the refugee/immigrant community help newcomers in numerous practical ways, including with job seeking and recommending reliable professionals, as well as by providing emotional support. He cautions, however, that because of the numerous losses and hardships suffered by refugees they can sometimes have limited resources to help each other. He cites three factors which enabled refugees to feel close to other refugee acquaintances: common experiences, mutual trust and self-disclosure, personal characteristics such as being available and being a good listener.

**Refugees in Canada’s Labour Market**

A handful of researchers are working to produce a body of knowledge on the economic experiences of refugees in Canada. Lamba (2003) used a multiple regression
approach to investigate the impact of human and social capital on the quality of employment of 525 refugees living in Canada. The findings indicated that the quality of employment for this population is generally low, and that the majority of respondents were dissatisfied with their current employment and reported being overqualified for their job. Refugees who had previously held high status employment were the most downwardly mobile. Steady employment was uncommon. Refugees reported double the national average of unemployment, and high levels of temporary and part-time employment.

DeVortez, Pivnenko and Beiser (2004) reported that refugees in Canada earn substantially lower wages than economic immigrants, have the weakest language ability, and the highest usage of income assistance after two years in Canada. They go on to show that after seven years in Canada, refugees tend to experience the most rapid increase in earnings of all immigrant categories and earn an average yearly income that exceeds that low-income cut-off (LICO). These authors also report that earnings convergence tends to occur within about twelve years, and that education and language abilities determine the speed of convergence. However, they note that only 52% of adult refugees were able to find employment. Thus even given their relatively strong economic performance, poverty was an endemic problem in refugee communities due to the high rate of social assistance usage.

Lamba (Ibid.) noted that there has not been a full examination of refugee participation in the labour force in the context of enabling and constraining factors and designated this as an important area for future research. He suggested that further research into the survival strategies refugees draw on when they first arrive in Canada could allow service providers to integrate these sources of assistance into the resettlement process by supplying social networks with appropriate and useful knowledge about the
Canadian labour market and to focus on improving their effectiveness and reducing the constraining impacts.

*Career Theory in Counselling Psychology*

In a recent review of career development literature, it was suggested that vocational theories do not adequately reflect the experiences of diverse populations (Kerka, 2003). The major theoretical constructs of career (for example, person-environment fit, efficacy beliefs, career choice readiness, decision making style) have still not been tested with culturally diverse groups (Kerka, 2003; Leong & Hartung, 2000). In fact, according to Collin and Young, “career psychology ... still scarcely acknowledges differences in gender, race, class and sexual orientation.” (p. 282).

Refugees to industrialized nations have work-related experiences that do not fit well into the current vocational theories. The discipline of career counselling evolved to help individuals in their interaction with paid work, but its assumptions and values were influenced by the ideologies of the economy (Richardson, 2000). Traditional conceptualizations of career speak about trajectories and strategic life plans but these do not convey the ambivalence, discontinuity and coercion often experienced in the working lives of marginalized individuals and groups (Hopfl & Atkinson, 2000). Current theories of career, which emphasize flexibility and adaptation (Hall and Mirvis, 1996 cited by Richardson, 2000), are based on assumptions about the freedom of choice and personal self-sufficiency; which suggest that motivation, planning and commitment lead to success. However, as regional and global social changes lead to a growing stratification of the workforce, these theories of career may be more meaningful to the few who possess the most rare and highly valued skills but less so for the least valued and least rewarded majority (ibid.).
In order for career theories to reflect the diversity of employment experience an ecological perspective, which recognizes that career development is impacted by personal, interpersonal and sociocultural factors, has been advanced (Cook, Heppner & O’Brien, 2002). Indeed, Richardson (2000) abandons the construct of ‘career’ and defines work as purposeful activity for social ends or outcomes, embedded in a social process. She advocates an approach to the employment domain that is sensitive to the importance of work in individual lives while also attending to the impact of external conditions; an approach that may better reflect the realities and serve the needs of a greater diversity of people (Richardson 1993, 2000). These theoretical positions influence the scope of this project.

**Participatory Action Research**

The methodological framework for this project has been derived from work on Participatory Action Research by Coenen and Khonraad (2003), Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), Kidd and Kral (2005), and Reason (2002). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is not a method, per se, but a dynamic process that develops from the unique needs, challenges and learning experiences specific to a given group. Methods and modes of action are formed over time, through a dialectic movement between action and reflection, and the understanding and change that evolve through PAR occurs as a function of this reflexivity (Kidd and Kral, 2005).

Though not yet widely used by counselling psychologists, Kidd (2005) notes that PAR methods have been used in research with marginal populations such as homeless persons, in a variety of health promotion contexts such as with consumers of mental health services, people with disabilities and AIDS, as well as in the area of multi-cultural
counselling research. Kral et al. (2002) describe their engagement in PAR projects with urban Canadian street youth, Inuit prison inmates, and an Inuit community experiencing a youth suicide epidemic, and discuss the positive effects of PAR in the context of cultural psychology. They emphasize the "fundamental importance of personal relationship in this sort of research" (p.159) and demonstrate how this core principle influences everything from the personal growth of the researcher, the quality of data that is generated, to the uses that the data is put to, and finally to the benefit to the community.

Kral, Burhardt and Kidd (2002) highlight several aspects of this research model that they consider crucial. First, the relationship between the researcher and the participants is interactive, dialectical, and develops as knowledge unfolds. Time must be taken to develop trust and rapport. Respect for the participant group needs to be demonstrated throughout the process. Finally, while there are different meanings of 'participation' in PAR, researchers and participants must share some goals in common. This may involve incorporating participant's needs and goals into the design of the project, providing the participants with themes and analysis generated from the data and including their feedback into the final report, or even inviting participants to share responsibility and be involved as co-researchers.

Stated simply, Participatory Action Research differs significantly from other forms of research. Rather than relying only on theory to conceptualize the problem, PAR projects originate out of concrete problems with societal implications (Sommer, 1998). Its goals are to solve the immediate problem, as well as contributing to theory and research methodology (ibid.). Action researchers may need the competency to use several methods of social science research, depending on what the specific research situation demands (Boog, 2003), be prepared to use field methods without a high degree of control, and to involve participants as co-researchers (Sommer, 1998). Finally, data
may be quantitatively and/or qualitatively analyzed and the information is disseminated to the client and related groups, with likely release to the media (ibid.).

In the special issue of the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, editor Ben Boog (2003) warns that because action research attempts to democratize the project of knowledge creation with a focus on increasing the power of individuals and groups and changing the way they participate in society, all actors involved – and especially those in a privileged position – have to be willing to face the challenges of power-sharing. The PAR process requires that “all involved have to recognize and accept the subjectivity of each other, and take each other seriously as an active co-subject in the research (p.424)”. He further exhorts researchers to continuously examine whether the project is functioning in an emancipatory way, or whether it has become a strategy of mobilizing people for certain pre-conceived ends.

The rationale for choosing to use a PAR approach in this project is based on its potential to generate benefits. The problem-solving quality of the method aims to produce knowledge that is contextual and useful. Participants may benefit by taking a central role in knowledge generation, by building problem solving relationships with others, by the fact that more information is available which relates to their communities and by positive outcomes of the actions that are taken to address common problems. Benefits also extend to the scientific community, as the knowledge base is diversified with previously unheard refugee voices. Finally, the emphasis on collaboration, partnerships and personal relationship in PAR brings the potential to engender trust and mutual understanding between myself and research participants, the wider refugee community, the agency, and the academy.

To conclude this section, the convergence of research on the effects of economic sufficiency on psychological well-being has led me to focus on the livelihood building
strategies that refugees devised in their first years in Canada with an aim of bringing the issue of forced migration into the vocational discourse. Researchers have amassed a body of knowledge about mental health outcomes among refugee populations and have begun to focus on the factors in the resettlement environment, notably poor economic integration, which may contribute to persistent mental health concerns. The economic experiences of refugees in Canada are beginning to be described by researchers across disciplines, however vocational psychologists have not yet offered their contribution. Since traditional theories about career development are not representative of the particular experiences of this population, they may not be very instructive about means for relieving the employment-related stressors refugees face. This leaves front-line service providers and helpers in the community without resources to inform them as they assist refugees to make the transition into the Canadian labour market. It is anticipated that a qualitative study using PAR practices focused on the strategies and problems that refugee themselves describe will generate rich information for refugee scholars and vocational counsellors alike.
Chapter 3

Method

This study proceeded in the manner described by Kidd and Kral (2005), as a "self-reflective spiral" composed of multiple sequences of planning, acting and reflecting. I will present the process as a sequence of stages, beginning with stage one: planning, stage two: data collection and analysis, stage three: learning and action, and ending with stage four: review; however I hope to make it clear that planning, acting and reflecting took place in each stage.

Figure 1. Visual Representation of Research Process.
Stage One - Planning

The first stage of the project included generating a research question, developing a research proposal, and negotiating the working partnerships between the university, the community agency setting and myself. While I recognize that it may have been preferable from a PAR perspective to begin the process of collaboration with participants prior to the development of the research proposal, beginning the research relationship with participants was not possible prior to the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board review.

Setting. The Vancouver Association for the Survivors of Torture (VAST) was the site for this project. VAST is a non-profit agency in Vancouver, British Columbia, whose primary function is to promote the well-being of individuals and families who have survived torture and political violence. A multi-disciplinary team provides social work, psychological medical, paralegal, and complementary health services while also working to support social and community development. While not exclusively mandated to serve the refugee population, the majority of VAST participants arrive in Canada as government sponsored refugees or refugee claimants. Within the context of addressing psychological trauma, VAST recognizes that safety and stability are pre-requisite and thus psychosocial support is an important element in their community based, survivor-centered treatment model. Work-related concerns are addressed in the context of helping participants settle in to their new environment and regain their sense of well-being. Consequently, the aims of this project fall within the purview of the organization. The VAST coordinator and Organizing Team (Board of Directors) approved the project, pending the proposal defense before my thesis committee, and the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board review. The VAST coordinator, colleagues and several
Organizing Team members were available for consultation and provided thoughtful feedback throughout the course project.

Role of the Researcher. "The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Creswell, 1994) and as a result, the person and position of the researcher is an integral part of ethical qualitative research practice (Haverkamp, 2005). Thus, for ethical and methodological reasons, it is important for me as a researcher to locate myself within the project, to be explicit about my assumptions and biases, and to elucidate my motivations for pursuing this particular research question. For me, these were not issues to be explicated and then set aside; rather, I began this process at the germination stage of this project, long before the ideas and questions were fully formed, and it remained an important part of my role in the project to engage in an ongoing process of reflexive self-awareness. The information that follows is included to help the reader understand my personal and intellectual stake in the project, which can be helpful when he or she comes to assess the procedures and analysis.

I approached this project with a number of overlapping and potentially competing roles: as a student of counselling psychology, a master's degree candidate, and as a psychosocial counsellor since 2001 at VAST, a non-profit organization that provides services for survivors of torture and organized violence. The research question arises out of my experience at VAST, as a resource person to the refugee resettlement experience. PAR was of personal interest and utility because it allowed me to investigate questions that had arisen out of my own work, to develop a project that had the potential to improve the service delivery within my own field, and to contribute to an area where my experience had shown me there were gaps in academic knowledge.

While the decision to undertake a project using Participatory Action Research fits the context of the problem, it also resonates with my own interests and values. As a
student of counselling psychology, I believe that human beings have the capacity for understanding, of making sense of our experiences, of transforming our inner world as well as our social conditions. I bring the same commitment to personal understanding, growth and social change to my work as a researcher. I believe that since counselling psychology is an applied science as well as a helping profession its aims are in line with the aims of PAR. Like PAR, the humanistic counselling tradition is mindful of power differentials in relationship, the need to maintain a person-centered focus, and the desire to facilitate positive change through knowledge acquisition and practice.

I anticipated encountering special challenges while engaging in this project. Because of my on-going professional role, dual relationships inevitably existed between those who choose to participate in my research and me. While I believe this is one of the strengths of this project, I was aware of the possibility of coercion and made an effort to ensure participants were secure in the knowledge that the services they receive at the agency would be available to them regardless of their decision to participate in the project. I hope that I made my aims and methods very explicit, to ensure that participants were free to act according to their interests and needs, and to assure them that they would not suffer any negative consequences if they choose not to participate or choose to withdraw. I drew often from the rich experience of VAST colleagues and academic advisors for consultation about ethical decision-making throughout the course of this project.

Ethical Considerations. Several authors have raised ethical concerns regarding research with the vulnerable refugee population (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Miller, 2004; Mollica, 2001; Silove et al., 2002). As the researcher has a primary ethical obligation to respect the rights, needs, values and desires of the participants, risks must be clearly delineated and prevented as far as possible (Creswell, 1994). In this study, risks to
participants included coercion, intrusion, emotional distress or re-traumatization, and stereotyping.

Because of the relational character of qualitative research, ethical research practice is determined more by individual decisions, actions, relationships and commitments, than by design or procedures (Haverkamp, 2005). A researcher can protect against the types of risks mentioned above by developing a trustworthy relationship between the participants and her/himself. Several personality characteristics of the researcher may facilitate research relationships with participants of this special population, such as intercultural empathy, the ability to communicate effectively, minimal levels of ethnocentrism, and maintenance of proper self-care (Pernice, 1994; Mollica, 2001).

In addition to these personality characteristics, researchers with prior exposure and familiarity with refugee communities can protect against risks to participants by having sensitivity to the particular needs and vulnerabilities of this population (Silove et al, 2002; Miller, 2004). Furthermore, clinicians who work with refugees are in a better position to earn the authentic, and trusting access that is necessary in order to gather data that is reflective of the experiences and feelings of community members (Miller, 2004). In this project my work experience with refugee communities was not seen as a barrier to objectivity that needed to be overcome but rather an important relational strength that provided protection from risk and access to information (Banyard & Miller, 1994).

I am sensitive to the fact that refugee populations have been exposed to high levels of violence and abuse, and was alert to possible triggers in the environment, the research questions, and the relationships between the participants and myself. Because of the potential for research interviews to lead to increases in anxiety symptoms and re-traumatization (Silove et al. 2002), I specifically chose a topic that would not require
participants to discuss their trauma histories. I am experienced in recognizing signs of psychological distress and exercised caution throughout my research interaction with participants. I offered explanations and justifications throughout the research process, reassured participants about the uses and consequences of the work, was available to participants for informal consultation and feedback about the project, and I often provided practical assistance and referrals subsequent to interview sessions (Silove et al. 2002). Though it never became necessary, I was also prepared to liaise with my VAST team-members to ensure that psychological care could be made available in the event that participants experienced distressing emotions as a result of participating in an interview or group meeting. The priority of the relationships between myself and the participants induced me to make decisions throughout the research process that were in the interests of the well-being of individual participants and for the benefit of the greater community of refugees in Vancouver.

Finally, I incorporated the following safeguards into the research design:

1) The research objectives were articulated verbally and in simple written English so that they could be clearly understood by the participants (including a description of how the data will be used), 2) written permission to proceed with the study as articulated was received from each participant, 3) a research ethics review was filed with the institutional review board, 4) participants were informed of all data collection devices and activities, 5) verbatim transcriptions, written interpretations and reports are available to participants if they wish to review them, 6) participants’ rights, interests and wishes were given priority when choices were made regarding reporting the data and 7) steps were taken to prevent identifying data from appearing in reports (Creswell, 1994 p. 165-166).

Ethical considerations about protecting participants from risk were at the core of the design of this project. Decisions made throughout the course of the project were
informed by my knowledge of the population, my relationships with individual participants, and in consultation with my colleagues and academic advisor.

Participants

Inclusion/exclusion criteria. The next stage in the process was to recruit ten participants who would be willing to participate in an individual, in-depth, semi-structured interview. The inclusion criteria was that participants should a) have arrived in Canada as refugees or refugee claimants, b) have been resettled in Canada for between two to five years, and c) be currently engaged in livelihood-building experiences. Additionally, because there was no funding in place for interpretation services, d) members of this group needed to have an intermediate conversational fluency in English. All of the original participants and up to ten additional participants would later be invited to take part in participatory activities related to testing the credibility and dependability of the findings, to make action recommendations, and to suggest ways of disseminating the results. The exclusion criterion for any potential interview or working group participant was that, while they could be accessing VAST on a drop-in basis for social support, they could not be currently undergoing psychotherapy at VAST for trauma related symptoms. This was to ensure that the research project did not jeopardize the therapeutic goals of VAST clients.

Recruitment. I had initially proposed that interview participants would be self-selected; and would choose to participate because notices posted in the VAST office piqued their interest. This was the case for working group participation. However, it did not prove to be a feasible way to recruit interview participants because the exclusion criteria effectively eliminated a large number of attendees who would have been exposed to the poster. Furthermore, the criterion that participants be relatively well settled with an
intermediate command of English effectively eliminated a considerable number of the remaining VAST attendees. We did not want to run the risk of posting openly and then having to disappoint VAST attendees by not accepting them as interview participants. Therefore, a list of potential participants was purposefully selected, based on the VAST staff team’s knowledge of each candidate. This was done to minimize the risk, while also providing maximum information about livelihood building strategies. A VAST staff member not otherwise involved in the project distributed recruitment posters to potential participants (see Appendix I). Twelve made contact with me by phone, email, or in person, at which time I asked questions to verify information related to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, provided orientation information about the project and informed participants that they could decide not to participate or could discontinue their participation at any time. Ten individuals who met inclusion criteria agreed to participate and a face-to-face interview was arranged at the VAST office. Two individuals did not fit the inclusion criteria for the interviews, having lived in Canada for well over five years; however, they both volunteered for later participatory activities.

Sample. The sample was purposefully selected to ensure adherence to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as to provide a range of backgrounds and experiences. It is important to consider the effect of selecting the participants from the client base at VAST. As people who have sought professional help to overcome lasting effects of political violence, it could be posited that VAST attendees may be among the most distressed members of the refugee population (though a significant number of distressed or symptomatic individuals may never seek help). However, the inclusion/exclusion criteria states that participants must have livelihood building experiences, a working knowledge of English, and not be accessing psychotherapy for trauma-related symptoms at the time of the interview. It is important to note, therefore,
that even those participants who continue to experience trauma-related psychological issues are still actively engaged in livelihood building and are functional in a new language. As a result the sample may include the most highly functioning and well-settled of VAST attendees. Since the aim of the project was to generate the widest possible range of strategies for overcoming common problems, participants were selected to represent a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. Participants are from the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, there are both men and women, with ages ranging from 21 to early 50’s, some with professional backgrounds and some with no previous work experience. Some participants arrived in Canada as government sponsored refugees, and thus did not experience the in-land refugee claim process; however, the majority of project participants arrived in Canada seeking refugee protection and were thus required to claim refugee status before the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board. In all their diversity, participants have in common the fact that they have successfully met many of the challenges of rebuilding a life in exile.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>% Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Region of Origin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-55</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugee status on arrival in Canada</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government sponsored</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inland Claimant</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single income</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single income/ family in Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single income/ family abroad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two income no children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two income with children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluent on arrival</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learned in Canada</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment history</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No prev. training or employment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-skilled worker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trades/ skilled worker</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stage Two - Data collection and analysis**

*Data collection procedures.* Data was gathered in three ways: through individual interviews with refugee participants, during a working group meeting, and through field notes taken after consulting with advisors and colleagues, after informal conversations with participants, and for the purpose of reflection.
For the individual interviews I developed an interview protocol that included opening statements, key questions and probes, as well as space to record observations, reflective notes, and demographic information (see Appendix III). Some of the key questions included: How did you get your first job in Canada? Did anyone help you get this job? How did you survive before you got your first job? Have you learned different/better ways of finding work since you arrived in Canada?

Interviews lasted between one to one and a half hours and took place in person at the VAST office, except for one interview, which was disrupted when the participant was called away to care for her child and which was continued the next day by telephone. Interview questions were employment focused but, as I anticipated, participants spontaneously discussed experiences in other life domains that impacted their abilities to develop livelihood-building strategies. The interviews were semi-structured in that, while participants tended to answer most of the questions spontaneously, I did review the protocol to ensure that all questions had been thoroughly covered. I also used interview skills such as active listening, clarifying questions, and empathic responses to facilitate the interview process.

Written, informed consent was requested in person during the orientation stage of the initial interview (see Appendix II). Written consent was also requested from all participants who engaged in the working group meeting (see Appendix IV). In both circumstances, participants were reminded that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. The continual verbal renewal of consent was used during data collection and throughout the later participatory activities to ensure that participants were making informed choices regarding their participation.

I conducted, audio-taped, and transcribed all of the interviews in order to ensure confidentiality and consistency of data collection. Field notes were made throughout the
course of the project, particularly during the focus group meeting and to capture comments and feedback that was given informally by participants, as well as during consultations with my research advisor and VAST staff members. Finally, in order to document my own participatory learning, I made on-going reflective notes as I gained experiential competencies, such as learning how best to engage with participants and gather data, and became more deeply immersed and engaged in the project (Reason, 2005).

**Reflection and analysis**

The data from interviews was analyzed with the aim of defining the strategies that participants used to become employable, seek employment and maintain employment. In conducting the analysis, I was guided by several authors who outline qualitative and PAR procedures (Creswell, 1994; Huberman & Miles, 1994; McTaggart, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Morrow, 2005; Reason 2005). This process of analysis began after the first three interviews were completed and transcribed, when I made a first attempt to thematize the problems and strategies that had been articulated, using the following steps: I read through all three documents to get a sense of the whole, made notes about the strategies and their meanings, and clustered similar topics. After I had collected clusters of topics I continued the interviewing process (Tesch 1990; cited in Creswell, 1994). I transcribed each interview as soon as possible and within days I re-read the transcript, in order to ensure the accuracy of the transcription as well as to contribute to my immersion in the text and my familiarity with participants’ language. Throughout this process I made notes and added new material to the topic clusters, creating new clusters as unique topics emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this way, a document was compiled wherein the entire text of each interview was broken up and reconfigured under broad
strategy-headings. With this document, I could begin to make comparisons between the responses within each heading. After several interviews were compiled in this way I read through each strategy heading carefully to see how responses differed from each other and whether there were sub-processes that fell under each broad strategy heading. I was thus able to partition the topic clusters, breaking the strategies into smaller processes (Huberman & Miles, 1994). After all ten interviews were completed, transcribed and compiled in this way I abbreviated the strategy headings and sub-headings as codes and then returned to the transcripts to see whether new topics and codes emerged. I then reduced the data by grouping related topics into categories, assembled data material into categories, and collected useful quotations to be used in the qualitative text (Tesch 1990; cited in Creswell, 1994). Consultation with research advisors during this stage yielded fruitful directions for analysis.

As I was engaging in this task, I noticed that respondents’ strategies developed in response to the challenges they faced, in the context of facilitating or impeding environmental and social factors. While the project was originally designed to focus on successful livelihood building strategies, I could not overlook the fact that the participants began by describing the challenges they faced—some they devised strategies to overcome, and others they were unable to resolve—and also that the strategies they developed depended in large part on the resources available to them. This was an explicit moment wherein I recognized the need to bracket off the originating ideas, to “hold lightly the propositional frame from which [I] started, to notice both how practice does and does not conform to [my] original ideas and also to the subtleties of experience” (Reason 2005, p. 209).

I realized I needed to trace out the path of problems and solutions, and that this might give me insight into relationships between them, as well as showing which
problems are unresolved and thus might serve as the focus for a working-group action. I began to look at the data more from the perspective of these questions: What impediments and hardships were faced? What strategies were articulated to overcome or cope with these? What problems had no attendant strategies? With these questions in mind, I revised my compilation text, including under the strategy headings those problems that were still unresolved. I then created a rough flow chart of problems, strategies, subsequent problems and their strategies until I was left with successful strategies and as-yet unsolved problems. This is the information I took to the working group meeting and will be summarized in the following chapter.

Working group process and contribution to data collection and analysis

After all of the interviews were transcribed and the initial analysis had been completed as described above, I convened a working group meeting. The goals of the group meeting were to a) submit a summary of the findings for member checking, b) prioritize unresolved problems and draw up a list of ameliorating recommendations, and c) plan for the dissemination of the findings.

All of the people who had participated in individual interviews were invited and expressed interest in attending the working group meeting, along with eight additional people who expressed interest after reading flyers posted in the VAST office. Due to scheduling difficulties, however, several interested people were not able to attend. Eight members (3 interview participants and 5 new members) comprised a working group of the following demographic composition: 5 men, 3 women; 3 Latin Americans, 3 Middle Easterners, 1 African, 1 Eastern European; Age range 30-60; years in Canada 5-30; average number of years in Canada 9; all but one member currently employed.
After introductions were made and the consent forms signed, group norms were established. These included: a) no one will be asked to share private information about themselves, b) group members will respect each other’s privacy (however, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed), c) group members will not be identified in any printed material, d) members are free to participate as much as they feel comfortable, e) all ideas are valuable and should be respected, and f) any concerns members have about the meeting can be discussed with me or the VAST coordinator. I then provided a thorough explanation of the research project; its purpose, method, and desired outcomes. I explained that during this meeting I wanted to hear their responses to the strategies that came out of the interviews, and ask two questions: 1) what is the best way to help new refugees with this information? and 2) among the problems that do not have solutions, could we think together of recommendations or actions that might help? The recommendations provided at this meeting will be described in the subsequent chapter as part of the summary of the findings, and the feedback given about the conceptual display will be included in the discussion within the evaluation of the project.

Stage three – Action

The actions flowing from this project can be understood in terms of communicative action and exploratory action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Communicative action strives toward inter-subjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus about what to do in a particular situation (Ibid.). Participatory action research opens a “communicative space” between participants so that people can search together for more comprehensible ways of understanding and exploring ways to act on common experiences and problems (Ibid.). In this project, communicative space was opened first in the individual interviews, in which one participant at a time worked
with me to articulate their experience of becoming employable, seeking employment and increasing their employment satisfaction. The communicative space widened as the working group came together to reflect on the findings that emerged out of the interviews and to think about how to act to improve the situation that was described. The communicative space will expand even further into the ‘public spheres’ described by Habermas (1992; cited in Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005) as I present the findings of this project at conferences and community meetings and engage with other researchers, service providers and policy makers to understand their stake and potential contributions to the experiences and problems described by refugee participants. Exploratory actions are those that are taken in order to learn from the unfolding experience. Actions have flowed from the recommendations of the participants and fit three broad categories: dissemination of information, advocacy, and community building. In the following chapter I will present a description of the exploratory actions that have been planned and implemented by the time of this writing. It should be noted, however, that given the preliminary nature of this project, these actions are intended as catalysts to further reflection, planning and action spirals and do not in themselves constitute solutions or end results.

Stage Four - Review

The final stage of the project began after the preliminary actions described above had been enacted. At this point researcher must address the intended and unintended consequences of the process and the action, and what the actions will be to attend to these unintended consequences (Coenen & Khonraad, 2003). As part of this project a full review of the participatory process will be presented in the discussion section following.
Chapter 4
Findings

This project evolved out of a desire to understand and articulate the livelihood building strategies that refugees use throughout the initial resettlement phase, as well as generate ameliorative recommendations and actions to address the problems that remain unresolved throughout this process. The findings of this research project, therefore, comprise the livelihood building strategies that participants described, the problems that they did not have effective strategies to overcome, recommendations that the working group offered to address these problems, and any actions that have arisen out of these recommendations.

Based on the qualitative analysis of data from ten individual interviews, clusters of strategies were identified and were given the following headings: establishing safety for oneself and immediate family members, improving English language fluency, creating a social support network, using social services, seeking initial Canadian employment, obtaining more satisfying employment, accessing further education, and personal characteristics that promote strategy implementation. Each cluster of strategies is presented and illustrated with quotations from the participants. The strategies are followed by description of the problems that participants encountered in rebuilding livelihood. These problems can be characterized as both a context for the strategies, as strategies arose in response to the problems, and as ongoing concerns for the participants, as not all problems were overcome completely. Table 2 below provides an overview of the problems and strategies as they emerged from this formal analysis.
Table 2. Summary of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Establishing safety</td>
<td>Legal protection</td>
<td>Status related systemic barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family reunification</td>
<td>Discrimination and racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low self-efficacy related to status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Improving English</td>
<td>Accessing formal ESL class</td>
<td>No access to advanced level ESL training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alternatives to ESL classes</td>
<td>Inability to balance ESL with work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Responsibility to family with less English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Building a social support</td>
<td>Making social contacts</td>
<td>Discouragement/ inaccurate information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>network</td>
<td>Accessing benefits</td>
<td>Inability to obtain financial assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Using social services</td>
<td>Accessing income assistance,</td>
<td>Poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Settlement services and</td>
<td>Negative emotional states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supplementary resources</td>
<td>Experiences of coercion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Difficulty accessing information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No direct access to employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Seeking initial Canadian</td>
<td>Job search strategies</td>
<td>Systemic barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employment</td>
<td>Childcare strategies</td>
<td>Temporary, insecure work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employment flexibility</td>
<td>Working outside field of specialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Distraction from continued work search</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exploitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Strategies for increasing</td>
<td>‘Canadian experience’</td>
<td>Lack of employment standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>job satisfaction</td>
<td>Social/cultural adaptation</td>
<td>Difficulty of re-entering field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accessing opportunities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Accessing training programs</td>
<td>Researching training options</td>
<td>Inability to finance education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and education</td>
<td>Re-training</td>
<td>Refugee status as a barrier to education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unwillingness to re-train or re-certify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Personal coping strategies</td>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>Coping abilities compromised by trauma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that promote livelihood</td>
<td>Meaning of work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>building</td>
<td>Spiritual/cultural practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Optimism for the future</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The inter-related and iterative relationship between the problems and strategies is illustrated in Figure 2 below. This illustration reflects the sequential nature of the rebuilding process, as narrated by participants.

Figure 2. Relationship of Strategies to Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRATEGIES</th>
<th>PROBLEMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social assistance</td>
<td>Arrive in Canada experience financial need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>while looking for work</td>
<td>Lack of English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of familiarity with employment culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discrimination and racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unrecognized credentials and experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of social support, young children at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological impact of pre- and post-migration stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL training</td>
<td>Temporary or part-time, low pay, insecure, outside field of expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settlement services</td>
<td>sometimes exploitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credential evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support network</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtain first</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Canadian work experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide to re-train</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defend worker's rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen personal coping resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtain increasingly satisfying employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. Livelihood Building Strategies and Problems

1. Establishing safety

Strategies. For those who are fleeing political violence and who come to Canada to seek protection as convention refugees, safety is of paramount concern. Obtaining legal protection through the process of making a refugee claim is the crux of the survival strategy, but one that exacts a heavy toll. It is a difficult and time consuming process that takes time and energy away from other livelihood building activities. Bilal explained,

As a refugee, you have to focus on your case. You can’t use your power for your work, because you have so much else on your mind. You have a lot to worry about: your case, your self, your life! And so only when you become safe, only then can you start your life, only then do you have power to focus. We have a saying in Arabic: you can’t take two watermelons in one hand.

The first and most important task, therefore, is to enter into the legal process of establishing grounds for protection and to then pursue family reunification. Even though one may have been granted refugee status, if a spouse and children remain in the country of origin it can take many years before these immediate family members are issued a visa to come to Canada. The family reunification process requires refugees to submit lengthy applications, meet numerous deadlines, and pay significant immigration and transportation fees for each family member. One participant had been separated from his family for almost five years, and explained,

My claim was accepted and I was successful, but that was only the beginning of the story. It has been a very long process for my children and my wife who are remaining back home. I have to get them back here. So all of these processes have to be gone through. And I believe that when my family is reunited, my life will change
for the best. I have had a lot of support in the long way I traveled, and while all my
problems will not go away when they get here I think we can make a life here in
Canada.

Participants emphasized the importance of engaging a competent legal representative,
being organized, submitting all of the paperwork on time, and obtaining support as
necessary.

Problems. Safety not only implies freedom from abuse in one’s country of origin
(that is, knowing that you will not be sent back to a country in which you are in danger)
but also the right to be free from threats to security in the new environment. Experiences
related to refugee and newcomer status, such as systemic barriers, discrimination and
racism can detract from refugees’ sense of safety in the resettlement environment and
undermine their livelihood building strategies. Participants described a position of
bureaucratic vulnerability throughout the time before they are granted permanent resident
status, during which they can be denied employment, social services, and important
documents such as work permits, as a result of bureaucratic backlogs, errors or ignorance.
Mishi, for example, was plunged into poverty after her work permit was not renewed for
several months due to an administrative delay. She explains,

Then my boss sold the store, so I was laid off, and at the same time my work
permit expired. Since my social insurance number also expired [along with the
work permit], EI wouldn’t give me any money. I had to go back to welfare and
even that took a long time because they couldn’t understand why I didn’t have a
work permit. I had been working full time and then all of a sudden I had nothing.
Nothing! That was one of the worst times I ever had. And it just happened! I
applied for the work permit at the right time, but they just didn’t send it for months and months.

In addition, respondents also spoke about barriers to employment and discrimination related directly to their immigration status. Many mentioned having to answer questions about their status and often being turned down for jobs, either because they can be easily identified as newcomers by their appearance, accent, or their temporary social insurance cards, which start with 9 and have an expiry date. Several participants also described experiences of racism and spoke of how deeply disruptive these experiences were to their sense of safety in their new environment. One participant explained,

There is absolutely one thing that nobody can deny, and that is that there is a disguised racism in Canada… It will never come in the open, but you see it in the reasons you are given to be denied services, in how you are treated when you go for an interview, try to buy something, even in stores, even at the reception desks of various organizations… And in the employment field there is no question that it is there, but it is disguised. This is why I left my country. I could have lived there if I am able to tolerate injustice. I can’t. But where can I go now?

As a result of such experiences, many participants expressed fear and anxiety about resettling in Canada as refugees. Their refugee identity affected the way they felt about themselves, their beliefs about what they could accomplish here, and their experience of other people in society. Bilal expressed his belief that many people who have resettled in Canada as refugees are intimidated by the perceived social stigma of being a refugee, and this adds pressure to the livelihood building process that other types of immigrants do not experience; saying,
We are talking about refugees. They are scared. You just land here by yourself and it is hard just to go out. You have to trust yourself, so you don’t think I am not good enough for here, I can’t live here. Refugee is not like immigrant.

Feeling stigmatized, many refugees may not access the services they are entitled to. For example, Soraya had arrived in Canada as a teenager, but because she was in an ESL program, she did not graduate before she turned 19. When she went to register for adult education to finish her diploma she explained how intimidated she became:

You need to show the study permit, and your social insurance number starts with a nine and they know right away you’re a refugee. I had that experience with school and it made it more stressful. It was stressful enough that I didn’t go through with it. I didn’t even go and ask for information because I don’t want to explain it. The reaction is not pleasant. Some people think refugees are criminals. When you explain it then they feel sorry for you, and I hate it when somebody feels sorry for me.

Having to constantly defend their right to access employment, resources, and simply to be here in Canada undermined many participants’ sense of security and may undermine their capacity to implement effective livelihood building strategies.

2. Improving English Language Fluency

 Strategies. Participants recognized that being fluent in English would significantly enhance their livelihood opportunities. Participants who did not already speak fluently when they arrived, accessed formal English instruction or devised alternative strategies to learn or improve their language skills. Several participants spoke of their belief that it was important to take the time to learn English properly, even enduring hardships in order to attend classes while still working enough hours to support
themselves, so that better work opportunities would be available later. Yasmin said, for example,

I used to work two jobs, 16-17 hours, but then I couldn’t study. I [decided] to work only my night job so I can take school and learn English. I just want a little money and time enough to go to school.

Participants also reported benefiting by gaining access to social networks by speaking English and experiencing feelings of increased self-efficacy by improving English language abilities.

Problems. Some participants were unable to balance ESL training with employment demands. Many were frustrated that they could not access higher levels of ESL training. The cost of transportation to attend classes was prohibitive to participants who were on income assistance or were working low-paying jobs. A few participants noted that their distress level on arrival in Canada made it difficult to attend classes, concentrate or retain new information. Further unresolved problems were experiences of discrimination related to lack of language fluency and having to assume added responsibilities for family members with less English fluency. Some participants were strained by added responsibility towards family members with less English. Being the best English speaker in a couple or a family often meant being the interpreter as well as the main bread-winner, regardless of the traditional role one might have had in the country of origin. Layla found herself in such a situation, and explained,

I have to care for my husband, because our situation - how we came here - was hard, and his feelings were very bad - also he did not know English language, so I had to take care of him.
This responsibility added stress to the more linguistically advanced individual, caused shame for the less advanced family members, and strained familial relationships.

3. Building a social support network

Strategies – Building a network. Most participants had few, if any, social contacts when they arrived in Vancouver, so each one spoke about how they built new social networks, and the ways in which this strategy helped them in their livelihood rebuilding process. Participants began looking for new contacts in familiar environments. Ethnic and religious communities seemed to be the first point of contact for most participants, as Florence explains,

First of all it is very important to get to know the community. You have to do that. If you are a Christian, you go to church, that way you get involved in something. ... So I am involved in that community and this is something I just love.

Several participants characterized the initial stage of rebuilding as a time of connecting with community members; which, for them, was a safe and familiar way of establishing a foundation for subsequent stages. Yet while ethnic communities may be the easiest points of initial contact, a few participants shared a concern about becoming too sheltered and thereby prevented from experiencing the personal growth and development that comes with meeting the challenges of a new environment. Dario observed,

I had some names of people who could help me in the Latin American community... and these people were very nice, very generous. But I came here with a dynamic of being, of trying to open myself and to go out, not just to be stuck in my own cage, or my own world or whatever. I wanted to explore, and to learn about this place, know more people... Some people want to go back into
their cultural identity but they get trapped sharing all this sadness of being in a
different place. That was one thing I didn’t want, so I became very active in
getting to know people here in Canada.

He and others spoke of the strategies they used to develop connections outside their
communities, through common interests, in their role as parents with other parents, and at
work. These contacts were often cross-cultural and several participants shared a sense
that these relationships helped them feel a wider sense of belonging.

*Accessing advantages of a social network.* Participants discussed a variety of
ways in which making social contacts gave them practical advantages in their livelihood
building process, making this a very valuable strategy. First, participants sought support
from new contacts for practical assistance on arrival, such as a place to stay before they
had the means to find their own accommodation, clothing, orientation to processes and
systems, and referral to social service organizations. Several participants also mentioned
turning to social connections for financial help saying, for example, “my friends, when I
was really struggling for money, they all helped me a lot, each of them.” In addition,
contacts were described by all participants as being extremely important in opening up
initial job opportunities - giving participants a ‘foot in the door’. Bilal explains the
importance of such assistance,

> I think the best way is start to work here in Canada is to know somebody. You
can’t just knock on the door. You need help to come in. My brother gave it to me.

He knows lots of friends...

Mentorship was another important benefit of networking. Newcomers would receive the
knowledge gained by those with more experience in Canada and would in turn pass it on
to newcomers as they themselves gained more experience. Florence shared her example,
I talk to many women who come here, they don’t know the right way to go. They don’t know how to approach the issue. I meet women with kids at the park, at the family places, and I talk to them about it, and also which schools are best for ESL, which daycare is good. We learn from each other. I went through the same thing, so if I can help I will.

Many explained that they were from societies where this was the only form of assistance, and they saw it as an indicator of their own progress and integration when they became able to offer support to others. Finally, participants also told me about how important their social network was in helping them cope with emotional suffering. As Dario explained,

It was a hard time. But emotional support is very, very important, to have friends, someone you love, someone to take care of you, someone who understands you deeply, because here you are alone. No family, no friends, of course you build that but it takes time. And it’s difficult.

Participants found comfort in different kinds of supportive relationships, including with their spouse or partner, family members, new friends, community members, religious leaders, and professional counsellors. Soraya described how a professional counselor helped her:

Most refugee people get depressed after they move because of what they went through and the changes… Depression puts a hold on moving forward. You think less of yourself, you don’t take risks, you don’t try because you think you can’t do it. When you get over the depression you see your own potential. This is true for me. Medication and counselling helped me overcome that. As a result I found a better job, I am moving forward, my confidence is higher, and I am willing to take some risks… Talking to someone who can help is a good thing,
somebody who knows about these things – not just to your friends who are in the same situation you are.

Each person spoke about how creating a new social network was an important livelihood rebuilding strategy, not just for material and practical assistance but also in an effort to seek out special relationships that could provide emotional support during a very difficult life transition.

Problems. Creating new social support networks was a significant livelihood building strategy, but it was not a panacea. There were limitations to the benefits provided by the social network. First, a sense of extreme financial precariousness was apparent in many of the stories people told of their first few years. Many described a situation in which their basic level of financial security was very vulnerable, so that circumstances such as illness, injury, not getting a work permit renewed in time, or immigration fees, could have severe consequences in terms of emotional stress, incurred debt loads, and restriction of choice or opportunity. Participants sometimes found, or feared, that their newly established social contacts, often similarly impoverished, would not be able to support them through these kinds of difficulties. As Mishi explained,

If I didn’t have good friends to help me, what would I do? I’d be homeless in the street with my kids. I felt I was always one pay-cheque away from that.

Sometimes I carry [that fear] right now.

Second, trying to meet the practical and emotional needs of others in their social networks can overwhelm people who are relatively well adjusted. Layla shared her experience,

I thought, maybe I can make a change in my community. I can give back. So I started [to offer interpretation services] and I went to the hospital as a volunteer. I
said 'hey I speak Arabic language this is my home telephone number, if you know any African woman who needs help'. Then everyone called me. I was so busy!

Third, several participants described receiving discouraging, inaccurate, or exploitative information from community members who had been in Vancouver longer than they had. Participants explained that some of their community members tried to be helpful but did not have adequate information about the processes and systems newcomers needed to master. Others spoke of being exploited by community members, reporting being referred to unprincipled consultants, being under-paid or illegally employed, and being taken advantage of because they did not know their rights or were afraid to assert them. One participant felt that a good solution to these problems was to seek information and assistance from many different sources, community support as well as professional assistance from social service providers who understand the refugee experience from a broader social perspective, know the legal rights and benefits that people are entitled to at all stages of immigration, and how to navigate the social systems. She offered this advice to newcomers,

I just want to tell everyone who comes as a refugee here, talk to a professional for help, not just anyone you know, not just people who have been around for longer. They know your rights. They can give good advice. There is a difference between community support and professional advice, oh yes, because in my community there are lots of people who think they know, and they don’t and they put people through hell. That’s very important.

Participants highlighted the vulnerability of newcomers to unscrupulous opportunists, and recommended seeking a balance of professional services and community-based assistance during the early stages of the livelihood rebuilding process.
4. Using social services

Strategies. All participants used a variety of social services to help them meet basic needs and build new social capacities. Welfare and settlement services were spoken of in most detail. First, participants accessed federal and provincial income assistance programs, which provided basic financial assistance during the transition period between arrival in Canada and finding stable employment. Participants reported that income assistance (often referred to as 'welfare') had ensured their basic financial security during the initial stage of orientation and adjustment; saying for example,

I was on social assistance for I think more than a year and a half. I had a good social worker at the beginning, like when I had $100 [after rent, for the month’s expenses] and if I couldn’t manage I could call and say I have no milk at home for my kids and he’d say, ‘come on’, and he’d give me a certificate or whatever.

Several participants also mentioned that their first jobs were very insecure and income assistance programs supported their transition to stable employment. One participant shared her experience, saying,

The welfare program is good, they are going to help you find a job. Several times I talked to my worker ... he knew I was very worried about taking welfare, but he didn’t push me too much because my English was not good, and he said it’s ok. But I tried very hard myself. And after I find a job, and I tried to cancel the welfare, they said ‘are you sure? What if next month they don’t want you?’ They let me keep my file open for two months, just in case, because if you want to come back [after the file is closed] it’s very difficult.

The provincial income assistance also offered participants pre-employment skills training and childcare supplements for low-income parents. Participants also developed new strategies as they learned to survive in their new environment with an insufficient
monthly income. Participants noted that, because their limited social assistance income did not cover basic necessities, they often needed to access other resources such as food banks, garage sales, and charitable donations of material goods such as second-hand clothing and furniture. For example, a participant reflected on the resources she learned to access and the capacities she developed,

I managed at that time. But actually I don’t know how! I was a magician at that time. I went to the food bank, I went to [refugee serving agencies] and I got help with food and clothes. My son’s elementary school helped me a lot. They gave gift certificates, for save-on-foods, they bought stuff for us. I just bought meat once a month and I learned how to cook, for example, with one chicken, four or five different meals to give to my kids. And the food bank at that time was ok. They gave eggs, cans, bread. So I managed, I really did. But if you ask me to do that now I can’t. No way!

These societal resources were crucial to survival during the first stages of resettlement as all respondents arrived with very limited (or no) means of support and experienced financial precariousness, often for many years.

Participants also contacted immigrant and refugee serving agencies for material support and shelter on arrival, orientation, information, referral to other service providing agencies, free language classes, paralegal assistance, as well as counselling and social support. These agencies helped participants to feel at home in their new environment, and participants remembered the social contact and support as being a very important part of the resettlement and livelihood building process. One participant shares,

I was losing hope. I do not lose hope easily. But when I came to [the agency] there was assistance, getting my family, arranging my claims, talking to counselors who told me that there were opportunities here for me in Canada.
They really boosted my energy. You need someone with whom you can feel close. ... my coming to [the agency] has changed my life. Things would have been very different, really.

All of the respondents reported that they depended to varying degrees on agencies with specialized knowledge of refugee experiences, needs, and barriers, with staff who could help them access and navigate their new environment, while providing caring social support.

*Problems – income assistance.* Welfare provided the only means of support for every participant for varying amounts of time before they were able to obtain their first Canadian employment, and for that reason it was a necessary and successful rebuilding strategy. However, participants expressed ambivalence toward the welfare system because of their experiences of severe financial insufficiency, negative emotional states, and experiences of coercion. Participants reported that even if they had been able to live frugally in their home countries, when they first arrived in Vancouver they struggled to make the welfare allowance cover their monthly expenses. Participants spoke of the strain of having to constantly control their spending, to weigh every need against the other, to calculate every purchase, and ultimately feeling afraid of being unable to survive in this society. Every participant echoed Yasmin’s response,

They give $510, so that’s $325 for rent and I had just $185 for myself for the whole month. And then with phone, bus, and everything, it doesn’t work.

Participants reported being unable to find affordable accommodation, running out of food before the end of the month, being unable to afford non-prescription medications (such as painkillers) or sanitary supplies, and having to walk long distances because they could not buy bus tickets.
A few participants stated their opinion that in spite of supplemental societal resources such as food banks, welfare recipients are still unable to sustain themselves adequately and may resort to other informal or dangerous means of survival. For example, one woman shared an experience of being solicited for sex from someone who recognized her financial need, saying,

One time a man found out I was surviving on welfare and asked, ‘how can you manage?’ He asked if I would visit with him once a week and he would give me $100. I knew what he wanted, and I was so shocked!

Another participant shared her belief that such low income assistance rates push people to consider ‘cheating the system’. She explained that if you do get a part-time job while on income assistance you must declare your earnings and they are then deducted from the cheque. She said,

I was getting money from welfare, and whenever I make money they deduct it. A lot of people said, ‘you know what? You don’t have to do that’. But I feel the system give me, and I need to give back. If I hide the truth I don’t like this. But people say are you crazy, you only make a little bit. But no, if I make over 250 I have to deduct. Then I think everything is good.

While only a few participants spoke this openly about the hardship they experienced, it is likely that many others simply declined to share their more grueling experiences of life in the welfare system.

Many participants did, however, recount negative emotional and interpersonal experiences during their time on income assistance programs. Everyone described feelings of anxiety about survival and felt that being on welfare increased their sense of alienation from this society. One participant explained, “I took three months from welfare and I feel like I am homeless”. Another related a story,
At one time while I was on welfare, (I don’t like to say this) I told somebody, ‘go ahead I have something to share, go and eat.’ And they said ‘no you are on welfare, why would I want to eat welfare money?’ That day for me was a very bad day. That hurt me very much. They must be thinking I don’t want to go to work. After that, while I stayed with welfare, I never tried to share with anyone. I felt ashamed. I didn’t want to hear that again. It was very bad.

Still others expressed frustration with the way they were treated by social service workers. Many felt that their circumstances, having just arrived in Canada, without knowledge of the new environment and often without a working knowledge of English, were not adequately understood. Participants shared experiences of coercion, as they were threatened with being cut off from income assistance, or pushed into employment related activities before they felt able:

This [worker] pushed and pushed. And I felt, why? I want to work. If I could get a full-time job why would I need to come over here to beg for money?

While accessing income assistance was a significant livelihood rebuilding strategy for every participant, severe financial insufficiency and negative emotional and interpersonal experiences, detracted from its value. It must be noted, however, that all of the participants in this project have been able to create new strategies to survive financial insufficiency and to move out of the income assistance system.

Settlement assistance. In terms of accessing settlement assistance, participants were sometimes frustrated that they did not find out about the services they were entitled to in a timely way. As one participant explained,

When I came to Canada I didn’t really know where to go. The only thing I did was, I had a friend whom I knew from back home, so I asked him if I could stay with him and he took me up. So I stayed with him for about three months. And
this guy has been here for all of twenty years and he didn’t know anything about social services, or anything that is available for newcomers. So for three months I didn’t have anything. I did not inquire either because in Africa they do not have any social services. There is no income assistance. You just turn to you friends.

A few participants also noted that illiterate newcomers are not well served by the volume of written information that is available, and that these newcomers tend to rely most heavily on other community members to help them navigate the social service systems.

5. Seeking Initial Canadian Employment

Strategies – developing job search skills. Participants developed several job searching strategies, including learning about the customary ways of obtaining employment in the new environment by accessing job readiness programs, high school classes, and the Internet to gather information about job postings, resumes, and interviews. They often found, however, that informal ways of locating and presenting themselves to potential employers, such as being introduced through social contacts, persistently cold calling, being willing to volunteer for a ‘training period,’ and being able to start immediately (even on the spot) were often more effective than sending out resumes. Florence, for example, discovered that she could not rely on the formal skills she learned,

I checked the local newspaper and I sent resumes to the people that were asking for employees. I sent in my resume, but I didn’t get any calls… The job search program also gave help with how to go to an interview. But I sent in my resumes and they didn’t call me. This was kind of depressing. But I learned then that if
you want to succeed in Canada you don’t wait. You can’t sit and wait for them to call. Because once you get that work permit now it is left to you to do it. Everyone agreed that the most effective job search strategy was to build a network of personal contacts that could pass on referrals. Participants said it was useful to talk to everybody they met for leads about jobs. Mishi, for example, laughed when she explained how she got her first job,

I met an Iranian woman on the bus by accident and she gave me her phone number and I gave her my phone number and later she called me. She said ‘do you want to work?’ And I said ‘yes of course,’ and she said ‘my son and daughter are working some place, why don’t you go there and check it out?’ So I went there and got something!

Thus it was important for participants to learn how to promote their practical and transferable skills to potential employers and to build a network of personal contacts for referrals and childcare. Since these skills were not taught in formal training programs, participants described learning through trial and error.

Childcare strategies. For parents, developing strategies around childcare was a critical part of the work search. At first, personal contacts provided childcare while a parent was out looking. Florence explained that having neighbours who could take turns with childcare made her job search possible. She worked very hard to develop and nurture these contacts, especially since the women in her apartment were unaccustomed to working together in this way. She explains,

You know, when I first moved into that house there were some people that were shy, they didn’t want to talk. But I learned you just have to give them time. My neighbour, she never said ‘hi’ to me. Whenever we were coming she would take her kids inside and she would lock the door. And I said, ‘ok, but one day you will
say hi to me!” ... I decided to be friendly - I would give her my friendship and she would just have to accept it!! Because she has a kid and I have one and we are just opposite, so that’s it. You can’t isolate yourself.

She later learned how to access a government childcare subsidy so that she could pay for this informal childcare while she was looking for work, and to cover some of the costs of daycare after she had secured employment. Florence stated that for a working parent’s peace of mind she must feel confident about the quality of childcare. She offered some tips for parents,

When looking for daycare the mother should go and check, so you feel comfortable. You can call and arrange a visit. Get to know the staff and supervisors. Just by talking, you can get to know what kind of people they are.

How they treat you and if they are comfortable with you coming to visit and ask questions – this is important. You can talk to the teacher and find out what they are doing all day. How will the kids spend the whole day? Is the environment safe? Do they have good clean toys and an outdoor playground? Don’t just talk, hang around and see how they interact with the kids.

Accessing childcare, first through personal connections, then licensed childcare after receiving government subsidies, was a very important livelihood-building strategy for this single mother.

Employment flexibility. Interviewees had a range of qualifications and experience but none of the participants I spoke to were able to draw maximum benefit from their education or years of experience to enter their occupational field, nor even obtain semi-skilled work, with their first Canadian employment. Amanti described how he unsuccessfully tried to access different levels of employment,
I was applying all over the place. I was giving an average of ten resumes a week. At some places the only excuse they give me is ‘you are over-qualified’. All of the resumes were customized, from basic jobs to those in my profession. Some I had to customize in such a way that I did not even mention that I have been to university. I had to show that I was only a high school graduate so that I could take it to some places.

Participants had to think quite broadly about the transferable skills they had and to be flexible in the types of employment they sought after. Many, like Yasmin, felt that it was most important simply to be working, and that having a choice of occupations would hopefully come later,

Any kind of work you have to do here, it doesn’t change who you are, it just helps you. If you start any kind of job you can make your life better. You can go up and show your education later.

Each of the participants entered the job market through temporary, unskilled work. Several obtained their first jobs through temporary employment agencies and found that within a few months they were able to get steady work. Others, however, were frustrated with these agencies and found part time or temporary jobs more quickly on their own. Participants often held a range of part-time jobs until they were able to find something more secure. All of the ten participants have moved into more satisfying positions. I will discuss the strategies they used to do so in the next section.

Problems. Lack of English, lack of Canadian experience, lack of knowledge about the new work culture, unrecognized credentials, lack of social contacts, and discrimination were all reasons participants cited for being unable to re-enter their field. Having unrecognized foreign credentials and experience was an insurmountable problem
for participants as they were trying to enter the Canadian workforce. Yasmin is in the
process of having her nursing credentials evaluated, but anticipates that her level of
English fluency may be a potential barrier. Additionally, with every year that passes
while she is focused on her refugee process, working several jobs simply to survive, and
trying to learn English part-time, she is out of practice and may have to retrain.
Participants find that their foreign experience also goes unrecognized. Amanti, for
example, could not directly build on his education or professional experience,

I am a sociologist and I worked in the social service sector with international
organizations for the last 23 years, so it would not be hard for me to prove myself
in this area of settlement, rehabilitation, counselling, and relief. All of these
things are part of my experience. I also have very good computer skills, website
design, and I am up-to-date on all the current software. I really should have been
able to find a much better job faster.

But neither could Kerim immediately benefit from his years of trades and artisan
experience,

There was a job doing metal work for the Skytrain construction. I could do this
job very well, but they want a certificate. If I want to take a certificate I will
spend years at school, and I don’t need it because I can do all these things, and
how many years experience? It is a problem. I cannot spend that time for nothing.
And they can’t teach me anything. I could teach them! I have a very old style.
No one knows it here and after me maybe it will be lost.

Beginning with entry-level, unskilled jobs -- as if they were novice workers -- was
frustrating, demoralizing and time-consuming for all of the participants. A few of the
respondents explained that these entry-level jobs were so demanding that they were
unable to adequately pursue their professional work search. They did not have the time
to continue to improve English skills, and were not in the right environments to make contacts in their field. While all viewed these initial jobs as a stage in their livelihood rebuilding process, many often worried whether these unskilled jobs would become permanent. Furthermore, participants found that employers often did not understand the regulations governing work permits, were simply unwilling to hire work permit holders, or worse, used participants' desperation to enter the workforce to exploit them. Several participants shared stories of being paid in cash, being paid less than minimum wage, working more than eight hours with no overtime and no paid breaks, and of feeling fear that they would lose their job unless they over-worked. One participant admitted that for a period of time she had a job that paid only three dollars an hour. Finally, participants shared their experiences of enduring difficult work and working conditions. Several of the women, in particular, spoke of being physically overwhelmed by the hard labour that was expected of them. For example, Layla explained,

Lifting, packaging, cleaning, cutting fruit vegetables, cleaning. I used to work in many warehouses. Cleaning bathrooms. I work sometimes night shift, all night alone underground cleaning the parking lot, and come home alone through the city. I feel it is not the kind of job for me. I had a lot of difficulties. I felt something is wrong. I was so tired. I am crying when I do those things.

Five of the participants had been injured on the job and reported that they had continued to work in spite of their injuries and pain.

6. Strategies for Increasing Job Satisfaction

Strategies. Participants shared their strategies for maintaining stable employment, building work experience and obtaining progressively more satisfying work. They spoke of gaining Canadian experience, adapting to the new employment culture, learning their
rights as workers in Canada, having adequate childcare, volunteering, and moving frequently from job to job in search of better opportunities.

*Canadian Experience.* All of the participants faced the challenge of entering the workforce without previous Canadian work experience. They reported that employers required it and would not usually consider the years of experience they had gained in their home countries. As Amanti explained,

> Every time I applied they ask if I have any Canadian experience, but really, if you don’t give me one how do I get it? I was offered a temporary job ... I believe I was over-qualified, but I did not have any Canadian experience. But [this first job] opened the door for me, and once I was in I could prove myself.

Building a resume of Canadian work history helped all of the participants access more satisfying positions. Many participants also spoke of the importance of building a trusting relationship with their employers, saying that this lead to more stable positions, more satisfying tasks, better pay, referrals to other potential employers and positive references. Additionally, participants stated that while they were over-qualified for their early Canadian jobs, the systems and technologies were often different than in their countries, and they were able to pick up transferable knowledge and skills that helped them move to more satisfying jobs.

*Social and cultural adaptation.* Early employment experiences also exposed participants to new social and cultural norms, and several participants suggested that their ability to adapt to the new employment culture led to increased employment opportunities and greater job satisfaction. They described a mode of interpersonal communication that promotes teamwork and collegiality, and includes such skills as friendliness, humour, and being open to asking questions and sharing information. In order to pick up new skills and derive the most benefit from their early Canadian work experiences it was important
for participants to be able to build relationships, to ask questions, and not to be afraid of making mistakes. Furthermore, several participants remarked on the challenge of adapting to diversity in the workplace, as well as learning how to be assertive so that their own cultural differences were respected. Sometimes accepting diversity in the workplace means confronting the values and assumptions of one’s cultural group, as Layla demonstrated,

I had one struggle and I learned a new thing. One day at work they ask me to do some interpreting for a transsexual, and in our culture this is not acceptable. I realized I can do it, but maybe my husband or my community doesn’t accept it. So I went home the first day like someone who has a big thing in her mind. So I explained to my husband, ‘If I don’t do those things I have not learned anything from the Canadian system. But I need you to understand so that if someone in the community talks to you, you will support me.’ And he said, ‘Ok this is your job.’ Being assertive, Layla pushed the boundaries of her cultural role expectations in order to function appropriately in the new employment culture. But she also learned to be assertive in order to express her own cultural and religious diversity within the workplace, for example,

[At work] there was no way I could make my prayers - you know we have five prayers a day. But sometimes I prayed [at work] and people look at me surprised, and also I had a hard time to find the direction. So I quit to pray, sometimes I miss two or three, and then I get home at midnight and I have them all to do and I am so tired to do so many prayers... It was the first time in my life I could not do my prayers. I feel a lot of stress. But whenever I called my family my father would say ‘don’t forget your prayer, don’t forget your prayer’. So I never discuss with
my family about that. But then I started to learn about the multicultural thing and I say, ‘everyone free to do their religion’, and so I began to carry my mat. Several participants shared examples of learning to adapt, but also to find ways of expressing their own values in the workplace, that helped them function in greater harmony with their employers and co-workers.

Volunteering. For some participants, volunteering was a valuable strategy in the livelihood building process. It was a way to increase their exposure to the Canadian job market while often allowing them to express some of their unfulfilled work values. Several participants had a lot of previous experience as community activists, and so volunteerism and community participation was already a natural and important part of their lives. Interested participants mentioned learning about volunteer opportunities in Vancouver through settlement agencies, flyers and newspaper advertisements. They found volunteer placements helped build a network in the field of employment interest or expertise, provided on-the-job training, kept them busy, provided structure to their day or week during times of sparse employment, and was a source of social contact and personal fulfillment. Volunteering often provided a gentler and more supportive exposure to the Canadian work culture than paid employment. Soraya compared herself to her friends who had access to volunteer placements through their high school programs. She believed they were better prepared to enter the workforce than she was, saying,

My friends, they had volunteer placements and I think they were more comfortable, just to get the feeling of what its like to be out there. Even if your English isn’t the best you can still do lots of things as a volunteer. You don’t have to get paid right away and that takes the pressure off and helps you get used to it. I mean I had lots of work experience but not Canadian. And it’s important.
You cope better when you actually have the job because you are already used to things from volunteering.

Several participants mentioned receiving supportive orientation to the workplace by supervisors who made their expectations explicit and helped volunteers achieve their objectives. They were also supported to overcome weaknesses in a way that encouraged growth and development, rather than in a punitive way as may be more likely in a paid position. These experiences helped participants to understand and adapt to the new employment culture.

*Accessing opportunities.* All of the participants discussed how they viewed their early work experience as a foundation for more stable, better paid, and/or more satisfying work in the future. They worked hard, built a good reputation with their employers, learned to function within a new employment culture, and they devoted energy to looking for more satisfying jobs, making many job moves in the early stage of their entry into the work-force. With their growing Canadian experience, most participants felt that making early moves from job to job was important, rather than staying in one place for a long time. As Amadou explained,

Something I don’t regret doing is switching, changing from work to work, from house to house. It’s a normal thing to do and every switch is better than what I left.

As participants gained experience they started to feel secure in the workforce. As Yasmin explained,

You know, once you get your first job, you ‘get inside’ and then you will always have a job. Right now whenever I want I can change my job.

With the knowledge that they could get a job to support themselves, participants began to have the confidence to take risks and search for better opportunities.
Problems. One of the significant problems participants spoke about was the lack of awareness and enforcement of employment standards. Indeed, a few of the participants, like Kerim and Amadou, were confident in their skills, had long experience as workers, and would not hesitate to stand up for themselves. But for those who were struggling to enter low-paying service or labour jobs, being without procedural knowledge of worker’s rights in Canada made them vulnerable to exploitation. Many participants spoke of working overtime without getting paid, of not taking breaks, of working for lower wages than their co-workers, doing skilled work without proper compensation and getting injured on the job without leave. Some of the ‘volunteer’ experiences participants related seemed frankly exploitative as well. For example, one participant volunteered as a housekeeper at a hotel in the hopes of getting a paid job, and another participant provided hundreds of hours of unpaid time to interpret for community members in hospital and to attend their social service appointments. Finally, after learning about their rights, participants faced the challenge of defending them. Soraya explained, “I knew my rights; I just didn’t have the confidence to say it. I was too scared. I worried that he wouldn’t want me anymore. And I need that money.” Several participants stated that their refugee status made it harder for them to defend their rights because they felt stigmatized or insecure. Mishi told me how proud she was when she was finally able to stand up for herself, but that this was only possible for her after she felt secure in her immigration status.

[Refugees] should learn the law, and ask people ‘what are my rights?’ I didn’t know my rights at first. Until I got my positive [refugee determination] answer, even if I knew my rights when I came to Canada, we refugees are scared to death.
I think I can stand up for myself now because I feel confidence since I got my positive decision.

For those who spoke of learning their rights and feeling confident enough to defend them, this process increased their job satisfaction and self-efficacy.

Participants developed the strategies of gaining Canadian experience, building their reputation and transferable skills, adapting to the employment culture, and defending their rights, while making moves from job to job towards progressively satisfying employment. It should be noted, however, that these livelihood-building strategies did not ensure participants a smooth transition towards progressively more satisfying jobs or protect them against numerous challenges and setbacks. Participants noted that they are better off than when they arrived, but none of the participants I spoke to have yet been able to attain their previous level of employment.

7. Accessing Training Programs and Further Education

Strategies. All of the participants reached a point in their livelihood rebuilding process where they began to consider accessing training or further education in order to improve their future job opportunities or increase their job satisfaction. Each participant had a range of different factors to consider when deciding what kind of training to begin. For most, their interests had to be weighed against the length of time they felt they could afford to devote to training because, for example, they had children to support through education, or perceived themselves to be too old. In addition, most had to spend time improving their English so that they could access the training programs they desired. A few participants who had not had the opportunity to access higher education or vocational training in their country of origin were able to explore new livelihood opportunities in Canada. As Mishi explained,
I want to go to school. I had a goal, back home, but then I got my high school diploma and then the revolution came and then I got married, and it was over. But then when I came over here to Canada I saw that it's good [to study]. But I think I am too old right now. I can't go through all the high school diploma and college and university, but I can go do a two or three year training program. Why not?

Several other participants who had unrecognized foreign credentials faced the difficult decision of whether to re-train entirely, or choose a less time consuming vocational training program. Yasmin, for example, has taken steps to regain her nursing credentials, though she acknowledges that it may take many years,

I am going to go to school and take my nursing job back. Even if I have to stay with this [janitorial] work for one or two more years, it is ok. But I want to die with my own job. It's not a problem if it takes long. Right now my English is better than before and also I am a good student. I think when my English gets better I can take a refresher nursing course and I think I can find my job. I miss my job.

Participants indicated that there was a wide range of information to consider when making their decision to take a particular training program and stressed the importance of not being frightened away but making informed decisions.

Problems. Participants articulated numerous challenges and barriers to obtaining their educational goals. Several participants felt simply unable to finance the education they desired, especially if they had children nearing high school graduation with educational goals of their own.
Immigration status created obstacles for participants. Florence, Amanti, Layla and Yasmin, who all aspire to obtain professional degrees, have waited between three and five years to become ‘landed’, focusing during that time on upgrading their English and/or acquiring vocational certificates. Dario, on the other hand, decided he would not wait,

I work to pay my bills, but I wanted to invest that money into my education, so I started taking courses... I didn’t have [permanent resident] status yet, so I was paying international fees. So all my money was going to pay the fees and I could only take one course at a time, because I felt, ‘I am going to go, it doesn’t matter how.’ Even with one course, at least I’m learning something. I was working from 7 o’clock in the morning ‘til 5 in the afternoon and then taking classes from 6:30 at night to 8:30 at night. And at the weekends I was practicing karate also and I was working at Superstore in the nights ‘til 4 o’clock in the morning. It was very busy.

Participants also commented that while there are numerous government supported training programs available, these seem only meant to prepare people for minimum wage jobs. Others found their immigration status to be an insurmountable obstacle to education, often because the process took so long that they had given up their goals by the time they became eligible for programs and funding. Many participants described or displayed difficulty in accessing information about training opportunities and processes, and sometimes seemed to give up their goals in confusion. Finally, one participant had a sharp criticism of the Canadian education system, in its demand for certification and creation of narrow specialists, saying,
Canadian workers are scared to try something new. They only do what they know. I am not afraid of a challenge and that makes things easier for me, because I can do different things. Many Canadians, not just workers, they go to school and they get special training. They are like a perfect screw-driver. But they can only spend their lives looking for the right screw. They are easily scared, because what if someone takes away their screw? That way I am like water. I will always find a way to go.

8. Personal coping strategies that promote livelihood building

Strategies – Personal development. Throughout my conversations with participants they told me about the personal coping strategies they used to maintain an active level of functioning during their livelihood rebuilding process. While self-confidence may have been elusive for some, participants who could maintain positive beliefs about themselves and their abilities said that these beliefs helped them accomplish difficult livelihood building tasks. A few participants admitted that they did not always feel their strength, but that being a role model for others, usually their children, helped them regain their personal power. As Florence shares,

I learned to be strong for my daughter. Not to hide my feelings, but to be strong enough to face them. And even now when things are bad and I am struggling, I remember her and the feelings sometimes disappear. She gives me motivation.

Participants also spoke of the importance of making meaning out of their migration experience by viewing it as an opportunity to explore identity and allow their sense of themselves to shift and grow. For some, identity development has meant challenging gender and cultural roles, and renegotiating the balance between the individual and collective construction of identity. For example, Layla has found that in spite of coming
to Canada in fear for her and her husband’s lives, she has come to feel an unexpected sense of purpose in her migration experience. She explains,

Between me and myself, I have something inside to encourage me. I start to think God maybe brought me here for two reasons. One reason for my husband, to have some safety, and a change in his life. But maybe God brought me here to be a new person. Maybe God bring me to Canada because I have some future here, but I don’t yet know the right way, I have to do something to find out.

Dario also spoke about identity development and the imperative of being adaptable and open to previously unknown possibilities, saying,

Refugees often bring a history of suffering, sure, but that is the history of all human beings. It is the history of that person, that person, my mother, my father, me, everybody. It has been that way forever and sooner or later you have to stop the cycle. That change has to come from yourself. It depends a lot on the attitude, the attitude and the will you have to adapt to new circumstances. It’s about not holding yourself to all these memories of the past. When we are holding on to all these memories and pain and traumas we perpetuate that suffering. And I don’t want that. I didn’t come here for that. And I don’t mean just to Canada, I mean to life. Yesterday is gone, it’s not coming back. And you can shape the future, but the shape comes from now, from your attitude now. We have to heal ourselves, and then help others heal, and then heal the planet. And so you see, there is lots of work to do every day.

Refusing to be identified as a victim, he shapes his identity in response to his desire for healing and to be engaged in his present circumstances. Layla, Dario and others have been inspired to build their own futures, which are quite different that what was laid out by cultural and familial expectations. And while this undeniably creates tension in
relationships, this newly awakened self-exploration seems to open new possibilities, and help participants remain focused on personal goals.

*Social engagement.* In addition to these kinds of personal shifts in identity, several participants spoke of how they have come to identify with pride as a member of their community in exile and as part of an international refugee community. This refugee identity gave them a sense of purpose and feeling of solidarity throughout their struggles with rebuilding livelihood: to help other refugees, and to combat the ignorance and discrimination refugees face in society. For many, the ability to share the strategies they had developed throughout their early resettlement period was not only a coping strategy but also a measure of their resilience. For example, Layla told me that her will to help other women in her situation has become her “secret agenda” and Amanti’s decision to fight racism and promote refugee equality here in Canada helped him make the commitment to be engaged in his new environment. He explained,

Sometimes I say ok, I have to just accept Canada as it is. I do not have to fight here. I have to go back home and fight. When the situation has changed and it is safer, I can return. But I am divided, sometimes I say no, wherever I am is my home, wherever I am is my country so I have to fight to make it better. And really my inclination is more and more this one. I am saying yes, where I am is my country.

Social engagement - the will to take part in the struggles that are going on in the place and the group that one finds oneself a part of - seemed to be a defining point in the rebuilding process for many participants because it helped them move out of a longing for the past and motivated them to engage with their present.

*Meaning of work.* Work held significant meaning as a coping strategy for many participants. Being able to remain focused on their motivation to work, such as the need
to gain financial independence or contribute to family income, often seemed to fortify participants against the hardships they faced on the job and throughout the livelihood rebuilding process. Some participants reported that work allowed them to feel more connected to their new society, and reduced feelings of alienation. Bilal, for example, felt invisible and marginal at first but as soon as he started working he felt entitled to participate in society. He shared these thoughts,

Once you get a job, its totally different. You feel like a human. Before I feel like I am shit. After, you work and you live like anybody else. You can be yourself – then you can scream I am here! I am something here!

Amadou also explained that being focused on work and setting work-related goals for the future was an important part of feeling engaged in this new society, helping him feel like he was here to stay. He explained,

I lost my home. I feel at home now, and it’s through thinking about the long-term goal: if I want to be there, how will I get there? Going from one job to the other, building a business has been difficult but I feel I have roots now. I don’t know how the tree is going to be, or what fruits it will give, but underground it is very solid and that is very important for me. I know now that what ever happens the roots are stable. I made sure the root is strong and the rest is taken care of.

For these participants work was an important way of entering the new society. Several participants also believed that working was beneficial to their mental and emotional well-being. Simply by providing structure to their lives, employment was a source of relief for many participants in their early resettlement. As Yasmin explained, “I like to work because it keeps me busy. I don’t think about other problems as much as when I’m
sitting home with nothing to do.” Kerim explained the relationship between work and mental health in his life, saying,

For me it is my way, it is my therapy. It helped me more than medication, more than a therapist, I can say. Because when I work, I am not just working for money. I am creating, I am talking with material, I am talking with myself. Refugees cannot do a lot of things in this country – you don’t know anything, you don’t have language. If you can create something you can start to believe in yourself again. You show yourself and others what you are. You can prove yourself. If not, it is just an empty world. If you don’t work your mind is busy with your problems: they will refuse you, what will happen to you, again you remember the torture or some other old stuff, it all comes new in a flash and your feelings go down and down. But if you concentrate on work you don’t have time to think. You stay busy. I work always overtime and when I get back home I am so tired I cannot do anything, I cannot think, I am just eating then sleeping. This is good.

For most of the participants focusing on the meaning of work in their lives, whether as a means of independence, a mode of interaction with society or a distraction from distressing thoughts and memories, was an important coping strategy.

Spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices. Throughout the livelihood rebuilding process participants were under enormous pressure to change and adapt. Often the ability to turn inward in spiritual contemplation or to familiar cultural practices provided a sense of comfort and fortified them to withstand and overcome the difficulties they were facing. For example, Layla explained,

My Imam said to me always, ‘whatever happens, sit down and pray with your God. If you have a pure heart and there is a pure connection between you and
your God, God will make everything easy'. I remember his words all the time when I am struggling.

Florence found similar comfort in prayer, saying,

I am a Christian, so I feel that it is God's work. So if you ask he will always give you what you need. I have always asked for the best things and I don't hope for less.

Whether it was prayer and reading religious texts, deepening one's contemplative cultural practices, writing and reading the poetry of one's linguistic group, or by playing traditional music, these activities were important sources of individual strength.

*Optimism for the future.* Finally, retaining a sense of optimism for their own or their children's future was an important coping strategy that helped participants endure the difficulties of the present. As Amadou declares,

Two years ago things were so much worse than a year ago, and a year ago is worse than today. I can say that if this is how things are going, I know the future is bright for me.

*Problems.* While the focus of the interviews was on participants' lives since arriving in Canada, several participants alluded to the fact that their personal coping abilities were compromised at times throughout their resettlement process by symptoms of psychological trauma related to their pre-migration experiences.

II. *Priority Recommendations*

Participants in the working group reviewed the findings and generated recommendations that they felt might begin to address the unresolved problems that have
been described above. Recommendations are directed to refugee communities, service providers who work on behalf of refugees, and policy makers whose jurisdiction affects refugees. Some of the recommendations are in the form of communicative actions that aim to inform a variety of stakeholders about ameliorating actions that they should undertake, while others are community development strategies that would harness the potential of refugees to work together to address their common problems with the support of agencies and policy makers.

**To refugee communities**

- Assertively identify and pursue opportunities in Canada. Remain up-to-date about community services that are available, and make appropriate referrals when it seems other community members could benefit from professional assistance.

- Organize for mentorship, mutual aid, community building and development. As one working group member declared, “Refugees make the mistake of waiting and hoping. We can organize together to solve our own problems.”

- Participate in anti-discrimination and anti-racism strategies. In the words of one working group participant, “Refugees who have been here longer should be more vocal in the community, in media, to improve society’s perceptions of refugees. Most people think we are charity-cases to pity or we are terrorists and criminals.”

**To settlement and multicultural agencies**

- Promote awareness of worker’s rights within immigrant communities. Consider collaborating with levels of government to develop an educational strategy for immigrant and refugee workers about their rights under Canadian employment law.
• Develop a formalized career re-entry program for refugees. Consider collaboration between refugee communities, settlement service providers and government agencies such as Human Resources Development Canada and Canadian Immigration and Citizenship, to explore employment-training and career re-entry options that allow paid work experience.

• Keep ethnic communities up to date with settlement information through regular outreach activities so that they can make appropriate referrals throughout the initial settlement process. Submit news releases, articles, and interviews to alternative language media, and attend community meetings and host workshops for community members. Remember that illiterate newcomers are not well served by the volume of written information that is available, and that these newcomers tend to rely most heavily on other community members to help them navigate the social service systems.

• Facilitate grass-roots refugee community development. Agencies possess valuable resources such as awareness of the policy environment, knowledge of funding processes and relationships with a variety of stakeholders. Use these resources to build capacities within refugee populations.

To Policy makers

• Focus on improving public perception of refugees by communicating respect for Canada’s humanitarian obligations under international law, as well as confronting stereotypes about refugees in national anti-racism programs.

• Improve awareness of policy implications of different types of immigration status among government service providers to ensure equal opportunity access to services.
• Raise the Income Assistance levels to provide an adequate standard of living to people who experience multiple barriers to employment.

• Collaborate with settlement services to provide career access programs, which include paid employment experience and funded access to career counselling services provided by qualified counsellors.

• Enforce labour standards among employers.

• Improve access to ESL training programs by reducing waiting lists, funding advanced ESL training programs and offering specialized ESL training for sufferers of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

III. Actions

Actions will continue to flow from the recommendations of the participants and fit three broad categories: dissemination of information, advocacy, and community building. Information will be disseminated in several ways: first, this thesis will have been defended as original research and made available to readers in this format; second, I am working towards presenting findings to VAST staff, other community-based groups, and at conferences; and third, this material can be used as the basis of an accessible booklet for refugee readers and articles for both academic and community-based audiences. Some of these activities may be more interactive and contribute more to experiential learning than others.

Advocacy activities will include using the knowledge gained from this experience to inform my role at VAST with and without the direct involvement of project participants and other VAST participants, such as making policy recommendations on behalf of VAST, implementing letter writing workshops so that participants can engage in letter writing campaigns, attending community meetings, bringing the concerns of
refugees to broader-based advocacy groups. Advocacy activities have the potential of widening the network of communication in much the same way as the dissemination activities but call for specific outcomes.

Finally, community-building activities can be undertaken within the scope of my role at VAST. For example, we are exploring the possibility of holding an on-going drop-in discussion and action group at VAST. The purpose of this activity would be to develop social networks for practical and emotional support, which was highlighted as an important livelihood building strategy. An on-going drop-in group would also have the potential to harness participants' own powers of community organizing to extend the process that has begun with this project, generating new understanding, actions and relationship networks to bring to bear on the problems of resettlement.
Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to articulate the strategies that refugees used to rebuild their livelihoods, the problems they confronted throughout this process, and to make recommendations and engage in actions to address some of these problems. Strategies were clustered under eight headings: establishing safety, improving English language fluency, building a social support network, using social services, seeking initial Canadian employment, increasing job satisfaction, accessing training and further education, and personal coping strategies which supported livelihood building. The refugee working-group prioritized the problems and suggested recommendations to refugee communities, service providers and policy makers. These recommendations will continue to lead to actions in the form of dissemination of information, advocacy, and community building.

The findings and outcomes of this project support three central conclusions: first, that refugees develop strategies in response to the problems they encounter; second, livelihood building encompasses a wide range of activities that are not all specifically related to paid employment, but that support a process of becoming employment-ready; and finally, livelihood building strategies are supported by societal, relational and personal resources. In the upcoming section, these conclusions will be discussed in the context of relevant literature. Later sections within this chapter will evaluate the credibility of the research process and findings, highlight areas for further research, and outline the implications and limitations of this project.
Research Findings in the Context of Relevant Literature

Refugees develop strategies in response to the problems they encounter. The convergence of research within migration studies on the effects of economic self-sufficiency on social integration and psychological well-being led me to question how individual refugees experience the transition into a new workforce (see for example: Aycan and Berry, 1996; Barudy, 1989; Beiser and Hou, 2006; Beiser, Johnson and Turner, 1993; DeVortez, Pivnenko and Beiser, 2004; Lamba, 2003; Tomlinson & Egan, 2002). Several researchers state that acquisition and maintenance of stable work is the major indicator of social integration (Barudy, 1989; Beiser and Hou, 2006; DeVortez et al., 2004). The original aim of the project was to articulate the strategies that facilitated successful economic adaptation and integration and to disseminate these in a form that would be useful to refugees. However, it became clear throughout the early stages of data collection that livelihood-building strategies were meaningful only in relation to the problems that participants encountered throughout the process.

While discussing their livelihood building experiences, participants elaborated on all of the post-migration stressors listed in the literature, including fear of repatriation, separation from family members, the stress of going through the refugee determination process (Sinnerbrink & Silove, 1997), the loss of important life projects, changes in socio-economic status and related concerns about economic survival, the loss of meaningful structure and activity in daily life, and the loss of meaningful social roles (Miller, 1999), unfamiliarity with the labour market and job-seeking processes, employers’ negative perceptions of refugees, unrecognized qualifications and prior experience, and language barriers (Tomlinson and Egan, 2002). Miller (1999) observed that for each source of distress there is a corresponding psychosocial need:
...a need for the development of new social networks, a need for the identification and development of new roles that provide a sense of meaning and structure to daily life, a need for the development of skills and competencies that will permit effective negotiation of the new environment, and a need for employment-related opportunities that permit refugees to achieve financial self-sufficiency in the shortest time possible (p.294).

Participants described a process of encountering problems, gathering the knowledge and building the capacities to overcome them, encountering and overcoming further problems, until they were left with unresolved problems. The findings from this study offer a rich description of how refugee participants developed and enacted livelihood-building strategies to overcome these sources of distress and meet their psychosocial needs, as well as how the working group strategized to address the numerous unresolved problems that participants were left with.

While DeVortez et al. (2004) suggest that economic integration occurs over a period of ten to twelve years for the majority of refugees, participants were able to overcome a significant number of problems within the first five years of their resettlement process using the various strategies that were described in the findings. Within this time span, all of the participants had been able to access income assistance to address initial financial needs, obtain their first Canadian employment, and then move out of this initial employment into work that was more satisfying. All of the participants who had arrived in Canada without speaking fluent English had made significant gains in language abilities. Almost all had also begun planning to access different career options by enlarging their networks, volunteering, and beginning training programs. Given the capacities that must be developed to overcome an enormous number of problems as a
refugee makes him or herself employment ready, we see why economic integration is such a useful indicator of social integration.

Livelihood building encompasses a wide range of activities that are not all specifically related to paid employment. This study contributes to a broader understanding of the context of work in people’s lives (Richardson, 1993) by detailing the struggles refugees face to obtain, perform, and cope with work while integrating themselves into a new employment culture. Of the eight strategy categories that were presented in the findings, only three – accessing training, seeking initial employment and increasing job satisfaction – fall into a traditional conceptualization of career because they are enacted with the aim of increasing functional capacities within the labour market. These employment-related strategies depend, however, on other strategies that are not part of the traditional conceptualization of career. Obtaining legal status and family reunification, improving English language fluency, accessing social services, and developing a social support network are foundational strategies aimed at increasing basic security and develop communicative capacities.

![Figure 3. Clusters of Livelihood Building Strategies.](image-url)
Developing job search skills, increasing employment satisfaction, and accessing training opportunities, are functional strategies that best fit within a traditional conceptualization of career development. Using the career development model (Super 1957, 1963, 1980), refugee newcomers might be seen to revisit an exploration stage of career development, in which they explore the new ‘world of work’, begin to develop a new occupational self-concept (defined by their past experience and their refugee identity) and attempt to implement that self-concept into a congruent work environment that matches interests, goals and abilities. In line with these theoretical expectations, strategies emerged that were enacted in order to increase functional capacities within the labour market. Participants emphasized the procedural knowledge they needed to gain, provided examples that highlighted their cultural adaptation within the new employment environment, and also spoke of on-the-job skills development and formal training programs to build functional capacities. All of these employment-directed strategies emphasize information gathering, skills development, adapting to new cultural norms, as well as personal planning and decision-making.

These functional strategies rest, however, on a foundation of basic security. Several researchers in the field of refugee studies note the importance of basic security, which is obtained through legal status and family reunification, as well as access to resources, and freedom from discrimination (Coates and Hayward 2005; Kramer & Bala, 2004; Sinnerbrink & Silove, 1997). For refugee participants, much of the initial resettlement stage is spent navigating the immigration system in order to obtain legal protection for oneself and immediate family; which, as participants illustrated, provides the material and psychological foundation of all subsequent livelihood building activity. As some participants noted, while one is authorized to work prior to receiving refugee
status, early employment experiences are temporary attempts at livelihood building under the threat of deportation. This fear of being forcibly returned to one’s country of origin is pervasive and, as participants described, it can leave refugees vulnerable to exploitation in the workforce. Participants also described how the distress of living in dire poverty hampered their early livelihood building process, and the members of the working group recommended an increased income assistance to address this problem. Silove and Ekblad (2002) make the connection between basic security guaranteed by the state and productive self-sufficiency for refugees, stating,

Providing effective and humane resettlement services, clarifying refugee claims in a timely manner, encouraging family reunion, countering tendencies towards racism and xenophobia in the wider society, offering opportunities for work and education, and providing targeted mental health interventions for the most psychologically needy, together will ensure that most refugees regain their capacity for self-sufficiency and productivity, an outcome that will benefit refugees themselves as well as the receiving societies (p. 402).

Those participants who had obtained basic security, in the form of legal protection and access to resources, described how this freed them to pursue other, more functional livelihood building strategies.

In addition to immigration concerns, participants also noted that experiences of discrimination undermined their basic sense of security. In 2003, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration reported the importance of freedom from discrimination for refugees, and acknowledged that the discourse since September 11, 2001 has branded refugees as threats to national security and propagated racist stereotypes and myths. The Committee’s recommendation 22, states,
To combat racism and xenophobia, and to promote inclusiveness and a sense of belonging, the federal government should launch a public education campaign to provide information about immigrants and refugees and their economic, social and cultural contributions to Canada. The federal government should also monitor hate crimes and prosecutions in Canada and report the findings to Parliament.

This recommendation emphasizes Canada's obligation to protect those seeking asylum from threats to basic security, and mirrors the refugee working group's recommendation to policy makers to improve public perceptions of refugees.

In addition to the functional strategies and those aimed at increasing basic security, researchers in cross-cultural career studies confirm that immigrants and refugees must develop their communicative capacities by improving linguistic fluency, adjusting to the new employment culture and developing a social support network (Behnia, 2002; Beiser and Hou, 2006; Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991). All of those who participated in interviews expressed their belief that a high level of English language proficiency was an essential prerequisite to gaining employment. Beiser and Hou (2006) state, "without language one can never truly enter a culture" (p. 158), and confirm that language acquisition supports successful economic and social integration. Refugee participants in this project expressed their frustration that the level of language instruction available in British Columbia is at a very basic level and recommended that advanced level instruction should be offered. Indeed, the House of Commons Standing Committee (2003) noted,

Because finding employment is clearly one of the most fundamental aspects of successful settlement and integration, we agree that language training should specifically target this goal.
The Committee had recommended that an advanced level of language training should be available throughout Canada, a recommendation that was echoed by the refugee working-group in this project.

Another strategy that depends on communicative capacities is the development of social support networks. All of the participants emphasized the importance of knowledge obtained by 'word of mouth'. Connecting with other people, newcomers gather and sort information, as well as build relationships to reduce isolation and feelings of alienation. Behnia (2002) asserts,

Strong support systems have a powerful influence on refugee’s well-being and adjustment to a new society. They provide refugees with information, advice, practical help and emotional support. (p.3)

Participants’ experiences clearly confirm this statement. In this study, participants’ social support networks provided employment-related benefits such as referrals to employers and information about the employment culture. Participants also described numerous other benefits, such as obtaining orientation and practical information, material resources and emotional support, which helped them gain the stability needed to enact employment-directed strategies.

In addition to supporting the conclusions of previous research about the importance of functional, security-increasing and communicative strategies, this project offers a unique contribution by providing a detailed description of the personal coping strategies that refugees used to overcome barriers and manage emotions throughout the livelihood building process. The personal coping strategies enabled participants to make meaning out of their migration experiences, accommodate a process of identity development, and maintain a sense of optimism for the future. The impact of previous trauma on participants’ ability to harness these personal coping resources was not
explored directly in this project, although the responses of several participants seem to support the conclusions drawn by Beiser, Johnson, and Turner (1993) and Lie, Sveaass and Eilertsen (2004) that employment related activity has positive effects on depression and posttraumatic symptoms.

Self-efficacy may be a salient concept underlying personal coping strategies (Wolfe and Betz, 2004). Several of the livelihood building strategies can be conceptualized in terms of exploratory behaviour facilitated by self-efficacy expectations, such as seeking out social services, building a network for support and referral, approaching potential employers, and standing up for worker’s rights. Whether participants reported successfully implementing exploratory strategies, or whether they reported avoidant behaviors might depend somewhat on efficacy beliefs around refugee identity, belonging, and entitlement. Participants’ sense of safety in the new environment may be dependant on internal self-efficacy perceptions as well as external pressures. According to this model, self-efficacy is strengthened through performance accomplishments, vicarious learning (modeling), reduced emotional arousal (anxiety), and social persuasion and encouragement (Betz, 2004). Thus it is encouraging to note that the participants described several strategies and recommendations that have great potential to increase efficacy expectations, including volunteering, refugee mentorship, community building and mutual aid.

Livelihood building strategies are supported by societal, relational and personal resources. It is clear that individual factors do not entirely account for the success of refugee’s livelihood building strategies, nor their failure to overcome all of the reported challenges. The findings demonstrate participants’ individual capacities for action but they also highlight the importance of adequate societal resources and relational supports.
Societal resources provide for social justice, security, and peace (Prilleltensky, 2003). As I have previously noted, these basic security needs are met for participants who are granted the right to permanent residence, family reunification, and freedom from discrimination and racism. Society must also foster material well-being through the ‘social safety net’ and access to employment. Community services and organizations such as settlement agencies, employment readiness programs, English language training, employment skills training and further education offer programs and services that help participants participate in and contribute to society.

Relational factors also facilitate participants’ abilities to participate in and contribute to society. The findings provide a rich description of the value of social relationships to the livelihood building process, from providing practical assistance to emotional support. Behnia’s (2002) research, which documents the significance of friends and caring professionals for refugee resettlement, supports these findings. Furthermore, this project itself functions in a relational way to address livelihood building: the researcher listened to and learned from participants, the working-group mobilized their thoughtful problem-solving capacities, and audiences will reflect on our knowledge and experiences.

The findings offer countless examples of the interdependence of social resources, relational supports and personal factors in the lives of project participants. In one instance, a participant’s growing understanding of the employment culture, combined with anti-discrimination legislation and social practices that accommodate religious diversity, allowed her to pray throughout the day at work, which helped her maintain contact with an important part of herself and also maintained family harmony. Similarly, relational factors including civic participation and a sense of community, can be facilitated by high quality settlement services that provide language instruction,
information and orientation, and community building activities. On the other hand, gaps in any of these domains can have a negative impact over all others. For example, social isolation can stunt all livelihood building behaviour, as one participant described:

When I first came here I was scared. People were so different, first because of the language, and then the new culture. I could not trust myself, I thought, 'I am not good for here, I can’t live here, I’ll never have communication with Canadian people.’ I broke that when I found friends, then I had enough reason to go out.

Legal insecurity also has a negative influence over all domains. A lengthy period of time without legal status leads to a state of limbo, during which time people have limited access to social services, limited capacity to act in the economic sphere, and the feelings of belonging and entitlement, which are necessary precursors to creating wider social networks and participating in community, cannot begin to grow (Coates and Hayward, 2005).

Individuals, groups and communities aim to attain satisfaction within each domain or to determine which dimension requires action in order to increase satisfaction (Prilleltensky, 2003). This seems an accurate description of the livelihood rebuilding process that each participant undertook, creating strategies that utilize individual capacities, combined with relational strengths and societal resources to overcome many of the challenges of resettlement. It was also apparent to the working group participants that the unresolved problems require ameliorating action at all three levels. They recommended actions to strengthen individual resources, which would have to find support from societal sources, such as increased access to training and education as well as personal counselling. They also recommended actions to increase the capacity of groups and communities, which might benefit from societal resources but would depend most on the relational capacities of caring and solidarity, such as refugee mentorship,
supportive groups, community building and mutual aid. Prilleltensky suggests that the negative consequences of poverty diminish the overall wellness of the individual, relationships and communities alike, while collective factors such as access to social justice and valued resources combined with a sense of community solidarity and personal empowerment will give rise to social and psychological wellness. It is my hope that this project functions as an exploratory example of local-level knowledge generation and strategizing to improve the well-being of refugee communities over all three domains.

*Credibility and Dependability*

In this section, which derives from the "review" stage of the research design, the trustworthiness of the findings will reviewed, especially in the context of a participatory action research project. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, I have incorporated several procedures common to qualitative methodologies in general and PAR in particular. In qualitative research, credibility rests on using a combination of data collection and analysis techniques such as: mechanically recorded data, use of participant verbatim language, triangulation, member checking, participant review, and prolonged field work (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Credibility in this project is also increased to the extent that the project adheres to the principles of participatory action research (Kidd and Kral, 2005), considering the level of collaborative participation and the extent to which the project has acted as a catalyst to increased awareness and change.

I have maintained an 'audit trail' of data and research decisions (McTaggart, 1998) while personally conducting audio-taping, and transcribing all of the interviews in order to ensure confidentiality and consistency of data collection. Field notes were made during the focus group meeting and to capture feedback that was given informally by participants, as well as during member checking consultations with my research advisor...
and VAST staff members, throughout the course of the project. I used Microsoft word 2004 for Mac, version 11.0 word processing software and all versions of data and analysis have been stored electronically. In terms of using verbatim participant language, I did initially transcribe and store the interviews verbatim; however, due to the English language limitations of most participants, I made subsequent versions of all interviews in which I made grammatical adjustments to enhance their readability.

I made use of triangulation to check observations and interpretations against different types of information sources including working group participants in later stages of resettlement, reflecting on the material from my own knowledge and experience as a practitioner, periodically reporting back to and consulting with colleagues and academic advisors, as well as maintaining a broad multi-disciplinary review of the literature. Additionally, I will continue to develop a ‘critical community’ by reporting the findings to a diverse audience thereby testing the coherence of arguments, the authenticity of evidence and the prudence of action (McTaggart, 1998).

I took care to establish and maintain the credibility of the project among participants and members by seeking different kinds of participatory and collaborative input. Throughout research design and proposal process I sought feedback from the VAST coordinator, staff and board members. The research design, interview and focus group protocols, sections of raw data, the development of codes and categories, and all stages of data analysis were subject to adept peer review. Refugee contributors participated in data generation and review, as well as by contributing to recommending, planning and implementing actions. The richness of the interview data and the willingness of participants to engage in the project for example by offering feedback, volunteering to participate in action related tasks, and checking in on my progress with
the write-up and presentations, suggests that participants, in particular, trusted the credibility of the research process.

In terms of ‘catalytic validity’, which is the extent to which the project acts as an instigator of change (Kidd and Kral, 2005), preliminary actions have been taken that hold the potential to begin to address the problems that were highlighted by participants. The flexibility and responsiveness of the method was of great utility in this project. Participants responded to the question of what strategies they used to rebuild livelihood primarily by discussing the barriers, problems and dilemmas that were encountered in the process. Many of the problems had no or minimal strategies associated with them - the problems continue. Thus it became apparent that a second research question had arisen: What are the barriers to livelihood building? This question had its own participatory action component: What actions could serve to overcome these barriers? The project has met the preliminary PAR objectives of ‘catalytic validity’ in that it has brought participants together to articulate and more deeply understand their common problems, and think about possible solutions. Following through on actions to address a few priority problems and recommendations could serve as the basis for another PAR project with scope for the level of participant involvement to increase. I see the potential for this process of inquiry and action to grow into an on-going part of the work at VAST.

Finally, within the context of evaluating the credibility and dependability of this project, it is important to consider the contextual and psychological factors that may have influenced the way participants told their stories, and the way the findings were co-constructed. I had been immersed in the field as a VAST staff member for over three years by the time the interviewing process began, and spent over six months engaged in interviewing and participatory activities with participants. It has been argued that such long-term immersion in the field is invaluable to a qualitative research process with
refugee populations as it gives researchers the foundations of genuine interpersonal relationship that allow participants to provide more trusting and thus more accurate information (Miller, 2004). My immersion also meant that I had knowledge of the broader context of refugee resettlement in Vancouver, as well as knowledge acquired through various types of interpersonal interactions over several years. This knowledge informed my role as a facilitator of the interview and group process and helped me reflect more deeply on the meaning and credibility of the findings.

Using PAR was also both personally challenging and rewarding. Because the literature on PAR does not provide a formal methodological structure it was sometimes frustrating to operationalize, especially as an inexperienced researcher. In addition, the imperative of continual self-reflection, while personally enriching, was time consuming and occasionally worrisome. These challenges were overshadowed, however, by the rewarding experience of being able to engage with participants on an intimate interpersonal level, bringing together a group of lively and engaged intellects to come to a shared understanding of common experiences, and exploring solutions to common problems. I appreciated the responsiveness and flexibility that the research design permitted as my own understanding of the population that I work with and for deepened.

Implications

For refugees and their communities. This project had direct implications for the participants. Several interview participants commented that participating in the research process helped clarify their experiences, put them into perspective, give them meaning and validated the distance they had traveled and the wisdom they had acquired. Working group participants stated that the knowledge that was distilled from these interviews then helped them appreciate the shared nature of their experience, expanding their awareness
beyond personal and national histories. Working group members displayed a greater sense of empowerment as they worked together to articulate recommendations to directly address the problems that were exposed through the research process. If such meetings continue, there will certainly be on-going relational and societal implications.

This document represents a communicative action, and is one of the outcomes of a collaborative knowledge creation process. The information that is presented here can be developed into an accessible format that will increase the awareness among the wider refugee community of effective strategies that may be used to overcome some of the challenges of livelihood rebuilding. Additional communicative and exploratory actions that are taken to follow up on working group recommendations will have continuing implications for the refugee community in Vancouver and perhaps throughout Canada.

Finally, the most direct implication for refugee communities is to recognize the need to create networks of solidarity that cross national, religious and ethnic lines and to work together in the service of mutual aid. In the words of one participant, “Refugees make the mistake of waiting and hoping. We can organize together to solve our own problems.”

*For program developers and policy makers.* Although municipal and provincial policies have a differing impact on refugee experiences, the research findings and working group’s recommendations have significant implications for program developers and policy makers in British Columbia, and may be relevant to policy jurisdictions throughout Canada. Most important is the implication that refugee well-being and livelihood success depends with equal measure on personal capacities, relational factors and carefully planned and adequately resourced societal supports. On several pressing issues, refugees and I add our voices to the concerns raised by researchers and advocates for social justice across Canada. In this project, refugees have highlighted the importance
of legal protection as a foundational livelihood building strategy, an issue that is being raised with growing urgency by Canadian researchers and refugee advocates who describe the costs of prolonged periods of legal limbo (Canadian Council for Refugees, 1999; Coates & Hayward, 2005; Goodwin-Gill & Kumin, 2000). Additionally, the inadequate level of income assistance in British Columbia is currently of real concern to many (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2006; Goldberg & Wolanski, 2005). Refugee participants described the poverty they endured while accessing income assistance, showing that not only is income assistance unable to facilitate livelihood-building strategies but it is creating perilous living conditions for people with numerous barriers to employment. Daycare is another policy issue receiving national attention (House of Commons, 2006; The Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2006). Refugee parents in this study emphasised the need for adequate, affordable childcare to enable them to implement livelihood-building strategies that support the growth and development of their children. Finally, the recent May Day demonstrations in the United States have drawn considerable attention to the plight of immigrant workers. While Canadian immigration officials have long acknowledged the value and necessity of immigrant workers given Canada’s aging demographic, it is imperative for policy makers to address the exploitation and abuse that vulnerable workers experience at the hands of employers and step up efforts to ensure that multilingual workers are aware of their rights and that worker’s rights are properly enforced.

Canadians could previously be proud of their nation for building an exemplary refugee protection system; however, changes to immigration and social policies are quickly eroding its quality (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2004). Policy makers must remember their humanitarian obligations under international law to offer protection to those who have suffered persecution. Surely this obligation extends to protection from
threats to safety inflicted within the Canadian policy environment? A significant number of the unresolved problems that participants described could be improved or resolved through making the recommended changes to social policy and the way that services are delivered.

For counselors and frontline workers. This project contributes knowledge of refugee experiences in the Canadian workforce, which can improve the practice of frontline workers in the 'settlement' field. Refugee participants emphasized the need for more access to personal counselling, and as one working group member stated,

Counsellors would be very helpful but they need to have very special training. This information [derived from the project] would be good for them. But they can't just tell us what to do. Job search programs, ESL teachers, and agencies already give a lot of information. We don't need information or instructions. We have worked all our lives and we know how. We need people who can help us understand ourselves, our place in this system, so we can understand for ourselves how best to move along. Some information should be given but what we really need is counselling support to help us find our own way (Working group member).

The information gathered as a result of this project demonstrates that counsellors and front-line workers require specialized knowledge and competencies; such as, an ability to work cross-culturally and cross-linguistically, and to possess knowledge of the legal and policy environment that impact refugees, as well as up-to-date knowledge of available social services, supplemental resources, rewarding volunteer placements and productive training opportunities.

Counsellors must also be sensitive to the layered and nuanced needs for safety that refugees bring, not only as a result of previous trauma but also on contact with the
new society. On-going experiences of cultural alienation, disorientation, discrimination, racism, dispossession, frustration, and marginalization may be profoundly threatening to the integrity of self. By recognizing the importance of social support, counsellors who are able to create a trusting bond with refugee participants can provide much needed psychological contact. This may help refugees to resist being, as one participant described, “cast adrift in the world” and overcome by hopelessness and helplessness.

Counsellors can also work with refugee participants to strengthen the personal coping resources that they possess by, for example, promoting a sense of genuine entitlement and belonging, and facilitating the kind of approach behaviours that characterize healthy adaptation. Counsellors can expand their role to include advocacy, with the aim of improving access to services. Importantly, counsellors can also challenge themselves to act in the interest of individual and community empowerment by facilitating the development of social support and mutual aid networks, and providing support for these networks to work towards collaborative solutions to common problems. Ultimately, the findings of this project imply that service providers must conceptualize their role in a systemic way, focusing not only on the problems and capacities of individuals, but also understanding how relational factors and societal resources enhance or impede individual and community development.

For further research. — Participatory Action Research in Counselling Psychology. In addition to the work described by Kral, Kidd and Burhardt (2002), this study offers a further example that PAR research practices can be used effectively within applied counselling and community psychology settings. As was the case in this project, PAR procedures provide counsellors a way to engage with their client populations that is personally and professionally rewarding. Scientist-practitioners using PAR can ask questions that are directly relevant to their professional practice, to engage in self-
reflection about their role, and shift the power relationship between themselves and their participants/co-researchers. It is a research stance that exhorts practitioners to differentiate between working 'for' clients and working 'with' participants. Innumerable lines of inquiry might fruitfully be pursued using this methodological stance to produce useful, local knowledge and to build the capacities of client populations to address problems that are of common concern.

Career theory in Counselling Psychology. The findings in this study highlight the need for career researchers to take the impact of the relational and socio-economic context on the career development process into greater consideration. This study also adds to the growing body of Canadian research that reflects the unique national context of immigration and employment, and should serve as a reminder to researchers not to neglect the statistically smaller but policy-relevant refugee population. This project contributes to opening up the area of refugee resettlement to vocational researchers, by providing a look at the strategies that a small group of relatively successful refugees used to rebuild their livelihoods. DeVortez et al. (2004) note that, within the refugee population as a whole, only 52% of adult refugees find employment and state that successful economic integration is dependant largely on labour market conditions. This study suggests that there may also be psychological factors that contribute to successful integration. Directions for further vocational psychology research could include an examination of self-efficacy and resiliency factors in refugees.

Refugee mental health. As the literature review demonstrates, there have been decades of research devoted to understanding the impact of gross human rights violations on human psychological functioning. This important work has helped to shape refugee protection policy and healthcare policy, and has the power to fortify world leaders resolve to uphold international laws, such as non-refoulement and the absolute ban on torture and
other cruel and unusual punishment. The findings of this study suggest that, while
refugees have personal coping resources and the capacities to devise livelihood building
strategies, the resettlement environment does not best support the successful adaptation
and integration of refugees. Future studies could explicitly examine whether there is a
compounding effect of post-migration stressors, such as prolonged duration of deep
insecurity due to fears of repatriation and financial precariousness, on trauma
symptomology. Findings related to these questions would have clinical relevance if, as
Barudy (1989) states, “elaboration and resolution of trauma is only possible when refugee
clients are able to achieve an adequate level of integration in society” (p. 726). Such
findings would also have serious implications for policy makers within resettlement
environments.

Limitations

Problem themes related to livelihood, and the strategies that a well-described and
contextualized group of participants used to overcome these problems, have been
articulated as a result of the research process. However, while all participants did have a
conversational fluency in the English language, at times language barriers prevented as
open and detailed an examination as may have otherwise have been possible. In addition,
though the intent of this project was to compile information that could be useful to the
refugee population and those who serve them, caution must be used when readers
evaluate the transferability of the findings. Given the fact that the participants in the
interviews and the working group were purposefully selected among employed refugees,
the usefulness of the findings to the refugee population as a whole may be limited.
Furthermore, interviews were only conducted in Vancouver, British Columbia; and
because municipal and provincial policies have differing effects on refugee experiences,
we can assume that refugees will devise different strategies in response to the problems they face in other Canadian locations. Finally, the time constraints of the participants as well as the researcher limited the number of group meetings that were possible at this stage of the project. It is anticipated that several complete cycles of planning, action and reflection could generate even more useful information about the nature of the problems and the problem-solving resources of the affected group.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to evaluate the degree to which this thesis has successfully addressed the objectives it originally outlined. We may conclude that the study has achieved its purpose of articulating the livelihood building strategies of a group of refugees who have recently resettled in Vancouver, and highlighting the problems these livelihood-building strategies could not resolve. While time constraints limited the number of complete cycles of planning, action, and reflection that were possible, this project has generated recommendations and action strategies aimed at ameliorating these problems, within a participatory action research framework. In discussing these findings and outcomes in the context of the relevant literature, this chapter emphasizes three central conclusions: first, refugees develop strategies in response to the problems they encounter; second, that livelihood building encompasses a wide range of activities that support a process of becoming employable; and finally, livelihood building strategies are supported by societal, relational and personal resources. These conclusions imply that livelihood building is an active, goal-directed process and that refugees succeed by utilizing a wide variety of strategies. The findings also support the idea that generating local knowledge about these strategies has an empowering potential for refugee groups. There is the additional implication that those who wish to understand the career
development process of refugees must attend to the social, economic and political factors involved. Finally, the conclusions specifically highlight the need for counsellors to expand their focus, beyond the individual to include relational and societal factors, when working with refugee populations.
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Appendix III: Interview Protocol

Orienting statement:
The purpose of this interview is to talk about your experiences of working in Canada. I know that it is sometimes very stressful to learn how to rebuild your life in Canada, and I think that in the years that you have been here you have learned a lot of things. I think the things you have learned could help other refugees. It is not my intention to upset you during this interview, so you do not have to talk about anything you do not want to talk about and you can quit whenever you want. You will be invited to join the working group later if you wish. The working groups will be looking at themes and quotations from all of interviews. You will not be identified in the working groups. Is there anything I can do right now to make you feel more comfortable? Are you ready to begin?

Key questions:
1. How did you get your first job in Canada?
2. Did anyone help you get this job? How did they help?
3. How did you survive before you got your first job?
4. Have you had some experiences of unemployment since getting your first job? What have you done when you were not working? (How do you take care of yourself, provide for your needs, what activities do you do to try to get back to work?)
5. Have you learned different/better ways of finding work since you arrived in Canada?
6. What/who has been most helpful to you?
7. What has been most frustrating about looking for a job?
8. How did you overcome these frustrations? How did you take care of yourself during difficult times?
9. If there is any information you could share with a new refugee what would it be?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your livelihood building experiences?

Demographic information:
Gender orientation:
Age range:
Region of origin:
Formal education/training:

Observations/Reflections:

Version date July 4, 2005
Appendix V: Structure of Working Group Meeting

Introductions, establish group norms, sign consent forms
- Sign consent form
- Introduction to the research project (purpose, method, desired outcome)
- Introduce the purpose of the meeting; “During this meeting I would like to show you the strategies that have come out of the interviews, and ask you two questions:
  - What is the best way to help new refugees with this information?
  - What problems do not have solutions, and could we think of recommendations or actions that might help?”
- Establish group norms: “Since we are a group together we should have some guidelines for making the meeting safe and productive:
  - No one will be asked to share private information about themselves, as group members we will respect each other’s privacy
  - You will not be identified in any printed material
  - You can participate as much as you feel comfortable
  - All ideas are valuable and should be respected
  - If you feel bad about how this meeting goes, please talk to me or Frances about it
  - Does anyone have any other ideas about how to make the meeting feel safe and productive?”
- Introductions by group members to each other

Activity #1
Display flow chart, describe, and discuss strategies that have been identified
- These are the strategies that some refugees found helped them. Do you see anything that is missing?
- List suggestions for how to help new refugees get this information
  - What can I do to help refugee get this information? What could VAST do? What could a group of refugees do?

Activity #2
Point out the unresolved problems, prioritize and make recommendations for actions (Dot nomination process)
- Are there strategies people here have used to tackle these problems?
- What else would help?
- Can we make a prioritized list of unresolved problems and recommend actions to address them

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  • You can participate as much as you feel comfortable
  • All ideas are valuable and should be respected
  • If you feel bad about how this meeting goes, please talk to me or Frances about it
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• These are the strategies that some refugees found helped them. Do you see anything that is missing?
• List suggestions for how to help new refugees get this information
  • What can I do to help refugee get this information? What could VAST do? What could a group of refugees do?

Activity #2
Point out the unresolved problems, prioritize and make recommendations for actions (Dot nomination process)
• Are there strategies people here have used to tackle these problems?
• What else would help?
• Can we make a prioritized list of unresolved problems and recommend actions to address them